

Valentines day conversion

By Bill Berkowitz

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If you aren't familiar with "Covenant Marriage," you should be by Valentines Day. In an event resembling the mass marriage ceremonies presided over by the Unification Church's Reverend Sun Myung Moon, Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee and his wife will convert their thirty-year marriage to covenant marriage on February 14 – Valentines Day – and they hope to be joined for a mass covenant marriage ceremony by 1,000 other Arkansas couples at the Alltel Arena in North Little Rock.

In mid-November, Governor Huckabee, accompanied by Dennis Rainey of Little Rock, Arkansas-based FamilyLife, a division of Campus Crusade for Christ, spent two days barnstorming about the state seeking converts. The governor said that while he thought the cost of the soiree would be covered by donations, he pointed out that he didn't mind using taxpayer funds to promote the project: "We believe it's an important enough event to use this time and resources for it because, quite frankly, we're spending an enormous amount of money dealing with the consequences of marriages that don't work out."

Gov. Huckabee's Valentine's Day get-together is only one event stemming from the religious right's post-election euphoria. In the coming months, expect evangelical conservative Christian organizations and right wing pundits, columnists and scribes to continue raving about the large turnout of so-called Values Voters and what it means for the future of American politics.

While Team Bush has already declared that the election was a "mandate" for everything from the president's war in Iraq and the war against terrorism to support for more tax cuts for the wealthy, conservative evangelical Christians see Bush's victory as opening the floodgates for a bevy of right wing social issues, including the passage of a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage.

For Dr. Leo Godzich, the executive director of the National Association of Marriage Enhancement (NAME), the huge "values voter" turnout was all about

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“marriage”: “America has spoken loudly in defense of the historical definition of marriage as between a man and a woman only, and elected officials ought to fulfill the will of their constituents,” Pastor Godzich, the associate pastor Phoenix First Assembly of God Church in Phoenix, Arizona, recently proclaimed.

Godzich isn't content, however, only to ban gays from getting married; he's heartsick that the institution of marriage has been taking huge hits over the past several decades. Godzich has been at Ground Zero in the “marriage wars” for years. He worked on President Bush's Healthy Marriage Initiative – the president's proposal to spend \$300 million a year to promote marriage among low-income families – and he is the founder of the Covenant Marriage Movement. On its web site, the CMM claims that it isn't “an organization, but rather an organism of cooperating ministries dedicated to strengthening the institution of marriage.”

Listed among the CMM “cooperating organizations” are American Association of Christian Counselors, Assemblies of God, Christian Men's Network, Covenant Keepers, Covenant Rebuilders, CrossLife Ministries, Focus on the Family, Intimate Life Ministries, Journey to Intimacy, LifeMates Ministries, LifeWay Christian Resources, Marriage Ministries International, Marriage Plus Ministries, Marriage Savers, Moody Bible Institute, National Association of Marriage Enhancement, Promise Keepers, Southern Baptist Association of Counseling and Family Ministry, and Y.M.C.S. (Your Ministry Counseling Services).

The Family Research Council's President, Tony Perkins, knows quite a bit about covenant marriage: As a Louisiana state representative he authored the nation's first covenant marriage law “which,” says Perkins in the November 10 edition of “Washington Update,” the FRC's daily online newsletter, “gives couples a choice between two types of marriage licenses: the standard marriage license and the covenant marriage license.”

According to FRC's Tony Perkins, “The standard marriage license allows no-fault divorce for any reason, while covenant marriage requires premarital counseling and longer waiting periods or proof of fault before divorce.” In addition, Covenant Marriage allows “divorce only in cases of adultery, imprisonment, abandonment, abuse and after a substantial waiting period,” MSNBC recently pointed out.

According to “Is Covenant Marriage a Policy That Preaches to the Choir?: A Comparison of Covenant and Standard Married Newlywed Couples in Louisiana”, a study produced by Bowling Green State University's Center for Family and Demographic Research, the major issues of “contention” surrounding

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covenant marriage are: “whether covenant marriage actually strengthens marriage or possibly reinstates the worst problems of fault-based divorce”; whether it “create[s] a ‘conflict of laws’ problem” – will covenant marriage requirements be recognized when couples move to other states? – and whether it “foster[s] a greater splintering of American marriage patterns as individuals and groups pursue other forms of marriages and unions.”

The study points out that “the longer waiting period for divorces leaves women and children in uncertain economic circumstances before they can receive an alimony or child support award”; the desire to dissolve a covenant marriage because of irreconcilable differences could cause couples to “fabricate a fault-based reason for the courts”; and the extended waiting period and prolonged counseling could place women and children “in danger in cases of domestic violence.”

None of these issues stopped Gov. Huckabee from signing the Covenant Marriage Act of 2001 (Act 1486), which made covenant marriage an option for couples in the state. In addition to Louisiana, it is also an option in Arizona.

Arkansas’ marriage rate is nearly double that of the US, LifeSiteNews.com recently reported, but it also has one of the country’s highest divorce rates, at 6.5 per 1,000 population, compared to a 4.2 per 1,000 national average.

Getting 1,000 couples to agree to Covenant Marriage may be a tough sell. According to Gov. Huckabee, a former Baptist minister, only 400 couples have opted for Covenant Marriage since 2001, versus the 40,000 couples who are normally married there each year.

John Brummett, a columnist for the Arkansas News Bureau in Little Rock, lambasted the governor’s efforts, calling covenant marriage “a Church Lady quick-fix notion cooked up in Louisiana, embraced by religious fundamentalists and latched onto by Huckabee as a means of lowering our state’s abnormally high divorce rate.”

The call to Covenant Marriage was also heard at the October 15 “Mayday for Marriage” gathering on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Called to rally the righteous against same-sex marriage, speakers – including a number of religious right luminaries such as Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council’s Perkins, and Charles Colson of Prison Fellowship Ministries – not only addressed the perils of gay marriage, but several spoke out in support of Covenant Marriage.

“Speakers pointed out that it is not simply the recent issue of same-sex marriage that threatens the American family, but the slow separation of sexual pleasure

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from marriage, and marriage from parenthood, that has occurred over the past few decades,” Crosswalk.com reported. Easily attainable divorces, the growing practice of cohabitation, the increasing availability of pornography and the quest for personal happiness above commitment have seeped into both the secular culture as well as the church.

Dennis Rainey, host of the radio program FamilyLife Today, spoke about the problem of high divorce rates among Christians: “For the past three decades, adults have assumed that children are resilient. They’ll get over divorce. They’ll bounce back... but children don’t bounce – they shatter – they shatter internally, on the inside where no one sees.” Rainey “challenged Christians to erase the ‘D’ word from their marriages, and commit to protecting children with the permanent promise of marriage. He also challenged churches to stop performing marriages that weren’t Covenant Marriages.

While Covenant Marriage may be way off in the future, the day is coming when it will take hold, convicted Watergate felon Charles Colson told the crowd: “This isn’t going to be a one-year, or a two-year, or a three-year fight. It will be fought until we prevail... don’t quit... don’t despair. Despair is a sin because it denies the Sovereignty of God.”