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The Coming Great Divide — There Is No Place to Hide

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When the California Supreme Court struck down that state's definition of marriage as a union of a man and a woman it announced a great social and moral revolution. Unless reversed by means of a constitutional amendment, this decision effectively redefined marriage and set a precedent that will reverberate across the nation.

At the same time, this moral revolution unleashed by the California court will also reveal a deep divide between churches and denominations. Issues of biblical authority have divided Christian (and Jewish) denominations and churches and have been the focus of intense debates and controversies.

One unavoidable outcome of the legalization of same-sex marriage is that the great divide between conservative and liberal churches and denominations will become glaringly evident in a way that has not been the case thus far. The singular question of whether churches perform and recognize same-sex "marriages" will tell a much larger story.

At least until this new phenomenon, churches and denominations across the board shared an understanding of marriage and a vocabulary that included words like "husband" and "wife." In the world before same-sex unions, that made sense. In a world without a shared understanding of marriage, even the vocabulary falls apart.

The Los Angeles Times offers an interesting look into the future in its May 19, 2008 edition. In the article, the paper reported on a cross-section of area churches, synagogues, and mosques.

From the article:

Pastor Gregory L. Waybright struggled from the pulpit Sunday to reconcile the laws of God with the laws of man. Though he wanted his church "to be a welcoming and loving house," he told worshipers at Lake Avenue Church in Pasadena, the California Supreme Court's decision last week to legalize gay marriage in California "is a contradiction of what God's word says."

The 4-3 ruling, which held that same-sex couples have a constitutional right to marry, has prompted conservative and liberal congregations alike to discuss whether gay and lesbian members will be allowed to wed in their churches, synagogues and temples."

These are the kinds of issues every religion has to grapple with," said James A. Donahue, president of the Graduate Theological Union, a Berkeley-based consortium of theological schools.

"How do you factor in the role of contemporary human rights, civil rights, the data about homosexuality" with "core traditions and beliefs?"

At Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church of Pasadena, the mood was celebratory Sunday, with Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" played at services in honor of the decision.

At Congregation Kol Ami in West Hollywood — which offers “outreach to the gay, lesbian and bisexual community,” according to its website — Rabbi Denise L. Eger’s e-mail box was filled almost instantly with requests from joyful congregants wanting to get married.

The polarity on biblical authority is glaringly apparent in this description of the coming reality in California — unless, that is, voters amend the constitution.

As the paper explains:

In recent years, conflicts over homosexuality and the Bible have unsettled many denominations, especially such mainline Protestant churches as Methodists, Presbyterians, Evangelical Lutherans and Episcopalians. Although the specifics vary, the controversies for all of these faith groups and for Conservative Judaism have revolved broadly around whether to provide official recognition to the unions of same-sex couples and whether to allow openly gay and lesbian clergy.

Thursday’s court decision is expected to add fuel to the debate, with several denominations poised to again take up gay-related issues at their national conventions this year. William McKinney, president of the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley and a professor of American religion there, said the ruling was applauded on his campus, which is a multid denominational, theologically liberal Christian seminary. Yet he said he felt an element of trepidation as well.”

We’re celebrating it on the one hand,” McKinney said, noting that San Francisco’s 2004 decision allowing same-sex weddings had given many people, both gay and straight, new appreciation for the powerful symbolism of marriage.” On the other hand, though, this sets us up for another round of the culture wars,” he said. “As a straight, married man, I feel for my gay friends whose private life is once again going to be the subject of public debate.”

The issue of biblical authority is central to this controversy, as is almost always the case. This becomes abundantly clear in an interesting statement from a rabbi:

For Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis, who heads the Conservative Jewish congregation at Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, the court’s decision has changed the way he will handle celebrating the unions of gay and lesbian couples at his synagogue. “I did not in the past. I will now,” he said in an interview. “I was really waiting for this [decision]. . . . From my point of view, it’s a very courageous thing and is part of the evolution of religious mores.”

Schulweis has been a rabbi for more than half a century and has seen his religion evolve, he said, first allowing women into the full “ritual life of the community,” then ordaining them as rabbis and cantors, and eventually embracing homosexuals.” It’s one of the most exciting parts of seeing religion as not static and inflexible but as sensitive to different times and different information and different knowledge,” Schulweis said. “What in the world did people in the biblical time know about homosexuals?”

Take a close look at that question. When the rabbi asks, “What in the world did people in the Bible time know about homosexuals?,” he clearly indicates that he sees the Bible as a human book that reveals no more than the attitudes and prejudices and limitations of its human authors. There is no acknowledgement at all that the Bible reveals what God would have us to know about homosexuality.

That, in the end, is the point. Is the Bible merely a human book? If so, then marriage can be anything we decide it should be. But, if the Bible is the Word of God, then we are bound by it. It’s as simple as that.

As *The Los Angeles Times* makes clear, there is no place to hide.

