

THE “CIVIL RIGHT” TO POLYGAMY?

By Dr. Michael L. Brown

In a two day period during the last week of September, the case for same-sex marriages in America was dealt two serious blows. First, on September 29, California’s governor Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed a bill seeking to legalize same-sex marriages. Then, on September 30, the Netherlands approved its first polygamous civil union. “I love both Bianca and Mirjam, so I am marrying them both,” stated Victor de Bruijn, who was already married to Bianca.

Governor Schwarzenegger has been accused of siding with those who deny gays and lesbians equality, opposing their basic civil rights. His veto, which simply upholds the will of the people of California as reflected in their year 2000 vote, is an obvious setback to the cause of same-sex marriages. The Netherlands ruling, however, while representing a less obvious setback to same-sex marriages, is potentially more damaging. This is because proponents of traditional, heterosexual marriage have consistently argued that once the fundamental definition of marriage is changed from “one man and one woman” to “one person and one person, regardless of sexual orientation,” there is no logical or rational way to stop the slippery slide into polygamous marriages, incestuous marriages, or even adult-child marriages. Indeed, one Canadian scientist has even suggested that, in the future, there would be nothing to stop someone from marrying a plant.

Same-sex marriage proponents have strenuously resisted this line of reasoning, but with little logical support. On what basis, it may be fairly asked, is it a civil right for a man to marry a man (or a woman marry a woman) while it is not a civil right for a man to marry two (or more) women or a brother to marry his sister or an adult woman to marry an adolescent girl? Indeed, a case is now pending in the courts arguing for the right to incestuous marriages, while Nadine Strossen, the president of the ACLU, has stated that her organization has “defended the right of individuals to engage in polygamy.”

Now, with the Netherlands leading the way, we have moved from theory to reality, and it is not hard to speculate as to what will come next. Holland was the first nation to legalize same-sex civil unions (in 1998), followed by legalized same-sex marriages and full adoption rights for same-sex couples in 2001. At present, polygamous marriages are not legal but polygamous civil unions are. What will tomorrow hold? And where will Mr. Bruijn and his wives find themselves a few years from now? Can he be taken seriously when he states that a fourth marital partner is not an option, since they are sincere about their marriage obligations and are committed “to be honest and open with each other and not philander”? What makes three a company but four – or five – a crowd?

The lesson for us to learn here in America is simple: Marriage is the union of one man and one woman, and we do well not to tamper with that definition – unless, of course, we are ready to countenance the possibility of a man adding a new married member to his household every few years or a woman marrying her brother and son. Who among us is ready to argue for that “civil right”?

Michael L. Brown, Ph.D., is president of FIRE School of Ministry in Concord and director of the Coalition of Conscience, an association of secular and religious leaders working together for moral and cultural revolution in America.