

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
19 May 2012

President Obama's "Evolution" on Same-Sex Marriage

Last week, the President of the United States, during an interview with ABC's Robin Roberts, declared that "I've just concluded that for me personally it is important for me to go ahead and affirm that I think same-sex couples should be able to get married." [Incidentally, he made his statement the day after North Carolina voters affirmed their overwhelming support of defining marriage as the union of one man and one woman. There are 30 states that have voted in a similar fashion.] Simply put, the President has agreed to a radical redefinition of the most fundamental institution of civilization. President Obama's views on this subject have, in his words, been "evolving." In February 1996, Obama, while running for state office in Illinois, signed a letter affirming the validity of same-sex marriage. In 2004, when he ran for the US Senate, and in August 2008, while running for president, he stated that he believed that "marriage is the union between a man and a woman. Now, for me as a Christian—for me—for me as a Christian, it is also a sacred union. God's in the mix." Earlier in his presidency, he had ordered his Justice Department to stop defending the constitutionality of the Defense of Marriage Act, signed into law by President Bill Clinton. He ended the "don't ask, don't tell" edict as it applied to the US military, also from the Bill Clinton era. In his interview with Robin Roberts last week, he invoked his Christian faith to explain why he is now supporting same-sex marriage: As a Christian, he said, "the Golden Rule" is the guideline for me. But, the Golden Rule is not the only ethical standard articulated in Scripture. So, how should we think about this momentous decision? Although Obama's declaration does not affect public policy per se, to have the President of the United States so boldly redefine marriage is stunning! Several key thoughts:

- **First**, without any question, his declaration stands utterly opposed to God's Creation Ordinance in Genesis 2. He may not like this Ordinance, but it is there—boldly, clearly and without any ambiguity. After giving clear instructions to Adam about his stewardship of the Garden, God concludes that it is not good that Adam is alone (v. 18). To prove this to Adam, God brings all the animals before him to name (vv. 18-20). Although this establishes his authority over the animals, it also served as an object lesson for Adam: He was the only creature of God truly alone. So, God creates the woman as his complement, his helper (vv. 21-23). Moses then offers a theological commentary on what God did with Adam and Eve (vv. 24-25). First, God established the paradigm for marriage. The man is to "leave" his family with the conscious understanding that he is establishing a new family unit. Second, that means "cleaving" (like glue) to his wife. Third, in separating from family and with the unqualified commitment to his wife, he and his wife will be in the process of "becoming one flesh." This concept does symbolize the sexual intercourse that physically unites the two human beings, but it also symbolizes the merging of two personalities, male and female, into a complementary whole. Their personalities, their idiosyncrasies and their uniqueness all remain; they do not cease. Instead, these two totally different human beings merge into a

perfect complement where both--now together--serve God in their integrity. In verse 25, Moses further comments that this couple is “naked” and not “ashamed.” They were so totally “other-centered” that they did not think of self, only of one another. We can properly infer that their sexual oneness was characterized by no shame or discomfort either. Their physical love was beautiful and fulfilling; no selfish or carnal lust was present. The wonder of romantic love was perfectly present in this first marriage. Theologically, what do we learn from this passage? How does this passage establish the model for a proper understanding of human sexuality and marriage?

1. When Jesus and Paul deal with questions of marriage or human sexuality, they always refer back to this creation ordinance of Genesis 2:18-25 (e.g., Matthew 19:1-12, Mark 10:1-12 and 1 Corinthians 7:10-11). These verses transcend culture and time and they constitute God’s ideal for sexuality and marriage.
2. Marriage is to be monogamous and heterosexual. From this passage it is impossible to justify polygamy or homosexuality. It is the standard, the ideal, for all marriages. Therefore, one simply cannot justify “same-sex” marriages. With this standard established for marriage, the other scriptural passages dealing with human sexuality are all measured against Genesis. Each detail that fornication, adultery or homosexuality is an aberration, a radical departure from God’s clear standard.
3. Genesis 19:1-11. This is the story of Sodom, which God utterly destroyed with fire. Homosexual commentators see the sin of the men as a violation of the Ancient Near Eastern hospitality codes. But 19:5 and Lot’s response in 19:8 demonstrate unequivocally that homosexual relations were on the minds of these men. It is a deliberate departure from God’s clear revelation in Genesis 2.
4. Leviticus 18:22, 29 and 20:13. Homosexual commentators often argue that we do not keep most other parts of the Levitical law, so why emphasize this one so adamantly. Although Jesus’ finished work on Calvary’s cross did render inoperative much of the Levitical law and practices (the argument of Hebrews), issues of human sexuality transcend the law because of the creation ordinance of God in Genesis 2. What God says in Leviticus 18 and 20 is tied clearly to His standard established at creation. Homosexuality is ethically wrong.
5. Romans 1:26, 27. In this passage, Paul’s argument about the debased sexual practices cited in the verses hangs on his use of the word “natural.” Homosexual commentators argue that Paul is condemning unfaithfulness in the homosexual relationship, not homosexuality itself. However, “natural” and “unnatural” can only be understood as departure or adherence to some standard that determines what natural and unnatural is. That standard can only be the standard established in God’s creation ordinance in Genesis.
6. 1 Corinthians 6:10. To motivate the Corinthians out of their spiritual lethargy and complacency, in this passage Paul lists the various categories of sinners God will keep out of His kingdom. His goal is that they examine themselves. Among those listed are “effeminate” and “homosexuals.” Paul Feinberg argues that these two Greek words

focus on both the active and the passive partner in the homosexual relationship. The emphasis of the passage is not on unfaithfulness to the homosexual partner, as the homosexual commentators contend, but on the very homosexual act itself.

7. 1 Timothy 1:10. Here Paul also condemns homosexuality as contrary to “sound doctrine.” The issue is not unfaithfulness to a homosexual partner but engaging in something that violates God’s clearly revealed standard. In this case, what is “sound doctrine” is God’s revelation in His creation ordinance, just as “liars,” “kidnappers,” “perjurers” and others violate his standards revealed elsewhere (the Ten Commandments for example). In summary, the Bible resoundingly condemns the homosexual lifestyle as contrary to the ethical standard God establishes in His creation ordinance of marriage. Without some benchmark to settle the ethical debate on human sexuality, there is no basis for making ethical decisions. God’s Word provides that benchmark; the human response of obedience is the only acceptable option.
- **Second**, it is quite astounding how rapidly American culture has accommodated, not only to homosexuality, but to same-sex marriage. Surveys demonstrate that the nation is about evenly divided on the question, with younger Americans overwhelmingly supportive of same sex-marriage. In about 15 years, this issue will be irrelevant and the debate will be over. A significant generational shift in cultural attitudes is emerging in our culture. How do we explain this? One clear explanation is the media, especially television. TV has been a powerful vehicle to desensitize the culture to the ethical issues surrounding human sexuality and marriage. Consider this: This spring on the following situational comedies, homosexuality is presented as a positive, acceptable and normal sexual lifestyle: “Glee,” “Grey’s Anatomy,” “Modern Family,” “Smash,” and “Happy Endings.” Edward Schiappa, professor of communications at the University of Minnesota, argues that “TV and movie representation matters.” In five separate studies, Schiappa and his colleagues have found that the presence of gay characters on TV programs decreases prejudices among viewers of the program. “These attitude changes are not huge—they don’t change bigots into saints. But they can snowball.” That is precisely what is occurring in American culture. Simply put, if American culture has no ethical foundation for making ethical decisions, then the pursuit of personal autonomy, the core value of this Postmodern world, will drive the debate and the decisions. As TV and movies present gay couples and same-sex marriage as just another viable ethical option, cultural acceptance and accommodation will follow.

American culture is in the process of redefining the most basic of all human institutions. It is being done so in the name of personal freedom and liberty. Nonetheless, from the perspective of Almighty God, humanity does not have the freedom to redefine this most basic institution. God created us, established with clarity the institution of marriage and defines its boundaries and parameters. As a culture, we may choose to defy those parameters but not with impunity. Read Romans 1:18-32 to see a summary of how human autonomy in defiance of God’s ethical standards produces dysfunction, self-destructive behavior and the downward spiral of civilization. Whether American culture and its president like what He says or not, God has spoken—and He has not stuttered!

See Brian Stelter in the *New York Times* (9 May 2012) and James P. Eckman, *Biblical Ethics*, pp. 47-52.