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The Baylor Same-Sex Marriage Controversy: What Now?

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When Baylor President Robert B. Sloan, Jr. released a statement denouncing the paper's editorial and declared it to be in conflict with both Scripture and university policy, the fur began to fly.

In a report published in The Los Angeles Times, Charles A. Weaver III, who teaches psychology and neuroscience at Baylor, stated that Sloan "certainly is within his right to do what he did." Nevertheless, Weaver accused the president of stifling debate. In his words: "But I'm not sure it was a wise decision. It is stifling. One of the issues for me the last year has been an atmosphere of intimidation and mistrust here. And this was certainly a very intimidating message." When it comes to issues like these, presidents of Christian universities are paid to intimidate.

Professor Weaver's statement is most revealing, for it underlines the moral timidity of so many faculty members, whose greatest fear is that debate on any issue might be "stifled." President Sloan's clear declaration of opposition to same-sex marriage is described by Professor Weaver as "a very intimidating message." Christian parents intending to send their children to Baylor University must certainly look for more "intimidation" like this—not less.

Several great warning signs emerge from this controversy. First, the anti-confessional stance so proudly embraced by Baylor University ensures that, over time, resistance to same-sex marriage and the normalization of homosexuality is almost sure to weaken. The absence of confessional accountability means that the university has no objective standard by which to judge faculty on these issues. Does Baylor University hire faculty members who would advocate same-sex marriage? If not, how is this issue raised in the faculty appointment process? Is the issue clearly articulated in the university's contractual arrangements with faculty? If not, the university is in the inconsistent position of chastising its student editorial board while paying faculty members who advocate the same positions.

When the Southern Baptist Convention revised its Confession of Faith in 2000, it added specificity on the issue of homosexuality, declaring all homosexual behavior to be inconsistent with Scripture and inherently sinful. Without such a confessional guideline—which faculty members would be obligated to sign and endorse—what prevents a faculty member from claiming academic freedom as a license to defend same-sex marriage or to advocate for the homosexual agenda?

This issue is not limited to Baylor University of course. Similar controversies are virtually certain to erupt across the world of evangelical higher education. Those institutions that have refused confessional accountability and have sought to find some middle ground in the culture wars will find themselves without adequate resources to confront this issue—and the host of issues close on the horizon.

Second, the Baylor controversy provides an eye-opening awareness that many evangelical young people hold loose views on matters of sexual morality. The 5-2 vote by the editorial board, coming from students at "the world's largest Baptist university," indicates something of the slippage that has taken place in "Generation Y."

This is consistent with the findings of several research teams looking at the moral values of young people in their late teens and twenties. Late last year, The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press released a major study on responses to gay marriage. According to the center's report, young people are much more supportive of gay marriage than any other age-defined group. As the report stated: "A closer look at the opinions of various demographic groups on this issue shows that young people, especially those in their late teens and twenties are more supportive of gay marriage than are older Americans. Even this youngest group of Americans do not, on balance, favor this idea; rather they are divided. But that is in stark contrast to people in their forties and fifties, where twice as many oppose gay marriage as favor it. Among those in their sixties and seventies, opposition outnumbers support by as much as four-to-one."

Today's college students have grown up in a culture of moral relativism, and they have been drinking deeply from the wells of cultural permissiveness. Shaped by an entertainment culture that celebrates sexual freedom and individual choice, these young people are far more likely to see homosexuality as a matter of "sexual orientation" rather than of sexual morality.

Furthermore, this generation of college students is much more likely than any previous generation to know peers who have openly identified themselves as homosexuals and lesbians, and generational empathy combines with a loss of biblical formation to create an environment of non-confrontational acquiescence. Issues of right and wrong have been transformed into questions of individual rights. An ethos of tolerance—defined as a refusal to make clear judgments on sexual morality—leads them to see controversies over sexuality as largely unnecessary and distracting.

Beyond this, the current generation of college students has seen marriage undermined by the Baby Boomers and by larger changes in the culture. Increasingly, they see marriage as the product of individual negotiation and "hooking up," rather than a sacred covenant between a man and a woman before God. Having witnessed the marginalization of marriage and the weakening of respect for the marriage covenant, many of these young people see same-sex marriage as a logical, if lamentable, concession to reality.

Third, this incident at Baylor University draws our attention to the tragic reality that we face a generation largely untaught in terms of biblical truth. In far too many cases, these young people have been involved in churches where youth ministry has been about entertainment and accommodation rather than about biblical teaching and confrontation.

We are reaping a harvest produced by decades of failure in conviction and biblical teaching. In many churches, teenagers are treated to an endless array of activities and entertainments, but they graduate from high school with what can only be described as a minimal understanding of biblical truth and the slightest engagement with the Christian worldview. Untaught and unshaped by the Scripture, they think in what can only be characterized as secular terms. Why should we be surprised that they—like so many of their peers—see same-sex marriage as a matter for political negotiation rather than for moral confrontation?

A generation ago, sociologist James Davison Hunter of the University of Virginia warned that evangelical young people were prone to what he called a pattern of "cognitive bargaining." Given the imperialistic power of the postmodern worldview, these students engaged in a process of bargaining away Christian truth claims in an incremental fashion. Biblical doctrines were, as Hunter described, compromised bit by bit as young people made successive cognitive concessions. We can now see clear evidence of cognitive bargaining on issues of sexual morality.

Fourth, the Baylor controversy also reveals the hostility any institution will face if it takes a stand for biblical standards on issues of sexual morality. Claiming that "freedom of the press" had been violated by Dr. Sloan's statement, the San Antonio Express-News denounced the university president and congratulated the student editors for their "courageous stand." According to the Express-News, "The Lariat editorial board deserves kudos for taking a bold stand on a hot topic at a university often derided as having rigid, backward rules and views." Presumably, the San Antonio paper considers opposition to homosexual marriage as among those "backward rules and views."

The Houston Chronicle was even more direct in its denunciation of President Sloan's statement. "It is not the school's Christian ideals that have unnerved many of its supporters, including the Chronicle," the paper editorialized. "It is Baylor's increasing unwillingness to brook any challenge to its insistence that all university endeavors must be aligned with biblical precepts." Well . . . just what does the Houston Chronicle expect of a university that claims Christian identity? Is the idea that "all university endeavors must be aligned with biblical precepts" a shocking concept for the

paper? Evidently so.

Oddly, the paper also seems to think that “Christian ideals” and “biblical precepts” are contradictory realities. For the Christian—and for the Christian university—these must be one and the same.

The controversy at Baylor is just a hint of things to come. Baylor may be able to sideline this controversy, but the same issue will merge again and again unless the university is ready to stand behind a unified biblical approach to dealing with the question. But what happened at Baylor is also a foretaste of what will occur on other evangelical college campuses where such questions are left open.

Very quickly—in just a matter of weeks and months—we will know where every institution stands on the question of same-sex marriage. For a Christian college, university, or seminary, failure to take a stand is just a cowardly way of endorsing same-sex marriage and the normalization of homosexuality. As the editorials from the Houston Chronicle and the San Antonio Express-News make clear, institutions taking a stand for biblical standards of sexual morality will pay a steep price. On the other hand, an institution unwilling to pay this price will forfeit its Christian identity. Is this really a hard choice?

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