

Franklin Graham: Do New Religious Freedom Laws Really Protect Christians?

When the statehouse of Indiana passed its Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) in March, they had no idea the conservative Hoosier state would become perhaps the most significant cultural battleground of the 21st century.

The legislation—designed to prevent government intrusion on an individual's religious liberty—seemed straightforward. It was not new ground. In 1993, the federal government passed a RFRA with a unanimous vote in the House and only three dissenting votes in the Senate. President Bill Clinton quickly signed it into law. Nineteen other states eventually enacted similar laws and Indiana seemed poised to become the 20th.

However, within hours of Indiana Gov. Mike Pence's signing, a firestorm of national criticism, disparagement and condemnation enveloped the legislation, sending an unmistakable signal that Christians are locked in a fierce conflict with liberal, immoral forces who despise Christianity, its teaching and its followers.

Almost immediately, White House press secretary Josh Earnest said: "It should be easy for leaders to stand up and say, 'It's wrong to discriminate against people just because of (whom) they love.'" The mayors of Seattle and San Francisco and the governor of Connecticut issued statements announcing that their employees would not be traveling to Indiana on business.

Commentators publicly castigated the legislation. Protestors called for a boycott of the NCAA basketball championships at the Hoosier Dome in Indianapolis. Corporations and companies threatened to take their businesses out of Indiana if the law

were implemented. Apple CEO Tim Cook, who is a homosexual, wrote an opinion piece stating “pro-discrimination ‘religious freedom’ laws are dangerous.”

The mainstream liberal media, which actively promotes the LGBT agenda, declared the legislation was anti-gay and discriminatory, despite assurances from Gov. Pence that the law was not discriminatory and was strictly meant to protect the ordinary religious freedoms of Hoosiers.

The unrelenting national outcry from the LGBT community was so clamorous and belligerent that within a week the state of Indiana capitulated to the opposition and inserted language into a new bill with comprehensive protection for people of any sexual orientation or gender. A bill originally crafted to defend the basic religious liberties of Hoosier citizens and businesses was completely altered to placate the powerful cultural agenda of the LGBT lobby.

Make no mistake: This is a watershed moment in the battle for the moral soul of our nation. Media, government and business all aligned their influence to override the initial legislation and severely weaken genuine protections for people of faith.

The elected representatives and governor of Indiana bowed at the feet of godless powers and chose to protect sexual orientation rather than religious conscience. They cravenly surrendered to the intolerant, sexually immoral agenda of gays and lesbians, and they left at great risk any business or individual that wants to live by an informed, biblical conscience.

This is a sizeable, dangerous tear in the moral fabric of America. A conservative Midwestern state was intimidated and cowed into changing legislation that now threatens the very kind of religious freedom that has built and held this nation together for hundreds of years.

The moral retreat was soon repeated in other states. North Carolina, which had been considering a similar bill, indicated that they would not pursue like legislation. Arkansas lawmakers passed a similar RFRA bill that Gov. Asa Hutchinson pledged to sign. When Bentonville, Arkansas, corporate titan Wal-Mart protested, the governor sent it back to the lawmakers to “clarify” the bill with explicit protection for sexual orientation.

The upshot of the episode reveals the dramatic shift in moral values that has taken place in our nation in a very short time. A once slow and steady drift toward a godless cultural ideology has quickly become a swift current of immorality, decadence and increasing opposition to religious thought and practice.

Just a few decades ago, President Clinton and Congress overwhelmingly passed the Defense of Marriage Act, which barred same-sex couples from receiving federal marriage benefits. By the first decade of this century, 31 states—many by a large majority—passed constitutional amendments that sought to ban same-sex marriage. Federal judicial rulings have now imperiled and overruled the majority of those amendments.

Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said in his book *Culture Shift: The Battle for the Moral Heart of America* that the ultimate goal of today’s secularist powers is that “public law should not be dependent on Christian morality, and Christian morality should have no influence on public law. Indeed, laws should never be determined or even shaped by any institution or idea that is self-consciously tied to Christian morality or even consciously derivative of Christian morality.”

We have not yet experienced the level of actual physical persecution and violence that followers of Christ endure in other parts of the world, but I certainly believe that Christians will increasingly be forced to choose between

rendering obedience to God or Caesar. We may face the threat of fines—like the Christian florist in the state of Washington who refused to provide services for a gay wedding and is now in danger of losing her business and home. Standing firm on our biblical convictions could one day even lead to incarceration.

I believe the prophet Jeremiah addressed the fundamental problem for our nation when he spoke to an apostate Judah that had sunk to new levels of moral depravity and was soon to be taken captive by the rising Babylonian empire. Jeremiah lamented: “A voice was heard upon the high places, the weeping and the supplications of the sons of Israel, because they have perverted their way, they have forgotten the Lord their God” (Jer. 3:21).

I don’t think there is any doubt that our country has forgotten and forsaken God. We reject the authority of His Word. We refuse to love the truth, and instead we pursue evil. We prefer the deeds of darkness over light. The vast mainstream of our culture is eager to do what is right in their own eyes, casting off any godly restraint or wisdom.

But this is not the time for retreat or passive indifference. The Bible says, “A righteous man falling down before the wicked is as a troubled fountain and a corrupt spring” (Prov. 25:26).

Now more than ever, Christians must be willing to take a stand for godliness. At home, at work, at school, at town hall meetings, in public venues across America, Christians still can be salt and light. We can run for office at every level of government. We can boldly and lovingly share our faith with those who may mock or ridicule us.

We may or may not see God transform our culture. But we can live holy lives and trust that the Lord will use our obedience as His witnesses to an increasingly corrupt society.

Who knows? God may be merciful and bring repentance and renewal before it is too late. I pray so.

Franklin Graham, son of iconic evangelist Billy Graham, is the president and CEO of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Samaritan's Purse.

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