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The Marriage Debate: Is 'Conservative' Enough?

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Wednesday, October 29, 2003

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Andrew Sullivan is one of the most eloquent homosexuals in the media. His homosexuality is not incidental to his identity, for he has placed sexuality at the very center of his work and cultural philosophy. Senior editor of The New Republic and columnist for Time, Sullivan is a writer of considerable style and ability. His internet-based writings are among the most often quoted on issues of sexuality.

Sullivan also considers himself a political conservative. Indeed, the articles by Sullivan and Frum are presented in a series entitled "American Conservatism." But, to Christian conservatives, Sullivan's conservatism appears very hollow.

This past summer's landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Lawrence v. Texas*, sets the stage for Sullivan's argument. Now that sodomy has been legalized, he argues, everything about sexuality in marriage is changed. "Whatever you feel about the reasoning of the decision, its result is clear: Gay Americans are no longer criminals."

The essence of Sullivan's argument is that homosexual activity, now decriminalized, deserves and demands to be fully accepted in the larger culture. "The term 'gay citizen' is now simply a fact of life," Sullivan argues. The decriminalization of homosexuality means that an entire social transformation on the issue of sexuality is inevitable. "For if homosexuals are no longer criminals for having consensual private relationships, then they cannot be dismissed as somehow alien or peripheral to our civil society," he asserts.

Writing as one who claims to be a conservative, Sullivan argues that his fellow conservatives are woefully behind the times in dealing with homosexuality. Conservatives, he laments, are living in a state of cultural denial.

Sullivan depicts this denial in stark terms: "The majority of social conservatives oppose gay marriages; they oppose gay citizens serving their country in the military; they oppose gay citizens raising children; they oppose protecting gay citizens from work place discrimination; they opposed including gays in hate-crime legislation, while including every other victimized group; they oppose civil unions; they oppose domestic partnerships; they oppose...well, they oppose, for the most part, every single practical measure that brings gay citizens into the mainstream of American life." All that?

Ever ready to push his arguments, Sullivan seeks to rescue conservatism from homophobia. Conservative opposition to homosexuality is, in a post-Lawrence world, "simply bizarre." He presses his case with the following question: "Can you think of any other legal, non criminal minority in a society toward which social conservatives have nothing but a negative social policy?" This is the new thrust of Sullivan's argument for the normalization of homosexuality and the legalization of homosexual marriage.

In the past, Andrew Sullivan has argued that homosexual marriage should be embraced by conservatives, precisely because true conservatives will seek stability over disorder. Given the promiscuity common to the homosexual male population, Sullivan argues that conservatives should see homosexual marriage as a helpful and healthy institutional barrier to rampant promiscuity.

In his article in *The Wall Street Journal*, Sullivan shifts his argument in a subtle but very important way. He now moves to the decriminalization of homosexual behavior as his trump card in the debate. He clearly calls for conservatives to acknowledge that homosexuality is now fully legal, and therefore homosexuals cannot be subjected to discrimination on any basis related to their sexuality. This means not only the legalization of homosexual marriage, but the complete elimination of all legal, cultural, political, and economic barriers to homosexual activity and relationships.

Domestic partnerships are not enough, he argues. Anything less than the institution of marriage is deficient and discriminatory. Sullivan, speaking on behalf of the proponents of homosexual marriage, demands that conservatives get with the program.

In his article responding to Andrew Sullivan, David Frum argues correctly that the gay marriage debate is not really about homosexuality, but about marriage. As he notes: "As always seems to be the way, we've come to understand the importance of marriage at exactly the moment that the institution is approaching the verge of collapse."

Frum, a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, presents a powerful argument against Sullivan's call for the legalization of homosexual marriage. Nevertheless, Frum concedes a great deal of territory when he fails to argue against the normalization of homosexuality itself.

Frum thinks that American conservatives have very mixed evaluations of homosexuality. When pressed for his assessment, Frum admits, "I'd guess that the very large majority of American conservatives have for many years regarded homosexuality as something that just is, and that should be tolerated in the spirit of live-and-let-live with which they tolerate all the other variations of the human species." Really?

The exchange between Sullivan and Frum demonstrates the limits of an essentially secular argument, even among those who consider themselves conservatives. Secular conservatives place the greatest premium upon the continuity of forms, institutions, and moral principles in the society. During a time of social change, secular conservatives tend to fight over the institutions rather than the principles or morality at stake. In this exchange of articles, both Sullivan and Frum are playing true to form.

Frum counters Sullivan's argument by pointing to the confusion found in jurisdictions where something like same-sex marriage has been attempted. In particular, Frum points to the nations of Denmark, France, Hungary, Iceland, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Canada, each of which has legalized some form of same-sex relationships in an institution with many, if not all, of the privileges of marriage. He also points to the fact that many of these domestic partnership laws are open to both homosexual and heterosexual couples. The *Pacte Civile de Solidarite* has been enacted by the French government in order to offer any couple, regardless of gender, an opportunity to share rights and responsibilities.

True to his conservative philosophy, Frum is concerned about this undermining of the institution of marriage. "Today, in France and Canada and other places, marriage is a continuum, a series of gradations between true single hood and formal matrimony. A woman who is cohabiting with a man in Canada or is pacted in France might well be deceived into thinking that her family situation is stable enough for her to have a child. But she would be wrong. The average cohabitation in Canada lasts only five years. Her government has told her that she is the next-best-thing to married; but from the point of view of her children, the next-best-thing is no good at all."

Frum argues that the distinction between married and unmarried relationships should be "a bright clear line." Homosexual activists, he acknowledges, want to restore that bright line, but with gay marriage on the side of the law. Frum then suggests that the most likely outcome in the United States is a "crazy-quilt of differing systems of 'marriage-lite' across the country." The states could pass very different models of domestic partnerships and marriages, all adding to a basic confusion about what marriage really is.

This would have a devastating impact among young people, Frum argues. "The result of the national trend toward

same-sex marriage will be that the young people of the country would be presented with 50 different buffets, each of them offering two or more varieties of quasi-marital relationships. In such a world, the very concept of marriage would vanish.”

Conservative Christians will recognize a great deal of wisdom in Frum’s argument. Like the secular conservatives, Christians are very concerned about the continuity of human institutions, especially the institution of marriage. But the Christian commitment to marriage goes far beyond common ground shared with secular conservatives. We do not see the most important function of marriage as limited to human happiness and social stability.

To the contrary, the Christian commitment to marriage is based on the Holy Scripture, which points us to marriage as a unique arena of God’s glory on earth, where His good pleasure is demonstrated in the right ordering of creation. In other words, marriage, as established by the Creator, becomes the culminating picture of creation’s goodness, with a man and a woman entering into the holy covenant of marriage and enjoying all the joys of marital life, even as they assume together all of the rights and responsibilities the Creator invested in this most important of earthly institutions.

For this reason, Christian conservatives cannot accept either of the arguments presented in The Wall Street Journal as adequate. Andrew Sullivan’s argument for the comprehensive normalization of homosexuality—based upon its decriminalization by the US Supreme Court—runs in direct conflict with the clear teachings of Scripture. Christians are bound by the authority of God’s Word, and cannot accept the verdict of a secular court as a substitute for the verdict of Scripture. Sullivan’s argument should remind Christians that the secular law is to be judged by the Scripture, for the Scripture will refuse to be judged.

But Christians must also beware, lest the argument presented by David Frum be accepted as our own. We share Frum’s concern for the social stability of our culture and we recognize with him the vital importance of marriage to that stability. Nevertheless, our concern must be addressed to a much higher dimension than social stability. Marriage is most fundamentally God’s institution given to men and women for our good, but ultimately for His glory.

This fascinating exchange in The Wall Street Journal should prompt American conservatives to further thought and reflection. More urgently, Christians should take a close look at these arguments, in order to be reminded that “conservative” just isn’t enough.

In the end, the Christian church may be the last institution on earth that remembers what marriage really is—and whose it is.

