

George O. Wood Offers a Grievous Warning American Christians Should Read Right Now

I feel impelled to write you this most unusual pastoral letter. I do it out of deep concern and I ask you to hear my heart.

We are on the precipice of losing critical religious liberty protections in our country. Over the past 25 years, the Supreme Court has severely limited the traditional understanding of the First Amendment to the Constitution. While matters like selection of ministers and internal doctrinal issues are probably not under near-term threat, the Constitution is no longer interpreted by courts to give people of faith, as well as the schools and service ministries we form, the protection we need in order to fully live out the implications of our most cherished beliefs. Meanwhile state courts, legislatures and city councils around the country have moved to further narrow the protections granted for religious liberty, as their citizens must choose between adherence to religious faith and full participation in the public square.

The threats to religious freedom that are now upon us can be likened to the frog put into a pan of water placed on the stove. The water warms gradually and the frog does not realize its peril until it is too late to jump out of the pan.

Many evangelical and Pentecostal believers and leaders have not been previously alarmed at how the “pan” has been gradually heated in the assault against religious liberty. For example, in our own Fellowship I and district offices contacted nearly two thousand credentialed ministers to

support a religious freedom bill just a month ago that was before a committee in the Missouri House of Representatives. Less than 15 percent of them even bothered to respond. The bill failed in committee and significant religious liberty protections were lost. We are like the situation described by Jesus in the parable of the weeds and the wheat: "But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat" (Matt. 13:25). We have largely been sleeping. Have we awakened too late?

I trust not.

Certainly the pending act (as of this writing) in the California legislature should wake us up. The California Senate passed Senate Bill 1146 which would either force schools like our own Vanguard University to radically change their mission or close down. The bill seeks both to shame faith-based colleges and universities and to declare their students unworthy of benefits that are made available by the state to every other similar institution in California. Vanguard's president, Dr. Mike Beals, stated: "This means that mission-based aspects of religious colleges and universities, which include prayer in classes, chapel services, spiritual formation activities and faith-infused curriculum, as well as requiring a statement of faith for admission and requiring ministry-based service experiences would be at risk if Senate Bill 1146 is passed as is." The bill is an intentional and all-out assault on our religious distinctives.

As I write, the bill is under consideration by a House committee. The fact that it passed the state Senate and is under consideration by the state House should ring a ten-alarm bell. If the attempt to gut religious liberty for colleges and universities is successful in California, you can be sure other dominoes will fall in California and across the country.

The secularists in our society seek to redefine the First Amendment protection of the "free exercise" of religion, to a

mere right of worship. In other words, their view is: "If you are going to be bigoted in your pro-life views or your view that marriage is between a man and a woman and that fornication (both heterosexual and homosexual) is morally wrong—then you must confine your views within the four walls of your sanctuary. But don't bring your bigotry into the public square." A society that adopts such a view may be setting the stage for a future day when even a defense of biblical teaching on human sexuality from the pulpit will bring with it the risk of punishment by the government such as in the loss of our long-held tax-exempt status without which many ministries would not survive.

At a recent meeting I attended in Washington, D.C. that dealt with the protection of religious liberty, the keynote speaker stated: "We are in mortal combat in this country over religious liberty." Don't believe me? Consider what Harvard Law School professor Mark Tushnet has written:

No conservatives demonstrated any interest in trading off recognition of LGBT rights for "religious liberty" protections. Only now that they've lost the battle over LGBT rights, have they made those protections central—seeing them, I suppose, as a new front in the culture wars ... [T]aking a hard line ("You lost, live with it") is better than trying to accommodate the losers ... Trying to be nice to the losers didn't work well after the Civil War, nor after Brown [v. Board of Education]. (And taking a hard line seemed to work reasonably well in Germany and Japan after 1945.) ... [T]he war's over, and we won ... [T]taking a hard line means opposing on both policy and constitutional grounds free-standing so-called "religious liberty" laws ... It also means being pretty leery about ... agreement by Christian conservatives to support extending general nondiscrimination laws to cover the LGBT community in exchange for including 'religious liberty' exemptions.

On this analogy, people of faith are as bad as the

Confederates and Jim Crow segregationists, as bad as World War II-era German Nazis and Japanese militarists. And notice that Tushnet is not just opposing religious freedom protections in nondiscrimination laws, he's also opposing "free-standing so-called 'religious liberty' laws." This kind of derision, by a prominent professor at an elite law school, is troubling.

How did we reach the place where we are? Let me suggest the following four steps are taking place, which have brought us to this point.

Caricature

Let me illustrate what I mean by caricature. Picture a first-grade class. The teacher is a wonderful young woman in her late twenties with two small children at home. She leaves the room momentarily and the class clown goes to the blackboard or white board and draws a frowning stick figure and labels it "teacher." The stick figure drawn bears no relation to reality except in the mind of the first grader who drew it.

So, what is the caricature being given to Bible-believing Christians by the secular left? "Hateful, mean, bigoted, narrow-minded" and a host of other terms. This caricature doesn't bear any resemblance to the overwhelming majority of Christians who bring great value to society through how they live, work and contribute to the public good.

Someone has said, "If I can define you, I can confine you." Once the caricature above attaches to believing Christians, we become identified through that false lens. Thus, for example, when we attempt to support religious freedom bills in legislatures, we are immediately defined as "haters." Big businesses and the media target legislative members and engender public support for the idea that core religious rights that were long the subject of broad societal consensus, are in fact unjustifiable shields for "bigoted" religious people and institutions that must not be tolerated.

Marginalization

Once the caricature is drawn, then it becomes easy to move to the next step—marginalization.

Think of this, for example, why is it that there is no evangelical on the Supreme Court? Evangelicals are one of the largest minorities in the United States. But, our pro-life position and views on marriage are regarded as not acceptable and militate against an appointment to the Supreme Court—and beyond that, to appellate courts and district courts. Our views are simply unacceptable to the political powers that be and we are sidelined from the public square—marginalized.

Ask yourself when you vote in the 2016 election: Would this candidate for president or the senate be more likely to appoint or vote to confirm a person with a pro-life and pro-marriage position as between a man and a woman? Would the presidential candidate be more likely to appoint people who will uphold the protection of the free exercise of religion, or erode it further?

Since the Supreme Court has now become a super-legislature in our country, my vote for president and Congressional candidates will depend entirely on the answers to the above questions in view of the fact that the next president will shape the Supreme Court, lower courts, and the culture of America for the next several decades.

It would be a step forward for truer diversity with evangelicals on the Supreme Court as well as other federal and state courts and in the executive branch of government. But even more important is the appointment of men and women of whatever faith, who understand and respect the value of religious freedom. Otherwise, we will continually be forced out of the public square and marginalized into smaller and smaller spaces that Christians can live in.

Discrimination

Once you can make a caricature of a group and marginalize them, you can discriminate against them.

The biggest examples of that, from a legal point of view, are the recent cases before the Supreme Court of Hobby Lobby and the Little Sisters of the Poor. In both cases, the present administration forcefully sought to discriminate against persons who, because of religious belief, did not want to facilitate abortions. Those decisions hung by a slim thread in the Supreme Court. Hobby Lobby won by a 5-4 vote, and the Little Sisters of the Poor case was sent back down to the lower courts, in all likelihood, because a majority of opinion could not be reached on a divided 4-4 Court. The appointment of one more pro-abortion judge to the Supreme Court will result in a far different result. Are you concerned about that? Do you want Hobby Lobby owners (who are Assemblies of God members) to be forced to go out of business because of their commitment to Jesus or the Little Sisters of the Poor to disband and stop serving the poor because of their convictions on life?

Another example that is impacting Assemblies of God colleges and universities as well as all schools who are members of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU) is a recent change in the Department of Education (DOE). President Obama's DOE leadership was bothered that schools like our own are exempt from Title IX provisions that permit religious educational institutions to decline admittance to or retention of students on the basis of same-sex behavior or gender identity. The DOE headlined their policy change with the caption: "Hidden Discrimination." Every school that applies for the exception (even though a valid legal argument exists that an exemption to Title IX is provided to religious schools without their having to apply for the exemption) is then publicly listed. The intent is to shame these schools for being "discriminatory." In other words, Christian institutions are discriminated against because they hold to biblical

teaching on sexual morality.

The discrimination plays out in different ways. For example, a Christian college president in the northeast co-signed a letter organized by a centrist group of religious leaders asking that a then-pending executive order by President Obama on LGBT rights leave schools like his in the same legal position as before. It was polite and gracious. The community in which the college was located became enraged that the college had that position. The local school board made a decision that it would no longer accept student teachers from that college, and various public facilities were denied for usage by the college.

Next on the horizon is the possibility that accrediting associations will determine that a school which has behavioral standards for students regarding same-sex or gender identity relationships is a school not worthy of accreditation, and/or that companies, school boards, and graduate schools will not admit or employ graduates of schools who “discriminate” on the basis of sexual orientation and identity. Schools will either be forced to accept standards imposed on them or go out of business.

Persecution

Step one: make a caricature of persons committed to scriptural teaching on morality. Step two: marginalize them. Step three: discriminate against them. Finally, the last stage: persecute them.

This is what is pending in the California legislature as I write—the outright persecution of Christian institutions by a state that says, “We will attempt to humiliate and marginalize you if you don’t give in.”

What’s next? Unless present trends are reversed, I can envision a day not too far off in which faith-based parachurch educational and compassion institutions are forced to close if

they retain biblical standards of sexual conduct for employment, or even requirements that employees, faculty, or students profess a Christian commitment.

The local church itself will be the last domino to fall in terms of persecution. Tax-exempt status may be lost. Ministers could lose the ministerial housing allowance. Donors may not be able to deduct charitable contributions. Churches which utilize their facilities for public events and compassion ministry, in addition to their times of worship, will be declared public places of accommodation and forced to provide marriage services to same-sex couples.

If you say, "Oh, that can never happen in America," then let me remind you that we never thought a day would come when the White House would be lit up with the rainbow flag to celebrate a decision by the Supreme Court to legalize same-sex marriage.

I have never written anything like I am writing to you now. I realize that what I am writing paints a very dark picture. You are now asking yourself, but what can we do? Here are some suggestions.

Pray

There may be some who are cynical about a call to pray. But, we know the Lord hears the prayers of His people. Let's take to heart 2 Chronicles 7:14, "If my people, who are called by name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land." We must pray for a third Great Awakening to come to America. Prayers of gratitude for the religious liberty we have enjoyed, and prayers of petition for its future protection should be an ongoing and regular part of our personal and corporate prayer life.

Engage

Use whatever means possible to exert your influence on our culture and political system. Be informed as a voter. Run as a candidate for office if you sense the Spirit asking that of you. Let your elected representatives hear from you on issues such as religious liberty protection.

It's also vital that we understand that we advocate religious liberty for others, not just ourselves. It is against our religion to impose our religion. When we find persons, organizations, or religious bodies who stand with us on the First Amendment protection of the free exercise of religion, then we welcome their advocacy alongside our own.

Of course, being engaged requires being informed; helping those who worship in our churches every week to understand the nature of the challenges we face, honestly but without overstating, is a critical first step. Had Christians across Missouri truly understood what was at stake in the religious liberty bill that failed in that state legislature earlier this year, the outcome may have been different. We must educate in order to inspire action.

Watch Your Spirit

There's a fascinating verse in Jude 9 that says, Yet Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil in a dispute about the body of Moses, did not dare to pronounce upon him a railing judgment. But he said, "The Lord rebuke you!" In other words, Michael did not behave like the devil in fighting the devil. We must take to heart the admonition of the apostle Paul, "The servant of the Lord must not quarrel, but must be gentle toward all people ..." Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will "grant them repentance to a know the truth" (2 Tim. 2:24–25). Let's be gracious as we take our stand on issues that concern us.

Do Good

The world may not agree with our beliefs, but they cannot deny

when we do good. As individual believers and as a church together we must continue to serve others. We must be known as people of compassion and mercy. We are for the just treatment of others and we help the poor, the needy, the addicted, the wounded, the lonely and the downtrodden.

Keep Doing the Main Things

Our first and foremost call is to preach and live the gospel. Let's keep the main things the plain things, and the plain things the main things. We must fulfill both the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20) and the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:37–39). That's our priority! Let's never substitute evangelism and discipleship with political action. Let's keep eternal matters and temporal matters in perspective.

Our Battle Is Spiritual

God loved the world and so must we. We cannot give others any reason to identify us as "haters" or "bigots." The world will not be won by Christians who are shaking their fists at sinners. Something is a truism when it is true. This truism is true: "We must hate the sin and love the sinner." "For our fight is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, and against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (Eph. 6:12–13).

Rejoice

Nothing happening has caught the Lord by surprise. He told us we would be persecuted because of our loyalty to Him. But we are not to be angry about that or downcast. Instead, Jesus said: "

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you

when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My Rejoice and be very glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in this manner they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:10–12).

Thank you for letting me share my heart with you on this vital matter of religious liberty. In every dark time, believers have learned to say anew, "The Lord reigns!" {eoa}

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