

Marriage on Trial

Glenn Stanton and Bill Maier, *Marriage on Trial* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004)

Reviewed by Juliana Weber

Stanton and Maier deal sensitively with what is, obviously, a very personal topic: same-sex “marriage.” Their tone of compassion and empathetic concern is a refreshing one. Both sides of the issue would benefit from their example. Writing in a user-friendly Q&A format, they wrap up each section with “cheat sheets” to provide helpful summaries of their main points. The most interesting part of the book, however, may be the Appendix, which is an interview with two people who have overcome unwanted homosexual attractions and who discuss their experiences openly.

The authors’ main contention is that marriage is about more than personal fulfillment or “merely a sentimental relationship between two people” (p. 95), even though many heterosexual marriages treat it just that shallowly, as evidenced by the social experiment with divorce these past several decades. To the contrary, both “Love and commitment are necessary, but not sufficient to form a marriage” (p. 25). Natural marriage has more to do with socializing men, protecting women, and providing a mother and father to every child (p. 46). Men and women *complete* each other (p. 11), forming a whole from two parts (p. 25), and such complementarity is optimal both in parenting and in one’s own personal development. Since society has a stake in setting norms for sexual relations, leading respectful domestic lives, forming families, and raising children (p. 35), public laws may appropriately discriminate between types of relationships that should and should not be publicly supported.

There is little favorable research concerning parenting results for gay couples. The existing research shows similarities between children being raised by homosexual couples and children of divorce. The idea of same-sex “marriage” implies that gender is simply a matter of mechanics or body parts (pp. 55-7); that gay or straight lifestyles are merely options, of equal importance and value to society. Furthermore, if it is admitted as a fundamental human right, there really cannot be a religious exemption to it.

The book has other weaknesses. The correlations between marriage and mental, physical, and financial wellness, adduced in Chapter 8, are not enough to establish which is the cause and which the effect. It is interesting that the highest rates of mental disorder occur among divorcees, but perhaps mental illness makes couples more likely to divorce (p. 99). That would also explain why divorcees are worse off than widows (p. 100). Nor is it clear that social programs to promote marriage would necessarily also bear fruit in other areas.

Chapter 9 builds an argument based on the overwhelming body of evidence showing that children turn out best when they are raised by both biological parents. The authors argue that society has no reason to recognize those relationships which are incapable of producing children biologically related to both parents in the household. Infertile heterosexual couples remain the unmentioned elephant in the room throughout the chapter (addressed indirectly in Chapter 10,

which discusses the complementarity of sexual difference as fruitful in itself). However, it is noteworthy that step-parents pose a greater risk for child abuse than biological parents, and step-families may produce more emotional and behavioral problems in children than single-parent families. This research indicates that society could reasonably consider discouraging step-parenting in all forms. This would address certain kinds of artificial reproduction and the high divorce/ remarriage rate, in addition to the recognition of same sex “marriage.” Disappointingly, the authors do not discuss, for example, the fact that children already given away to adoption fare better with non-biological parents than they would with no parents at all, but reasons to deny adoption rights to gay couples also arrive in the next chapter.

Chapter 10 addresses the complementarity of the sexes and how that contributes to the healthy parenting of healthy children. Calling motherly and fatherly love “qualitatively” different (p. 113), the authors list ways in which mothers and fathers create different experiences for their children (p. 114). Any list is prone to stereotyping, and perhaps everyone knows a couple that breaks the mold. Still, the stereotypes persist. Gender-based differences in styles of communication styles or discipline, and ways of thinking and acting, might just be indestructible and meaningful after all. This, it seems, is the most necessary chapter for the overall argument of the book, though it is one of the shortest.

Part of the reason that thinking about sex differences is so new, they argue, is that they used to be more obvious; that is, prior to the emergence of birth control pills. When childbearing became separated from marriage and abortion became widespread, the definition of marriage changed to one of “a private, expressive, emotional relationship between two people” (p. 123). Marriage was no longer perceived as a service to society, something meant to be productive in itself. The divorce revolution made even the marriage vow optional, with the excuse that healthier parents would naturally lead to healthier children – an excuse that “actually worked out far worse for both children and adults than anyone ever imagined” (p. 123). A man and a woman can complete one another, whereas same-sex relationships “can’t provide the many dynamics humanity needs to live well and produce the next generation” (p. 126). We feel the difference when we are in a group of just men or just women; the dynamic changes when just one person of the opposite sex enters the room. “Ponder how deeply this absence would be felt in the smallness and intimacy of a family” (p. 127). The difference is real, and the complementarity it allows for “is what provides the rich positive benefits of marriage for adults, children and society” (emphasis removed, p. 127). This is for the sake not of religious exemption, but of a healthy society, the authors argue.

It is commonly argued that homosexuality is inborn and unchangeable, something akin to race or gender, because such an argument places gay rights in the context of race and gender equality, the authors note. Gay rights become another step in the march toward a free society coming into itself. Stanton and Maier challenge the studies that would support this argument. No replicable study has shown that homosexuality is *determined* by genes or biology (pp. 133-6), but there are some studies showing that particular kinds of family dynamics and sexual abuse are common among people with homosexual attractions (pp. 136-8). It appears that a complex interaction of factors, including genes and biology, psychology and social dynamics, contribute to sexual orientation (p. 138). Coupling this with a chapter on the abnormality of homosexuality (e.g., its high correlation with mental illness, drug abuse, and domestic violence even in so-called gay-friendly countries such as the Netherlands) strengthens the case against the legitimacy of a

homosexual lifestyle (Chapter 13). Rather, sexual orientation can be flexible (unlike race or gender), and a substantial number of people who seek treatment for unwanted homosexual attractions achieve “much less depression” and “good heterosexual functioning” (p. 153). A strong minority of those with unwanted homosexual attractions are able to make a complete break from homosexual attractions (p. 153). The authors affirm that there are those with deep-seated homosexual tendencies, whose condition may be resistant to treatment (p. 151), but it does not follow from this that homosexuality is inborn or unchangeable in the same way as race or gender. The appended interview explores the genesis (unmet needs, abuse, etc.) and decline (fulfillment of unmet needs, unconditional love, affirmation and acceptance) of those unwanted attractions in great personal detail (pp. 176-91).

Finally, the authors point out that it would be helpful if individual gay rights activists stopped pretending to speak for the group. There are those in the gay community who desire same sex “marriage”; but there are others who have no interest in it; and there are those who would like to validate many forms of relationships, marriage being only one such arrangement (pp. 157-65). There are also those in the gay community who reason (p. 167, emphasis original):

“that legalizing same sex marriage will ultimately harm all of us. And since Nathanson is gay, it’s difficult to claim he’s motivated by intolerance or homophobia. Quite to the contrary; he simply understands the importance of natural marriage and places *the greater good of society* above his own personal preferences.”

Juliana Weber is a graduate of Ave Maria University currently on staff at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Washington, DC. She also holds a BA in Psychology from SUNY-Fredonia.