

Living Your Faith Like Bonhoeffer, Washington, and Wilberforce

George Washington once said, "Religion and morality are the essential pillars of civil society." Benjamin Franklin, deemed one of our nation's most irreligious Founders, opined that "only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters." Once upon a time, through tax-exemptions and other initiatives, our nation sought to encourage religious groups to contribute to society by teaching the populace to be moral and to care for those who are less fortunate. However, in recent days, even leaders of the "free" world are calling for the faith community to ensconce their beliefs behind the four walls of the church. No longer are religious beliefs seen as a necessary support for society, but rather as discriminatory ideas set against the "public interest." No longer does our society understand that Christianity is not only what a person does on Sunday but also the way he or she lives throughout the entire week; not only in one's private life but also in one's public life. In an age of multiculturalism, Christianity is seen as culture-killing rather than life-giving, and thus, many are trying to suppress it. Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton even said that in order to promote a social agenda in Africa, "deep-seated cultural codes, religious beliefs and structural biases have to be changed." Her remarks reveal the fact that Christian culture is increasingly viewed as a hindrance to society and thus orthodoxy at its best can be tolerated and at its worst ought to be suppressed. This shift has led to calls for the end of tax-exemptions for religious institutions. More pointedly, while writing the majority opinion for the recent Supreme Court decision *Obergefell v. Hodges*, Justice Kennedy stated:

“Those who adhere to religious continue to advocate with utmost, sincere conviction that, by divine precepts, same-sex marriage should not be condoned. The First Amendment ensures that religious organizations and persons are given proper protection as they seek to teach the principles that are so fulfilling and so central to their lives and faiths, and to their own deep aspirations to continue the family structure they have long revered.”

This does little to bolster a religious person's trust in the ability to actually practice his or her faith. Justice Kennedy may as well have said, “You can teach about your beliefs, but we aren't guaranteeing anything.” Faith permeates our whole being and should form our identity. Thus, it cannot be left at the door. We do not hold our beliefs as reactions to the culture, but rather as immutable principles from God. They cannot be thrown away to fit the culture's whim. The marginalization of Christians is not a new problem. William Wilberforce grew up in the Enlightenment era in Britain in which the majority of people went to church. However, church attendance did not typically correlate with a devout faith. Dietrich Bonhoeffer lived in pre-World War II Germany where the Gospel had been largely removed from the church. Phyllis Schlafly began her career in the 1950s, a time when the merging of faith and politics was foreign. Yes, even in the ‘Leave it to Beaver’ era, faith and politics were separated. When faced with this opposition we can choose to run or enter the fray and fight for truth. William Wilberforce considered leaving politics, but his good friend William Pitt the Younger responded, “If a Christian may act in the several relations of life, must he seclude himself from them all to become so? Surely the principles as well as the practice of Christianity are simple, and lead not to meditation only but to action.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer fled to America to escape the rise of the Nazis but soon realized he could not watch his countrymen suffer from safety. He ultimately returned to Germany and

joined the resistance. In the 1970s, America was rocked by both the Watergate scandal and the sexual revolution, and seemed completely devoid of any moral understanding. In the midst of this climate Phyllis Schlafly rallied thousands of Christians across the country to defend women and fight the proposed "Equal Rights Amendment." She, along with many others, helped return religion to politics. So what did these leaders do when everything seemed to be against them? They fought on to incorporate faith into the public consciousness, and as a result, they changed the world. Wilberforce fought for the next twenty years, Bonhoeffer until the Nazis took his life, and Schlafly continues to this day. They did not cave to the pressure to sequester their beliefs in their homes and houses of worship, but rather allowed their beliefs to permeate all of their life, even as society and government worked against them. We face similar challenges today. We must not stay hidden in our churches or our homes. True belief simply will not allow it. True belief calls us to come and die daily, not just on Sunday.