

## Opinion

by David Gillespie

### New variations on old themes

What happens when politicians try to be theologians and historians? What happens when theologians try to be politicians? Well, not much that's good.

In the mid-1800s, leading Southern theologians of the day — men such as James H. Thornwell and Robert Lewis Dabney — argued vehemently that African-Americans were inferior to whites. They made what at that time were assumed to be valid biblical cases that blacks, because of their inferiority, should not be allowed to vote. Appeals to “thousands of years” of biblical history were everywhere.

Dabney went so far as to offer a “genetic” defense of his position, too, arguing that blacks and whites were two distinct species. Thornwell traced blacks to Noah's son, Ham, and argued that the curse placed on Ham in Genesis Chapter 9 applied to all blacks.

Long before either one of these two gentlemen, Saint Augustine had argued that slavery was justified, not on racial grounds, but because of the sins of the person enslaved.

Blacks weren't the only people oppressed by Bible-based arguments made by “Bible-believing” Christians. For more than 200 years women were subject to discrimination based on what was generally received as the Bible's teaching.

Early church theologian Tertullian argued way back in the third century that sin



existed in the world because of the moral inferiority of women, basing his arguments on the early

chapters of Genesis. Speaking to women, Tertullian said, “You destroyed so easily God's image of man.”

Through the teachings of men like Charles Hodge of Princeton Seminary (he taught there 58 years and trained thousands of American clergymen), women were by God's design inferior to men and subject to their authority in all areas of life — church, society and home.

Should women be emancipated, according to Hodge, society would suffer irreparable harm. “If women are to be emancipated from subjection to the law which God has imposed on them ... all order and virtue would speedily be banished.”

Sound familiar? Maybe something like, “If gays and lesbians are allowed to enjoy the benefits and privileges of marriage, society as we know it will crumble?”

Fortunately for us, church and society came to realize that these men were wrong; we came to understand that all humans, black and female included, were equal — though it did take us a while.

Perhaps the biggest mistake contemporary politicians and others trying to constitutionally ban gay marriage make is when they repeat the blanket, sweeping statement: one man-one woman marriage has been the model for and

bedrock of civilization for thousands of years.

That is simply not the case.

Monogamous heterosexual marriage is, in history's timeline, a relatively new thing. It is not nor has it ever been the biblical model for family units. While it may be a good one (among other good ones), the Bible nowhere argues for it; neither does it present it as the divine model for societies. Indeed, the opposite is the case.

Throughout biblical history men had multiple wives, concubines and sex slaves — all with divine approval. This was because in those biblical cultures, women were thought to be inferior, to be property. We don't think that now.

What we need to realize is that when sweeping statements of alleged historical “fact” or unquestionable biblical interpretation are made by such people as the president, Sen. Lindsay Graham (R-SC) or S.C. Attorney General

Henry McMaster or any number of preachers on a given Sunday, it *ain't* necessarily so.

That's not to say religion shouldn't inform our national discourse on civil rights. It should. Many times in our history it has done so to our benefit, to our enlightenment.

However, if the president, congress and South Carolinians want to protect marriage, they need to look at those destructive trends which can in no way whatsoever be attributed

to gay and lesbian citizens; trends like divorce, domestic violence, the need for affordable health care and poverty.

Religion has a lot to say about how we treat each other. Indeed, for the writer of the New Testament book of James, how we treat others, especially widows and orphans, is the hallmark of true religion.

Jesus himself is reported to have said as much when he told his disciples that when they fed the hungry or clothed the naked or visited the sick, they were exercising true religion.

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Using a false argument like “2000 years of traditional marriage” in order to justify constitutionally discriminating against gays and lesbians in the United States and in South Carolina will not lower the divorce rate; it will not reduce the number of children being raised by a single-parent; it will not

reduce domestic violence; it will not reduce healthcare costs.

When we try to make public policy based on one narrow interpretation of a single religion, we lose some of our freedom. There's no getting around it.

Hopefully, somewhere in this debate, we all — George W. Bush, Lindsay Graham and Henry McMaster included — will get our history and our theology straight. ▀

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