

Why Aren't More Evangelicals Talking About This?

One of the remarkable things about the current race for the presidency is the virtually complete absence of any discussion of Donald Trump's troubled marital history by social conservatives in evaluating his fitness for office.

It's one thing when a political figure is divorced by his wife. It may not be something he can prevent, as was the case in Ronald Reagan's first marriage, to actress Jane Wyman. It's a different thing when the candidate himself initiates the dissolution of a marriage.

When he returned from Vietnam, John McCain left his first wife. She had been injured in a car wreck while he was gone and had gained weight. He dumped her for his current wife, who is beautiful and elegant by contrast. This became an issue in the 2008 race, and McCain admitted to the nation during Rick Warren's presidential forum that the termination of his first marriage represented the single "greatest moral failure" of his life.

Newt Gingrich's checkered marital past was also an issue. I was among a number of social conservatives who simply could not support Mr. Gingrich in 2012 for this reason alone, particularly when there were acceptable conservative alternatives who had exemplary personal lives. As I told Michael Isikoff of NBC News at the time, "The problem with Mr. Gingrich is—not once, but twice—he has violated that solemn and sacred oath, and that's why it's a show-stopper for me."

And yet the flamboyant Mr. Trump has thus far escaped any genuine probing on this matter. He is famously on his third marriage, married to a glamorous woman who has done nude, lesbian-themed photo shoots in the past.

While Trump is quite rightly making an issue of Bill Clinton's randy sexual past and Hillary's role in enabling his career as a serial sexual abuser, Trump himself has so far been left unchallenged and unscathed.

Unlike Mr. McCain, Trump seems adamant that he has nothing to apologize for. When asked last summer if he'd ever asked God for forgiveness for anything, he replied, "I am not sure that I have."

We can readily stipulate that for most voters, Trump's domestic history may not matter—"Everybody makes mistakes," "who am I to judge" and so on. But evangelicals cannot afford to be so cavalier when it comes to evaluating a man's fitness to hold the highest office in the land. At some point, we social conservatives must look squarely at Mr. Trump's personal history and decide how much weight we should attach to it.

Yesterday on *Meet the Press*, Trump was asked about those who might scrutinize his marital past, as he has scrutinized Bill and Hillary's past. He told Chuck Todd, "It's fine." With that permission slip in hand from Mr. Trump himself, I offer some facts and observations.

Trump's divorce from his first wife Ivana was tabloid fodder for years because it involved a long affair between Trump and Marla Maples, who eventually became his second wife. While still married to his first wife, Trump put Ms. Maples up in a suite at the Trump Regency, where together they would dominate the social scene in Atlantic City.

Meanwhile, the Trump children were devastated, as all children are in such circumstances, by the attention given to their father's affair with Ms. Maples and by front-page coverage of their parents' separation and impending divorce.

Donald was utterly unapologetic about abandoning his first wife. He admitted that he was the one who left and that he did

it because of his sexual infatuation with Ms. Maples, using a vulgar expression I cannot repeat on a family-friendly website. All this was happening in the early '90s, at the very same time news started to dribble out about Bill Clinton's sleazy sexual escapades.

Trump's excuse for his behavior, and his explanation for why people should not give it serious consideration is, "You know what? I wasn't the President of the United States. And I wasn't dealing in the Oval Office, all right? A big difference. I wasn't the president." That's an alarmingly thin and relativistic pretext, as if some things can be sexually immoral if a president does them but not if a businessman does them.

Trump also divorced his second wife, with whom he had conceived a child out of wedlock, in 1997, just months before their prenuptial agreement would have boosted her settlement from \$1 million to \$5 million. He made it clear at the time that he was the one who ended the marriage. "Marla's a good girl," Trump told a friend, "but I wanted out."

Is this all sordid, tabloid stuff? Of course it is. It would be irrelevant for anyone other than Trump and his family if he did not want to be president of the United States. But he is pursuing an office described in the Constitution as a position of "public Trust." So can the public trust Donald Trump?

Should Trump's marital history matter in a presidential campaign? Absolutely. As Harry Truman observed, "If a man lies to his wife, he will lie to me. And if he'll break his oath of marriage, he'll break his oath of office."

Perhaps there will be some spiritual leader who will speak to Donald Trump with a prophetic voice today as John the Baptist did to a politician in his day. John famously confronted Herod the tetrarch about his unrighteous personal life, and publicly rebuked him for being immorally linked to his second wife. "It

is not lawful for you to have her," declared the evangelist. For his courage and for his boldness to confront a politician about his troubled marital history, he literally lost his head.

This was a perfect opportunity for Jesus to criticize John. He could have said, "Well, this just shows you what happens when preachers start meddling in politics and start criticizing the sex lives of others." But he didn't. Instead, he said, "I say to you, among those who are born of women there is no greater prophet than John the Baptist" (Luke 7:28).

Character counts. Just ask the Cincinnati Bengals, who got bounced out of the NFL playoffs last weekend because two players with a history of impulse-control problems got flagged for two penalties on the same play and gave Pittsburgh a chip-shot field goal to gain a wholly improbable victory. The hopes of the Bengals and the entire city of Cincinnati were crushed in the process.

The Bible is quite explicit that leadership in the church is to be reserved for those who have demonstrated fidelity in marriage. An elder, Paul writes, "must be blameless, the husband of one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2). You may say, "Well, God is talking about the church here, not politics." True, but this is a clear indication that when it comes to exercising public leadership, marital history is important to God.

In addition, three times we are told in Romans 13 that public officials are either "servants of God" or "ministers of God." So though it is trendy to say we are electing a president, not a pastor, the biblical truth is that we are in fact choosing ministers of God for the public square, and our standards should be high.

It might be one thing if Mr. Trump was the only option conservatives have. But virtually the entire rest of the field, including its strongest conservatives, has exemplary

(not perfect) marriages and families. To my knowledge, Ted Cruz, Ben Carson, Mike Huckabee, Rand Paul and Rick Santorum, just to give a few examples, are all above reproach in domestic matters and have not been touched by a hint of sexual scandal. The same may well be said of most if not all the other GOP candidates. Fidelity in marriage is not impossible. Millions and millions of American men are doing it every day.

Elders are to be faithful husbands and good managers of their households to provide public examples of what marriage and family are designed to be. Marriage in America is in desperate shape. Only 51 percent of today's adults are in a married relationship compared to 72 percent in 1960. We are in desperate need of a president who models for the nation a healthy, satisfying and lasting marriage. A good example in the White House raises the standard for the entire country. A bad example corrodes it.

Bill Clinton, for example, convinced America's youth that oral sex isn't sex. Consequently, an epidemic of orally transmitted STDs affecting the mouth, neck, and head swept across the land and devastated the sexual health of an entire generation.

It's bad enough when a lack of character hurts a football team. It's another thing when it damages a nation. Many evangelicals and other social conservatives will find Donald Trump's reckless marital past to be a disqualifier for the Oval Office. And they should.