

The following is a Statement on Marriage Rights by the Council of the United Church of Christ Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Concerns written in January 2004.

The Coalition writes...

(Theological Context)

Since its founding, nearly thirty-two years ago, the United Church of Christ Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns has held at its core the understanding that God has created and creates a world of abundance and blessing-and that we are called to be good stewards of this creation. God's abundance and blessing are manifest in innumerable ways, but one of these is the gift of human embodiment-our sexuality and our gender expression.

As people of faith, we understand that, because we are recipients of such a gift as embodiment, we are called to be good stewards and use it in ways that make for creativity, love and justice. There are a multiplicity of ways to do this and we are surrounded by examples-the dancer who dances in worship, the Forest Service employee who hikes and keeps our forests safe, the healer who uses massage to relieve pain, the actor who goes into character to bring the audience pleasure or deep lessons, the church group that works together to build a Habitat for Humanity house. And we can use the gift of embodiment in our intimate relationships to practice love, create hospitality and bring forth children.

Further, we understand that the gift of embodiment-of sexuality and gender expression-is individual, familial and communal. And our stewardship needs to pay attention to all three.

(Historical Context)

Marriage has a complex history. On the one hand, it is an institution that seeks to provide a place for commitment, love, the nurture of children and the cornerstone for stable communities. And in many places, for countless people, it has done this. However, it is also true that for centuries, the institution of marriage has been significantly corrupted by domestic violence, the assumption of women as property, the abuse of children and the perpetuation of a racial caste system and racist institutions. This is certainly not true in all cases, but any conversation about marriage must recognize this reality.

Thus, as we approach the conversation of marriage rights - and in particular marriage rights for same-sex couples- it is the reality of God's gift of embodiment with our individual, familial and communal stewardship responsibilities and the history of the institution of marriage that set the context out of which we speak.

(Our Statement)

First, it is important to say that any conversation about marriage falls into two categories-civil and religious. Currently, these categories are being blurred and confused. But we need to keep them separate. As a civil rights issue, marriage should be accessible to all committed couples in the United States of America. This is a very clear issue of civil rights and we need to be unequivocal-all the rights and responsibilities of marriage-of which there are some 1000-need to be accessible to any couple who is of legal age and willing to ascent to them. Just like other justice issues in the past, civil rights need to pertain and apply to all people, not just an exclusive group.

Given this, we applaud the movement in Massachusetts which seeks to uphold the civil rights of all its people by making marriage a civil union accessible to both heterosexual and same-sex couples who are willing to make such a contract and commitment. And we urge all states to make similar moves.

We further urge that work be done on the federal level to repeal the so-called Defense of Marriage Act of 1996 which legalizes discrimination by denying the civil right of marriage to same-sex couples.

As a religious issue, we need to respond out of our theological heritage. We have outlined above some of our inherited theology, but to say it again, the conversation about marriage that takes theology into account places marriage in the broader context of creativity, love and justice. By placing the conversation here, four things come to the fore:

1. Any conversation about marriage needs to affirm that marriage's purpose and focus need always be love, wholeness, justice and equality. This can include but doesn't necessitate the nurture and care of children. Further, we give thanks to God when marriage-be it between a woman and a man or between two people of the same sex-is a covenant which reflects God's covenant with us.
2. However, any conversation about marriage needs to take the history of domestic violence, oppression and the misuse of the institution seriously. Any kind of marriage-whether it be between a man and a woman or whether it be between persons of the same sex-is a covenant whose purpose must be life, justice and equality. And we rightly give thanks when two people enter into such a relationship.
3. Any conversation about marriage needs to de-centralize marriage as the only expression of covenant and commitment between people. This is to say that God has given to us many forms of relationship-in community, in friendship, within our culture, etc. And Scripture gives us examples of all of these as holy and blessed. (eg., the notion of the "People of God" referred to in the Hebrew Bible and the "Body of Christ" referred to by Paul, the relationship of David and Jonathan and Ruth and Naomi.)
4. Any conversation about marriage must take seriously the reality that, given the above two points, many LGBT and heterosexual folks have made conscious choices to covenant with one another in ways other than marriage. And these covenants should also be honored and celebrated.

As a Coalition Council, we urge all Coalition and United Church of Christ members, all faith communities and society to engage intentionally and thoughtfully in conversation about civil and religious marriage, so that love and justice may abound for all people.

For more information about how you can become involved, visit our website at www.ucccoalition.org

The following is a letter to the President, from Bette Midler...

Dear President Bush,

Today you called upon Congress to move quickly to amend the US Constitution, and set in Federal stone a legal definition of marriage. I would like to know why.

In your speech, you stated that this Amendment would serve to protect marriage in America, which I must confess confuses me. Like you, I believe in the importance of marriage and I feel that we as a society take the institution far too lightly. In my circle of family, friends and acquaintances, the vast majority have married and divorced - some more than once. Still, I believe in marriage. I believe that there is something fundamental about finding another person on this planet with whom you want to build a life and family, and make a positive contribution to society. I believe that we need more positive role models for successful marriage in this country - something to counteract the images we get bombarded with in popular culture. When we are assaulted with images of celebrities of varying genres, be it actors, sports figures, socialites, or even politicians who shrug marriage on and off like the latest fashion, it is vitally important to the face of our nation, for our children and our future, that we have a balance of commitment and fidelity with which to stave off the negativity. I search for these examples to show my own daughter, so that she can see that marriage is more than a disposable whim, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

As a father, I'm sure you have faced these same concerns and difficulties in raising your own daughters. Therefore I can also imagine that you must understand how thrilled I have been over the past few weeks to come home and turn on the news with my family. To finally have concrete examples of true commitment, honest love, and steadfast fidelity was such a relief and a joy. Instead of speaking in the hypothetical, I was finally able to point to these men and women, standing together for hours in the pouring rain, and tell my child that this is what its all about. Forget Britney. Forget Kobe. Forget Strom. Forget about all the people that we know who have taken so frivolously the pure and simple beauty of love and tarnished it so consistently. Look instead at the joy in the beautiful faces of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon – 51 years together! I mean, honestly Mr. President - how many couples do you know who are together for 51 years? I'm sure you agree that this love story provides a wonderful opportunity to teach our children about the true meaning and value of marriage. On the steps of San Francisco City Hall, rose petals and champagne, suits and veils, horns honking and elation in the streets; a celebration of love the likes of which this society has never seen.

This morning, however, my joy turned to sadness, my relief transformed into outrage, and my peace became anger. This morning, I watched you stand before this nation and belittle these women, the thousands who stood with them, and the countless millions who wish to follow them. How could you do that, Mr. President? How could you take something so beautiful - a clear and defining example of the true nature of commitment - and declare it to be anything less? What is it that validates your marriage which somehow doesn't apply to Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon? By what power, what authority are you so divinely imbued that you can stand before me and this nation and hold their love to a higher standard?

Don't speak to me about homosexuality, Mr. President. Don't tell me that the difference lies in the bedroom. I would never presume to ask you or your wife how it is you choose to physically express your love for one another, and I defy you to stand before Del Martin and

Phyllis Lyon and ask them to do the same. It is none of my business, as it is none of yours, and it has nothing to do with the "sanctity of marriage". I'm sure you would agree that marriage is far more than sexual expression, and its high time we all started focusing on all the other aspects of a relationship which hold it together over the course of a lifetime. Therefore, with the mechanics of sex set aside, I ask you again - what makes a marriage? I firmly believe that whatever definition you derive, there are thousands upon thousands of shining examples for you to embrace.

You want to protect marriage. I admire and support that, Mr. President. Together, as a nation, let us find and celebrate examples of what a marriage should be. Together, let us take couples who embody the principles of commitment, fidelity, sacrifice and love, and hold them up before our children as role models for their own futures. Together, let us reinforce the concept that love is about far more than sex, despite what popular culture would like them to believe.

Please, for the sake of our children, for the sake of our society, for the sake of our future, do not take us down this road. Under the guise of protection, do not support divisiveness. Under the guise of unity, do not endorse discrimination. Under the guise of sanctity, do not devalue commitment. Under the guise of democracy, do not encourage this amendment.

Bette Midler

Lastly, a Personal (not Institutional) Statement on the Proposal for a Gay Marriage Constitutional Amendment Joseph C. Hough, Jr., President of Union Theological Seminary

There have been hundreds of editorials, statements, responses and other commentaries of the Proposed Amendment to the Constitution to limit civil definitions of marriage to those unions sanctioned by civil and religious authorities to unions between a man and a woman. In effect, it means that no matter what religious groups think about the matter, the state will not honor even those marriages that we sanctify with legal status if we choose to provide marriages for gay and lesbian people.

At the outset, it is clear that the President of the United States, in pushing this matter to the forefront of public discussion, made what is clearly a political move to distract attention from those issues on which he is so clearly vulnerable in a national election and to satisfy a major segment of his political supporters. And I must add, that the call by the Democratic pretenders to "leave it to the states" is just as great a problem for me. I think that it is more likely that most of the states will pass such constitutional provisions than it is that the proposed federal amendment could ever succeed.

This is not the first time, however, that a constitutional amendment to ban certain types of marriage has been proposed. In December of 1912, Representative Seaborn Roddenbery of South Carolina proposed an amendment that he justified with the same words that the President used. He proposed the amendment, he said, in order "to uphold the sanctity of marriage" by prohibiting any marriage between "Negroes or persons of color" and Caucasians. The truth of the matter was that it was not to preserve the sanctity of marriage that the Georgia congressman offered the amendment. It was to express his utter disdain for the humanity of black people and to preserve the discriminatory patterns of segregation founded on personal and institutional racism. His comments at the time made that clear. As late as 1959, a judge in Virginia justified that state's ban on interracial marriages by declaring that God Almighty did not intend for the races to mix. Most Americans today would find this view incredible. The President's proposal caters to those who have a similar and total disdain for the humanity of gay and lesbian people that is tantamount to a denial of their humanity. It is no more capable of being justified morally than the ridiculous proposals of the Georgia congressman or the Virginia judge.

In summary, I oppose this Proposal for a Constitutional Amendment limiting marriage to a man and a woman for several reasons:

*This amendment is legally wrong. It would violate the rights of gays and lesbians to equal treatment under the law guaranteed by the U. S. Constitution. It is important to recognize that what is at issue here politically is not the rights of religious groups to sanction gay unions or deny them. At its base, it is an attempt to force the convictions of certain religious groups who support the President into the Constitution of the United States thus denying for religious reasons basic political rights to gays and lesbians. Even the main moral argument used by the President is not valid. This amendment would not strengthen the family. There are a host of problems that are besieging the American families. There are the growing financial strains created by job losses, rising basic costs in health and education that have exacerbated an already tragic increase in the divorce rates in the nation. In fact, it is financial pressures that are the most common reason given for broken marriages. Furthermore, it is impossible for

me to see how a few more people getting married and pledging themselves to each other could ever have a negative effect on families. There is simply no evidence that gay and lesbian couples are less capable of making long term commitments to each other when they are not openly persecuted and prosecuted if they try to keep those commitments in any public way. Since it must take extraordinary strength to move against the stream of hate directed against gay and lesbian couples, legalizing gay and lesbian marriages would in all probability add to the numbers of stable families.

*Therefore, this proposed amendment is morally wrong. Aside from the denial of basic equal rights under the constitution, the proposed amendment would lend support to those people who openly express hatred and disgust with gays and lesbians who dare to say who they are. It is morally wrong to act in such a way to bring great harm to persons just because they are who they are.

*The amendment is theologically wrong from a Christian point of view. The basic ideals that most Christian churches allude to when they speak or write theologically about marriage include commitment to a future of abiding love and care, the maintenance of hope and respect, loyalty and support in times of adversity, and fidelity to those we marry in matters of sexual intimacy. Gay and lesbian couples are certainly as likely as straight couples to honor those commitments. In fact, welcoming to the marriage altar those who have been denied the privilege of marriage for so very long will certainly increase the number of Christian couples who make serious vows to each other and keep them. Therefore, there is no serious theological basis for denying the sanctity of marriage to gay and lesbian couples in the church.

Joseph C. Hough, Jr., President of Union Theological Seminary