



CPAC: On Gay Marriage, Conservatives Show What Toleration and Co-Existence Really Look Like

Tyler O'Neil

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Liberals may think that everyone who hesitates to celebrate gay marriage is a bigot and a homophobe, but a group of conservatives and libertarians at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) on Friday showed what civil discourse on the issue really looks like. Panelists disagreed on policy and on the definition of marriage, but agreed that the right to dissent is extremely important.

Mollie Hemingway, senior editor at *The Federalist*, started the discussion on tactics by explaining how believers in traditional marriage swayed her to their side. "I didn't think that the federal government had any business defining marriage, and that is why I thought they should stay out of the business of regulating it," Hemingway recalled. But later she realized that "in the real world, that is just not something that can be accomplished," because there is a good reason why "marriage has been treated so specially by governments across all time and space" -- it produces children.

Hemingway recalled people who supported traditional marriage -- "they didn't call me names, they just tried to reason with me."

This statement led *Townhall* Political Editor Guy Benson to differentiate between the left and the right. "This conversation that we're having right now literally couldn't happen at a left-wing conference," Benson declared. Liberals "have dug in their heels on the issue, and they are hounding heretics ruthlessly from their midst."

Ryan T. Anderson, senior fellow at The Heritage Foundation, discussed his relationship with fellow panelist Ilya Shapiro, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. "He and I disagree about marriage, but Ilya is willing to engage in that debate. He doesn't think it's a debate between his side and bigots."

Shapiro attacked the hypocrisy of many liberals who proudly post "Coexist" bumper stickers on their cars, but cannot stomach the idea of a dissenting opinion. "What coexistence really looks

like in America today is disagreeing with someone on marriage and not trying to sue their business out of existence because they disagree," Shapiro declared.

One of the most potent and powerful and effective and successful arguments that people who support same-sex marriage have advanced for many years is, this is our love, this is our marriage, it will not affect you in any way. And then, once the political goal was achieved, that argument of winning hearts and minds seemed to have gone out the window (in some quarters, certainly not all), and they now say, "Agree with us, or else. Mandatory celebration, or else." And that is where I say "no thank you, I am not aboard this train anymore."

The panelists disagreed on many issues, from the meaning of marriage to the way in which the state should balance equal protection and religious liberty, but they all treated one another civilly. Shapiro argued that Kentucky clerk Kim Davis was in the wrong, and Anderson disagreed. Hemingway openly attacked the libertarian position (the state should stay out of marriage) advocated by both Shapiro and Benson, but the discussion never slid into personal attacks.

One thing each panelist did agree upon, however, was the weakness of Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy's majority opinion in the case that legalized gay marriage, *Obergefell v. Hodges*. They called it poetry, not law. "To extend the logic of Kennedy's opinion -- scratch that, his non-legal writing -- you can't achieve full dignity as a human without being married," Benson mockingly declared. "To those of you who are single out here, get going! You will not be fully actualized in Justice Kennedy's eyes unless you get married."

Shapiro also heaped scorn on the homosexual couples who sue flower shops and photographers for denying them service at a gay wedding. "It's not like the gay couple that wants flowers or photography has no recourse if this particular vendor does not service them," he declared. "Beyond any religious issues, there's a free speech First Amendment issue."

That may be the fundamental point of agreement. Perhaps the best response to attacks on (ironically) bigoted liberals who wish to enforce their celebration of gay marriage on the entire population isn't to cry out for religious liberty, but to rally around the First Amendment. Freedom of speech is something even the most avid atheist can easily support, and this kind of civil discussion amid disagreement is exactly the kind of argument that is more likely to win hearts and minds.