

THE MARRIAGE DEBATE: PART 1 (8/1/04)

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We hear it everywhere we turn: *The institution of marriage is under attack*. From the Oval Office to the halls of Congress, from the public airwaves to pulpits all across the land, we are told that the very foundation of all that is sacred and holy is under attack by sinister forces eager to destroy all that is right about American culture.

I especially love seeing the congressman who is on his third marriage, having had a couple of dozen affairs over the years, tearing up as he talks about the sanctity of marriage. But it's an election year, we have a hot-button issue here, and the Religious Right knows they have a winner. Gays and lesbians are easy targets. And while many are using this issue for less than noble purposes, I acknowledge that a lot of people believe sexual orientation is a matter of choice. They believe that being gay or lesbian is simply a preferred lifestyle, and that they have a moral obligation to speak out against it. We'll talk about that next week.

A few of the more popular preachers here in Wichita have managed to garner nationwide publicity over this issue. And they have manipulated the press in a rather ingenious way. They have managed to make *themselves* look like the victims. As they attack the gay and lesbian community, *gaining* popularity as they do so, they have given angst-ridden statements about how difficult it is to stand up for the truth—how it would be so much easier just to stay quiet. But God has called them to make their stand, and they are willing to take all the spears and arrows that come their way for being willing to stand up for God's word.

I don't know about you, but my wife Leigh and I have not spent very many anguish-filled evenings wondering whether or not our marriage would survive if our nation *fails* to pass a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage. We just don't feel like our marriage is under attack. And yet, time and again we hear these words: *We have to stand up for biblical marriage—it is the foundation of society*. Okay. Let's take that seriously. Let's use the Bible as our guide, and create our culture and our laws around the biblical view of marriage. In fact, since there is a movement afoot to amend the Constitution of the United States to deny the possibility of same-sex marriage, let's go all the way. Let's write the principles of biblical marriage into our Constitution.

Now, before we start amending the Constitution of the United States, there is something I have to mention. That amazing document serves two purposes. It creates a system of government, and it secures the rights of citizens. Its purpose is not to *deny* rights and privileges to anybody. But that is exactly what an amendment to prohibit same-sex marriage would do. Even for the person who believes homosexuality is a sinful choice, it is ridiculous and dangerous to use the Constitution to make your moral stand. We've got tens of thousands of pages of laws on the books that are not written into the Constitution—a document most of us believe should be tampered with as little as possible.

But it's an election year, and there is some momentum behind the idea. And so let's take it to its logical conclusion, and write biblical marriage into the law of our land. The constitution of the United States has been amended 27 times. We must amend it

at least another four times if we want to do this right—if we want to make sure that biblical marriage is a foundation of our great nation.

So Amendment number 28... I suggest it read like this: *The institution of marriage shall consist of a legal union between one man and one or more women.* This amendment is an easy one. The Bible is filled with examples of men with multiple wives, and there is no indication that this is anything other than moral, appropriate, and the natural way of things. Consider Jacob, whose name God changes to Israel, and who then becomes the father of twelve sons, each of whom is the founder of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. We find the story explained in some detail in the 29th and 30th chapters of Genesis, but to make a long story short, Jacob marries two sisters: Leah and Rachel. As they have occasional difficulty bearing children, each of those two women—in a move that most men could only call gracious, understanding and magnanimous—allow the husband they share to also take their slave girls as wives. Pretty soon there are kids all over the place, including twelve sons spread among Jacob's four wives.

But let's not pretend this was some sort of special exception to the rule. Consider King David. We first discover the story of his marital status in chapter 3 of 2nd Samuel, where we are told he has six sons, each one born of a different wife. Of course, this was only the beginning. Who can forget that a few years later David will seduce the beautiful Bathsheba, wife of one of David's top generals? Once he realizes he has impregnated her, he tries to trick his general—Uriah—into thinking the baby belongs to him. But Uriah is not fooled. So David does the right thing. He sends Uriah off to the front lines of a battle where he knows he will be killed, and then takes Bathsheba to be one of his wives.

Now, I've wrestled with how to get all that biblical morality into this amendment, and it's just too complicated. I just don't think we should necessarily legislate the killing of a man just because his wife is bearing your child. So for the sake of keeping it simple, we'll let the 28th Amendment stand as written: *The institution of marriage shall consist of a legal union between one man and one or more women.*

The 29th Amendment: *Marriage shall not impede a man's right to take concubines in addition to his wife or wives.* This is important, because it seems obvious that not all wives are equal. The biblical answer is to have a secondary level of wives, not quite on the same social footing as the primary wives, but still under the authority of the husband, and still bringing her husband's children into this world.

Back to our old friend King David. After his marriage to his six original wives and before his little fling with Bathsheba, the Bible tells us, quote, "David took more concubines and more wives, and more sons and daughters were born to David." There is an old saying that goes, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree," meaning children pick up on quite a few of their parents' traits. Well, the child of that relationship between David and Bathsheba—King Solomon—certainly didn't fall far from the tree when it comes to a genuine admiration for the institution of marriage. I'll quote from the 11th chapter of 1st Kings: "Among Solomon's wives were seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines." Wow! And I have trouble remembering the date of *one* anniversary!

According to 2nd Chronicles, Solomon's son Rehoboam was also a chip off the old block, taking 18 wives and 60 concubines, who together gave birth to 88 children.

So we have some solid biblical reasons for establishing this secondary wife status. Now, I'm no lawyer, so I won't pretend I can cross all the *T*'s and dot all the *I*'s that will go along with this 29th Amendment. But I'm sure all of those elected officials who so desperately want to make biblical marriage the law of the land will be able to iron out all the details.

Amendment number 30: *A marriage shall be valid only if the wife is a virgin. If she is not a virgin, she must be executed.* Well, we're on solid biblical ground here. This is straight out of Deuteronomy 22:13-21. Now I know what you're all thinking. Sure, this law sounds great, but what if the husband is wrong? What if a guy claims that his 37th concubine is not a virgin, but she really is? No problem. Deuteronomy covers that eventuality. If it is determined that she really was a virgin and he was lying just to have her killed, well, listen to his punishment. Quote, "He shall be fined one hundred shekels of silver."

Sounds fair enough! Of course, if she is unable to prove she was a virgin, Deuteronomy is clear. Again I quote: "If evidence of the young woman's virginity is not found, then they shall bring the young woman out to the entrance of her father's house and the men of her town shall stone her to death." Now, this is one of those places I question whether or not we should take the Bible absolutely literally. Do we really have to stone here to death? I mean, this is the 21st Century. Couldn't we do a lethal injection? There's no need being barbaric!

Okay, time for our final amendment to the Constitution, amendment number 31: *If a married man dies without children, his brother shall marry the widow.* This one is pretty hard to ignore, because we find it on more than one occasion in the Bible. If a woman's husband dies without giving her children, it is the legal obligation of the deceased's brother to marry the widow and assure that she has children.

The only problem here is what to do if the brother refuses. This is one of those places where the Bible seems to give us two different answers regarding the punishment of the uncooperative brother. According the 38th chapter of Genesis, when Onan refused to impregnate his brother's widow, Onan was put to death. I don't know. That seems a little harsh. Maybe she wasn't his type. The 25th chapter of Deuteronomy provides another form of punishment. This is so strange I refuse to paraphrase it, and will read directly from Deuteronomy.

"When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband's brother to her, and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. But if the man has no desire to marry his brother's widow, then his brother's widow shall go up to the elders at the gate and say, 'My husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband's brother to me.' Then the elders of his town shall summon him and speak to him. If he persists, saying, 'I have no desire to marry her', then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, pull his sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and declare, 'This is what is done to the man who does not build up his brother's house.' Throughout Israel his family shall be known as 'the house of him whose sandal was pulled off.'"

Okay, let's look at this "pulling the sandal off the foot" a little more closely before we write this into the Constitution. The Old Testament is full of these strange little sayings that are called euphemisms. A euphemism is the substitution of mild, indirect language to express something that people would find offensive if stated in plain English—or in this case, in plain Hebrew.

Bible scholars agree that this passage from Deuteronomy is a Euphemism. Here is what is actually supposed to happen if a brother refuses to wed his deceased brother's widow. The widow is permitted to make the brother appear in a very public place—say the Oprah Show—and in front of all the world, she is to strip him naked, and spit on that part of his anatomy that he would normally keep covered.

Well, thank goodness for euphemisms! We'll let our esteemed senators and representatives figure out exactly how to word that critical element of biblical marriage into law as they reconstruct our Constitution.

Next week we'll be a bit more serious about all of this, and examine those passages of the Bible that are used to attack gays and lesbians. We'll think seriously about this notion of same-sex marriage. For the few minutes we have left this morning, I want to share something I received over the internet. I know that many of you have seen this—it has made the rounds on the net several times over the past few years. But it's worth another look. This is a satirical letter to Dr. Laura Schlesinger, the radio personality who offers up advice on how to live a moral life. She is adamantly against gays and lesbians, citing the Bible as the foundation for her venom. This is an open letter to Dr. Laura, originally written four years ago by somebody named J. Kent Ashcraft.

"Dear Dr. Laura, Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's Law. I have learned a great deal from your show, and I try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind him that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate. I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the specific laws and how to best follow them.

When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord (Lev 1:9). The problem is my neighbors. They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. Should I smite them?

I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?

Lev. 25:44 states that I may indeed possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighboring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?

I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?

A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an Abomination (Lev 11:10), it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this?

Lev 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. May I attend church even though my vision is not 20/20?

Most of my male friends get their hair trimmed, including the hair around their temples, even though this is expressly forbidden by Lev 19:27. How should they die?

I know from Lev 11:6-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?

My uncle has a farm. He violates Lev 19:19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread (cotton/polyester blend). He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot. Is it really necessary that we go to all the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? (Lev 24:10-16) Couldn't we just burn them to death at a private family affair like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws? (Lev. 20:14)

I know you have studied these things extensively, Dr. Laura, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging. Your devoted disciple and adoring fan, Ken.”

We'll come back down to earth next week. In the meantime we should be cautious about demanding others live up to the letter of the law—especially laws that were written several thousand years ago. As Paul writes in 2nd Corinthians, “The letter kills; but the spirit gives life.”

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