

Setting the Record Straight

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On July 1, I posted an article on my personal Facebook page titled “40 Questions for Christians Now Waving Rainbow Flags.”¹ I think the article is timely and that its author made a number of good points. Within 48 hours the article was shared 80 times from my page alone and a number of comments were made. One Facebook friend, Chris Armer, pushed back on the article and asked me if I thought a Christian might be able to be against an act but for the freedom to do the act in the U.S. He said it would be similar to being against Islam but for the freedom to practice it in the U.S. (Chris was assessing the arguments critically and doing so in precisely the type of format I intended. He actually does not advocate same-sex marriage.) I replied that I think that’s a fair question and that I’d have to think about it before providing a firm answer. After all, I believe one should be free to worship as they please in the U.S. and that includes Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, etc. Yet, could worshipping a false god be worse in God’s view than same-sex marriage? If I believe the first should be legal in the U.S., why not the latter?

Later that day, I started another post on my personal Facebook page (not my Public Figure page) saying I thought Chris made an interesting point and wanted to know what others thought. That post received many more comments than I anticipated; in fact, eleven times more than I received on the previously mentioned article. Being in the midst of research and writing my next book with an end of year deadline, I’m very disciplined with my time and consistently face temptations to get sidetracked onto other projects. This year I have declined invitations to participate in public debates and to write an essay for a prestigious publication that would look good on my CV. I have declined these because I desire to stay focused on my current research project. So, my practice on Facebook is that I rarely read every comment on my postings and this post was no

¹ <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2015/07/01/40-questions-for-christians-now-waving-rainbow-flags/>

exception. I glanced through the comments quickly and replied to a few that caught my attention for one reason or another.

Most of those commenting on the latter post are against same-sex marriage and regard same-sex relations as sinful. But some who replied are for same-sex marriage and defended Chris' question. I found the replies of the former to be persuasive to varying degrees. On a few of them, I offered critical comments pertaining to what I thought were weaknesses in their arguments. A few misinterpreted my friendly criticisms as vacillating on my view of same-sex marriage and were aghast that I could criticize some arguments made to favor the view I embraced! I was also accused of being "ambivalent" on my view of same-sex marriage. One blogger quickly turned it into an opportunity and wrote something that certainly does not express my view: "Michael Licona expressed ambivalence about public policy regarding homosexual marriage. He suggested that since the US is not a theocracy, we shouldn't ban homosexual marriage." Another blogger said I was irresponsible and blasted the RESPONSE² to the SCOTUS ruling provided by *The Ethics & Religious Liberties Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention* as being a "disturbingly insufficient statement." This statement was signed by many prominent evangelicals. I agree with the statement and signed it, too.

My post was made in the spirit of a group that used to meet at my home several years ago. During our meeting, we'd often discuss an issue and have to argue from both sides. We found it both enjoyable and a productive way to learn. Our group became very tight. Many of us did not agree on matters that were most important to us. But we respected and loved one another. Several in the group were not believers. A few of them ended up becoming Christians. And two of the members are now involved in full-time Christian ministry. You may have heard of them: David Wood³ and Nabeel Qureshi.⁴

I've always enjoyed open discussions where anything could be put on the table and questioned. I'm also content to admit I don't have an answer or to acknowledge when a

² <http://erlc.com/erlc/herewestand>

³ <http://www.answeringmuslims.com>

⁴ <http://rzim.org/bio/nabeel-qureshi>

person makes a good point, even when it may not agree with a view I hold. This is how it is among friends. Seeing how some have read some things into a few of my statements that I did not intend to communicate resulting in their distortion, I now realize that my involvement in open dialogue on politically sensitive matters will probably need to be restricted to friends in a closed setting. Hindsight is always clearer.

Our statements often possess a degree of unintended ambiguity or vagueness when thinking out loud in the course of collegial dialogue. When this occurs on sensitive issues, it often becomes easy to become quite defensive and think someone may be saying something they are not. Accordingly, I'd like to be clear in what follows pertaining to my present thinking.

I'm saddened and worried over the SCOTUS decision to legalize same-sex marriage. I regard same-sex relations as sin. I also have the same concern as the four dissenting justices: the curtailment of religious freedom in the U.S. It is not a matter of "live and let live." The side that just won won't allow that. During the past few years alone, Christian college ministries have been booted off campuses such as the University of Michigan, Vanderbilt, UCLA, and others, for not obeying a new requirement to allow gays and lesbians to serve on their Christian ministry leadership teams. Within the past 12 months, Gordon College was threatened to lose its accreditation unless they revised their policy of accepting only those students who agreed to follow a moral code of having sex only within traditional marriage.⁵ Fortunately, the threat, though very real was unsuccessful. With their SCOTUS victory, I think the winning side will now be emboldened even more to seek punitive actions toward those of us who do not comply with their demands.

Therefore, the battle concerning same-sex marriage is not close to being over. To what extent then should I be involved in a fight to overturn what is now the law of the land? That is a choice for the individual Christian to make.

⁵ <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/417788/gordon-college-keeps-its-faith-and-its-accreditation-david-french>

When a matter that is not my expertise is the topic, I don't have to hold a position with concrete certainty or answer every objection to my satisfaction. Do I regard same-sex relations as sinful? Yes. Am I in favor of same-sex marriage? No. Do I think Chris Armer made a reasonable point that got my attention and weighs on the side of a reasonable case for same-sex marriage in the U.S.? My initial impression was yes. But that's not to say that impression would be my final one after further reflection. Was I thoroughly persuaded by any of the comments offered to answer Chris' point? No. But that doesn't mean that I did not think good points were made. Nor does it mean that I now favor same-sex marriage or agree with the SCOTUS ruling any more than, to make a not-equal comparison, acknowledging good points made by Calvinists render my standing as a non-Calvinist compromised. Neither should my initial impression now require me to engage in enough reading to become thoroughly informed on the matter of same-sex marriage and formulate an answer to every objection when I have neither expertise nor an interest in being focused on this topic. I should be allowed to say, "Hmm. I'm not willing to defer matters to which I'm already committed and devote a significant amount of time in order to come up with an answer to Chris' point that satisfies me."

Bottom Line: To characterize my position as "live-and-let-live" would be inaccurate. I have merely stated that as one who has been opposed to same-sex marriage, I think Chris made a good point worth reflecting upon and let there be dialogue on the topic. Others have read things into my words that are not there. They are criticizing a straw man. Moreover, they criticize me for not dropping everything at once, reading further on an issue, and arrive at a firm conclusion. I freely acknowledge that I'm not an authority on the legalities of same-sex marriage in U.S. And I don't think I have as much influence as some imagine. I've tried to be charitable in my replies. I only wish these few taking me to task would be more charitable in their assessment of where I'm at.

Chris wrote the following on my post that summarizes my thoughts quite well, "Let me be clear, the question I asked Michael Licona was not intended to be some rock solid argument for how to view same sex marriage. I never thought that. And I know that Michael Licona never thought that. . . . I know that Michael Licona doesn't support same

sex marriage. And I do not support same sex marriage. But I will always support conversation about difficult issues that are relevant.”

And now back to Chris’ question:

Do you believe a Christian might be able to look at this issue in the same manner as religious liberty? That someone can be against the act but for the freedom to do that act. Such as I can disagree with Islam but support a Muslim's right to worship freely. Can a Christian be for liberty while disagreeing with how that liberty is used? Why would giving liberty for someone to worship another god (also an abomination and highly damnable) be any different than allowing liberty for someone to marry?

As a Christian, I’m obligated to follow the laws of the land as long as they do not violate the laws of God (Romans 13:1-2; And Paul had the Roman government in mind!). So, what does our Constitution and Bill of Rights say about same-sex marriage and religious freedom? The First Amendment of the Bill of Rights prohibits the making of any law impeding the free exercise of religion. So, we are guaranteed the free exercise of religion. It is a right.

What about same-sex marriage? There is nothing in our Constitution and Bill of Rights that grant U.S. citizens the right to same-sex marriage. But neither do they prohibit it. What the Constitution does is relegate such decisions to the People acting through their elected representatives. What those five judges who formed the majority of SCOTUS did was usurp our Constitution and impose on the People what they believe is a new right, even though this right has no basis in the Constitution or a precedent in the Court. My limited and perhaps inaccurate understanding of the role of SCOTUS is that it is to interpret the law according to the Constitution. The creation of new laws belongs to the legislative branch of government.

The majority opinion of the Court was that the core definition of marriage should have a two-person element but that there was no need to preserve the man-woman element. But this is arbitrary. If the man-woman is not necessary, why should the two-person requirement be? After all, polygamy has been an accepted practice in many societies for thousands of years and continues to the present, far longer than same-sex marriage. In fact, no society permitted same-sex marriage prior to 2001.

In his dissenting opinion, Justice Scalia commented,

Except as limited by a constitutional prohibition agreed to by the People, the States are free to adopt whatever laws they like, even those that offend the esteemed Justices' "reasoned judgment." A system of government that makes the People subordinate to a committee of nine unelected lawyers does not deserve to be called a democracy. (page 5)⁶

Accordingly, the five justices violated "a principle even more fundamental than no taxation without representation: no social transformation without representation" (page 6). Justice Thomas said "the majority's decision short-circuits that process, with potentially ruinous consequences for religious liberty" (page 16). Accordingly, there is a distinct difference between the freedom of religion and the legalization of same-sex marriage. The former is a right guaranteed by the Constitution of the U.S. The latter should be decided by the People through their elected representatives.

There is no doubt this discussion can and will go much further in the coming days in the public forum. My intention here is only to provide an answer to Chris' question. More could be said and will be said by others in the days to come. However, I want to be clear that, while supporting traditional marriage, I have no intentions of becoming an apologist for it. There are others, like my friend Frank Turek, who are far more qualified for the

⁶ A pdf document with the majority and dissenting opinions may be viewed at http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/14-556_3204.pdf. The page numbers noted refer to the section relevant to the particular Justice's opinion.

task. As for me, my focus will remain on Jesus, His resurrection, and the Gospels. So, I will not continue this discussion.

Finally, while I am disappointed in the SCOTUS ruling, as Christians we must remember that our primary “citizenship is in heaven from which also we eagerly wait the Savior our Lord Jesus Christ“ (Phil 3:20). I find it very easy to get caught up in my present life, which largely consists of work and doing the leisurely activities I enjoy in order to build a comfortable life. But that should not be my primary goal in life. While I may tell myself it is not, do my actions back that up? What would my life look like if I loved God with my whole being and my neighbor as myself or at least was making efforts to move in that direction? When I compare that with what my life actually looks like, it makes me ask how seriously I’m taking my responsibilities as a citizen of heaven. The persecution of Christians in the U.S. may come. But persecution can be good because it motivates us to live as God calls us to live and separates true disciples of Jesus from those playing the game. Perhaps that’s what the American church needs. If it is, then let it come! The bottom line is my disappointment in the SCOTUS decision can serve to refocus my passion on the One deserving it; one who welcomes us into His kingdom and Who rules perfectly. He knows our situation and cares. But He cares far more about what is going on in His kingdom than about what’s going on in the U.S. And we should, too.