

A Foundation on Which to Stand

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The issue of "gay marriage" and a cultural demand for moral affirmation of homosexuality will be the shaping forces in the Christian church in America for the next 5 years. Christians are not prepared for the challenges that will be directed at their moral beliefs and many, perhaps most, will be completely unable to answer those challenges. Christians are also not prepared to meet the cultural hostility, ghettoization, and even physical persecution that will come from identifying with historically accepted positions on morality.

A state of preparation for the future must rest on two things. One is a recognition of the place of suffering as a cost of following Christ. *For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him. (Php 1:29)* Although the Bible often talks about this, and although we are becoming increasingly aware that the church is living in persecution all around the world, most of us have not really accepted the truth that "*all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*". We have built our understanding of Christian identity on the concept of fitting in, or being winsome. We have believed that the Christian life, lived right, can be faithful to Christ and accepted in the world at the same time. Perhaps this is truly possible in a Christian culture, which America once was. However, that culture has passed but our understanding of what our faith will produce in the culture has not changed accordingly.

The second part of preparation relates to our epistemology or basis for truth. Specifically, with respect to what is ahead, Christians must believe there is a basis for their view on marriage that consists of more than "all good people know this". Why? Because the definition of "good people" is exactly what is now being contended. The erosion of the Christian mind and presence in American culture (The number of unchurched Americans increased by 92 percent between 1991 and 2004) has opened the door for social change unimaginable a generation ago. The homosexual movement, seeking to redefine the moral center of our culture, has made clear it cannot be content with anything less than the destruction of authoritative moral claims from Christianity. This should not catch Christians by surprise. The intolerance we see emerging in the gay culture has already been described quite graphically in the Bible. There are no more disturbing descriptions of sin in all of Scripture than Genesis 18 and Judges 19. These passages taken along with Romans 1 and an understanding of the conviction of God's Holy Spirit that comes through His church, should make Christians expect that any moral claim condemning homosexuality will be virulently opposed. This opposition means ultimately that the Christian position will be framed by its opponents as being immoral itself, hateful, bigoted and violating the rights of others.

Christians need to recognize that the culture as a whole can become quite intolerant of Christian moral claims, despite our earnest, sincere and humble appeals. There have been times in the past (most recently in Germany in the 30's and China in the early 50's) when Christians were unable to turn back the cultural tsunami in which they found themselves. This possibility is very challenging for Christians in America because we have always believed Christian principles, properly communicated, can win the hearts and minds of the majority in our culture. However, that time has probably past. Christians can no longer find confidence in their beliefs by the value those beliefs are acknowledged to have had in our country. Christians in America must now enter a new phase in American Christianity – we must find a grounding for our faith as a persecuted minority.

As this rapidly developing change unfolds, Christians themselves will be polarized. Some will back away from the offending claims of their faith, ultimately leaving orthodoxy all together. Others will define and articulate a basis for the moral claims of Christianity that establishes these claims as universally true and

therefore valid for everyone in our culture. But without a confidence in a basis for truth Christians will find themselves driven by intimidation and even coercion to accept a new morality. They will publicly distance themselves from the claims of their faith (which is already happening), and so distance themselves from Christ. The end of this process may actually be a denial of the faith on the part of many who now claim to be Christians.

How do we find a basis for the Christian view of marriage that is clear enough to put forth as true for everyone? This can only come as we are confident there is a source of knowledge about marriage that we can be sure of – meaning it must be both understandable and trustworthy. While most Christians would say the Bible is their source of truth, this perspective generally comes with a degree of ambiguity and uncertainty on some subjects, among them the issues of marriage and gender. This ambiguity exists because nearly all of the Biblical basis for understanding marriage comes from the first three chapters of Genesis. Yet the average Christian would have no confidence in knowing how to understand those chapters and would certainly lack confidence in using them as a framework for debate in the public square.

It is hard to overstate the significance of this. This lack of clarity about our basis for morals regarding sexuality and marriage is going to separate many church people from a Biblically based morality. As many believers will ultimately conclude, unless there is a very clear basis for understanding God's perspective on marriage, Christians have no business promoting a "Christian" view of marriage publically, and really should not even hold it as a moral issue within the church. (Many liberal denominations have already come to this conclusion). So Christians must either clearly articulate a biblical basis for morality related to marriage and homosexuality or they need to acknowledge there are no specific Christian moral prescriptives and simply base all morality on what is "loving".

I believe this dividing watershed is the next chapter for the church in America. Over the next few years the church will be divided by this issue into two camps - one being those who clarify a Biblical basis for Christian moral values and then continue to publically identify their Christian faith with those values and the second being a (probably much larger) segment who let go of any scriptural authority related to public morals or ethics.

This brings us squarely to a controversy the church has tried to leave unaddressed for several generations. *There is no basis for the traditional Christian perspective on marriage unless the early chapters of Genesis can be understood as a divinely inspired communication intended to give clear and definite truth about mankind, men, women and marriage.* Jesus supported his teaching on marriage by referencing the first chapters of Genesis. Paul anchored nearly everything he taught about gender, morality and marriage in the first chapters of Genesis. Indeed, almost every doctrine of the Christian faith becomes part of a consistent worldview only when it is put in the context of what we are told in the early chapters of Genesis.

This is perhaps only mildly problematic when speaking in Christian circles. Christians are generally willing to grant the Bible an overarching moral authority even if specific parts of it are obscure or not even believed. But if we want to bring truth from the Bible by which to teach, call, and judge our world, and we want to do so with intellectual integrity, this presents a formidable challenge. As Genesis is studied it becomes clear that the author of Genesis intended the book to be understood as straightforward historical narrative, and as such the Bible is consistent with itself. This straightforward historical narrative, however, does not fit with the history considered authoritative in our time, which history describes an evolutionary origin of life, of man and of human culture. Most Christians accept part or all of the origins history presented by our scientific, educational and cultural authorities. Their commitment to the Bible is maintained by assuming the book of Genesis, as well as other difficult parts of Scripture, can be allegorized to find God's meaning or intended truth.

The problem with this solution is that the points of the Genesis account that must be allegorized are the very points that provide the basis for a Christian truth on gender distinctions and marriage. But allegorizing, by definition, means moving from a symbol to an intended truth. The intended truth comes through interpretation, which, of course, is subjective and open to challenge. It's hard to stand in the face of intimidation, loss of social standing, loss of employment or perhaps even arrest based on one's own interpretation of what God meant in an inspired allegorical myth. The closer one looks the more clear it becomes that there is no defensible basis for absolute truth regarding gender, marriage or morals without confidence of a true, historical communication of the origin of the human species by God's hand as recorded in Genesis.

Therefore, that very point of conflict which Christians have worked hard to label as non-essential - as in saying it doesn't matter how God created the world, the important thing is to believe in Jesus - turns out to be critical to the faith after all. What has happened as we have chosen not to contend for a true historical record in the Bible is that we have lost (given away) the very foundation necessary to defend a Christian view of morality against the reasoned attacks of our day. Given that the Christian understanding of man, sin, death and the loss of eternal life also come from Genesis, we have also lost any reasoned understanding for why someone needs to trust in Jesus in the first place. Without a confident understanding of God as an intentional, involved Creator we really let go of why God has the right to define or judge sin. Only to the degree that He has created us to be moral beings can God rightfully require that standard of us. Without clearly understanding what God did in creating us we don't have a solid basis to understand His intent related to marriage or any other aspect of human behavior.

A century ago, J. Gresham Machen made an observation we should be quite sobered by today. He said,

"False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion. Under such circumstances, what God desires us to do is to destroy the obstacle at its root ... What is today matter of academic speculation begins tomorrow to move armies and pull down empires. In that second stage, it has gone too far to be combated; the time to stop is was when it was still a matter of impassionate debate. So as Christians we should try to mold the thought of the world in such a way as to make the acceptance of Christianity something more than a logical absurdity."

After a great deal of thought and study, I have come to believe that without a historical understanding of Genesis, Christianity becomes that logical absurdity. And I think we have come to the point where empires are being pulled down.

Until very recently our culture has brought only a passive hostility to Christianity. The place of Christianity or the Bible as a source of truth or moral authority has been gradually but systematically removed from government, education and media. It has been marginalized as irrelevant or out of place in public life and without claim on the "real world". However, Christianity itself was always acknowledged, if begrudgingly, as representing true standards for morals and ethics.

In the past few years a spate of books have made the best seller list accusing Christianity of not just irrelevance, but actually being evil - a malicious force in society. The challenges related to gay marriage will aggressively carry that theme, and the claims of Christians to know absolute moral truth will be attacked as bigoted and hateful, emanating from an ignorant and dangerous commitment to religious fundamentalism. It is this change from passive to active opposition to Christianity that Christians, and Christian leaders, must prepare themselves and their flocks.

I write this because I have come to believe that there is no more important issue in this preparation than a determination regarding the opening chapters of Genesis. Are they a true record of the history of our origin? If so, we have a solid basis to know truth about God's intent for marriage, sexuality and much about the expression of our gender. We also have that solid basis to understand evil and the separateness of God from the world He created. If Genesis is not a clear, straightforward account of history then what may be determined from it is not clear and cannot provide a basis for claims to universal truth.

Finally, while the most important matter is the clarity of God's people regarding His truth, that clarity must also be a basis for communicating truth to our world. Though they may reject that truth we also know each person made in God's image has an eternal destiny and an eternal judgment. If God has given clear truth we must in love communicate that truth to our fellow man. Christ came to save every person from their sins and the beginning of that salvation comes as we acknowledge our sin and come to Him as our Savior.

A Christian foundation to any moral claim in our world can only be based on the real existence of a true and comprehensible communication from God. If God has communicated right and wrong through which He will pronounce an eternal judgment then absolute truth exists. If God has not so communicated, or if that communication cannot be clearly understood by anyone seeking that truth, then we do not have a basis for a moral message to our world.

Christians are coming to a time when they will be forced to decide what they believe about truths they had always thought were self-evident. That crossroads will make them ask questions – and need answers like never before – about the Bible and its validity. Those questions will ultimately go to Genesis. If the clearest, simplest and one of the longest historical narratives in the Bible cannot be taken at face value, how can we claim to be so certain about the more obscure and difficult things? If those things that are open to historical or scientific verification are conceded as having been falsified in their most straightforward reading, how can Christianity be considered authoritative on that which can never be verified (such as morals or eternity)? Or as Jesus Himself put it, “I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?” (John 3:12)

Fortunately, nearly every question related to origins is being addressed by good scientists making sometimes astonishing discoveries that support the historical testimony of the Bible. Organizations such as Answers in Genesis, The Discovery Institute, and Institute for Creation Research, to name a few, are reputable resources for scientific studies supporting evidence for a Creator or the Bible. Biology, archeology and geology all give a strong support to what is written in Genesis. Though such research is not generally accepted (just as Christian morality soon will not be), for those who pursue the evidence with an open mind, the results are surprising and affirming. Christians have every reason to assume the Bible is a straightforward communication of truth from God.

If an object look at the evidence from our world cannot support the Bible, then Christians do not have an basis for any truth claims in our world. Christianity becomes simply one more personal preference. But if God really as given us the earliest history or our world and of our species, then we have a treasure, and a basis for truth that is part of the gospel itself.

“God has set the revelation of the Bible in history; He did not give it (as He could have done) in the form of a theological textbook. Having set the revelation in history, what sense then would it make for God to give us a revelation in which the history was wrong? God has also set man in the universe which the Scriptures themselves say speaks of this God. What sense then would it make for God to give His revelation in a book that was wrong concerning the universe? The answer to both questions must be, 'No sense at all!'”

Francis Schaeffer, The God Who is There