



IN DEFENSE OF SOCIAL CONSERVATIVISM

The Case for Continuing our Focus on the Family in Matters of Public Policy

By John Stemberger

Today's evangelicals are at a crossroads. There is a movement afoot among more moderate evangelicals advocating that conservative Christians adjust our policy focus away from traditional pro-family issues including abortion and same sex marriage to "compassion issues" such as global warming, poverty and AIDS. On the other side of the ideological spectrum, the "leave me alone" coalition of libertarian and fiscal conservatives assert that the new core issues on our agenda should include immigration, taxes and tort reform. Both of these two movements are calling for change in the scope and substance of our agenda after three decades of Christian activism. What, then, should be our response? The answer is found in returning to the first principles of *why* we are social conservatives, and to again affirm the primacy of family in matters of public policy.

What is a Social Conservative?

The hallmark of a social conservative in the American political context is a primary commitment to protecting traditional marriage, family and moral structures in culture and public policy. Social conservatives are willing to draw a line in the political "sand" over certain core issues - those that so fundamental to a civilized society that we disqualify public officials if they do not support these basic human values. It is clear that life and marriage have been two such disqualification issues. But are there other fundamental issues our agenda should include?

God's Plan for Social Order

As Christians, we should be about comprehensively discerning God's social order for all areas of life. In many matters of ethics and policy the scripture speaks with clarity. Yet other issues leave us debating incremental judgments about issues of prudence, stewardship, necessary boundaries in granting rights, regulating behavior, punishing crime, paying restitution, public funding, legal protection, or due process. While all issues are moral issues, we can not speak with the same moral strength on how to fund hurricane relief or immigration policy as we do on abortion and same sex marriage.

Why Focus on the Family?

As with any movement, effectiveness requires sustained focus. If we attempt to be experts on every issue and fight every battle, we will loose the cohesiveness of our constituency and weaken our prophetic voice. We will also be less effective in the final result. Effective strategy requires well protected priorities. The issues surrounding marriage, family and life itself *must* remain the primary focus of our movement as social conservatives. But why continue to limit the focus primarily to family issues? There are at least five good reasons.

1. Families are the First and Most Basic Form of Government

Theologian Abraham Kyper was the first to communicate the Biblical concept of "Sphere Sovereignty." Within society there are various institutions, all of which have their own authority, limitations and purpose. The three primary spheres are family, church and civil government. Of the three, family is clearly the most important sphere. Families were established in creation as the foundational institution for ordering human behavior and were the first and most basic form of government given by God. Families shape and develop character, values and traditions - and they socialize the little human beings we call children. Most importantly, family is the primary sphere in which personal responsibility or "self-government" is learned.

2. Our Opposition Seeks to Redefine the Human Experience Itself

Our opposition does not have mere marginal disagreement with us on certain domestic policies. Many are seeking to redefine the human experience itself. What was morally unthinkable just a generation ago is now not only socially acceptable but is, in many cases, also protected by the full force of law and newly discovered rights created by judicial fiat. Their worldview is deeply rooted in personal autonomy, moral relativism, Social Darwinism, homosexualizing culture, secularizing the public square and escaping from all social norms. This unbiblical thinking barely resembles any vision of human civilization we have historically known and the implications to the family are far reaching and devastating.

3. Family Breakdown Contributes to Every Other Domestic Policy Problem

It is hard to imagine a domestic policy issue which is not directly affected by problems associated with the breakdown of families. Poverty, crime, welfare, abortion, education, health care, social security, STDs and elder affairs are all drastically effected by the strength or weakness of our families. Consider the consequences of divorce, absentee moms and dads, moral relativism, a void of character training, lacking male role models, gambling and a host of other maladies on our society. When we work toward keeping families first in our public policy focus, we are simultaneously getting to the root of numerous other social ills which plague our society.

4. The Direct Relationship Between Family Breakdown and Government Growth

It appears we have lost Reagan's battle against big government. One of the primary reasons for the massive growth of government in the past 50 years has been the failure of the family to function in its proper role. It is easy to demonstrate the direct and corresponding relationship between the brokenness of families and the growth of taxation and government regulation. The family is God's original department of health and human services. When families fail, the government steps in to save what's decaying. This "state sponsored salvation" requires greater taxation and a growing bureaucracy to sustain this massive social safety net. We must work for cultural, policy and legal structures that create incentives for families -- and, by extension, churches and communities -- to embrace their rightful place as the decentralized and personal caretakers for those in need.

5. Who We Are is More Important than How Much We Get

Economics, welfare, taxes, disaster relief and insurance are all important issues that must be vigorously debated. But these issues will always be with us. Public policy must be about more than "who" gets "what." Social conservatives understand that moral, social and cultural issues transcend economics. Social and moral issues define us a people. Nothing is more important to the destiny of a people than its cultural heritage. The very social fabric of our culture is preserved by focusing on the family in matters of policy. One of the chief objections William Wilberforce faced in parliament to ending the slave trade was that "ending the trade would damage the economy." *Doing* the right things in life is always more important than *getting* the right things in life.

National Security: The New Pro-Family Issue

Leading conservative evangelicals are now arguing that national security should become a new core issue for pro-family social conservatives. Simply put, if an Al-Qaeda dirty bomb takes out an entire major American city, what good is advocacy for the unborn in view of such an attack? The fact of the matter is this: we must recognize that we now have enemies, both foreign and domestic, who must be taken seriously. If we limit ourselves to consensus issues like radical Islam and the war on terror, I fully agree. National security must become a new core issue for social conservatives in light of this now clear and present danger.

Finally, What if We Succeed?

After a recent lecture, I was talking with a noted theologian who posed this question: "If we ended abortion in this country and protected marriage in all 50 states, would God then be concerned about other issues like the poor, the economy, the environment and other justice issues?" It was an interesting question. But there is an assumption in his question that cannot be overlooked. Are we *even close* to ending the ongoing battle against abortion? Are marriage and family structures adequately protected from radical redefinition? Has the onslaught of obscenity and secularism in our culture subsided? Until we can answer *yes*, we should stay the course and continue to focus on the family in matters of public policy.

John Stemberger is a lawyer in Orlando, Florida who serves as the President and General Counsel of the Florida Family Policy Council. The mission of the FFPC is to strengthen Florida's families through public policy research, issues research, and grassroots advocacy. The FFPC is associated with Dr. James Dobson and Focus on the Family.