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The Baylor Same-Sex Marriage Controversy: What's Going On?

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In an editorial published February 27, the paper's editorial board served notice of its support for the actions of San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom in performing illegal same-sex marriages and for the city in filing a lawsuit against the state and its legal prohibition of same-sex marriages. According to the editorial, "taking into account equal protection under the law, gay couples should be granted the same equal rights to legal marriage as heterosexual couples. Without such recognition, gay couples, even those who have co-habitated long enough to qualify as common law spouses under many state laws, often aren't granted the same protection when it comes to shared finances, health insurance and other employee benefits, and property or power of attorney rights."

The editorial board went on to issue what amounts to a blanket endorsement of same-sex marriage and, by extension, of homosexuality itself. "Like many heterosexual couples, many gay couples share deep bonds of love, some so strong they've persevered years of discrimination for their choice to co-habitate with and date one another," the students commented. The editorial board went on to argue: "Just as it isn't fair to discriminate against someone for their skin color, heritage or religious beliefs, it isn't fair to discriminate against for their sexual orientation. Shouldn't gay couples be allowed to enjoy the benefits and happiness of marriage, too?"

According to a note attached to the editorial, the editorial board had voted 5-2 in favor of this statement. If the students were looking for attention, they got it—and fast. President Sloan released a written statement denouncing the editorial and characterizing the editorial board's decision as irresponsible and "unwelcome."

"It is important for Baylor constituents to know that this position held by five students does not reflect the views of the administration, faculty, staff, Board of Regents or Student Publications Board, which oversees the Lariat," Sloan stated. He went on to claim that the paper's stance on same-sex marriage is out of step with "the vast majority of Baylor's 14,000 students and 100,000 alumni."

Interestingly, this is not the first time the paper's editorial board has offered a pro-homosexual slant. Just two weeks before the editorial on same-sex marriage, the paper ran an editorial criticizing the administration for denying an openly-gay student a ministerial scholarship. The editorial board also flirted with controversy in a recent editorial calling for minors to have information about access to abortion. Nevertheless, it was the same-sex marriage editorial that sparked the real controversy.

In his statement, Sloan indicated that the university was inundated with complaints from its constituents. "We've

already heard from a number of students, alumni and parents, who are, as am I, justifiably outraged over this editorial.” According to Sloan, “Espousing in a Baylor publication a view that is so out of touch with traditional Christian teachings is not only unwelcome, it comes dangerously close to violating University policy as described in the Student Handbook, prohibiting the advocacy of any understandings of sexuality that are contrary to biblical teaching.” The president went on to promise that the Student Publications Board would be addressing the matter with the newspaper’s staff as soon as possible.

Speaking to the broader university constituency, Sloan sought to assure the Baylor family that, “while we respect the right of students to hold and express divergent view points, we do not support the use of publications such as the *Lariat*, which is published by the University, to advocate positions that undermine foundational principles upon which this institution was founded and currently operates.”

Of course, by the time President Sloan issued his statement, the controversy had already spilled into the national media and was fodder for news articles, editorial opinion, and political debate. Some homosexual advocacy groups quickly championed the editorial as a signal of support from an unexpected quarter.

If the paper’s published letters to the editor are any indication, student opinion was decidedly mixed. Darrin Adams, complained that President Sloan was turning Baylor University into a Ministry of Information with an Orwellian agenda. He particularly objected to President Sloan’s linking of homosexuality and Baylor’s Christian roots. “I, and many others as seen from letters to the editor, am not represented by our school president nor am I totally represented by the editorial board. I do, however, think an intelligent group of my peers can better represent the Baylor population than a Baptist preacher.” Denise Hamblin, a social work major, argued, “Students should be tired of being put under the umbrella of Baylor’s conservatism. Social justice and equality have somehow gotten sacrificed as priorities—sacrificed to the close-minded [sic.] few who would have you believe they are ‘holier than thou’.”

Other students voice support for the editorial, and registered opposition to same-sex marriage and homosexuality. “Marriage implies a consummation in sex,” argued Violet Williams, “and traditionalists believe sex is designed not only to display love but to create children. A gay relationship is sterile, thus not fulfilling the design of God.” Alex J. Bell argued for editorial freedom, but against the board’s editorial. “While I respect your journalistic freedom to express your opinions on a given topic, I believe the views the editorial board expressed regarding the city of San Francisco and gay marriages are incorrect and misguided.”

Controversies over student publications are routine in higher education, and few university presidents are spared the embarrassing responsibility of responding to a flagrantly outrageous student editorial. Nevertheless, the situation at Baylor rises to the level of national importance when the controversy on that campus is more closely examined.

Many included within Baylor’s large constituency must have been reassured to know that President Sloan found the editorial deeply offensive and described himself as “justifiably outraged” over the editorial board’s misjudgment. Furthermore, reassurance was given in the form of Sloan’s clear affirmation that any endorsement of homosexuality undermines the “foundational Christian principles upon which this institution was founded and currently operates.” In his statement, President Sloan had described an endorsement of same-sex marriage as “out of touch with traditional Christian teachings” and, “contrary to biblical teaching.” So far, so good.

In reality, Baylor University has been embroiled in a lengthy and overheated controversy over the university’s leadership and direction. President Sloan has advocated a new direction for Baylor, pointing the university toward top-tier academic status and redirecting the institution into a deeper and more substantial identification with the Christian worldview. Under his leadership, Baylor has added a number of scholars with international reputations for a serious embrace of the Christian worldview and its application to all areas of thought and research. These new professors—and the “Baylor 2012” plan promoted by President Sloan—have run into direct confrontation with many of Baylor’s older faculty members.

The bottom line in this controversy is a debate over whether Christian conviction should be brought into the classroom by application of a Christian worldview to all academic disciplines. The resistance of Baylor’s older faculty indicates that, for many at least, Christianity is devoid of specific intellectual content. That would certainly go far in explaining some of the confusion on the issue of homosexuality present on the Baylor campus.

Furthermore, even under the agenda of “Baylor 2012,” the University steadfastly insists that it is not a confessional institution and faculty members are not required to sign any confession of faith. University leaders, including Provost David Lyle Jeffrey, have criticized confessional boundaries as illegitimate for an academic institution. But without a confessional statement, what is to prevent a faculty member from advocating same-sex marriage?

All this adds up to a bundle of confusion. President Sloan clearly—if briefly—articulated a traditional and biblical understanding of homosexuality and same-sex marriage. But where is the army of faculty behind him? Where are the faculty members willing to put themselves on the line to stand with their president in support of the biblical concept of marriage and opposed to the normalization of homosexuality? Until that question is answered, we cannot assume that this issue is settled—not by a long shot. Is Baylor’s faculty willing to take a strong and unified stand on this vital issue of moral importance and political controversy? If not, why castigate the students as irresponsible?

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