

## CPAC on Marriage in the Shadow of Obergefell

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The Conservative Political Action Conference once again took up the subject of same-sex marriage last week, with one big change to the political landscape: this time the discussion took place under the shadow of *Obergefell v. Hodges*. “Dearly Beloved: A Conversation on Religious Liberty and Marriage in America” presented differing perspectives on the issue of religious freedom and gay rights, and during the discussion, one panelist revealed the particular quandary he faced in light of the freedoms lost and freedoms gained with the decision.

Panelist Guy Benson, a political editor at Townhall.com and Fox News contributor, mentioned that in his new book, floating among the footnotes, lies his first public disclosure of life as a gay conservative. In an [interview](#) on “The Kelly File,” Benson said he opened up about his sexual orientation in order to provide relative context to a chapter on the issue of gay rights, context which he “owed” readers. When Megyn Kelly asked how Benson reconciled gay rights and religious freedom, Benson argued that though he appreciates the fight led by many to allow him to speak openly about his sexual orientation, the left often “crosses a threshold into punishing and purging dissenters,” violating individual’s freedom to practice religion without attack.

Such tension extended into last week’s discussion. When asked about Obergefell, Benson admitted that he was torn between personal satisfaction and doubts of the court’s “sound legal reasoning.” “I find myself in an interesting position of agreeing with the decision or being personally gratified by the outcome, but having some concerns about how the court reached the position.” Instead of dwelling on this tension, however, Ilya Shapiro from the Cato Institute quickly affirmed Benson’s doubts regarding the case’s legality, stating “Kennedy did a disservice” to the nation. The two other panelists—Mollie Hemingway from The Federalist and Dr. Ryan T. Anderson from the Heritage Foundation—echoed Benson and Shapiro’s comments against the court’s ruling. Hemingway and Anderson share a disagreement with same-sex marriage, but their respectful openness about their beliefs mirrored that of Benson moments earlier.

Later on in the panel discussion, Benson spoke against individuals in favor of gay marriage who demand “mandatory celebration, or we are coming after you.” Instead, he emphasized the need for coexistence within American society. In terms of exercising religious freedoms, he argued that civil disagreements become impossible when advocates threaten to sue those with traditional values “out of business,” referencing a florist in Washington state and a photographer in New Mexico, both of whom were hammered with government fines and the media’s disgust after exercising their right to maintain their conscience. Again, Benson was met with considerable agreement among the panel as Hemingway argued against the court’s “favoritism” toward one group over another. Anderson reflected that “people in robes” should not impose their personal bias on an entire nation.

CPAC itself has not been immune from controversial decisions about which speech to allow and which to prohibit concerning the issue of gays and conservatism. Previous years were accompanied by controversy over the allowable status of now-defunct conservative gay rights group GOProud, as the socially conservative wing of the movement vehemently objected to the group’s admittance as a sponsor or exhibitor. This year’s discussion, which lasted around half an hour, hinted at a pivot for conservatives, even in the heart of the movement—a shift from promoting traditional family values to defending religious liberty.

Before addressing a question regarding *Obergefell*, Benson turned to the audience and briefly polled the room, asking for a show of hands to determine where attendees stood on the issue. While those opposed to same-sex marriage did make up the majority, the hands of the minority did not represent a significantly smaller percentage. Similarly, in reaction to Benson’s footnote reveal, Joshua Riddle, co-founder of the site Young Conservatives, commented “It’s almost like conservatives don’t hate gay people like the media and the left would love for you to believe.”