What the battle for traditional marriage means for Americans—and evangelicals. By Mark Galli

In December 2000, the Dutch parliament became the first to pass legislation that gave same-sex couples the right to marry, divorce, and adopt children. On April 1 of the following year, the mayor of Amsterdam officiated, for the first time in human history, at the ceremonies of the first four gay couples. In the ensuing eight years, Belgium (2003), Spain (2005), Canada (2005), South Africa (2006), and Norway (2008) followed the Netherlands’ lead, and Sweden may now not be far behind.

While we shake our heads at those libertarian Dutch, traditional marriage was challenged in the U.S. even earlier, in 1993, when the Hawaii Supreme Court ruled that the state’s prohibition of same-sex marriages amounted to discrimination on the basis of sex. For the first time in U.S. history, a state supreme-court ruling suggested that gay couples may have the right to marry.

Social conservatives were galvanized into action and enacted a series of protective measures. Congress passed and President Bill Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 1996. Three states soon adopted constitutional same-sex marriage bans: Alaska (1998), Nebraska (2000), and Nevada (2000). And in a few years, 42 states enacted statutes similar to DOMA (although three of those bans have since been overturned).

Gay marriage advocacy was given new life with Massachusetts’s historic 2003 high court ruling, which said that it was unconstitutional to deny same-sex couples the right to marry. It became clear that statutory bans were not enough; judges could throw out the laws if they felt the bans violated state constitutional rights. Over the next three years, voters in 23 states immediately amended their constitutions to limit marriage to heterosexuals.

Since then, the issue has ebbed and flowed, like trench warfare, with each side gaining only yards of territory with each new legislative or judicial assault. When the battle of Election 2008 had ended, it appeared that social conservatives had the momentum when constitutional amendments banning gay marriages passed in three more states. But seemingly out of nowhere, gay marriage advocates have won stunning judicial, legislative, and social victories.

Connecticut began granting marriage certificates to spouses of the same gender in November 2008. In April 2009, Iowa’s high court ruled that banning gay marriages was unconstitutional, and gay couples began lining up at Iowa court houses. The Vermont legislature legalized gay marriage that same month, while Maine and New Hampshire legalized gay marriage in May.

All the while, Rick Warren and Miss USA contestant Carrie Prejean were hit hard for their public statements against gay marriage. To be against gay marriage now carries a social stigma.

A recent poll of Massachusetts residents revealed that 36 percent of voters who oppose gay marriage agreed with the statement, “If you speak out against gay marriage in Massachusetts you really have to watch your back because some people may try to hurt you.”

In short, traditional Christians feel like the armored tank of history is rolling over them, crushing traditional marriage under its iron treads, impervious to argument, the ballot box, or judicial logic. Even more disheartening has been to witness how, in each mainline denomination, and even in some evangelical seminaries, fellow Christians lobby hard for gay marriage.

The depressing feeling of inevitability is precisely what advocates of gay marriage want to instill in their opponents. But relying as many do on historical determinism—“Side with us because we’re going to win”—suggests that gay marriage advocates have run out of arguments. It also demonstrates historical amnesia. Arguments from historical inevitability have often been assumed by millions—to take two examples, the inevitability of Communism and the death of religion—and yet have proven to be wrong.

Still, we are at our wits’ ends about what to say next, impervious as the gay marriage juggernaut is. We know biblically and instinctively that “male and female he created them,” and that these complementary sexual beings are designed to become one flesh. We know that this spiritual instinct and biblical argument will not make much headway in the public square. So what do we say?

We can make secular arguments, of course, but the more we look at the strongest secular arguments we can muster, the more those arguments cut two ways. And one of the edges of those arguments will make evangelicals bleed, I’m afraid.

THE NONRELIGIOUS CASE

One way to get at the heart of an argument is to listen to allies who take the opposite view on this issue. There are some social conservatives, for example, who argue for gay marriage on conservative grounds.

Take The Atlantic’s foremost blogger, Andrew Sullivan, a Roman Catholic. He also happens to be gay, but his argument does not rest on his sexual preference. His case, as he asserted in a 2003 Time essay, is “an eminently conservative one—in fact, almost an emblem of ‘compassionate conservatism.’” He says the institution of marriage fosters responsibility, commitment, and the domestication of unruly men. Thus, “bringing gay men and women into this institution will surely change the gay subculture in subtle but profoundly conservative ways.” Growing up gay, he realized he would never have a family, and that it’s “the weddings and relationships and holidays that give families structure and meaning.” And thus, “when I looked forward, I saw nothing
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McGill University law professor Margaret Somerville, in a 2003 brief before Canada's Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, argued in much the same way. She says that to form a society, we must create “a societal-cultural paradigm.” This is a constellation of “values, principles, attitudes, beliefs, and myths” by which a society finds value and meaning, both individually and collectively.

“Reproduction is the fundamental occurrence on which, ultimately, the future of human life depends,” she says. “That is the primary reason why marriage is important to society.” Thus, it is crucial that societies protect marriage as a fact and as a symbol, as that institution that fosters human life, doing so in the context of family and society. “Even if a particular man and woman cannot or do not want to have a child, their getting married does not damage this general symbolism.”

Again, the argument is involved and nuanced. Both Blankenhorn and Somerville ground marriage in something larger than two selves who wish to find fulfillment. Marriage is inescapably connected to children and thus family, and family is inescapably connected to society.

In a highly individualistic culture, this argument swims upstream, but conservative Christians recognize that it corresponds to their basic theological instincts. The thrust of the pro-gay-marriage argument rests on the assumption that the happiness of the individual is paramount, and that the state's responsibility is to protect the rights of individuals to pursue whatever they think will make them happy, as long as no one gets hurt.

The irony of radical individualism is that it will eventually hurt somebody. In practice, the happiness of one individual always runs into the happiness of another, and then only the strong survive. The weaker individual is no longer treated as fully human, and thus his or her right to happiness is compromised. In our nation, we see this in the way we treat individuals at both ends of life, in the way we treat mothers and fathers accountable to the child and to each other — for every child born, there is a recognized mother and a father, accountable to the child and to each other.

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Evangelicals are sensitive to this reality, but are less aware of how much we proactively participate in the culture of individualism. While stopping short of abortion, we...
We are, of all Christian traditions, the most individualistic. This individual emphasis has flourished in different ways and in different settings, and often for the good. It has challenged moribund religion (Reformation), prompted revival (Great awakenings), ministered to the urban poor (Salvation army), abolished slavery (William Wilberforce), and led to explosive worldwide church growth (Pentecostalism). But it is individualism nonetheless, and it cuts right to the heart of one of our best arguments against gay marriage.

We cannot very well argue for the sanctity of marriage as a crucial social institution while we blithely go about divorcing and approving of remarriage at a rate that destabilizes marriage. We cannot say that an institution, like the state, has a perfect right to insist on certain values and behavior from its citizens while we refuse to submit to denominational or local church authority. We cannot tell gay couples that marriage is about something much larger than self-fulfillment when we, like the rest of heterosexual culture, delay marriage until we can experience life, and delay having children until we can enjoy each other for a few years.

In short, we have been perfect hypocrites we are called into the battle not because we are promised victory, but because we’re called to be witnesses of a greater battle. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has famously said that “the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts.” In our time and place, it is a battle with the original temptation: to imagine we are gods, captains of our own souls and masters of our fate—a habitual unwillingness to submit to anything bigger than the self.

As we contend with gay marriage proponents, then, we contend as both prophets and penitents. Like Isaiah, we can announce to our culture the poisonous fruit of immorality, while saying, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (Isa. 6:5, ESV). Like Paul, we can forthrightly warn others of the horrific consequences of sin.