

Editorial: Same-sex marriage & the intractable knot of freedoms

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Same-sex marriage has tied American society into a seemingly intractable knot.

Advocates of one great value pull a thread that ultimately tightens and restricts another cherished principle. And vice-versa.

Human rights vs. religious liberty.



Marv Knox Both sides are tugging with all their might. They anticipate a summertime Supreme Court ruling determining the ability of all Americans, regardless of sexual orientation, to marry. They're pitting the civil rights of same-sex couples who wish to marry against the religious liberty of vendors who believe facilitating their wedding tacitly endorses their union. In our polarized culture, championing one value impedes the other.

No wonder we're contending with a tight, tangled mess.

If Justice Anthony Kennedy rules as he has on other gay-rights cases, the court will vote 5-4 to legalize same-sex marriage. Either way, the decision

will feed the flurry of bills in state legislatures, designed to blunt or to extend effects of the ruling.

All of this presents a challenging question for Baptists and other Christians: How do we move forward?

(By the way, people who presume only one “Christian” answer to the same-sex marriage/religious liberty debate do not appreciate its complexity. Faithful Christians live in both camps, precisely because of their faith. Most cannot understand why the other side believes as it does.)

Let’s think about the competing issues first and then consider responses.

Religious liberty ...

From our beginning, Baptists championed religious liberty. Baptist co-founder Thomas Helwys died in an English prison 399 years ago. Colonist Roger Williams chartered Rhode Island. Pastor John Leland helped secure the Bill of Rights. Texas statesman George Truett preached from the steps of the U.S. Capitol. All for religious liberty. The Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty leads the fight for religious freedom today.

Advocacy for religious liberty has been called Baptists’ greatest contribution to American culture.

And yet the debate over same-sex marriage touts a tenuous, touchy question: Where is the boundary of religious liberty?

Is the church protected from violating its religious beliefs? What about church-affiliated institutions, such as a university, hospital or children’s home? Can a large business owned by Christians base its practices on the owners’ beliefs? The Supreme Court’s 2014 *Hobby Lobby* case sided with Christian owners.

But now the question takes a personal tone: Must small businesses and

individuals serve gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people, even if they believe marriage between anyone other than one man and one woman is sinful? Must they choose between breaking the law and violating their conscience?

... Or civil rights

The other side of this conundrum—the degree to which all citizens must be treated equally—likewise is complicated.

Baptists came to this cause centuries after defending religious liberty. Baptists' Southern forebears owned slaves. Since Emancipation, some Baptists resisted equal treatment of all races. But some Baptists championed racial equality: Martin Luther King and pastors across the racial spectrum, seminary professors, the Christian Life Commission and others. In fact, racial equality is the common denominator between so-called moderate and conservative Baptists today. Remember, though, we did not always agree on this point: Plenty of Christian businesspeople refused service to African-Americans at their lunch counters, citing religious conviction as a reason.

At the root of today's conflict is a disagreement about whether sexual orientation should be a protected civil liberty. Some see this as exactly like the race issue; others—including many African-American pastors—believe such a comparison is unjustified.

And so, among Baptists, a minority advocate for full privilege and equality of homosexuals as an obvious civil right, while a larger group resists same-sex marriage as a moral issue, not a civil right.

If you see homosexual activity as immoral, then you may see providing flowers, taking photos and baking cakes for gay or lesbian weddings as tacit approval of immoral acts. But if you do not think homosexual activity is immoral, you may contend the trappings of a wedding are value-neutral

and, consequently, protected civil rights.

When the Supreme Court rules, the primary legal template for homosexual marriage and attendant rights will be set. That won't stop state legislatures from writing laws, but it will frame the issue decisively according to federal law.

Christians must respond

Then the responsibility will be on Christians to respond. Churches will be protected by the First Amendment's religion guarantees and cannot be forced to conduct marriages against their will. But individuals, especially business owners, will face choices. Ideally, they should react with a goal or mission in mind: What, in the name of Jesus, do you hope to accomplish?

At least three possibilities present themselves:

- *Protective purity.*

This approach seeks to preserve the definition of marriage against encroachment of culture. Adherents cite Scripture and history. They may engage in civil disobedience by refusing to violate their sincerely held religious beliefs.

Advocates should question what they intend. If they want to drive down a stake for the traditional definition of marriage, they may succeed. If they hope to stem the tide of history, they probably will fail.

If their goal is to lead all people to Christ, they face an uphill climb. From their perspective, condoning sinful behavior is not a loving action. But others see their opposition to same-sex marriage as harsh and unloving. So, they run the risk of alienating people who believe differently, including non-Christians. Their challenge is to hold their position so winsomely their opponents cannot ignore their gentleness, humility and radical love.

- *Required accommodation.*

This middle way—which probably will be taken by the majority of Christians who disagree with gay marriage—is the path of least resistance. Call it the civilian equivalent of Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Take all the business that comes through the door, because the law requires it. But don't engage customers, or especially homosexual couples, any more than necessary.

Shopkeepers, vendors and individuals who accommodate with no comment will give no hint of blessing a union they do not condone. But they also will not provide any testimony of their faith.

- *Relational transformation.*

This strategy sees providing goods and services as an opportunity to engage people. Despite what some might expect, it can be implemented by Christians across the theological spectrum. It allows them to be honest and transparent, yet winsome and compelling.

Planning a wedding, for example, is complex. Vendors have plenty of time to get to know the couple. A Christian who opposes gay marriage may say something like this: "You know, my faith teaches me marriage is for one man and one woman for life. The law says differently. My faith teaches me all people are made in the image of God, and so I believe everyone deserves the best cake (or photos, or flowers, etc.). When I use my gifts, I bring God-given joy to others. So, I'm looking forward to delivering the cake of your dreams."

That conversation doesn't condone homosexual marriage. But it does shine the light of Jesus into lives—maybe two lives who have experienced their share of rejection by Christ-followers. It conveys care and warmth that comes from Jesus. Who knows? Maybe it will lead them to follow Jesus.

Christians are not going to agree about homosexual marriage. But may we

at least agree on what Jesus taught us to be the gospel in a nutshell: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27).