

Thanks to everyone for attending. And I would like to thank Pastor Yucan for graciously allowing me to participate in this panel. I'm here today to speak against California Proposition 8, which is to say I am here to speak in support of legalized Gay marriage.

Currently I am a sociologist-in-training, and through that training we sociologists come to learn that one of the most important parts of an argument is defining one's terms. So that's where I'd like to begin today, namely, through defining what exactly American society means when it uses the word "marriage." It seems to me that when Americans invoke the word marriage, they are in fact potentially referring to three distinct concepts, which today I will call civil marriage, symbolic marriage, and religious marriage. I will discuss each of these in turn.

By civil marriage, I mean to designate the process by which two individuals petition the government for legal recognition that they are united as a couple. In the United States, more specifically, this involves getting a marriage license and having someone who has been granted authority by the government (whether a judge or a religious figure) bear witness to that union. Why would two individual seek out a civil marriage? Well, fortunately or unfortunately, being married brings some very real benefits, notably regarding taxes, insurance, pensions, and so on.

It is unclear to me why a couple consisting of a man and a woman deserve these benefits more than a couple consisting of two same-sex partners. That seems a bit unfair. Of course, one might think that we can entirely eliminate the legal benefits of marriage, but I doubt that already married straight couples will support such legislation. A few politicians have suggested that we develop new frameworks known as "civil unions" or "domestic partnerships" that would allow Gay couples to receive some, if not all, of these benefits. Basically, it would seem that this is just a rose by another name, and I'm not sure it would stand up to Prop 8 either. Further, I think the concept of a "civil union" ignores the second important aspect of marriage, that it is symbolic.

A marriage is symbolic in so far as it expresses the fact that the two individuals are pledging to commit to one another, and moreover that they want their friends, family, community to witness that pledge. Unlike civil marriage, symbolic marriage doesn't actually change anything material. One is still physically the same person before the wedding as one is after. However, I think we can agree that there is a powerful and useful psychological component to symbolism; one feels more secure perhaps. Or at least in theory. I'm not married myself so I don't really know. Once again, it is not clear to me why we would not want to allow our Gay friends to have this greater sense of security, and allow them safe alternatives to the risky so-called "behavior" to which some here might object.

Of course, this leads to the question: should we legalize (or keep legal in this case) something that may be immoral? Notice this is not a question about whether homosexuality *is* immoral, but rather about the role of government in legislating the issue. And to think about this question, I think we need to discuss the nature of the third conception of marriage, namely, the religious. Those of us who are of a Christian background may see marriage as representing a second sort of symbolism, that is, regarding the relationship that God has with us, his church. And marriage is also practical; the two partners are supposed to help one another in their respective devotion to the faith.

And I think these are wonderful aspects to have, and I look forward to the day when I might share in them.

However, I wish to state very strongly that, if it is on these grounds that you wish to support Prop 8, I wish you would reconsider. The fact is, we recognize lots of marriages already that do not constitute the Christian approach. Any marriage of two individuals from a different faith background or backgrounds already does not fulfill the religious requirements of marriage that we propose. Why do we only claim the legal prerogative in this case? If you object to Gay marriage because you oppose the sexual practices, I can say with a great degree of certainty that plenty of straight couples, Christian or otherwise, probably engage in sexual practices that could be construed as sinful. Moreover, let me say unequivocally that marriage and sex are two very distinct concepts that should not be conflated.

In the final analysis, I would ask that you consider what I have said when you are making your decision on Election Day. In doing so, I think this would be a step towards ameliorating the rift between the Christian and Gay communities (which are not necessarily mutually exclusive). We Christians often speak of “spiritual warfare.” Yet as we learn from Ecclesiastes 3:8, “there is a time for war and a time for peace.” I would like to conclude by suggesting that perhaps we Christians should seek to engender some spiritual peace.

Thank you for your time.

Response to comments:

Re: comments on marriage as a purely religious institution. This is historically and sociologically inaccurate. Marriage as a general concept exists in a multitude of societies regardless of religious background. It would be more correct to say marriage is a social institution that stems from a time when the boundaries between religion and government were less clear than they are now, and yes marriage rites would have been steeped in religious ritual. Further, even if it were true that marriage is fundamentally religious, with respect to America, the obvious question is “which religion?” I think we can all agree that we live in a sufficiently multi-vocal society that we cannot legally define marriage in solely Christian terms. I think it is therefore ironic that people bring up “freedom of religion” when defining marriage in this way.

Re: comment on proliferation of AIDS. I wasn't entirely sure of the relevance of this comment, but I think the point that the speaker was trying to make was that allowing Gay marriage, which in her view is equal to sexual sin, would increase the spread of AIDS in the U.S. I couldn't disagree more. First, it is obvious, but it needs to be said: Gay individuals are not the only ones who have AIDS nor did they (as some believe) start the epidemic. Second, as I was trying to allude to in what I presented: allowing Gay individuals to openly enter into committed relationships will almost certainly decrease the amount of promiscuity, which will likewise almost certainly decrease the likelihood that any member in that community will contract AIDS.

Re: general sentiment that allowing Gay marriage may encourage behavior that is considered to be sinful. Again, I was alluding to this in my discussion of symbolic marriage but I did not want to deal with it more explicitly at that time because I was trying to avoid entering into debating whether non-straight orientation should be seen to be sinful. And I still want to avoid that because the goal of this discussion is to be as non-partisan as possible. However, let me speak pragmatically and generally about any behavior that is held by some to be sinful. For the sake of argument, I'll address the issue of the legalization of marijuana. Some people hold that smoking pot is wrong (although smoking tobacco, which is arguably more dangerous, is held to be ok), and therefore it is not legal to smoke pot. Nonetheless, a fairly large number of people still like to smoke it regardless of the fact that it is illegal. So the question is: is it better to have legal codes

that don't actually seem to practically restrict smoking pot and in fact might make smoking pot more dangerous or to legalize it, possibly but not necessarily encouraging it, so that the people who would be smoking pot anyways can do so in a safer environment? Notice that answering this question does not really hinge on whether smoking pot is actually morally wrong by virtue of some standard. For my part, in most cases, I would generally choose safety.