

Solemnize Me

It's time for gay covenant marriage.

By William Saletan

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Dearly beloved, we are gathered to join together these two ideas in holy matrimony. On the right, covenant marriage, an option legalized by some states but widely shunned as too conservative. On the left, gay marriage, an option widely sought but outlawed as too radical. Covenant marriage, in which spouses choose to make divorce more difficult, has become a forlorn maiden, a home without a constituency. Meanwhile, the gay marriage movement has become a frustrated suitor, a constituency without a home. Let us bless them, that they may join as one flesh: gay covenant marriage.

How did these two young movements come to be so perfectly made for each other? The story begins many years ago, when gays and lesbians, having campaigned for a right to privacy and then for equal treatment in the workplace, sought legal recognition as families. As their ambitions grew, so did resistance. In states where judges gave them the right to marry, voters [took it away](#). Two years ago, after the highest court in Massachusetts ruled that gay residents could no longer be denied marriage, voters passed ballot measures against the practice in [13 states](#). A few weeks from today—on [6/6/06](#), for those of you keeping track in your copy of Revelation—the U.S. Senate will vote on a [constitutional amendment](#) to ban same-sex marriage.

Supporters of gay equality think they can demand marriage like any other right. They call it "[marriage equality](#)" or "[freedom to marry](#)." But in the minds of most Americans, not all freedoms—or equalities—are equal. Three years ago, in a Pew Research survey, 80 percent of Americans agreed that gays shouldn't face "restrictions on sex between consenting adults in the privacy of their own home." Nevertheless, 56 percent worried that same-sex marriage "would [undermine the traditional American family](#)." In Gallup polls on homosexuality, support for "equal rights in terms of job opportunities" approaches 90 percent, but solid majorities [oppose](#) offering gay couples the "same rights as traditional marriages." Last month, a Pew survey found that majorities think gays should be allowed to serve openly in the military but [not to marry](#).

Why do people who tolerate gay equality in other realms of life draw the line at marriage? Look at a [letter](#) recently signed by 50 religious leaders in support of the constitutional amendment. Marriage "sustains civil society," they write. "When marriage is entered into and gotten out of lightly, when it is no longer the boundary of sexual activity, or when it is allowed to be radically redefined, a host of personal and civic ills can be expected to follow." Divorce and illegitimacy were bad enough, the letter warns; now courts are twisting marriage into "an elastic concept able to accommodate almost any individual preference."

This is what keeps same-sex marriage, unlike sexual privacy or workplace equality, on the wrong side of public opinion. Marriage isn't like a job or a tryst. It's an honor and a

responsibility. You can't assume or demand it; you have to earn it. The whole point of marriage is that it's bigger than you. It's usually about kids, and it's always about commitment. Suing for it in the name of freedom or equal access rubs people the wrong way. It sounds like you're trying to loosen the commitment or stretch the boundaries to suit you. Marriage doesn't come to you. You have to come to marriage.

That's what inspired the covenant marriage movement. Beginning in 1997, [Louisiana](#), [Arizona](#), and [Arkansas](#) enacted laws making covenant marriage an option. If you buy in, here are the [rules](#): Before marrying, you have to go through counseling. You have to affirm orally and in writing that your marriage is "for life," that you accept its "responsibilities," that you've "chosen each other carefully," that you've "disclosed to one another everything" important to the marital decision, and that you'll "take all reasonable efforts to preserve our marriage, including marital counseling." Divorce takes longer than today's no-fault dissolutions, and the grounds are narrower. The prescribed waiting period is usually two years.

The pioneers of covenant marriage thought their followers would flock to it. They were wrong. In states conservative enough to promote it, fewer than [one in 100](#) marrying couples has chosen this option—about [6,000 to 7,000 couples](#), judging from [published data](#). Meanwhile, in states liberal enough to permit same-sex marriage or civil unions, thousands of gay couples have signed up—more than 7,300 in [Massachusetts](#), 1,200 in [Vermont](#) (6,600 more if you count out-of-staters), and 700 in [Connecticut](#). More than 3,700 gay couples have registered for domestic partnerships in [New Jersey](#); another 30,000 or so have registered in [California](#). Despite being absurdly outnumbered, more blue-state gay couples than red-state straight couples are signing up for as much commitment as the law allows. And that's not counting gay couples agitating for marriage in other states.

So here's what we have: On the right, empty pews in the church of commitment. On the left, people fighting to get in. It's a match made in heaven. There's just one problem: Covenant marriage laws exclude same-sex couples.

If covenant marriage were opened to gays, many on the left would spurn it. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force calls it "[reactionary](#)" and chafes [even at the notion of pre-divorce counseling](#). Last year, when Gov. Mike Huckabee, R-Ark., upgraded his marriage to a covenant, activists crashed the ceremony with a banner demanding "[Queer Equality](#)." Moderate gay organizations, however, [have yet to weigh in](#). Two years ago, John O'Sullivan, editor-at-large of *National Review*, mused on the possibility of calling their bluff. "Just how many gay couples would sign up for a marriage that really was lifelong?" he [asked](#). "It would be a searching test of consistency. And it would also settle the question of whether gays seeking marriage are seeking public commitment to a lifelong partnership or merely absolutely equal status for homosexuality."

Fair enough. But the test goes both ways. In their foundational statement on marriage, Catholic, Baptist, and evangelical leaders [claim](#) to be defending it against cohabitation, divorce, and "diminishing interest in and readiness for marrying." They call for "mentor

couples" and "influence within society" to promote marriage. Can you imagine a more powerful influence than finding out that the gay couple down the block has a stronger marriage than you do? Can you imagine a more powerful way for that couple to earn society's respect? Here's a chance to get more marriage, less cohabitation, and less divorce. Is that what conservatives want? Or would they rather keep out the gays?

If anyone can show just cause why these two movements may not be joined together, let him speak now or forever hold his peace.

A Christian Declaration on Marriage

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As we celebrate the 2000th anniversary of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, entering the third millennium, we pledge together to honor the Lord by committing ourselves afresh to God's first institution-marriage.

We believe that marriage is a holy union of one man and one woman in which they commit, with God's help, to build a loving, life-giving, faithful relationship that will last for a lifetime. God has established the married state, in the order of creation and redemption, for spouses to grow in love of one another and for the procreation, nurture, formation, and education of children.

We believe that in marriage many principles of the Kingdom of God are manifested. The interdependence of healthy Christian community is clearly exemplified in loving one another (John 13:34), forgiving one another (Ephesians 4:32), confessing to one another (James 5:16), and submitting to one another (Ephesians 5:21). These principles find unique fulfillment in marriage. Each, therefore, has its own obligations to prepare, strengthen, support and restore marriages.

Our nation is threatened by a high divorce rate, a rise in cohabitation, a rise in non-marital births, a decline in the marriage rate, and a diminishing interest in and readiness for marrying, especially among young people. The documented adverse impact of these trends on children, adults, and society is alarming. Therefore, as church leaders, we recognize and unprecedented need and responsibility to help couples begin, build, and sustain better marriages, and to restore those threatened by divorce.

Motivated by our common desire that God's Kingdom be manifested on earth as it is in heaven, we pledge to deepen our commitment to marriage. With three quarters of marriages performed by clergy, churches are uniquely positioned not only to call America to stronger commitment to the holy union but to provide practical ministries and influence for reversing the course of our culture. It is evident in cities across the nation that where churches join in common commitment to restore a priority on marriage, divorces are reduced and communities are positively influenced

Therefore, we call on churches throughout America to do their part to strengthen marriage in our nation by providing:

- Prayer and spiritual support for stronger marriages
- Encouragement for people to marry
- Education for young people about the meaning and responsibility of marriage
- Preparation for those engaged to be married
- Pastoral care, including qualified mentor couples, for couples at all stages of their relationship
- Help for couples experiencing marital difficulties and disruption
- Influence within society and the culture to uphold the institution of marriage

Further, we urge churches in every community to join in developing policies and programs with concrete goals to reduce the divorce rate and increase the marriage rate.

By our commitment to marriage as instituted by God, the nature of His Kingdom will be more clearly revealed in our homes, our churches, and our culture. To that end we pray and labor with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

May the grace of God, the presence of Christ, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit be abundant in all those who so commit and be a blessing to all whose marriages we seek to strengthen.

Signers and presenters at November 14, 2000 press conference, Washington, D.C.

Cardinal William Keeler
Archbishop of Baltimore
National Conference of Catholic Bishops

Bishop Kevin W. Mannoia, President
National Association of Evangelicals

Dr. Richard Land, President
Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission
Southern Baptist Convention



RELIGIOUS COALITION FOR MARRIAGE

[A Letter from America's Religious Leaders in Defense of Marriage](#)

Throughout America, the institution of marriage is suffering. As leaders in our nation's religious communities, we cannot sit idly by. It is our duty to speak. And so across the lines of theological division, we have united to affirm, in one voice, the following:

For millennia our societies have recognized the union of a man and a woman in the bond of marriage. Cross-culturally virtually every known human society understands marriage as a union of male and female. As such marriage is a universal, natural, covenantal union of a man and a woman intended for personal love, support and fulfillment, and the bearing and rearing of children. Sanctioned by and ordained of God, marriage both precedes and sustains civil society.

Marriage is particularly important for the rearing of children as they flourish best under the long term care and nurture of their father and mother. For this and other reasons, when marriage is entered into and gotten out of lightly, when it is no longer the boundary of sexual activity, or when it is allowed to be radically redefined, a host of personal and civic ills can be expected to follow. Such a point has always been stressed by the world's great monotheistic religious traditions and is, today, increasingly confirmed by impeccable social science research.

Long concerned with rates of divorce, out-of-wedlock births, and absentee fathers, we have recently watched with extreme alarm the growing trend of some courts to make marriage something it is not: an elastic concept able to accommodate almost any individual preference. This does not so much modify or even weaken marriage as abolish it. The danger this betokens for family life and a general condition of social justice and ordered liberty is hard to overestimate.

Therefore, we take the unprecedented stand of uniting to call for a constitutional amendment to establish a uniform national definition of marriage as the exclusive union of one man and one woman. We are convinced that this is the only measure that will adequately protect marriage from those who would circumvent the legislative process and force a redefinition of it on the whole of our society. We encourage all citizens of good will across the country to step forward boldly and exercise their right to work through our constitutionally established democratic procedures to amend the Constitution to include a national definition of marriage. We hereby announce our support for S.J. Res.1, the Marriage Protection Amendment.

May God bless all marriages and all those who labor to protect the sanctity and promote the goodness of marriage throughout this nation.

Signed,

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