

[MARRIAGE]

Marriage Matters

BY DAVID P. GALLAGHER

Many older adults today are asking clergy to perform a "lawful covenant" marriage rather than a "legal contract" marriage because their spouses are deceased and there are financial implications.

For example, John, age 71, is receiving Social Security benefits of \$1,000 a month, and his wife, Nancy, age 68, is receiving \$600 a month in benefits. If John dies, Nancy receives the higher of the two amounts, \$1,000 monthly. However, if Nancy remarries, the situation changes and she'll only receive her original benefit of \$600. For this reason many seniors are choosing not to get legally married. Sometimes they choose to live together unmarried, and sometimes they ask clergy to perform a service of commitment that isn't legally recorded by the state. There may be other legal and financial reasons as well that prevent older adults from wanting to remarry legally.

So is marriage a "contract," a mutually binding agreement between a man and a woman recognized as a legal civil contract by the state, which issues licenses for people to enter into such contracts?

Or is marriage a "covenant" between a man and a woman pledging themselves before God, their

Creator, to become "one flesh" as long as they live? In the United States, the first is the primary concept. The fact is that religious (church) ceremonies are accepted on a legal basis. Confusion

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same arguments that some young people give. They want to have the physical pleasures

arises because clergy are permitted to act as "agents for the state" to perform legal (contract) marriage ceremonies within the religious (covenant) marriage setting.

There are four reasons why I would not perform a marriage kept secret from the state:

1) Marriage is a legal contract that's sanctioned by the state.

Marriage is established by God (Genesis 2-3; Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:7-8; Ephesians 5). Financial pressures may seem to force people to live together, but at the same time, these are the

of marriage, but they don't formalize the relationship because they'd lose financial rewards (alimony, welfare benefits, and so on). At some point people need to ask whether or not

Response to 'Marriage Matters'

BY PAUL EPPINGER

I have problems seeking to expound a "biblical" view of marriage because there are several concepts of marriage, depending on the period of time focused on in the Bible.

The writers of Genesis, for example, perceived that male and female were created equal and that the purpose of marriage was the unique opportunity to discover the emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical intimacy required to become a total human being.

The patriarchs (2000 to 1700 B.C.) believed that women were inferior to men, that children were the means to ensure immortality and the

perpetuation of the family name, that the purpose of marriage was for the begetting of children, and that monogamous marriages were to be circumvented if the marriage didn't produce sons.

The monarchical period (1020 to 586 B.C.) perceived women as inferior to men, children as an extension of the work force, the purpose of marriage as providing positive diplomatic relations with foreign powers and among

the common people, and polygamous marriages as acceptable.

The prophets didn't mention marriage much, but they saw women as inferior to men, the purpose of marriage as providing children to extend the prophetic message or build up the nation with pure Israelites, and marriage as something that could and should be dissolved if its purpose was unfulfilled. For these reasons then, to talk about the biblical concept of marriage leads to confusion and misunderstanding.

So in response to Dr. Gallagher's four reasons why he wouldn't perform a marriage kept secret from the state...

1) Marriage is a legal contract that's sanctioned by the state—but Jesus was always more concerned with people than with

they're willing to do what is right in God's sight even if there are financial penalties for doing so. The supernatural aspect must be factored into the equation. Because the law says that we need a license, I believe that as Christians we should obey.

2) Ceremonies kept secret from the state offer a bad example. This bad example impacts the children, the grandchildren, other family members, and the rest of the congregation. We need to continue to uphold the biblical standards that marriage is God's ideal and urge couples to make the tough choice between economics and upholding biblical values. These couples could continue to be friends in celibacy and live as single people. Are sex and economics more important to most people than moral values? Somehow, society, including Christian couples, has caved in to economic excuses for living together without legal license.

3) Marriage has a biblical fabric. The fabric of marriage in a spiritual

and legal commitment, as a witness to strengthen family life, supersedes any economic factor. Jesus said that we should render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Mark 10 refers to divorce, and the text strongly implies deep commitment to a full marriage covenant. A legal marriage in the United States requires a license. Romans 13:1 tells us that we have a responsibility to deal with the governing authorities and that we're to live according to the laws of our country.

Not legalizing marriage means trying to use the ends to justify the means, which goes completely against Christian ethics. If we discourage young couples from living together for financial reasons, we should hold older adults to the same standard. I wonder if the usual concern of "cannot remarry for financial reasons" really means "find it financially less robust to remarry." These are wisdom issues in which prior decisions may be coming home to roost. Isn't the issue often a matter of a diminished standard of living rather than impoverishment or impossibility?

4) Intentional deception is incompatible with the biblical model.

An intentional nondisclosure of the marriage to the church, the public, or the governing authorities indicates an unwillingness to adhere to the biblical model of marriage. This is especially true in cases where individuals seek to gain the financial or social advantages of being single, while still wanting to enjoy the benefits of marriage. Marriage is for better or for worse; it's not a halfway commitment. It seems to me the issue is honesty. I wouldn't be able to encourage a couple to continue to receive governmental revenues based on what amounts to a deception, and I could not bring in the church, which I represent by performing such a ceremony, as a partner in the deception. ☪



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legal institutions. Jesus consistently shattered the all-too-hallowed institutions of the Sabbath, the Law, and the temple. Whenever any institution blinded, bound, or thwarted the person's development as a total human being, Jesus sought to change it. Jesus was interested and concerned with people, not legal institutions.

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2) Ceremonies kept secret from the state offer a bad example—but there are bad examples of marriage in the Bible. Abram claimed that Sarai was his adopted sister. He also had Hagar and Keturah as wives. Nahor, Eliphaz, Jacob, Esau, Gideon, Samuel's father, David, Solomon—all had several wives. What kind

of bad examples are these men?

3) Marriage has a biblical fabric—but there are many diverse examples of marriage in the Bible.

And all these examples were accepted as correct and legitimate during the historical

periods in which they existed. Love is the basic foundation for all marriages, and whether or not a marriage has been recognized by the state doesn't cancel its legitimacy. The biblical fabric must be love.

4) Intentional deception is incompatible with the biblical model—but that leads to a question.

Dr. Gallagher's central point here is honesty. My question is how honest is

it for our society (the government) to withhold money that the individuals have contributed during their lifetimes to Social Security just because they've signed a document that declares they're married? The basic honesty that must be presented and preserved is that of love.

For these reasons, if and when I'm invited to give a blessing to an elderly couple who don't want to have the civil ceremony of marriage, I'd do it immediately—because I believe that is what Jesus would do. ☪



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ment in Phoenix, Arizona.