

How about "Justice of the Peace Billy" instead?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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A few years ago, a pastor acquaintance of mine made [headlines](#) when, in an act of solidarity with gays and lesbians, he renounced his state-granted authority to perform weddings. Other pastors have made [similar moves](#).

This strikes me as an elegant and sensible approach: couples, whether same- or different-sex, are free to have a commitment ceremony at the church, but if they want the rights and protections of civil marriage, they must take that up separately with the civil authorities.

Political statements aside, isn't this how weddings *should* work? A stronger sense of marriage as an [earthly estate](#) would do a lot to defuse the same-sex marriage debate. Instead, marriage exists in a strange cultural space that seems unaffected by the separation of church and state.

On Valentine's Day in Central Park, Reverend Billy—the activist and performance artist best known for his anticonsumerist Church of Life After Shopping—[led](#) a mass "[unmarriage](#)" ceremony in which couples symbolically suspended their own vows in support of the rights of others to take them (via *Geez* magazine's [blog](#)). The fake minister's protest follows roughly the same logic as the real ministers' stance: until there's equality via *expanded* rights, let's achieve it by *denying* them.

Yet

this event seems a bit off to me. In part it's the dissonance of rejecting your own rights in the name of their importance for others, like a voting-rights activist refusing to vote. In part it's that treating marriage this glibly doesn't seem likely to win converts.

But

my main objection is to the juxtaposition of a civil-marriage-focused message with a religious-themed shtick. I like Reverend Billy's antishopping fire and brimstone and his [cash-register exorcisms](#); it makes sense to talk about consumerism as a spiritual problem. But the marriage debate is constantly caught up in conflations of the religious and secular spheres, making it difficult to speak clearly of how the [religious freedom](#) and civil rights questions are and aren't related.

Publicity stunts are a terrific thing, provided their message is clear and coherent. But putting on a collar and recruiting a [gospel choir](#) to advocate for civil-marriage rights may confuse as much as it enlightens.