

“NC Marriage Amendment and BSCNC Churches”

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January 12, 2012

Much interest surrounds the upcoming vote on the proposed amendment to the Constitution of North Carolina defining marriage. The vote on May 8, 2012, will focus on adding the following 22 words to the state’s governing document:

“Marriage between a man and a woman is the only domestic legal union that shall be valid or recognized in this State.”

The churches comprising the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina (BSCNC) are filled with individuals who are citizens of this state. As citizens, these individuals are free to engage in a process to support the passage, or the defeat, of this amendment. But what about the churches themselves - is there any place for the churches in the debate that is beginning to boil on this matter? The answer to that question is an emphatic “yes,” but requires a number of qualifications and explanations.

Churches are non-profit entities that qualify for tax exempt status under section 501 C. 3 of the Internal Revenue Code, and as such are prohibited from endorsing political candidates. And while not strictly prohibited, churches are greatly limited by the tax code in their efforts to influence legislation. The vote on the amendment before the citizens of North Carolina is viewed as legislation; therefore churches must understand that there are restrictions to the amount time, effort, and resources that they may invest in such efforts. The problem is that the prohibition concerning political candidates is a “bright line” while the limitations concerning the influence of legislation is a “gray area.” While it is understandable that a significant investment of time, effort, and resources would be grounds for a potential challenge to a church’s tax exempt status, the ability to clearly identify what is to be understood as “substantial effort” is difficult at best. Churches are encouraged to consult their attorney or contact our offices for additional assistance as they consider these matters.

Two important issues

First, and most importantly, churches and the individuals who comprise them must recognize that two matters must be properly understood in this debate. The first is the question of the definition of marriage. For the church, the definition of marriage is significant. There is great biblical basis for the church to voice its position on the definition of marriage. It is my hope that pastors will preach and teach on the biblical expectations of marriage; however, I strongly discourage pastors from preaching and teaching on the marriage amendment.

This leads to the second important issue in this debate: adding the definition of marriage in our state’s constitution. It is difficult to find a biblical basis that motivates the church to engage in this aspect of the debate. However, that point should not be construed as a discouragement to individuals within the church from expressing their position on this aspect of the debate outside the church. A distinction must be made between efforts of church members and efforts of the church as a corporate body on this matter. This statement deserves some additional explanation.

Mission of the church

The mission and purpose of the church, as a corporate body, is to glorify God and to fulfill the church's divinely appointed mission. As Baptists, we hold very strongly to a doctrine of local church autonomy, meaning that each church is responsible to discern how God is leading them to uniquely fulfill their divinely appointed mission in their local community, across the nation, and around the world. While many Baptists hold to a clear doctrinal distinctive, we also defend the necessity to uniquely express those distinctions as the local body of believers senses God leading.

With this said, individuals are free to vote and to encourage others to vote for specific issues in specific ways. Churches may encourage individuals to vote, but should not instruct individuals how to vote. Individuals may invest their time, efforts and resources in significant ways for the passage or defeat of legislation. However, churches may not invest their time, efforts and resources in significant ways for the passage or defeat of legislation.

Specifically, individual citizens of North Carolina who are also pastors and church leaders are free, separate from their positions in the local church, to invest their personal time, personal efforts and personal resources in the influence of legislation. However, pastors may neither leverage their position in the church nor church resources, such as facilities or membership for such purposes.

Some pastors will wonder if it is wise to say anything at all about the marriage referendum to their congregations. As stated earlier, preaching and teaching on the biblical definition of marriage is both encouraged and in order; preaching and teaching on the marriage referendum is discouraged. This brings us to a most important point in this debate: the opportunity that stands before the churches.

Ministry Opportunity

The debate brewing in communities across North Carolina about the marriage amendment must be viewed as an opportunity for ministry; ministry that expresses the mission of the church – to take the life-transforming message of the Gospel to each member of the community, nation and world. Churches are strongly encouraged to find ways that they might rise to the occasion and take the opportunity to preach and teach on the Bible's position on marriage in the days preceding the May 8 referendum. However, our preaching and teaching must be true to God's Word.

Key point: Many fear that failure to pass the referendum will harm the "sanctity of marriage" in the future, but the truth is, the current views and expressions of marriage in our state, our communities, and our churches have already done so! Heterosexuals have already damaged the sanctity of marriage in significant ways, and the church has been very quiet on the matter.

At the risk of being misunderstood, I make the following observations: I am of the opinion that if the churches rise to the occasion to preach and teach on the life-transforming, and I include in this idea of transformation - marriage transforming, power of the Gospel, then the church has made a wise investment of time and effort. Regardless of the outcome of the marriage referendum, the church should view its efforts as a "win" only if the church rises to the occasion to fulfill its mission while the attention of so many North Carolinians is turned to the issue of marriage. However, if the church fails to rise to the opportunity to fulfill its mission, and worse yet, "sells its birthright" as the church becomes a vassal of political forces on either side of this debate, passage of the referendum is a "loss" for the church, for our communities and for the great state of North Carolina.

How to get involved

Therefore, if churches may only involve themselves in an insubstantial way in the influence of legislation, where can its members turn? The churches cooperating with the BSCNC have enjoyed a long tenured relationship with the Christian Action League of North Carolina. Individuals, business and other groups are free to engage with the Christian Action League to support them in a myriad of causes, including but not limited to: gambling, alcohol issues and other matters of social concern. The executive director of the Christian Action League, Reverend Mark Creech, can be contacted via e-mail at office@christianactionleague.org, or by calling (919) 787-0606. Reverend Creech will gladly share how individuals may choose to involve themselves in these matters.