

June 22, 2012

How My View on Gay Marriage Changed

By David Blankenhorn

IN my 2007 book, “The Future of Marriage,” and in my 2010 court testimony concerning Proposition 8, the California ballot initiative that defined marriage as between a man and a woman, I took a stand against gay marriage. But as a marriage advocate, the time has come for me to accept gay marriage and emphasize the good that it can do. I’d like to explain why.

I opposed gay marriage believing that children have the right, insofar as society makes it possible, to know and to be cared for by the two parents who brought them into this world. I didn’t just dream up this notion: the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which came into force in 1990, guarantees children this right.

Marriage is how society recognizes and protects this right. Marriage is the planet’s only institution whose core purpose is to unite the biological, social and legal components of parenthood into one lasting bond. Marriage says to a child: The man and the woman whose sexual union made you will also be there to love and raise you. In this sense, marriage is a gift that society bestows on its children.

At the level of first principles, gay marriage effaces that gift. No same-sex couple, married or not, can ever under any circumstances combine biological, social and legal parenthood into one bond. For this and other reasons, gay marriage has become a significant contributor to marriage’s continuing deinstitutionalization, by which I mean marriage’s steady transformation in both law and custom from a structured institution with clear public purposes to the state’s licensing of private relationships that are privately defined.

I have written these things in my book and said them in my testimony, and I believe them today. I am not recanting any of it.

But there are more good things under heaven than these beliefs. For me, the most important is the equal dignity of homosexual love. I don’t believe that opposite-sex and same-sex relationships are the same, but I do believe, with growing numbers of Americans, that the time for denigrating or stigmatizing same-sex relationships is over. Whatever one’s definition of marriage, legally recognizing gay and lesbian couples and their children is a victory for basic fairness.

Another good thing is comity. Surely we must live together with some degree of mutual acceptance, even if doing so involves compromise. Sticking to one’s position no matter what can be a virtue. But bending the knee a bit, in the name of comity, is not always the same as weakness. As I look at what our society needs most today, I have no stomach for what we often

too glibly call “culture wars.” Especially on this issue, I’m more interested in conciliation than in further fighting.

A third good thing is respect for an emerging consensus. The population as a whole remains deeply divided, but most of our national elites, as well as most younger Americans, favor gay marriage. This emerging consensus may be wrong on the merits. But surely it matters.

I had hoped that the gay marriage debate would be mostly about marriage’s relationship to parenthood. But it hasn’t been. Or perhaps it’s fairer to say that I and others have made that argument, and that we have largely failed to persuade. In the mind of today’s public, gay marriage is almost entirely about accepting lesbians and gay men as equal citizens. And to my deep regret, much of the opposition to gay marriage seems to stem, at least in part, from an underlying anti-gay animus. To me, a Southerner by birth whose formative moral experience was the civil rights movement, this fact is profoundly disturbing.

I had also hoped that debating gay marriage might help to lead heterosexual America to a broader and more positive recommitment to marriage as an institution. But it hasn’t happened. With each passing year, we see higher and higher levels of unwed childbearing, nonmarital cohabitation and family fragmentation among heterosexuals. Perhaps some of this can be attributed to the reconceptualization of marriage as a private ordering that is so central to the idea of gay marriage. But either way, if fighting gay marriage was going to help marriage over all, I think we’d have seen some signs of it by now.

So my intention is to try something new. Instead of fighting gay marriage, I’d like to help build new coalitions bringing together gays who want to strengthen marriage with straight people who want to do the same. For example, once we accept gay marriage, might we also agree that marrying before having children is a vital cultural value that all of us should do more to embrace? Can we agree that, for all lovers who want their love to last, marriage is preferable to cohabitation? Can we discuss whether both gays and straight people should think twice before denying children born through artificial reproductive technology the right to know and be known by their biological parents?

Will this strategy work? I don’t know. But I hope to find out.

David Blankenhorn is the founder of the Institute for American Values.

Gay marriage was legalised in most of the UK in 2013. What effect has it had on gay and lesbian relationships? Do we care if marriage equality contributes to the demise of gay culture, identity and community? I do. We should consider what might be lost, as well as gained, if a new generation of gay men and lesbians were to rush into marriages without firstly having experienced that blast of emancipation that follows on from the realisation that you are that thing that some people loathe or pity and you feel utterly thrilled with it. It's about respecting difference. An achievement that allows us to view ourselves as morally superior to the Taliban and so-called Islamic State. Perhaps all at Stormont will show us the same respect when it next votes on this matter.