

It's the premises, Stupid

Last week, I was talking with several friends after a Theology on Tap session on secularism. We were discussing several hot-button issues: the HHS mandate, decline of Catholic education, relationship of church and state and so on.

The conversation finally settled on the controversial same-sex marriage law, which recently passed in Maryland. As we broke down the issue, it became apparent that marriage was not the underlying issue; rather, the debate was really over gender. That is, what constitutes maleness and femaleness? Traditionally, gender has been determined by biological features and seen as immutable, but recently, gender has been redefined to mean a state of mind. In other words, what makes a male or female can change or even an individual person's gender can change.

The belief that gender is socially constructed has had a profound impact on society. Most visibly, the line between male and female has become blurred, resulting in a shift to an androgynous ideal. In some radical cases, parents have kept the gender of their children a secret, refusing to identify their child as a boy or girl. Closer to the point at hand, if gender is a mental state, it follows that an individual could biologically be a male but mentally identify with certain female qualities, laying the groundwork for a male-male (biologically speaking) relationship. This philosophical shift is also behind the effort to increase the number of genders beyond the traditional two, and reveals the close association between homosexual and transgender causes.

As we debated the intricacies of gender theory, one of my acquaintances proposed that the core issue was not marriage or even gender; it was the nature of truth. Is truth timeless, unchangeable and objective; or is it mutable, socially constructed and relative? A person's view about same-sex marriage flows from these fundamental philosophical premises. In a very simplified way, if truth is objective, then gender is unchangeable, and marriage is between a male and female. Conversely, if truth is relative, gender is changeable, and marriage is a union between any two people.

We often publically debate in the realm of conclusions, presupposing numerous premises. A Christian, for instance, might argue that same-sex marriage is wrong

based on statements from the Bible. Such an argument takes for granted that an individual believes the Bible is an infallible text. In turn, the absolute authority of the Bible rests on numerous other assumptions. Appealing to the Bible, therefore, might be a convincing argument for some, but meaningless for others.

The country is so divided today because we have heated discussions over major policy issues focusing on the end result and rarely does the nation engage in conversations on the fundamental assumptions guiding those positions. As a result of this situation, the country has two distinct conversations on the left and right, which seem to be in two different languages. In these discourses, politicians, news reporters, and intellectuals equally rally support for their causes as befuddle the opposing side.

The problem of mutual unintelligibility can be solved by finding the point of divergence, the first place where the two groups begin to disagree. This point is where the debate needs to take place. Laws, trials, and government mandates are merely battles. The war is won or lost based on which basic way of thinking is accepted by the general public. Win the premises, and you will win the conclusions.