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The Alliance of Baptists Affirms Same-Sex Marriage

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The latest group to join this parade is the Alliance of Baptists, a denomination that consists of 115 congregations, united mainly by the fact that they are no longer part of the Southern Baptist Convention. The Alliance was born out of the Southern Baptist Convention's controversy of the 1980s, and it first functioned as a protest movement against the conservative leadership of the SBC. Since its establishment in 1987, the Alliance has gone on to establish itself firmly on the left wing of American Protestant liberalism.

Meeting recently in Dayton, Ohio for its 2004 convocation, the Alliance of Baptists adopted a "Statement on Same Sex Marriage," that demands legalization and full support for homosexual marriage across the United States. It puts the Alliance boldly on the same-sex marriage bandwagon.

The Alliance statement begins by decrying "the politicization of same-sex marriage in the current presidential contest and other races for public office." What can this mean? There are no non-political approaches to this issue, for both sides are arguing over law and public policy. Any demand that same-sex marriage be legalized must take the form of a political argument. The law, after all, is a political instrument. Thus, when the Alliance of Baptists criticizes the "politicization" of the same sex marriage debate, it insinuates that its own activity is above politics while those who oppose same sex marriage must lower themselves for engagement at the political level. This is not a promising start.

The statement goes on to put the group in solid opposition to any constitutional amendment banning homosexual marriage. "We specifically reject the proposed amendments to the constitution of the United States and state constitutions that would enshrine discrimination against sexual minorities and define marriage in such a way as to deny same-sex couples a legal framework in which to provide for one another and those entrusted to their care."

The Alliance directed its most critical words at Christian denominations that oppose same-sex marriage. "As Christians and as Baptists, we particularly lament the denigration of our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender sisters and brothers in this debate by those who claim to speak for God." Placing the group on the other end of the spectrum, the statement affirmed that the Alliance of Baptists "supports the rights of all citizens to full marriage equality, and we affirm anew that the Alliance will 'create places of refuge and renewal for those ignored by the church'."

Stan Hastey, the Alliance's Executive Director, has written that the Alliance was birthed "in the white-heat controversy of the fundamentalist uprising that resulted in the capture of the Southern Baptist Convention." Originally organized as the "Southern Baptist Alliance," the group changed its name in 1992 to "The Alliance of Baptists." As Hastey indicates, this was a way of "signaling formal distancing of itself from the Southern Baptist Convention." In reality, the group was already light years removed from the SBC on both moral and theological issues. The name change was an honest reflection of reality—the Alliance and the SBC stand on opposing sides of the great theological divide.

Moving steadily leftward, the Alliance joined the National Council of the Churches of Christ [NCC] in the year 2000, and formed a partnership with the United Church of Christ in 2002. In joining with the UCC, the Alliance formally attached itself to a denomination that was already well known for its acceptance of homosexuality. The UCC allows congregations to celebrate gay unions and to ordain homosexual ministers. Earlier this year, the Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Concerns Council of the United Church of Christ, issued a statement demanding, not only the full legalization of same-sex marriages, but the church's affirmation that "any conversation about marriage needs to de-centralize marriage as the only expression of covenant and commitment between people." Just in case their point might be missed, the group went on to insist: "Any conversation about marriage must take seriously the reality that, given that . . . many LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] and heterosexual folks have made conscious choices to covenant with one another in ways other than marriage. And these covenants should also be honored and celebrated." This is not only a call for the legalization of same-sex marriages, but a virtual call for the virtual abolition of marriage itself.

The Alliance's move towards the full acceptance of homosexuality has been apparent for some time. In 1995 the group adopted a report on human sexuality entitled, "A Clear Voice." The voice was indeed clear, and the point of the report was obvious—the group was calling for the full normalization and acceptance of all homosexual relationships. The Alliance's original covenant began with a call for its members to claim "the freedom of the individual, led by God's Spirit within the family of faith, to read and interpret the Scriptures, relying on the historical understanding by the church and on the best methods of modern biblical study." That wording was carefully crafted to allow the group and its members to deny the authority and truthfulness of difficult biblical texts dealing with issues like sexuality, while claiming to be "led by God's Spirit" and relying on historical interpretation and the "best methods" of modern biblical scholarship.

The escape hatch in their statement was in full operation as the 1995 report on human sexuality began by asking, "whether the Bible actually addresses the issue of sexual orientation as we understand it today." And, "whether there is an unambiguous sexual norm in Scripture." By the time the group's official report concluded, they had answered both of these questions with a resounding, "No."

In "Discerning God's Will in Biblical Interpretation," an appendix attached to the report, the Alliance claimed that "Baptists assume that moral decisions about sexual expression or any other issue must be rooted in Scripture." Claiming to interpret the Scripture through tradition, reason, and experience, while also taking full account of the historical context of the biblical text, the group claimed a right to re-interpret biblical texts that condemn homosexuality by claiming the higher "light of the revelation of God given in Jesus Christ." As an example of their approach to the Bible, the group's report asserted that "interpreters may ask whether the affirmation of heterosexual relations in the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 is intended also to prohibit all same-sex relations or whether the silence on same-sex relations is merely a descriptive reflection of a world where heterosexual marriage relations were so much the norm that alternatives were not mentioned." The report went on to provide another example: "Again, interpreters may reasonably ask whether our attitude toward Old Testament condemnations of same-sex acts is affected by the priority of love in Jesus' teachings and his acceptance of women, prostitutes, tax-collectors and other theretofore considered as second-class citizens or sinful outcasts."

In other words, this group can find an interpretive loophole in order to get around any of the several biblical texts that so clearly condemn homosexual activity in every form. If Genesis 2 is just a "descriptive reflection" of heterosexuality as a norm, it tells us nothing authoritative about humanity at all. In the end, the group's "attitude" toward the biblical condemnation of homosexuality is mere dismissal.

Even in 1995, the issue of homosexual marriage was on the horizon. The group affirmed, "That genital sex, for both heterosexual and same-sex oriented persons, is most responsibly expressed when it occurs in the context of caring, loving, committed, covenant relationships between monogamous adults." Furthermore, the Alliance invited its member congregations "to lift up the ideal of covenant—that is challenging persons, whether heterosexual or same-sex oriented, to express sexual intimacy within the covenant context of a committed, monogamous relationship. One example of that support could be a ritual, a covenant-making between the couple, the couple and God, and the couple and the Christian community."

In the end, the Alliance of Baptist's statement endorsing same-sex marriage comes as no surprise. This is the logical extension of the group's denial of biblical inerrancy and its subversion of biblical authority. Nevertheless, the Alliance of Baptists should be recognized for its candor and honesty on this issue, for many other denominations and religious bodies

are doing their best to hide their real convictions on the question. Virtually all of the mainline Protestant denominations have been engaged in a debate over the issue of homosexuality that has lasted at least three decades. In most of these churches, the liberal leadership wants to affirm homosexuality and same-sex marriage while more conservative members at the grassroots resist—and they are the ones paying the bills.

There is no refuge on the issue of same-sex marriage, however. The questions will eventually be answered. Churches will either endorse same-sex marriage, or they will not. Congregations will perform same-sex marriages, or they will not. Denominations and religious institutions will recognize same-sex partnerships, or they will not. There is no middle ground, no place of compromise, and eventually no place to hide.

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