

Relativism and “Gay Marriage”

By Mike Winther, President of the Institute for Principle Studies

The Obergefell decision and the proper role of civil government

In the wake of the recent Supreme Court decision on “gay marriage”, there is ample reason to criticize the Court, but there is also ample reason to criticize the critics. In the political, moral and academic debates of our time, it is important that we take the correct stand, but it is equally important that we support our position with the correct argument.

All the wrong arguments

I hear critique after critique of the Supreme Court that blames the court for overreaching its authority because this decision should be made by the people. Yes, I believe that the court did overreach its authority, but not because it usurped the democratic process.

By now you have heard dozens of voices decry the decision in Obergefell v. Hodges. “A decision against democracy”, “Ignoring the will of the people” they say. But these are the wrong arguments.

Several decades ago, a well-known Christian leader, whom I greatly respect, was participating in a well-publicized and well watched debate about legalizing homosexual marriage in a large state. A public opinion poll in the state had revealed that the majority of the state’s citizens opposed homosexual marriage. This Christian leader made frequent reference to this poll in the debate. In fact, the whole foundation of his argument against the “gay marriage” bill was that this bill did not represent the will of the citizens. “It was undemocratic” he said, arguing that the legislature should reject the bill because the voters didn’t want it.

The fallacy of this Christian leader’s argument should have been obvious, but to most Christians, it was anything but. If our argument against homosexual marriage is based on public opinion, then we must concede to, and even accept, these marriages when 51% of Americans support them. This is the fallacy of democracy.

Relativism

Any philosophy that makes its determinations of right and wrong based on the opinion of the majority is a philosophy of relativism. Relativism, the philosophical view that there are no absolutes, is the dry rot of modern civilization.

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Its damage is not obvious at first, but when ignored, it soon weakens an entire structure. A society without some absolutes is a miserable place to live.

Ask a friend who supports homosexual marriage if he or she supports polygamy. Would they support a marriage between one man and three women? What about one woman and several men? If they love each other, shouldn't they have equal treatment under the law? If your friend opposes polygamous marriage, you may want to inquire as to the basis for their opinion. What moral code supports their opinion?

If the ethical basis for societal laws is democracy, then everything is up for grabs. Murder, theft, vandalism, fraud and even polygamy could be up for a vote. Once something is democratically endorsed, there would be no basis upon which to challenge these policies. Of course there will always be some standard for the law, but the question is, "whose standard?" Do we trust majorities to define these standards?

The marriage debate is just one of many ways that modern Christendom has been seduced into embracing relativism because we are fighting relativism with relativism.

Feelings

The problem here is that most Christians and traditionalists do not have a framework for determining the proper role of government. Instead of studying and understanding the biblical principles for the civil state, most modern Christians base their views on their feelings. We "feel" that a particular government action should or should not happen and we grasp for straws (or strawmen) to support our position. When we oppose a policy that is unpopular, we invoke democracy as the foundation of our argument. But when we oppose a policy that is popular, we invoke the Constitution to support our opposition to that action. And when we oppose a policy that is neither unconstitutional nor unpopular... well... we often don't know how to justify our position. Our feelings might be correct, but if we don't know why they are correct we won't be able to defend our position much less persuade others.

The proper role of government

The solution to the problems of "feelings" and "relativism" goes to the foundations of the IPS message. First, there are both proper and improper actions for a civil government. Some tasks are within legitimate civil government authority and other actions are outside of that authority.

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Second, all authority has an “author”. This is to say that there must be a source or an origin of government authority. So we ask the question, “Where does government get its legitimate authority?” If the source of government authority is the majority, as in a democracy, then that majority grants authority to civil government. In this model, any government action that is consistent with the opinion of the majority is properly authorized and therefore legitimate. This of course is a relative standard of right and wrong because majorities frequently change their minds.

Third, the only reliable standard of right and wrong for mankind or mankind’s institutions is found in scripture. If God is the author of all legitimate authority and if scripture is our reliable source for knowing God’s will, then we should search scripture to guide our policies—not public opinion. Much to the surprise of most moderns, the Bible has quite a bit to say about the proper operation of the civil state. A complete exposition of this subject is beyond the scope of this article, but the relevant point here is this: God is not inconsistent and He does not direct contradictory actions.

If God is the source of all legitimate authority, we can conclude that properly functioning civil government can never legitimately advocate or encourage anything that God forbids.

God would never forbid something and then authorize the civil government to encourage it.

Based on scripture’s prohibitions of homosexuality, no government institution (family government, church government or civil government) is ever authorized to encourage or promote the behavior. The same would be true of any number of sins. It would be wrong for the civil state to recognize adulterous relationships and legitimize them. Likewise it would be wrong for government to issue licenses in recognition of burglary or any other sinful activity.

The problem, of course, is that fewer and fewer Americans see homosexuality as sinful. This is because fewer and fewer Americans understand or trust the Bible. Why has this happened? Certainly, the church bears much responsibility here. Christians have failed to study and have often retreated from the important academic debates of our time. When Christians do engage, we often make the wrong arguments.

I would be remiss if I didn’t add that much of the blame for the shifting opinions in America rests with the teaching in our government education system. This raises another question, “Is education one of the proper roles of civil government?” Unfortunately, many Christians are relativists on this issue as well.

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