



CanaVox Notes on the Meaning of Marriage

In *What We Cheer For* we show our support for the conjugal understanding of marriage as a comprehensive union of persons: a union of hearts, minds, and bodies in which spouses achieve true organic bodily union. In these notes we'd like to unpack some main ideas behind that view, as developed by Robert P. George, Sherif Girgis, and Ryan Anderson in several articles and books in the last decade, and as advanced by CanaVox dialogues around the world on the meaning of marriage.

To begin with, there are two rival definitions of marriage, the consent based view of marriage and the comprehensive view of marriage.¹

The Consent-Based View of marriage essentially holds that marriage requires:

- A. consent and commitment (but not necessarily permanency);
- B. two people to join the union (though some think it could be more) and
- C. an intense romantic emotion. That your partner be your “#1 person.”²

By contrast, **the Comprehensive Union or Conjugal View** requires a union of *several dimensions* of our being. It requires:

- A. A union of hearts, minds/wills *and* bodies between a man and a woman,
- B. intrinsically ordered towards the creation of children
- C. which unites them (1) permanently (or life long) and (2) exclusively.³

Let's look at these latter claims slowly.

A. A union of hearts, minds/wills and bodies between a man and a woman

¹ Another way to refer to the “consent-based” view of marriage is as the “soulmate” view of marriage or the “revisionist” view of marriage. We follow the authors’ lead in referring to the historic understanding of marriage as “comprehensive” or “conjugal” and prefer not to use other terms often used, such as “traditional” marriage or “institutional” marriage. “Traditional” carries some baggage, and can be faintly derogatory on the relationship between the sexes. “Institutional marriage” can convey that marriage is a creation of the state, whereas marriage arises naturally in societies reasoning about what natural rights and duties are owed to the mother, child and father in their procreative triangle. All in all, the new name “comprehensive marriage” gets to the heart of what is essential of marriage without the baggage of other adjectives for marriage.

² John Corvino’s description, cited by Ryan Anderson (2015). p. 15

³ Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson, Robert P. George, *What is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense*. p. 23. See also Robert P. George, *Clash of Orthodoxies*, p. 77: “Marriage is a two-in-one-flesh communion of persons that is consummated and actualized by acts that are reproductive in type, whether or not they are reproductive in effect.”

The most important element here is the bodily union. Whereas all other friendships can include a union of hearts, minds and wills, only in marriage can spouses achieve true, organic bodily union.

Girgis, George and Anderson explain what **organic union (or organ union) means**. First they draw our attention to other organs of the human body, for instance, the lungs, the heart or the stomach, and note that, with respect to respiration, circulation or digestion, our biological systems are sufficient and complete. One does not need anyone else's lung in order to breathe, or anyone else's stomach in order to digest.

With respect to reproduction, however, we are incomplete. Each person has only a part of the sexual organs necessary to procreate. We have lost sight of the remarkable uniqueness and wonder of the reproductive system, that each person requires *someone else's organ* in order to become a complete organism capable of procreation. (Imagine, by analogy, if you needed to hug someone and interlock your hearts in order to circulate blood!) In the sexual embrace, the male and female form a *single organism*; a single reproductive unity; a real (and *not* a metaphorical) "one flesh union."⁴

Because the consent-based view lacks sexual union, it proposes marriage to be just like any other relationship of friendship, or companionship, only a more intense version. "Rather than understanding marriage correctly as different in kind from other relationships, the consent-based view sees in it only a difference of degree: marriage has what all other relationships have, but more of it."⁵ This makes it very tricky to regulate by law, because technically, a mother daughter duo can claim to be married, as can siblings, trios, polygamous networks and countless other relationships that satisfy the consent-based requirements.

Another requirement of conjugal marriage which we mention only in passing since it is not in great dispute today, is that there be a union of "wills," or that the marriage be voluntary, freely entered. If the bride or groom marry because some pressure is coercing them, then it is a kind of mock union, a farce.⁶ We share this insistence on *consent* with our adversaries' definition of marriage; and the three major world religions --Judaism, Christianity, and Islam-- all hold that a forced marriage is an invalid marriage.

B. Intrinsically ordered towards the creation of children

The act that unites a couple body and soul, love-making, is also a *reproductive* act, even if it is not reproductive *in effect*. Therefore, marriage is intrinsically oriented towards (or aims at the goal of) children.

That said, children are not necessary to have a real and complete marriage. Children *enrich* what is already complete, the united spouses. They *crow*n a marriage. They are "perfective participants in the

⁴ "What is Marriage?" *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy*. (Vol. 34, no.1 Winter 2011), Section B.1. and Girgis, Anderson, George, *What is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense* (Encounter Books, 2012) pp. 25-26.

⁵ Ryan Anderson, *Truth Overruled* (2015), p. 15.

⁶ So, although the "Consent-Based" view of marriage gets its title and name from the free act of consent, that does not mean that consent is not important or is somehow lacking in the comprehensive view. In past eras of history, the *voluntary* condition of marriage was stressed much more by the defenders of marriage, when marriage debates centered around whether arranged marriages were valid, or whether child-marriages were permissible, since children were not old enough to fully understand/consent to what they were doing. In our time, individual choice and autonomy are highly valued, so consent —*as a condition for marriage*—is not in dispute today.

organic community (i.e. the family) that is established by their parents marriage.”⁷ That is why we say that marriage is “ordered” towards children, but not that a marriage must have children to be a real marriage. Otherwise, the spouses’ unity would be a mere means towards the good of procreation, which is false. Marriage is an end-in-itself.

Couples with infertility are therefore fully married, because they are united in all the essential dimensions of their being and have ordered their actions towards the creation of children, even if their marital embrace does not *result* in conception. From the standpoint of natural law, they have full marriages. There is simply no comparison to two men or two women, whose bodies cannot unite, even remotely, in the reproductive act.⁸ And, couples with infertility can also choose to crown their marriages with adopted children, providing a mother and father to a precious child who needs a stable family.

C. Which unites them (1) permanently (or life-long) and (2) exclusively.⁹

Because it is comprehensive, or total, leaving nothing behind, the spouses must also pledge sexual exclusivity and permanence. The *thoroughness* of the union means that it lasts through time (is permanent) and at every moment (is exclusive).¹⁰

The pledge is essentially a promise *never to give up* on the other person, a pledge of unconditional love--when healthy or unhealthy, wealthy or unwealthy, when tempted to go with another or not-- to care for each other’s flourishing well into old age. This is to say that the promise of permanency is first given for the sake of the *adults* forging the union.

The pledge of exclusivity and permanence is augmented, however, by any children born of their union. Because children take a decades to educate and rear, and continue to benefit from their parents’ union late into adulthood, marriage has an internal logic of permanency; children reinforce the norm of lasting commitment. Put negatively, divorce deprives children of their intact biological family, and infidelity takes away the parent’s attention from their spouse and children to other lovers and possibly children from other relationships. Children are the primary reason why from the point of view of the *state*, marriages should be long lasting and stable. “The stability of marriage... best ensures that children will know the committed love of those whose union brought them forth. This gives them the best shot at becoming healthy and happy people, which affects every other social good. That is why every society with the merest ambition to thrive has socially regulated male-female sexual bonds: to shore up the stabilizing norms of marriage, on which social order rests.”¹¹

Legally, then, it is a tragedy that *Obergefell* has redefined marriage to be understood as mere companionship for adult fulfillment, as the consent-based view claims it is.

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⁷ Robert P. George, *Clash of Orthodoxies* (2001), p. 80. See also Girgis, George and Anderson, *What is Marriage? Man and Woman a Defense* (2012), p. 30

⁸ As we sometimes point out in reading group discussions, rectal intercourse is not organic union. It is a mismatch of the digestive system (anus) and reproductive system’s organs interacting in forced ways, which are also *rife* with medical risk.

⁹ Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson, Robert P. George, *What is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense*. p. 23. See also Robert P. George, *Clash of Orthodoxies*, p. 77: “Marriage is a two-in-one-flesh communion of persons that is consummated and actualized by acts that are reproductive in type, whether or not they are reproductive in effect.”

¹⁰ See *What is Marriage?* Harvard Journal (2011), p. 14-15

¹¹ Sherif Girgis, “*Check your Blindspot: What is Marriage?*” *Public Discourse* (2013).