

Former Senator: Something's Radically Wrong When Hundreds Can Gather in a Grocery Store but Can't Go to Church

COVID-19 is a dangerous health threat that should be taken very seriously, but this does not justify arbitrary and excessive government edicts.

Something is radically wrong when dozens, and sometimes hundreds, of people can gather at the local grocery store, constantly walking through most of the facility, but not be allowed to attend their local church service, even if the church is strictly practicing social distancing.

What is the legal justification for relatively free access to physical food, but tightly restricted access to spiritual sustenance?

Churches and other faith-based organizations are not recreational clubs. They are an essential part of our culture that sustains us individually and as a nation. This is why they are different from movie theaters, retail stores and other public places of business. Religious organizations are constitutionally protected from government control.

The Bill of Rights, in the First Amendment, begins with: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." It is significant that this special protection of religious freedom is the first specific, enumerated constitutional right.

George Washington understood this essential strength we draw from our reliance on God's guidance and support. It was a common understanding when our nation was founded. In his

farewell address President Washington included this admonition:

“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens.”

Today the most common free exercise of religion takes place every week as millions of Americans meet together across our great nation in tens of thousands of churches to pray, worship, learn, support one other and follow God to the best of their understanding. At least that was the pattern until all of the stay-at-home orders effectively shut down most of the churches and other faith-based organizations.

It can be argued there is a compelling state interest for rules to be established to try to control this epidemic. But when those rules start to put limits on our rights, particularly our constitutionally enumerated rights, legal scholars all agree that those rules must be narrowly tailored through the least restrictive means that advances that compelling state interest. And, to be in line with the 14th Amendment, those rules must be equally applied for all situations.

In simpler terms, government quarantine rules must accommodate our constitutional rights to the greatest extent possible. Closing down in-person religious services when large groups of people are still allowed to congregate in grocery stores is a blatant violation of the First and 14th Amendments to the Constitution.

Every governor has taken an oath to uphold the Constitution and every public health official is subject to honor and obey those same constitutional rights. If some activities must be

deemed essential activities, religious services should be at the top of the list.

Following the wisdom of our founding president, today's leaders have a moral, legal and constitutional obligation to allow all religious activities to function to the greatest extent possible, with more latitude than grocery stores, not less.

Open up the churches now! {eoa}

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