

Editorial: Changing culture, a drama in three acts

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The stunning rapidity of American society's shift toward homosexual rights—embodied particularly in the Supreme Court's affirmation of same-sex marriage in *Obergefell v. Hodges*—sets the stage for a drama in three acts.

Act I: Religious liberty

You can be certain *Obergefell* will lead to future Supreme Court decisions. Same-sex marriage is the law of the land. But some Americans will resist participating in LGBT weddings, based upon their religious convictions. The levels of protection most likely will break down into three categories:

- *Congregations and their ministers*. Their religious freedom is triply protected, as noted in [last week's editorial](#).



Editor Marv KnoxThe First Amendment provides a strong, durable guarantee for the free exercise of religion. Americans are free to worship as they please. And since a church wedding ceremony is a core act of worship, the government is loathe to tell congregations and their ministers how to conduct weddings or whom to marry.

The Religious Freedom Restoration Act—adopted in 1993 at the federal

level and in 1999 in Texas—maintains government cannot substantially burden religious practice without demonstrating a compelling reason to do so. Government intrusion into wedding ceremonies would violate the federal and state RFRA.

This spring, the Texas Legislature passed the Pastor Protection Act. As if the First Amendment and RFRA left any doubt, this new law, which takes effect Sept. 1, specifically grants clergy the right to refuse to conduct marriages that would violate their beliefs.

- *Religious institutions.* The operation and policies of religiously affiliated organizations—such as colleges and universities; benevolence agencies that care for children, families and the aged; and hospitals—will become an important battleground for religious liberty.

As Managing Editor Ken Camp's [article](#) this week demonstrates, the future of these organizations, particularly in light of *Obergefell*, is uncertain. Expect court cases involving the rights of faith-based academic institutions to maintain policies against homosexual accommodation and the freedom of religious child-care agencies to deny foster-care and adoption placement to same-sex couples.

The courts will be asked to recognize that, while these faith-based organizations are not congregations, they are religious institutions. The institutions will note their spiritual beliefs undergird everything they do, and being commanded to violate those beliefs is no less an intrusion into religious liberty as declaring how churches must conduct worship.

- *Individuals and businesses.* The rights of individuals and small businesses to refuse participation in same-sex weddings based upon religious beliefs will continue to be tested. The outcome could go either way.

On the one hand, some courts have said individuals and businesses do not possess the protections of congregations. And, especially if they operate in

the public realm, they must function according to applicable laws. This would mean an individual or private business could not claim a religious exemption. But on the other hand, the Supreme Court has ruled closely held businesses possess the same rights as individuals, and in the case of Hobby Lobby, it protected religious belief.

Act II: Religious relationships

The plot in this act will not involve the judicial system, but it will feature congregations, denominations and faith-based organizations. They will be asked to decide how they relate to one another when some of them welcome and affirm homosexuals and others do not. The pace of the plot has quickened as social acceptance of homosexuality has spread. It is coming to a church or denomination or religious ministry near you.

The Baptist General Convention of Texas, for example, will face more tests of fellowship. The BGCT has established clear precedent. It has removed fellowship from two congregations that ordained homosexual deacons, and a third church voluntarily left the convention when it became overtly welcoming and affirming. Other congregations have and will cross those lines. Will the precedent hold, or will the BGCT find a way to retain relationship with churches whose stance on LGBT issues is not consonant with the traditional Baptist position?

The state convention doesn't have to look far to find examples of both options. The Southern Baptist Convention's policies make homosexuality a test of fellowship. Churches that in any way affirm homosexuality are removed from the SBC. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is intentionally neutral. It has declared homosexuality a local-church issue, and congregations have agreed to disagree while continuing to cooperate through CBF. The BGCT's position more closely mirrors the SBC's. It will decide if it will hold the line and remove more churches from the left or if it will adopt the agree-to-disagree model and, most likely, lose churches from

the right.

Act III: Christians in culture

Without a doubt, the *Obergefell* decision heightened the tension of America's culture wars. It created the deepest social division our nation has felt since the Supreme Court handed down *Roe v. Wade*, the right to abortion, in 1973. Supporters of *Obergefell* celebrated what they believe to be a monumental advance in civil rights. Opponents lamented what they described as the moral failure of the nation.

In many respects, the division over same-sex marriage provides a microcosm of the larger division in our society. The best description of this phenomenon is [David Brooks' insightful column](#) in the *New York Times*, "The next culture war."

Churches are likely to respond in one of four patterns. (For a historic explanation of this idea, read one of the best ethics books ever written, [Christ and Culture](#), by H. Richard Niebuhr.) Those patterns are:

- *Retreat*. Many congregations will be tempted to withdraw from culture altogether. They feel defeated, and they want to protect themselves and their children. So, they will live as far apart from culture as possible.
- *Accommodate*. Other congregations will adapt social mores wholeheartedly. Their attitudes and convictions will not vary significantly from the prevailing culture around them. Ironically, this will take place on both the right and the left.
- *Attack*. These congregations will engage the culture war. They will struggle against the changes around them, criticizing and resisting and seeking political and other structural changes.
- *Transform*. These congregations will seek to change culture, but not by

force. They will adopt the biblical metaphors of salt, leaven and light. They will try to demonstrate the love of Christ winsomely and attractively, so others desire to follow. Also ironically, different congregations will approach this challenge from both the right and the left.