

How Christians Have Partnered With Gays to Attack Marriage

How our long-held definition is being threatened by two unlikely partners: gay marriage and Christian infidelity.

I have never made the issues of homosexuality and gay marriage a primary focus of my work. Justice for the poor and combining evangelism and social action have been central issues in my writing. But the issue of gay marriage has become so prominent, so critical, that I can't be silent.

Within the last few years numerous states have legalized same-sex marriage. The widespread victory of legalized gay marriage was declared to be inevitable.

Why do I think biblical, Spirit-filled Christians should engage this issue with renewed wisdom and energy?

First, if any state is to survive, it requires an ongoing supply of babies who grow up to be good citizens. Even with modern technology, you need a "mother" (even if she is only a surrogate) and a "father" (even if he is just an anonymous sperm donor) to produce a baby. And every civilization has known what contemporary sociologists now demonstrate: Children grow best into wholesome adults when they live with their biological mother and father. In the past and still today, marriage law is a crucial way the state can promote and encourage the sound nurturing of the next generation of citizens.

Second, right or wrong, law is a moral teacher. Most people assume if something is legal it is moral. Furthermore, if the state adopts gay marriage, public schools will inevitably teach children that gay marriage is as good as marriage understood as the union of husband and wife.

Most legal scholars on both sides of the debate agree that lawfully sanctioned gay marriage will result in a huge confrontation between “gay rights” and religious freedom. Religious institutions of many kinds will find that their freedom to practice and even say what they believe about sexuality and marriage will be increasingly challenged and restricted.

Our Tarnished Credibility

Tragically, however, because of our own mistakes and sin, evangelicals and charismatics have almost no credibility on this topic. Over the last several decades we’ve been largely correct on the fundamental issue of God’s design for sexuality—and disastrously wrong in the ways we’ve dealt with homosexuality. If Satan had designed a plan to undermine our credibility on the issue of homosexuality, I doubt he could’ve done any better than what we’ve practiced.

We have tolerated genuine hatred of gays in our midst, failed to adequately condemn gay bashing, neglected to act in gentle love with people among us struggling with their sexual identity and used the gay community as a foil to raise funds for political campaigns—all while failing to persuade our own evangelical community to keep their marriage vows. Worst of all, we’ve failed to deal honestly with *the* major threat to marriage and the family: namely, heterosexual adultery and divorce.

Many more charismatics and evangelicals oppose gay marriage than condemn divorce as sinful. But it’s obvious that the primary factor undermining marriage and family today is the 95 percent of the population that is heterosexual. Vast numbers of us are not keeping our marriage vows!

The Barna Group’s data shows that evangelicals and charismatics divorce at the same rate as the rest of the population. Many of our leaders have failed to take a clear

stand against cheap divorce because they and their people were getting divorced just like everyone else. And then we've had the gall to use the tiny gay community—anywhere between 2 to 5 percent of the population—as a whipping boy whom we labeled as the great threat to marriage.

Ed Dobson got it right. Pastor of the largest evangelical church in Grand Rapids, Mich., he sensed a call to serve those with AIDS and began visiting a local AIDS center run by the gay community. Dobson's Calvary Church was soon engaged with the gay community so much that a local gay and lesbian newsletter ran an editorial that, while explicitly noting the church believed their gay sexual activity was sinful, thanked Calvary for inviting gays and lesbians to their church services. The gay community knew that Dobson and his church loved them because they gently ministered to those dying of AIDS.

Think of the impact evangelicals could've had in the last three decades if more of us had followed Dobson's example.

What Is 'Marriage'?

Many, of course, argue that legalizing gay marriage is no problem. They question how granting a state marriage license to that tiny percent of the population that is gay hurts the 95 percent of the community that is heterosexual.

Furthermore, they ask: How can we deny the rights and privileges of marriage to gay folk without violating the principle of equality? Finally, as gay activist and Roman Catholic Andrew Sullivan notes, the understanding of marriage has changed: "From being a means to bringing up children, it has become primarily a way in which two adults affirm their emotional commitment to one another."

But is *emotional commitment* between two adults what the state should care about in marriage? Is that all marriage is? My basic question is this: What legitimately should a neutral

state understand marriage to be? I think the central answer is clear.

The state rightly must seek to promote in its marriage law the best setting to nurture the next generation of wholesome citizens. This is why every civilization has historically understood marriage to be the union of a man and a woman.

In a fascinating article, "The Liberal Case Against Gay Marriage" (*Public Interest*, Summer 2004), Susan Shell argues similarly that the central concern in the state's engagement with marriage is to secure "the relation between a child and a particular set of parents."

She continues: "A husband is, until otherwise proven, the acknowledged father of his wife's offspring, with recognized rights and duties that may vary from society to society but always exist in some form. And a wife is a woman who can expect a certain specified sort of help from her husband in the raising of her offspring. All other functions of marriage borrow from or build upon this one."

As a result, Shell asks: "Can those who are not even potentially partners in reproduction, and who could never under any circumstances have been so, actually 'marry'?" Her answer is clearly no.

Whatever else one may want to say positively about the emotional commitment of two men or two women to each other, it is simply not marriage. If the central concern of the state in marriage law is to secure a good relationship between a child and its biological parents, then by definition marriage can only involve a man and a woman.

A second, related argument supports the historic definition of marriage. Other things being equal, it is better for children to grow up with their biological parents. Only sexual relations (or some modern technological variation) between a man and a woman can produce babies. And the best way to

produce healthy, wholesome adults is for those babies to grow up with their biological parents.

It's a fact that marriage to the mother is by far the best way to ensure responsible fatherhood; when not married to the mother, few men are effective fathers. If the state's central concern in marriage law is to produce healthy, wholesome adults, the optimal setting for this is in a good relationship between a child and his or her biological parents—which means marriage can only involve a man and a woman.

Everything depends on one's definition of marriage. If, for the purposes of state law, marriage is a relationship of the type that characteristically produces children and encourages their biological parents to raise them because that is best for them and therefore good for the whole society, then gay marriage makes no sense.

If, on the other hand, marriage is not about bringing up children but about how adults solemnize their emotional commitment to each other, then gay marriage becomes plausible. But if this becomes what marriage is, why should the state have any interest in regulating it through laws? There are many important, intimate relationships—for example, the very close nonsexual friendship of two women over a lifetime—that the state rightly does not seek to regulate via laws.

The core idea of marriage—as a relationship between a man and a woman that obligates them to work together to nurture their biological children—has been important to every known civilization. Why? Because it corresponds with three fundamental realities of human existence: It takes both a man and a woman to make a child; any society that wants to survive must have children; children deserve both their mother and father.

If Gay Marriage Is Legal ...

What would happen if American law accepted gay marriage? While

we must avoid fear-mongering or exaggeration, I think it's increasingly clear that there would be multiple negative results.

1. It would weaken the connection between marriage and procreation and the connection between biological parents and their biological children. Almost every court case supporting gay marriage explicitly downgrades the role of procreation in marriage. In the Massachusetts Supreme Court's decision bringing in gay marriage, the court explicitly said the state was indifferent to family structure; that is, society has no preference for children growing up with both biological parents!

2. The embrace of gay marriage will almost certainly change what is taught in public schools. If in law gay marriages are equal to marriages of husbands and wives, then the schools will certainly begin to teach that to all our children as the proper view for every good citizen.

3. There will be a variety of pressures to silence people who believe homosexual practice is sin. Virtually all legal experts agree that if the law sanctions gay marriage, there will be a colossal confrontation between religious liberty and "gay rights." Through licensure and government grants a wide variety of faith-based organizations will face growing pressure to abandon their stand on homosexual practice and gay marriage.

As Marc Stern of the American Jewish Congress has warned, once the law recognizes gay marriage, there will be court cases against religious institutions (colleges, universities, camp grounds, hospitals, adoption agencies, and so on) that refuse to treat legally married same-sex couples the same as married heterosexuals.

Similarly, it's likely that government will slowly withdraw benefits from faith-based organizations that believe they

shouldn't treat legally married same-sex partners the way they treat husbands and wives. Gay activists will undoubtedly argue in the courts that government dare not "subsidize discrimination" and therefore government funds must not flow to faith-based organizations that oppose gay marriage or refuse to hire persons engaged in homosexual actions.

The evidence is clear. The widespread redefinition of marriage in the law would have far-reaching negative consequences. It would mean abandoning what every civilization for millennia has understood marriage to be. It would further erode the already weakened marriage culture and seriously undermine religious freedom.

Given the momentous importance of this issue, we must make our best effort to preserve the historic understanding of marriage—even though there is no certainty that we will succeed.

That isn't to suggest our case is hopeless. Though the latest Gallup poll shows a majority of Americans (53 percent) now favor gay marriage (last year only 44 percent favored it), every time the issue has been in the ballot—in 31 statewide referendums—the voters have refused to endorse gay marriage. The divorce rate is the lowest in 40 years, so perhaps we are beginning to make progress on renewing marriage.

Hate Isn't a Response

What can we do that offers the best chance of success as we seek to retain the historic understanding of marriage?

First, we can demonstrate our desire to respect and treat gay folk fairly. One significant way to do that would be to support the legal recognition of civil unions. (This may actually reduce promiscuity as well.) There are several things that gay couples want that are fair, such as hospital visitation rights, inheritance rights and joint property ownership. I see no problem with a carefully written law that

defines a number of such specified rights as part of a legally recognized civil union.

That doesn't mean those rights should include everything. Given the purpose of the state's marriage legislation, there are some rights and benefits—specifically those designed to strengthen the likelihood that children grow up with both biological parents—that belong only to those who are married and not to those in civil unions.

To have a realistic chance of success in retaining the historic definition of marriage, we must do two other things:

First, change the widespread perception that Christians generally, and evangelicals and charismatics in particular, hate gays; second, set our own house in order by dramatically reducing the devastation and havoc in our families caused by heterosexual disobedience.

Our changing the public perception dare not be a tactic. We must truly repent of the deep, widespread anti-gay prejudice in our circles.

We must ask forgiveness for our failure to condemn gay bashing; repent of our refusal to walk gently and lovingly with young people in our churches struggling with their sexual identity; and stop elevating the sin of homosexual practice above other sins. We must also make a clear distinction between homosexual orientation and practice.

One more thing is essential, and I think it is the most important. Our argument that the tiny gay community is to some extent undermining marriage sounds like a hypocritical farce unless we acknowledge and correct the fact that the most important reason for the dangerous decline of marriage and family is the sinful failure of husbands and wives to keep their marriage vows.

If we can't do whatever it takes to help the next generation

of Christians resist adultery and divorce and model wholesome, joyful family life, then we should admit that we have nothing credible to say in the public discussion of marriage.

On the other hand, if in the next couple generations, Christian husbands and wives would keep their marriage vows for a lifetime and raise their biological (and adopted) children in joyful wholesome families, our homes would be one of our most powerful evangelistic tools. And they would also give us credibility when we go to the wider culture to promote the historic understanding of marriage.

I devoutly hope and pray that the Christian world in general, and charismatics and evangelicals in particular, will rise to this challenge. I pray we will model faithful marriages and wholesome families, as well as persuade the larger culture that God's definition of marriage is not an arbitrary divine command but the way to lasting joy and wholeness for families and society.

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