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What's Really at Stake in the Gay Marriage Debate? Part Four

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Writing more than twenty years ago, Thomas Sowell described the basic worldview clash we observe today as a struggle between “constrained” and “unconstrained” visions of humanity. The fundamental distinction between these two visions is moral, but the thrust of each is ideological. The constrained vision may be considered basically conservative, while the unconstrained vision is basically liberal, in modern terms.

There is great wisdom in Sowell’s analysis, and in his book, *The Conflict of Visions*. But the greatest achievement of this book is Sowell’s insistence that political struggles have ideological origins.



This is certainly true with reference to the political struggle over same-sex marriage. In California, the controversy is over “Proposition 8” on the November ballot — a measure that would amend the state’s constitution to establish marriage as the union of a man and a woman. Voters in Arizona and Florida will face measures that would disallow same-sex marriages.

Nationwide, we face efforts to repeal the Defense of Marriage Act (a repeal championed by Sen. Barack Obama) and to achieve same-sex marriage through the courts. State by state, the issue is constantly reshaped and reframed.

At the same time, there is a sense that the public is shifting its perception of the issue. When the issue is framed as simple fairness, Americans increasingly seem to tire of arguing that sexual behavior or orientation (at least in terms of homosexuality) should matter when it comes to the basic rights associated with marriage. This trend is especially noticeable among the young. Younger Americans, by and large, see homosexuality as part of the recognizable landscape and within the normal range of human behaviors.

All this represents a massive shift in perception over a relatively short period of time. The activists promoting the normalization of homosexuality have been tremendously successful in their efforts. The mainstream media, the educational elites, and various culture shapers have pushed this cause. Today, on the average college or university campus, homosexuality is not considered to be a major moral issue. Any discrimination against homosexuals, on the other hand, *is* considered a moral issue of urgency and outrage. In much of the culture, it is considered increasingly immoral to assert that homosexuality is immoral.

There is no real ground for compromise between these two visions and perspectives. Both sides frame their argument in moral terms. Advocates of the constrained vision argue that humanity is heterosexual by default and design and that homosexuality is thus an aberration to be sanctioned and discouraged. Advocates of the unconstrained vision argue that homosexuality is just one among several acceptable options for humanity.

This framework for analysis helps to explain why the two opposing sides in this controversy see the issue in such starkly different terms.

Those opposed to same-sex marriage see marriage as an essentially heterosexual institution that is fundamental to human happiness and the well-being of civilization. Those who support same-sex marriage see limiting marriage to

heterosexuals as a way of exercising patriarchal oppression against sexual minorities. Marriage is seen, therefore, as an obstacle to human happiness and autonomy that must be either destroyed or radically revised. The quest for this radical revision is seen as an act of human liberation. To the conservative, this is a mortal blow directed at the very heart of the culture.

Moral conservatives see homosexual behaviors as matters of grave moral concern. Moral liberals and libertarians see homosexuality as no more morally significant than the color of one's eyes. It's just part of what makes some people who they are.

Adding credence to Sowell's argument, a person's position on same-sex marriage is a very good predictor of positions held on other issues as well. Careful observers know that this is no coincidence. A cadre of liberal Hollywood celebrities supports same-sex marriage as what they call a civil rights issue and recently held fundraisers that produced millions of dollars to defeat Proposition 8. Meanwhile, opposition to same-sex marriage is most discernable among conservative Christians and other conservative groups like the Mormons.

The middle ground is fast disappearing, even as arguments based in a framework of natural law seem to carry no public force. This leaves conservative Christians — evangelicals in the main — as the bulwark of opposition to same-sex marriage. For evangelicals, the question is always a question of what the Bible teaches, and the Bible straightforwardly presents homosexual behaviors as immoral and sinful — and in stark terms.

Believers committed to biblical authority will find no way to avoid this controversy, and no ground for accepting the "fairness" argument. If the Bible is the revealed Word of God, then we know that homosexuality is a sin of great spiritual consequence. Those who reject the authority of the Bible will, in the end, likely come to accept *some* argument for the normalization of homosexuality and homosexual relationships.

Despite their massive and contentious collision over this great question, the two opposing sides in this controversy are agreed on one major point — the importance of the issue. Both sides believe that the victory of their position on this issue is a precondition for true human happiness and human thriving. And, truth be known, both sides see the other camp as a threat to human happiness and well-being.

To a significant degree, these opposing camps define almost all of reality in starkly different terms. Both sides bring energy and passion to the public square. Both sides see the controversy as a battle for the future of civilization.

On that point, at least, both sides are right.

