

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

I wrote a letter to the editor, and what a reaction it has elicited! I have promised to give more complete responses on our church web site than I could give through the editorial page of the Dundalk *Eagle*. This little note will lay them out. It will include my letters, as I sent them to the *Eagle*, not as they ended up going to print, along with several references and responses to what people have written in response to me.

I'll try to let my answers to people's points will be ruled by a fair balance between Christian conviction and Christian compassion. That is to say, I'll offer rebuttals and corrections to ideas, but no personal attacks against people. As I indicated in the paper, I'll try to classify objections and responses under four general headings: (1) the idea of the separation of church and state, (2) references to the Bible and the history of religion, (3) the nature and purposes of marriage and (4) appeals to Christian love and compassion.

First, my letters, as I sent them to the editor. Portions edited out will appear in **bold** type.

Editor:

I am gravely concerned about the ACLU's lawsuit seeking to redefine marriage in our state, and perhaps even more alarmed at our attorney general's barely tepid defense of the state's marriage laws. Maryland law is right to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman, and should be defended vigorously by the attorney general's office.

I say this for several reasons:

1. In thousands of years of human history, no culture has understood marriage to be potentially a same-sex union.
2. This is because human sexual anatomy bears eloquent witness to the fact that men are made for women, and women for men.
3. Both common sense and solid research tell us that, when other things are equal, the "traditional family" is the healthiest place for raising children.
4. Restructuring society so as to remove any cultural guidelines for normal gender development would be a cruel act. It is likely to influence some young people to be more open to embracing a lifestyle that may seem exciting or exotic (at first), but which is demonstrably abnormal, infertile and unhealthy.
5. Most of America would seem to share that view. This year, 13 states have passed state constitutional amendments defining marriage as between a man and a woman, seeking to protect themselves from just such a lawsuit as the ACLU is pursuing here in Maryland.
6. As an evangelical Christian, I am compelled by clear Biblical teaching to believe that marriage is only a union between a man and a woman. I have no intention to stand by mute while a small group of people who have felt marginalized by their own behavior seek to restructure society in such a way as to marginalize millions of people like me who believe that our fathers were right to found our laws on a largely Judeo-Christian basis.
7. Any thoughtful citizen should see the need to structure society's laws so as to strengthen and protect "traditional" marriage.

When all is said and done, that is the most sensible and compassionate course for any culture to take.

Marriage is indeed a human right, and the law should protect the equal rights of all citizens to have access to it. No unmarried man should ever be prohibited from marrying the unmarried woman of his choice; nor should any unmarried woman ever be kept by law from marrying the unmarried man of her choice. Yet no citizen or group of citizens has the right to redefine marriage for the rest of us. It always has been, and always will be, the union of a man and a woman.

Christopher Gudmundsson (*printed in the Eagle November 18, 2004*)

Editor:

I've been interested to read the responses to my letter that the *Eagle* ran on Nov 18. I appreciate those responses, but I question the validity of most of what they have said. The responses deal with four basic kinds of objections: those based on (1) the idea of the separation of church and state, (2) references to the Bible and the history of religion, (3) the nature and purposes of marriage, and (4) appeals to Christian love and compassion. I won't have room to talk about all of those things here, so I'll just focus briefly on the last two. I'll try to have complete answers to all the objections posted at www.dundalkfirst.org in the next month or so.

Few ideas have worked so much mischief as the naïve notion that the main purpose of marriage is to express feelings of love. Marriage is so much more. It is the fundamental relationship of civilized society, and has been throughout history. Marriage is inextricably bound up with things like property, parenting, and more. Romantic emotions are only a small corner

of the full picture. It may sound sweet to some to say that any pair (or group) who consider themselves to be “in love” should be able to formalize that relationship as a legally recognized, legally binding marriage. To me, it sounds more like a formula for far more headache and heartbreak in our society.

In point of fact, people are already free to create and enter just about any legally binding relationship they please, defining whatever rights and responsibilities they might choose within that relationship. Citizens should and do have liberty to conceive and construct contractual relationships, work out their own solutions to problems, and live with the consequences of their choices. But the state has no duty to create ready-made designer relationships for people within its law code, and no reason to make it easy for people to abandon the self-evident, time-honored norms for marriage.

The state does indeed have a compelling interest in marriage law. Both common sense and repeated studies confirm that “traditional marriage” is normally the healthiest place for raising children, meeting mutual needs, and providing life-long care. Beyond that, evidence continues to mount that homosexuality in itself has a real, lasting bent toward self-destruction. Just a few weeks ago, the Centers for Disease Control released a report revealing that, even with all the supposed advances in education, prevention, and treatment, the AIDS infection rate is actually going up among gay men in America. While gay men comprise only 1%-3% of the population, they make up fully 44% of the new HIV infections. Even apart from AIDS, there are a number of other infections and conditions that are directly caused by the common sexual practices of gay men. **While many gay “marriages” may well be monogamous, the gay subculture in our land remains unremittably committed to an agenda of complete sexual license, and continues to demand that such irresponsibility be protected by our governments as a legitimate lifestyle choice.** It is in the public interest to use our laws to encourage “traditional” marriage and morality, and to discourage both homosexuality and heterosexual promiscuity. That is neither unloving nor cold-hearted. It’s just true.

You see, real love doesn’t shy away from addressing real issues. As the oft-quoted “love chapter” itself notes, “Love does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth” (1Co 13:6). Or as the “apostle of love” said, “By this we know that we love the children of God: when we love God and observe His commandments” (1Jo 5:2). In other words, real love is willing to call right “right” and wrong “wrong” – even when it makes people uncomfortable.

Not everyone will recognize **those** Christian ideas as necessarily binding on their lives, I realize. But there is evident truth in them, regardless. If homosexuality is, as I have said, an observably abnormal, sterile, and dangerous behavior, then treating it as a normal behavior is not the path of love by any stretch of the imagination.

I have known two homosexual men in my life. I had some open talks (and some memorable moments of prayer) with both of them about their homosexual acts and affections. I am confident they would tell you that I acted like a friend, treating them with respect, compassion, honesty, and, yes, Christian love. Yet neither would they tell you that I shied away from telling them what God says about their lifestyle. I loved them too much to fudge the truth. For those who doubt that I could love gay people at the same time that I’m telling them that their lifestyle is wrong, I invite you to come to First Baptist Church the first Sunday in 2005. My sermon will be titled “Christian Love and ‘Gay Marriage.’” Judge for yourself whether I know anything about either.

The law of Maryland has always recognized marriage as the union of a woman and a man. Realistic compassion, sensible foresight, and gutsy love demand that that understanding be preserved in the laws of this state. That is why I again call upon our attorney general to mount a vigorous defense of Maryland’s existing legal definition of marriage as the lifelong union of a man and a woman.

Christopher Gudmundsson (*printed in the Eagle December 30, 2004, edited*)

Editor,

I’m delighted by much that I’ve read in the last two issues of the Eagle, written in response to my ideas. (Which, of course, is not exactly the same thing as agreeing with much of it!) Only one thing genuinely dismays me: the suggestion that I’ve denigrated or defamed anyone.

To say that a love is unhealthy, dangerous, or even wrong is not the same thing as saying that that the one who feels it is somehow less of a valuable person, nor as saying that the feeling is not really love.

In my previous letter, I did not sneer at any love, not even those loves that are clearly unnatural or unhealthy. I’m in no position to. As with most people, my emotions of love were all over the map at various times in my younger life – the good, the bad, and the ugly. Exclusively heterosexual, if you need to know, but not always exclusively healthy.

My point was that marriage needs to be stable, while love (as a bare emotion) is notoriously unstable. Strangely, in trying to prove me wrong (or at least recklessly overconfident) about love, that writer actually restated the basic truth of my

point most eloquently. Marriage is about so much more than love alone, precisely because love alone is too unpredictable to serve all by itself as a solid basis for marriage. And marriage law needs to recognize that fact.

In all that I've written, I've never in any way tried to devalue anyone as a person. I have objected rather stringently to the homosexual lifestyle, and attempted to show why I believe "same-sex marriage" is a bad idea for Maryland. But objecting to a behavior is not the same thing as denigrating or defaming a person. With six kids and a puppy at my house, I object to some behavior or another every day I live. But that's not scorn; that's a father's love. And when I point out sin, that's not an attack; it's just part of what I do as a preacher who loves people.

What delights me in what I've read from so many others? Plenty! I'll mention them all on our web site at www.dundalkfirst.org, and I'll welcome the chance to correspond personally with those who e-mail me from that site.

All I'll say here is that I'm delighted to acknowledge my indebtedness to a recent commentator for pointing out something that may prove quite helpful to the members of the church I serve. I really do need to preach a sermon on how New Testament believers can come to terms with Old Testament texts that may seem grossly unchristian. The fact that I made that peace years ago doesn't mean that all the members of the First Baptist Church have. Since they read the *Eagle*, too, a sermon is surely in order.

What delights me more is that that writer seems to have said to all of Dundalk that he's looking forward to attending that day, if I'll tell him when it's coming. Excellent. I'll probably call that sermon "The 'Good' Book Says What?" and preach it on January 30. I'll be even more delighted if that person will come, introduce himself, and give me a chance to shake his hand. And I'll be most delighted if he'll join my family for a meal some time soon afterward.

Christopher Gudmundsson (*sent to the Dundalk Eagle January 15, 2005*)

Now, on to the objections...

Objections based on the idea of the separation of church and state

One respondent wrote that religious considerations should be kept out of public policy considerations because we came to America seeking freedom from religion, and created a nation in which church and state would be kept separate. The Bill of Rights, he wrote, guarantees the separation of church and state because of religious persecution. Another person wrote that, if the church wants the government out of the church; the church should stay out of government.

The separation of church and state was originally a Baptist idea, finding its way into the Bill of Rights largely as a result of pressure from Baptists. So perhaps a Baptist can set the record straight on this oft-misunderstood issue. The early American Baptists never envisioned a secular society, in which all thoughts of God are consigned to the limited sphere of private preference. Neither did the Founding Fathers who were most responsible for our Bill of Rights (Madison and Jefferson). Rather, they envisioned a society in which religion flourished because freedom prospered. In such a society, a largely Christian consensus would form the framework for moral discourse, and churches serve as the conscience of the culture. (Read the Federalist Papers some time!) But no single Christian denomination would be given public recognition or support by the federal government. (State governments were another matter; in point of fact, several states had established religions, with the last one disestablishing in 1833.)

These facts are matters of historical record that are almost never mentioned in our contemporary discussions of religion and public policy. Some people seem to be under the impression that the First Amendment silences all religious voices, symbols, or ideas. In fact, the Bill of Rights says only that Congress has no power either to establish one particular religion or to control any established religion, and no power to curtail the free and open exercise of any religion in the U.S. in any way. Far from limiting religion's role in government, the Bill of Rights limits government's ability to regulate religion's role.

That's not anything close to the enforced secularism that seems to be the rule these days. The Supreme Court of the United States is probably most responsible for this confusion, having in the 1940's used one interpretation of one phrase in one letter of Thomas Jefferson's as a reference point for understanding the entirety of what the First Amendment says about religion and public policy. Since that time, other letters of Jefferson's have been found that clarify what he meant by the separation of church and state. But no matter.

Well, actually it does matter – to me, at least. I, too, believe in the separation of church and state. I, too, am suspicious of concentrating too much power in any one organization or group of them. But I am triply suspicious of attempts to remove any trace of Christianity from the public sphere, and seriously alarmed at how fast and loose people are playing with the Constitution these days.

Incidentally, the reason the government should stay out of the operations of churches has nothing to do with the First Amendment. Rather, it's simply that the government has no jurisdiction over the human conscience. It never has had any, and never could.

Objections based on references to the Bible and the history of religion

There were several references to some of the more obscure or severe Old Testament passages. It is true that Christians no longer observe many of the laws of diet and hygiene that were designed for the health and safety of ancient Israelites. Is that so strange? Those laws expressed God's will for His people long ago, under conditions that passed away millennia ago. Yet there is wisdom to be gleaned from those ancient rules nonetheless. All the dietary laws were fulfilled in Christ (Acts 10:1-11:21;), but it's still a good idea to watch how your meat is cooked. Touching your wife during her menstrual period is no longer a severe offense to God (who was intensely interested in the fertility of His chosen people before the coming of the Messiah), but it's probably still a significant problem for your wife. Those taboos may seem strange or quaint to us, but there were good reasons for them, and they still make a good bit of sense.

As for the severe passages in the Old Testament, it's really a simple thing to address the ones that were mentioned in the paper. "An eye for an eye"? That ancient *lex talionis* ("law of retaliation") was addressed to a society in which there was no police force or justice system as we know it, and in which justice was usually meted out in the form of family-sanctioned retaliation. The *lex talionis* was an expression of compassionate justice, demanding that the retaliation be limited to the severity of the infraction. It also demanded that, when tribal judges were handing out the punishments, they impose penalties that fully punished the offense: no cronyism, no favorites, just justice. Rough justice? Frontier justice? Savage justice? Probably. But all things considered, it was still justice, and far better – in the long run, far more *compassionate* – than abject anarchy.

Another writer pointed out that the Bible seems to condone slavery, and even rape. He was right about one, but quite wrong about another. The Bible nowhere condones rape; rather, it condemns it strongly. The prophets, did, however, repeatedly warn the people of Israel that, if they did not repent and return to their God, He would allow foreign invaders to utterly subjugate their land. Part of that devastation would include the raping of wives, the enslavement of children, the sacking of cities, the pillaging of villages, the burning of fields, and more. Sadly, the people of Israel never really listened, and their history is one long litany of plunder and destruction, finally climaxing in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. God never condoned or approved of such barbaric acts, but He did use them repeatedly to bring His judgment upon His people.

As for slavery, we should be careful to say what is true.

1. Any slavery is a denial of the gospel of Christ. While that sentence does not appear in the New Testament, that sentiment comes through loud and clear – in Galatians, in Colossians, and especially in Philemon. Although The New Testament writers never made it a mainstay of their message, because it would have sounded too much like anarchy in a Roman ear, they clearly made light of the supposedly enormous difference between slaves and free men. They said that any and every believer is free in Christ.
2. Slavery was as much a part of the cultures of that day as electricity is a part of ours. While the gospel has clear implications for transforming entire cultures, its primary focus is on transforming individuals with cultures. The Bible's assumption of slavery has to be understood in that light, or it will inevitably be misunderstood.
3. The chattel slavery of early American history was a genocidal atrocity, and stands as an everlasting shame to our nation and its Christian heritage.

And then there were the references to the various atrocities committed by "Christians" in the name of Christ. Here I will only note that the author simply misplaced his condemnations. The instances he mentioned had nothing to do with Christianity; they were merely perpetrated by people purporting to be Christians. Let me mention his misunderstandings, and then try to come clean on what I consider to have been genuine atrocities committed by people who truly were motivated almost entirely by religious zeal.

That author mentioned the Jews during Holocaust, civil rights leaders, and American Indians. In each case, a fair survey of the actual history will show that sincere Christians were at the forefront of efforts to prevent the atrocities, while the abuses themselves were fueled, not by religious fervor, but by bare profit motive or some foreign ideology that only hid behind Christian ideas. True, the profiteers and ideologues claimed to be Christians. But they were not. Their fruit made that clear.

When it comes to the Crusades and the Inquisitions, however, it's clear that the monsters of those nightmares were devout, deeply sincere followers of Christ. It is also clear that they were deathly, horribly, damnably wrong. They stand as gruesome specters, haunting my conscience – and they should. Force and faith do not mix. Period.

At the same time, I feel reasonably comfortable stacking all the good and all the evil done by Christians, in the name of Christ, against all the good and all the evil done by secularists, in the name of man. Compare them honestly, and you'll have to agree: Christianity has been enormously beneficial for mankind.

Objections based on the nature and purposes of marriage

A couple of writers seemed to argue that marriage is an issue entirely between God and the couple, with the state having no real business in the issue. I've written elsewhere that I consider that to be a naïve opinion, one that only a little bit of thought will dispel. Wherever there are parental or property rights involved, the state has an interest. And who says marriage is only for couples? Why not groups? Neighborhoods? Farm yards? Of course marriage has to be defined by the state.

One writer appealed to the American Psychological Association's determination that same-sex couples are just as good at raising children as other couples. On the face of it, that would seem to be a false statement, no matter what group made it. The data show pretty conclusively that children grow best in families that have both a mother and a father. Beyond that, one should really look into how the psychological trade associations came to change their opinion about homosexuality. The truth is, they did so more in response to ideological pressure than to scientific research.

I was delightfully surprised to find an ally in my struggle for marriage and against divorce. In trying to illustrate the problems with "traditional marriage," one writer had much to say about the precipitous rise and devastating effects of divorce in America since the middle years of the 20th century. To everything he wrote, I say "Amen! Preach it!" I couldn't have said it better myself. The flaw in his argument, though, is that it doesn't show a weakness in marriage. It only shows the weakness of a culture that won't take marriage seriously. We preachers said all along, "Don't make divorce easy! It'll destroy the kids!" We were told to sit down and shut up, because we were just a bunch of Chicken Littles spreading unwarranted hysteria. Well, guess what? Here we are, and it's far worse than we ever dreamed. And now Americans want to do more tinkering with the foundations of marriage? I cannot believe there's any wisdom down that road.

I have written much about marriage elsewhere, so I won't repeat myself here – very much. I'll only reiterate this simple truth: marriage is the fundamental relationship of human society. Mess it up, and you mess everything up.

Objections based on appeals to Christian love and compassion.

One person mentioned couples who had been "together" for years, but who found they had no legal rights in deathbed and other crucial decisions. I certainly sympathize with the pain they must have felt, but I question whether it was the fault of the society or our morals. Rather, any person is free to grant complete power of attorney to just about anyone he wants. That freedom should be preserved, but it need not be supplemented with legislation to create alternative family structures and relationships. As with other issues, while there may be a few who hurt as a result, the result of the government's sanctioning of other structures would ultimately turn out to be less compassionate.

Marriage has greater health and success built into it, because God created it. Even those who don't believe in God can see that the "one man for one woman" setup is calculated to make life easier for those who are in it – if they take the whole thing as God intended it. Virginity until marriage and faithfulness in marriage will eliminate all sexually transmitted diseases. Raising children rather than chasing self-indulgence will provide a sweeter pleasure during youth and a natural framework for elder care. Work and thrift rather than welfare and debt will lead to prosperity and freedom. And the list goes on. Real compassion, rather than telling people they can do whatever they take a notion to do, will point them to the way we're made as the primary consideration in how we should live.