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## Q&A#27 What Does it Mean to Call Marriage a Natural Institution?

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Today's question: "If marriage is a pre-political institution then none of the measures laid down by the state (e.g. registration, marriage certificates etc.) make a marriage legitimate in God's eyes. In which case, what does constitute a legitimate marriage in God's eyes? One answer I've been given, based on Genesis 1-2, is something along the lines of: a man and a woman who make promises to each other before God and some witnesses. What are your thoughts on this, and which passage(s) would you use to make your case?"

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## Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, if marriage is a pre-political institution, then none of the measures laid down by the state, for example registration, marriage certificates, etc. make a marriage legitimate in God's eyes? In which case, what does constitute a legitimate marriage in God's eyes? One answer I've been given, based on Genesis 1-2, is something along the lines of a man and a woman who make promises to each other before God and some witnesses.

What are your thoughts on this, and which passage or passages would you use to make your case? The claim that marriage is a pre-political institution is related to the stronger claim that marriage is a natural institution. As a natural institution, marriage is unlike

something like a university or a health service or an army that has been dreamt up as an institution invented by human beings. Marriage is something that arises from the very structure of nature itself.

The bond between a man and a woman is, in the claim that marriage is a natural institution, it's seen as something that is grounded within the natural order itself. This is not just an arbitrary pairing that has been created, but there's something fitting about this to the very nature of reality, that reality gives rise to this structure. When we go from society to society, we will see vast differences in the way that marriage is practiced.

In some societies, there will be polygamy, in others, there won't. In some societies, there will be a significant difference between the age of the marriage partners, in others, there won't. There will be different ages at which people enter into these marriage unions, different laws of inheritance, there will be different laws of where people live.

Will it be patrilocal or will it be matrilineal? Will it be patrilineal or will it be matrilineal? Will there be strong rules against consanguineous marriage or will there be an openness to that? How often will people marry people within their own extended family? What particular relations are open to be married? Do we have a practice of endogamy or exogamy, marrying outside the group? All these different things represent areas in which practices of marriage can vary from society to society. The claim that marriage is a natural institution, however, is first of all, it's not a claim that marriage or monogamy is the common way of doing things. It may be, but that's not the claim being made.

The claim that marriage is a natural institution is not just a claim about marriage being a regular thing, a common thing. It's a claim that marriage is something that is fitting to reality itself. Monogamy, the joining together of a man and a wife in a faithful bond for life and an exclusive bond for life, that that is something comporting to reality itself.

And so it's a statement about reality and nature, not just about marriage. Beyond this, we need to recognise that from society to society, there will be different ways of doing these things and the way in which conventions and customs and just general principles arise out of this legal structures and systems and the broader institution of the family and marriage. These things are adumbrating or filling out around the reality of the natural union of a man and a wife, of a man and a woman in a sexual union that is ordered towards natural ends to the bearing of children.

Now, this can be a difficult thing for us to understand within modern society. We don't usually think of natural institutions. And so the claim that marriage is a natural institution is one that certain people balk at.

But it makes it helps us to understand the commonalities across societies. There are all these differences in these aspects of marriage and how it's practised. But beneath all of

those, there's the recognition, the almost universal recognition that marriage is about the bringing together of a man and a woman in a sexual union and that one of its primary ends is the bearing of children.

And it's about creating a realm that protects and honours that place where we all arise in. We're all born into the world within such a union. Now, when we think in modern society, marriage has changed quite considerably.

So within modern society, marriage has been privatised in various ways. So, for instance, in the issue about same-sex marriage, when people were talking about marriage, it was just assumed that the norms of marriage were just things that people choose to enter into or not. The idea that the norms of marriage rest upon everyone, to some extent or other, that if you're not married, you're expected to be chaste and sexually abstinent.

That expectation is not one that you have within modern understandings of marriage. Marriage is just a thing for certain people to enter into. It's not a general norm for the whole of society that shapes everyone's practice.

So that's a significant difference. It's a de-institutionalisation of marriage. The treating of marriage primarily as a lifestyle choice and an economic decision, things like that, that's validated by society, rather than something that comes with a set of norms and responsibilities and all these other things that marriage has traditionally involved.

And within our understanding of marriage, it's also a very, it's focused upon companionship. In a society where we're very atomised and lonely, marriage is that union in which you can find connection and companionship and something to deal with the loneliness. And so people who are held out of the institution of marriage are held out of something that's serving purposes that marriage traditionally did not serve to the same extent.

And we should understand why that can be resisted and pushed against by so many people. When we're thinking about marriage, then, as a natural institution, what we're talking about is something that is grounded within nature itself, that is witnessed to by the commonality of these structures across societies. That even in all the differences that they have, there has been this consistent down to the, until fairly recently, this consistent recognition that there is something about the union between a man and a woman that is especially worthy of honour, recognition, social sanction and structure.

And that social sanction and structure is not just a celebration of it, however it forms. Rather, it's a recognition that this is such a significant relationship, such an important one for our well-being as a society that needs to be regulated, that needs to be well-ordered, that we can't have a practice of marriage where people do not hold themselves to a proper structure. Now, this suggests that a natural institution is not just something that plays out automatically.

A natural institution is not just the way things occur naturally, without any intervention. Rather, as a natural institution, the claim is that we are to comport ourselves to the natural order, to that union between man and woman that has been blessed with fruitfulness. Now, to do that well, we have to be people who can make and keep promises.

We have to be people who can form this union and remain in this union faithfully. We have to be a society that supports that faithfulness. And we have to do this in a way that is expressive of love and enables the fruitfulness and the growth and the life that should be characteristic of that union.

And so as a natural institution, it is something that's not grounded upon any decision of society. Society has its customs and it has its conventions and its rules and its laws that surround marriage. But those are just to surround the fundamentally natural thing that will always express itself differently from society to society.

And those customs are important because marriage does not come into the world unclothed. Marriage, like clothes, it is natural for human beings to wear clothes. That does not mean that clothes naturally grow on our bodies, but is natural for us to wear clothes.

There's something about the human being for which clothes are fitting. We're naked creatures and as we wear clothes, it's an expression of our glory. It's an expression of our peculiar relationship to the world, one that other animals don't share.

In the same way, it's natural for us to have language. As human beings, we have many different languages. We have many different styles of clothing.

But all those languages and styles of clothing are fundamentally expressing something that's natural to us. And in the same way with marriage. That marriage is a natural thing in the same way as language is natural to us or clothing is natural to us.

These are ways in which we relate to each other and to the world that if they were stripped from us, if we had them removed from us, we'd be left bereft of something that is important for our rising to our full humanity. And so as Christians, this statement that we're making about marriage is not one that's based upon a divine command. It's based upon the natural order itself.

And so I think a helpful passage to go to is when Jesus talks about marriage in Matthew 19. And he answered and said to them, Have you not read that he who made them at the beginning made them male and female and said, For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. So then they are no longer two, but one flesh.

Therefore, what God has joined together, let not man separate. It's important to think

about the logic of this. Jesus doesn't say that God said at the beginning that men and women must get married, that man and woman are to be joined together in this marital union.

Rather, what this is all grounded in is God's creation of humanity as male and female. It's grounded in God's creation, not some command that is given to that creation. And so the creation of humanity as male and female and the woman being taken from the side of the man, that is the reason for marriage, for the two being joined together and becoming one flesh.

Because of the nature of God's creation itself, not because of some command that has been given. So the idea that marriage is some religious thing, that a religious claim that's being made, that's not one that Christians should accept. Rather, we should argue that marriage is natural.

It's built into creation itself. And we will not understand any of the things that we're talking about within our society if we do not understand this natural order. It's important to recognise that so many of our debates about sex, sexuality, gender, marriage, and all these other issues increasingly take place in a disoriented fashion because we've removed that big reality of male and female being created to bear children from the middle of the picture.

Once that's removed, everything else starts to become confused. I mean, what does it mean for me to be male? What does it mean for someone to be female? Why should we join together as man and woman? Why not man and man or woman and woman? Or why not just have polyamorous thruplets or whatever? Why do we have to, thruples, why do we have to have this pair bonding? It's not just because there's something magical about the number two. It's about the fact of male and female and their union that can be formed is one that only a male and female can form.

And that union is one that is given in creation itself. It's the union into which people are born. When we talk about becoming one flesh, male and female become one flesh in sexual union, but also in the bearing of children, a very concrete way of becoming one flesh.

And so to understand this in a way that takes marriage, that takes the natural order seriously, is really important within our current context, because so many people treat marriage as if it were primarily a divine command, rather than something that's part of nature itself. And so you can't just cede to societies the idea that, oh, well, Christian marriage is about male and female. But marriage within society can be between any partners who choose.

No, as Christians, we're arguing something about nature itself, not just about what God says. So how can we argue for a definition of marriage? What is a sufficient

understanding of marriage? The answer that was suggested within the question is a man and a woman who make promises to each other before God and some witnesses. Now, there seem to be some things just immediately, there seem to be some things missing from this.

There's no mention of a sexual union. I think that's the most obvious thing. Marriage has sex at the heart of it.

There's something about the sexual union between the two parties in marriage that is worthy of public recognition, celebration, sanction and regulation. The idea that if you have extramarital relations, that you are compromising that union, that you have broken that union. And it also means that as a natural union, a natural institution, marriage isn't just something that we can have a bespoke form of.

We can have different cultural forms of it from society to society, which are dressing up the fundamental reality. But the idea, for instance, that you could have an open marriage, you can have a marriage that's just sexually exclusive. It's really up to you.

It just depends what floats your boat. That's not something that comports with this understanding of marriage as a natural institution. As a natural institution, we can't just make marriage to be what we want it to be.

Making promises to each other before God and some witnesses. What are those promises? Is there a particular form that they are comports to? I mean, the promise, there's almost a, there's almost a circular definition here. If there's no sense of what they are promising, what they are entering into.

The presence of witnesses and God and the informal event that marriage should involve a wedding. What about common law marriages? Are those still marriages? I think within scripture, there'd be good reason to say that there are maybe a way of entering into marriage that's not very appropriate. But it's a marriage nonetheless.

So we would seem to need the idea of sexual union, things like cohabitation. And we would need also the idea of something more than just a wedding. There has to be something about the union that is established over time.

That has to be, those promises have to be validated somehow. So just making promises and then doing nothing to change anything. Those promises would be empty.

Rather, there has to be some sort of cohabitation, some sort of sexual union for marriage to be consummated. Entering into marriage consensually and legally and appropriately is important. But to actually establish a marriage, there has to be sexual union.

And this is something that has been debated in various, or developed in various ways over the Western tradition. With the Germanic tradition very much focusing upon

cohabitation and the Roman, Latin tradition more upon consensus in the original Roman tradition. And so that increasingly within the church, that fused into both of those things together.

That both of those are needed for a marriage to be legitimate. And it's entering into something that you've not decided the shape of yourself. That marriage, the shape of marriage is given to us.

The question is, are we going to be faithful to the institution that we've been brought into? An institution that's built around the fact that humanity has created male and female. And that they can join together as one flesh. And so the institution of marriage is the joining together of man and woman in a manner that is entered into appropriately.

And that is faithfully worked out in accordance with the natural order. And so mere promiscuous sleeping around is not marriage. Likewise, a relationship based upon coercion is not marriage.

Something that's entered into unlawfully is also, can also be seen as not marriage. So for instance, if someone has another wife and then enters into a marriage by deception, then that's not lawful either. And so I think we need to flesh out this definition a bit more.

I don't think it's a sufficient definition. I would go, when we're talking about passages, I would just go where Jesus argues. Jesus uses Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 and brings those two things together.

And he bases it all upon creation. That creation is a natural institution, that marriage is a natural institution is based upon the way that the world is created. It's based upon the fact that male and female are created to bear fruit.

That they are created to enter into one flesh union that is blessed. And as a result of that, marriage is a formalisation of that through social structures, addressing up of the natural order, addressing up of that blessed union. And so it's a way that society honours what God has blessed.

It's a way of recognising the importance of this and its need to be appropriately approached if it's going to be conducive to the health of society. Because when it's not, things break down and society starts to unravel. And so the importance here, I think, is to go straight to creation, not to go just to some biblical command that we can present people with.

As if this was merely God's construction of reality. But reality itself is ambivalent on this front. No, reality itself calls for male and female union and for the need to honour and give that particular recognition.

And so the idea within our society that this is just heterosexist or something along those

lines. That the fact that marriage is male and female is merely a result of the patriarchy and the fact that heterosexuals are more common than homosexuals. This is not actually the case.

Quite the opposite. It's because the very nature of reality testifies to the blessedness and the importance of the union between male and female and the need to protect and to honour that in a particular way. And so marriage, as we go from society to society, what societies are doing are recognising a natural reality.

And building structures around that to protect and to encourage it. To ensure that it is practised in a way that is honourable. Practised in a way that is in accordance with reality.

Calling us to be faithful to that reality. To practise our relationships in a way that are conducive to the good of nature being achieved. That union between man and woman.

That fruitful union having its full effect. And that requires sexual exclusivity. It requires lifelong faithfulness.

And these sorts of things which are a development out of the natural order. An attempt to ensure that that natural good will rise to its full flourishing. I hope that this helps.

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