

Atlantic Baptist Article
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Another Kick at the Can

Here I am writing another column around the whole marriage issue. There are days when I think it's time to move on – to tackle another topic or research another issue - but for the most part, I'm convinced that there is still much for me to learn (and pass on) before God will release me from this particular portfolio.

As I write this, Paul Martin's government has just sent a new reference question to the Supreme Court. It is the question that probably begged to be asked from the moment the Federal Government opted to not appeal the decision of the Ontario Court of Appeal last spring. The question is:

Is the opposite-sex requirement for marriage for civil purposes, as established by the common law and set out for Quebec in s. 5 of the *Federal Law - Civil Law Harmonization Act, No. 1*, S.C. 2001, c. 4, consistent with the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*? If not, in what particular or particulars and to what extent?

In short, is the current definition of marriage (and hence court decisions and government policies based on that definition), unconstitutional?

The timing of this new question is of course interesting in that it will delay feedback from the Supreme Court until after a federal election. The new time-line anticipates a response from the Supreme Court in the fall of 2004, debate and discussion in the House into 2005 and a vote not before the fall of 2005.

The government has justified the delay by arguing that input from the Supreme Court on this question will bring greater clarity, but on the other hand, the benefit of this clarity seems a bit ambiguous if, as the Justice Minister Irwin Cotler insists, the government is committed to recognizing as "marriages" the unions of committed same-sex partners.

For those of us who believe that the opposite-sex definition of marriage is the best basis for our society, where do we go from here? What more can be said? What can we say to ourselves – the faith community – that will help us to make sense of the political and judicial determination to redefine marriage?

I have two observations to share. The first is that Pierre Elliot Trudeau's comment and conviction (made when he was Minister of Justice in 1967) that

“the state has no business in the bedrooms of the nation”, precipitated (or reflected?) a dramatic ideological shift, the impact of which we are really just beginning to come to terms with. As outrageous as that comment must have been to many Canadians in 1967, in the 36 years since then, our country has come to not only believe that it is true (and consequently cannot and should not be contested), but we have also institutionalized it in our laws and public policy. Is it true? Is sex a private matter to be left to the discretion of consenting adults? What have been other implications of this view? Is this a biblical view?

In Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry (2002:107) William Willimon says:

Christianity tends to see most things that the world regards as private, as intensely public. For us, sex is not a private matter. Sex is a public responsibility, intertwined with politics, something to be engaged in for the common good, not merely for individual satisfaction.

For many Canadians, this statement would seem prudish and even ridiculous. As we Christians (individually and collectively) continue to consider how best to serve God within our secular society on social and moral issues, we need to understand the broader mindset – it is one in which the truth of the Gospel seems like foolishness (2 Cor. 2:14).

The second observation I would like to make is that the direction our country has gone (as reflected in both law and public policy) concerning our collective “Canadian” understanding of homosexuality can only be understood if one realizes that it is premised on a belief that sexual orientation is innate, biologically determined, and therefore likely unchangeable. When, in 1985, the courts extended the discrimination protections of the Charter to homosexuals on the grounds that sexual orientation is an analogous category to race, ethnicity and sex, this view of homosexuality became the “conventional wisdom” of our age.

The irony in this is that there is no consensus within the scientific community that this is so – in other words, science has yet to either establish or refute the “cause” of homosexual orientation (or, for that matter, of heterosexual orientation!). Thus, the decision to view homosexuality as a biologically determined social characteristic has been a political and legal decision, not a scientific one.

What has all of this got to do with Atlantic Baptists? I believe that if we are to “put evangelism first” in all that we do, we must understand the culture that is our mission field. Just as missionaries to foreign shores prepare for ministry by learning about the culture, so we who are called to mission in North America must learn to read our culture as from without so that we can be effective from within.

For the most part, our courts and parliaments have accepted two dubious notions: that **sex is a private matter** and that **homosexuality is biologically determined**. If we are to be instruments of social change within our culture we must be committed to diligently seeking God's wisdom so that we will know how to creatively challenge people to reconsider those assumptions – to step back from one ideological position to consider another.

And, we must pray, believing, that God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven, not because we have successfully defended the truth in the public square, but because God is God. Truth **will** prevail and good **will** triumph over evil, whether we can see it or not!