

It's helpful to remember that for us Protestants, marriage is not a sacrament. For a few centuries before the era of Martin Luther and John Calvin, the Catholic Church had the understanding, and Catholics still do, that marriage is a sacramental act between a man and a woman that confers grace upon them, a grace that helps lead to their eternal salvation. We Protestants don't believe that. Calvin, one of the primary founders of our Reformed Tradition, considered marriage to be among those earthly matters that were called "adiaphora," the external and discretionary things of life that do not confer grace.

While Calvin believed that marriage ceremonies belong in church, he established in 1546 that marriage laws are properly in the realm of the state, because he saw the civil government as God-given, put there by God for the proper ordering of human society. So he took marriage law-making away from the church, which had made a mess of it, and put it back into the hands of the state where he believed it belongs.

For five hundred years the Protestant Church has worked hand-in-hand with the state when it comes to marriage. The state regulates who may marry and makes sure that all is orderly and legal. For us to recognize the right of the state to set the broad parameters on who is legally able to marry is nothing new. We Protestants have been doing that for centuries.