

Sorry, Democrats: Religious Liberty is for Individuals, not Just Churches

One of the enduring, hard-to-kill myths about the United States Constitution is that it only protects religious liberty for churches and other religious organizations. For instance, Debbie Wasserman-Schultz, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee, said the following recently, when speaking of same-sex marriage and Christian bakers:

If you're a religiously affiliated organization, then you have wider latitude in terms of the Constitution and the protections that the First Amendment provides. I think Americans make a distinction between protecting the First Amendment rights of religious organizations or religiously affiliated organizations and being able to discriminate, broadly – simply because of one individual who owns a business and their own values and their being able to impose those values on either their employers or their customers...

So for Ms. Schultz, churches have religious liberty rights but individuals do not. Ms. Schultz is plainly, flatly, and dangerously wrong. This is for the simple reason that the rights spelled out in the Bill of Rights are individual rights, not group rights. You do not need to belong to some designated or recognized group or organization to possess them. They are yours by constitutional decree whether you exercise them by yourself or with others. For instance, the Second Amendment protects the right of individuals to keep and bear arms, so that they can be formed into a militia if need be. It is the right of the people to keep and bear arms that is protected, not the right of the militia. The Third Amendment protects individual homeowners from being compelled

to house soldiers. You don't have to belong to a homeowner's association to claim that right. The Fourth Amendment protects individual Americans from warrantless and unreasonable searches and seizures. The Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Amendments protect the right of every individual American to a fair, speedy, and impartial trial and exemption from cruel and unusual punishment. The First Amendment is no exception to all this. The right to freedom of speech belongs to every individual American. You don't need to be a part of a speakers' bureau or some free speech group to claim the right to verbalize your views on political, cultural, and religious matters. So with freedom of the press. This is not, as commonly understood, a right that belongs only to newspapers and media outlets. Newspapers only possess this right because the owners and those who write for them already possess it as individuals. The freedom to publish one's political opinions is a right that belongs to every individual American, whether he is a blogger writing on his own website or a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist writing for Debbie Wasserman-Schultz. The right to assemble peaceably with others – that is, the right to choose with whom you associate – is an individual right that belongs to every individual American. The right to petition the government for redress is likewise an individual right. You don't need to belong to some law firm or lobbying organization to possess it. The right to the free exercise of religion is exactly the same. It is not a right that is reserved exclusively for churches. It is a right that belongs to every American, including Christian bakers, florists, and photographers. They have exactly the same right to exercise their religion as churches do. Churches have the right to the free exercise of religion for the simple reason that every person who belongs to them does. Since every single individual member of a church possesses the God-given and inalienable right to freedom of religious exercise, then the church does too, because it is made of individuals who possess that right. Thus, in stark contrast to Ms. Schultz's view – and sad to say, the view of a lot of misinformed conservatives

– Aaron and Melissa Klein have exactly the same constitutional right to the free exercise of religion that a church does. The right to the free exercise of religion is a right possessed by every American 24 hours of every day and seven days of every week. It is not a right that can be restricted to one hour a week, from 11:00 am to noon on Sundays, which is what President Obama and others are seeking to do by substituting the phrase “freedom of worship.” It’s important to notice that what is being protected here is the free exercise of religion. Exercise by its very definition includes action, not just belief. The right to the free exercise of religion includes the right to live one’s life guided by religious principle, and that includes the way in which an American runs his business. The Kleins have the First Amendment right to exercise their religion in the way they conduct their business. This means they have the freedom to bring religious values into their place of business, including when they are making decisions regarding same-sex marriage. They have the First Amendment right to freedom of speech, which means they get to choose what kind of speech they utter. They cannot be compelled to utter expressive speech that violates religious principle and conscience, for at that point, their speech would no longer be free. They have the First Amendment right to freedom of the press, which means they get to choose what messages they write on the cakes they bake. They have the First Amendment right to freedom of association, which includes the right to decide with whom they do business. And they have the First Amendment right to petition the government for the redress of the indignities they are currently suffering, bureaucratic and tyrannical gag orders or no. Going back to Ms. Schultz’s statement regarding discrimination. The biggest victims of discrimination here are the Kleins. Their fundamental human, civil and constitutional rights have been trampled. So if Ms. Schultz’s is truly serious about the evils of discrimination, then she will come to the aid of the Kleins this very day. The Supreme Court just upheld the right of a Muslim to dress according to her religious convictions while

on the job. Apparently Muslims can bring their religious values into the marketplace but Christians cannot. Bottom line: Debbie Wasserman-Schultz's shrunken, withered, and desiccated view of the First Amendment is clearly and unmistakably wrong. The entire First Amendment of the Constitution protects the right of Aaron and Melissa Klein to do exactly what they have done all along. The Kleins belong to God. They are his people. And God is saying to the pharaohs in Oregon, "Let my people go." It's time once again to let freedom ring. *(Unless otherwise noted, the opinions expressed are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of the American Family Association or American Family Radio.)*