

Marriage Lite

***Civil unions, a popular alternative to gay marriage,
could make real marriage largely a thing of the past.***

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An alternative to gay marriage that is already commonplace throughout the Western world is the establishment of “civil unions.” These legal arrangements grant some of the rights usually associated with marriage to partners of any gender or sexual orientation who register as a couple. Civil unions stop short of marriage—you don't have to get a divorce to get out of them. But they are a way of allowing homosexual couples to share insurance coverage, hospital visitation rights, tax advantages, and other perks of matrimony without going so far as to allow people of the same sex to get married.

Much of Europe has civil unions. So does Canada. The state of Vermont has them, as do many of America's large cities. The major Democratic presidential candidates oppose gay marriage, but they are in favor of civil unions, a view that is shared by a large bloc of the American public. But while gay marriage would be a catastrophic revision of the most fundamental institution in human culture, civil unions have the potential of undermining heterosexual marriage.

Already, advocates of civil unions are touting their benefits for nonhomosexuals. Even nonsexual relationships—roommates, friends who share a house—could score some benefits. Couples who live together out of wedlock could have some rights, before deciding whether marriage is right for them. Elderly couples whose spouses have died could have a “union” without jeopardizing the inheritance rights of their earlier families.

Civil unions would become a sort of “marriage lite.” You could enter into them and take advantage of the legal benefits, but then leave them whenever you wanted. No messy divorces. No marital property laws. No alimony payments. No child support. All the benefits of marriage without any of the hassle.

Which raises the question, if you can get a civil union, why get married? Heterosexual couples in Europe and in Canada are already acting on this logic. They are registering for civil unions as a replacement for marriage. They live together, have kids, and raise them, just like any traditional family, but whenever they want to leave they can go their separate ways. Marriage lite drives out real marriage.

At the essence of marriage is its permanence. A man and a woman promise to form an exclusive relationship with each other, “till death us do part.” The biggest blow to the institution of marriage, of course, has been the mutation of divorce from a rare, but sometimes necessary concession, to a no-fault, socially acceptable event. But every culture in history recognizes that men and women—and especially their children—have a profound need for a permanent relationship with each other that binds them into lifelong families.

This is precisely the state’s interest in marriage. Since the family is the basis of society, governments must protect families. Marriage laws, including those that people now try to negotiate away with prenuptial agreements, exist to ensure the unity of the marriage bond. As far as the government is concerned, marriage is a civil union. If such unions no longer have to be permanent, the rest of marriage law could come unraveled.

Nancy Pearcey, in her forthcoming book *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*, traces the tendency to split all of life into an “upper story”—the realm of subjectivity, emotion, and private meaning—and a “lower story” of facts, objective reality, and everyday life. She shows how moral values and religious belief have been consigned to the upper story, where they no longer have an effect on the world.

Once there are two options for couples, marriage will be in the “upper story” of private morality, romance, and religiosity. Civil unions will be in the “lower story” of pragmatic, real-life law and practice. It will be possible to have both, but the lower story wins out every time, for all practical purposes. Usually, feelings are changeable, but external institutions are permanent. In this new arrangement, any permanence must be in the “feelings” realm, with change being institutionalized. Once civil unions are legal and in vogue, the basic human institution will be, literally, “put asunder.”

Legislation can deal with specific problems that various kinds of partners have without creating a new category of marriage. Let those with health insurance name whomever they want as beneficiaries on their family plans. Give hospital patients the right to say whom they want to visit them. Pass laws straightening out inheritance squabbles. Give tax breaks to roommates. Just keep heterosexuals from having the option of marriage lite.