Bigotry, David Blankenhorn, and the Future of Marriage

By Maggie Gallagher

“We’ve been fighting about gay marriage for what, 15-20 years now. Is there any evidence that fighting gay marriage is contributing to a greater appreciation among the broad society of the marital institution? Is there any evidence that the re-institutionalization of marriage is happening as a result of opposing gay marriage? And the best answer I can give to that is ‘no.’” – David Blankenhorn.

With that quote Mark Oppenheimer, the Beliefs columnist of the New York Times, begins his transcript of a new documentary, “David Blankenhorn and the Battle Over Same-Sex Marriage,” which was released on Friday along with an op-ed by Blankenhorn in the New York Times entitled “How My View on Gay Marriage Changed.”

Maybe you’ve never heard of David Blankenhorn. But he’s a very significant figure in the larger struggle over our fraying marriage culture.

In the early 1990s, Blankenhorn wrote a book called Fatherless America and launched a think tank (the Institute for American Values) drawing attention to the problem of family fragmentation. He did extraordinary work, bringing together family scholars, policymakers, thinkers, and writers across ideological lines to help form a new consensus that marriage matters.

In 2007, Blankenhorn wrote The Future of Marriage, in which he lays out the evidence that marriage is the union of male and female, oriented toward giving children a father as well as a mother. He agreed to testify on behalf of Prop 8 during Judge Walker’s show trial, and he was one of the few experts who did not run when he learned his testimony might be televised.

David Blankenhorn was also for almost a decade my boss, my mentor, my colleague, and my friend. He remains my friend. I take him seriously and want to consider what he said, why he said it, and why he and I disagree. And also to face honestly what his change of heart says about the struggle for marriage.

It’s funny. I left my job at the Institute for American Values unexpectedly in 2003 because David and I disagreed on same-sex marriage. With the Massachusetts court about to rule, I felt an urgent call to focus attention on what gay marriage will mean for marriage as a social institution. David wasn’t going to try to tell me what to think or say (David is not like that), but at that time he really did not want the Institute for American Values drawn into the gay-marriage fight.

For years, all of us in the marriage movement avoided gay marriage. I did too. I wanted to talk about divorce and unmarried childbearing, and I considered gay marriage just a distraction—an unlikely and remote threat. I was wrong about that. I quit my job at David’s Institute for American Values with a check for $10,000 and a vision that it had now become necessary to defend marriage intellectually, in principle—and from first principles.

Much of what we now consider “traditional” about marriage had been won in intellectual and cultural fights of Catholic thinkers with pagan philosophers a millennium ago. Time to gird intellectual loins to fight again for the truth about the good of marriage.

David took his own time coming to the same conclusion. I vividly remember sitting in the office with David, who had a contract to write a book about marriage, when he looked up at me and said, “I realize if I try to write a book on marriage and I don’t talk about gay marriage, people will laugh at me.”

We tried to elide the debate as long as we could—both of us—when we, like the rest of the American people, were forced to confront the question: What is marriage? Why do we care about it? How much is fighting for it worth? How best do we fight for it?

David thought hard and carefully about both questions in the gay marriage fight: What do we owe gay people? And what is marriage? With great care and thoughtful reflection, he came to a position that almost no one else in the country holds. And also to face honestly what his change of heart says about the struggle for marriage.

I proposed gay marriage believing that children have the right, insofar as society makes it possible, to know and to be cared for by the two parents who gave them life. In this sense, marriage is a gift that society bestows on its children.

Marriage is how society recognizes and protects this right. Marriage is the planet’s only institution whose core purpose is to unite the biological, social and legal components of parenthood into one lasting bond. Marriage says to a child: The man and the woman whose sexual union made you will also be there to love and raise you. In this sense, marriage is a gift that society bestows on its children.

At the level of first principles, gay marriage ephases that gift. No same-sex couple, married or not, can ever under any circumstances combine biological, social and legal parenthood into one bond. For this and other reasons, gay marriage has become a significant contributor to marriage’s continuing deinstitutionalization, by which I mean marriage’s steady transformation in both law and custom from a structured institution with clear public purposes to the state’s licensing of private relationships that are privately defined.

I have written these things in my book and said them in my testimony, and I believe them today. I am not recanting any of it.
Many of us hold this view of marriage. What makes Blankenhorn singular and I suspect lonely in this fight is his view of gay relationships. In his book The Future of Marriage, Blankenhorn also endorses the "equal dignity of homosexual love," and says in a footnote he disagrees with the Biblical view of sexual morality. He struggled to reconcile what he called a "conflict of goods."

Institutions, David taught me, arise to address social problems. If a problem is merely individual and personal, individuals solve or don't solve their personal problem. Nothing is at stake for the larger society so they are left on their own, in freedom, to succeed or fail at solving their problem.

Social institutions arise to address social problems: when the problem is big enough and affects the good of the whole society, individuals aren't just left on their own to figure out for themselves where the good lies. Social institutions arise and are embedded in a matrix of public norms that serve to direct the minds and the hearts of individuals toward some urgently necessary good.

The problem that marriage as a social institution is designed to address is that sexual unions of male and female create children. Only in and through marriage will these children come to know the care and love of both their parents.

Gay marriage, in David's view, was an attempt to address an important new social problem: how to demonstrate respect for gay people in our society. In David's mind, gay marriage represents not a case of good versus evil, but a conflict of goods. He has not stopped believing that marriage is the union of male and female, he has simply lost hope he can help strengthen marriage as a social institution by opposing gay marriage: "I have no stomach for what we often too glibly call 'culture wars.' Especially on this issue, I’m more interested in conciliation than in further fighting," he writes in the New York Times.

It isn't that David no longer sees a conflict of goods in embracing gay marriage. He simply thinks that the battle is lost, so now he has only one hope—that by trying something new he can make something good for marriage happen:

So my intention is to try something new. Instead of fighting gay marriage, I'd like to help build new coalitions bringing together gays who want to strengthen marriage with straight people who want to do the same. For example, once we accept gay marriage, might we also agree that marrying before having children is a vital cultural value that all of us should do more to embrace? Can we agree that, for all lovers who want their love to last, marriage is preferable to cohabitation? Can we discuss whether both gays and straight people should think twice before denying children born through artificial reproductive technology the right to know and be known by their biological parents?

Will this strategy work? I don't know. But I hope to find out.

David Blankenhorn underestimates, of course, how important his nuances are or will be. His New York Times op-ed, along with the documentary interview he gave, will be treated as a recantation and his own voice will be drowned out by people who claim to speak in his name to say things he does not believe. That is part of the process of cultural subordination we are now in, and are now wrestling with how to deal with.

The Prop 8 trial turned out to be a serious trial for David, as Mark Oppenheimer’s interview makes clear:

After his testimony was over, Blankenhorn was attacked in the media, accused of being unqualified, ignorant, and bigoted. Frank Rich of The New York Times wrote one of the most scathing columns. "You can’t blame the Prop 8 advocates for wanting to keep Blankenhorn off camera," Rich wrote. "Boies demolished him during cross-examination."

So I expected that Blankenhorn would not want to talk about that episode. But when he and I sat down on May 9, he said that he actually enjoyed testifying in California.

Blankenhorn: "Well, the best time I had was at the trial itself. Because that was when I was actually on the stand and I got to say what I believed."

And Blankenhorn said he did not feel particularly ruffled under cross-examination by Boies.

Blankenhorn: "He had a high old time saying that I didn’t have a PhD and that I was just some bumpkin who wrote a book …"

Blankenhorn: "I competently made an argument that he was unable to punch many holes in. Although, of course, if you ask him about it, he says he punched a million holes … and if you ask the Prop 8 plaintiffs they’ll say this was worst witness in the history of witnesses and too stupid to walk and chew gum at the same time, and so on. But I felt good about it. It was only after the trial — it’s like living two realities."

Oppenheimer describes the attacks:

It wasn’t just journalists who went after Blankenhorn. The marriage equality camp includes plenty of famous people, Hollywood stars. …

Blankenhorn: I had an old community organizing buddy who wrote a note to me after the trial and said how does it feel to be America’s most famous bigot? I used to think you were a good person. Now I know you’re a bad person. How does it feel to know that your tombstone will read that you’re just a bigot? My response to him is not repeatable on radio, but I told him what I thought he could do with those thoughts … but it was very painful. Now, you’re asking is there a fear that it’s true? Well, don’t you think any person who is at all self-reflective would have to worry about that? Sure, I think anybody would, and so I think I probably do, too. Sure, wouldn’t anybody if people were saying this about you? … I don’t lose sleep over that because … I’m not saying everything I did was right, but I’m saying that I feel a sense of integrity about the things I’ve done on this issue all along. I feel I’ve tried my best to act with integrity. Does it mean I’ve always done that? No. Does it mean I’ve worried about this? Well, I guess, yeah. Not just the reaction, but is it true? Yes. Because how could you not? How could anybody not?"

"After the trial, something changed in Blankenhorn," according to Oppenheimer, "He does not entirely know how to describe what happened. Maybe it was some cocktail of the fame, the public abuse, or just getting older. Maybe it’s that he began to fear for his legacy, for how the world would remember him. He definitely saw that gay marriage was happening, and it was likely to spread and wasn’t going away. There was no turning back the clock. Is it too cynical to say that nobody wants to be on the wrong side of history? Maybe that’s not a fair way to put it."
But David switched sides. Above all, Oppenheimer says, “David Blankenhorn has decided to stop fighting. He is fifty-seven years old, and he says he still ‘has a little gas left in the tank.’ In the years he has left, he wants to forge alliances with all people interested in building stronger families, whether those people are gay or straight.”

David’s out of the gay marriage fight, which was never a major focus for him. He’s hoping that by embracing gay marriage he’ll be allowed by the powers that be to do something about divorce and unmarried childbirth, his core concerns. God bless him and good luck.

The lessons gay marriage advocates will take from David Blankenhorn’s “conversion”? They will learn what they know: stigma and hatred directed at people who disagree with them work.

What lessons should we take? What lessons do I take? The first is that no one can fight alone. To stand up to the wall of hatred directed our way, we need each other. And we need the larger sense of community that faith uniquely provides. The second is that as we fight for the good, we must never respond to hatred with hatred, to exclusion with the desire to exclude.

David Blankenhorn is my friend and I love him. I also respect him. I understand what he just did and why he did it and I wish him well in his personal fight to somehow square the circle, to combine a culture of gay marriage with a renewed culture of marriage. Here’s a bit more from David’s interview:

Sometimes it’s important to stand down a bit from the purity of one’s position in the interest of comity. We need to live together here. Sometimes it’s not being chickenhearted or selling out … You can compromise a bit from the purity of one’s position in the interest of accommodating a broader spectrum of people in the society as kind of full members. You know? You can bend a little bit because we have to live together.

Yes we do.

But here’s what I want to say to David and to you: a comity that is bought by surrendering principle is submission, not comity at all. The truth about something as important as marriage cannot be the price we pay to live with each other.

The challenge of our time—and it is a deep challenge, not an easy one—is to find new ways to combine truth and love. Giving up marriage is too high a price to pay. And it is not the last good we will be asked to surrender, unless we find the courage to stand.

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