

If We Want to Keep Our Civil Rights, We Have to Defend Religious Liberty

Shortly after George Washington became president, he wrote to the United Baptist Church, "I would have never signed off on the Constitution if the liberty of conscience was insecure." While Christianity was not the official religion of the United States, the various expressions of Christian worship were clearly protected by the First Amendment along with the Christian culture.

Yet, that is changing rapidly.

With the recent passage of the California House Bill 2943, the state legislature is attempting to go where no government has ever gone before in regulating speech and religious thought. This new bill would not only prevent Christians from discussing what the Bible teaches about morality, but it could also put the Bible on its newest banned book list using the issue of gay rights.

The bill, which passed recently by a 50 to 18 vote, declares it an "unlawful business practice" to engage in a "transaction intended to result or that results in the sale or lease of goods or services to any consumer" that advertises or engages in "sexual orientation change efforts with an individual."

What does that mean? In essence, the broad scope of the bill's dragnet would prevent any practices, counseling, books or training that are contrary to same-sex attraction. This includes efforts that might eliminate or reduce sexual or romantic attractions or feelings toward individuals of the same sex.

At the time of this writing, the bill is awaiting passage by

the Senate.

Under this statute, a pastor who read from I Corinthians 6:9—which describes homosexual acts as sexual depravity that disqualifies a person from inheriting the kingdom of God—would be subject to sanctions as an “unlawful practice.”

Even if the bill does not pass the Senate, the fact that an attempt to regulate religious speech has gotten that much traction in a legislature, will have a chilling impact on religious expression.

Evangelist Mario Murillo has aptly called this the “War on Repentance.”

When the First Amendment was drafted in August of 1789, it was to protect religious liberty with what was referred to as the “right of conscience.” James Madison explained it as a liberty out of bounds from state regulations. As the issue was debated, Madison argued that Congress “could not compel men to worship God in any manner contrary to their conscience.”

California Bill 2943 runs directly contrary to Madison’s teaching and the First Amendment protections, by declaring “unlawful” any religious motivated speech to assist a person who wants to resist homosexual impulses.

The freedom for the right of conscience was revived in 2014 by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.* In that decision, the court reaffirmed Hobby Lobby’s right to object to the Obamacare mandated requirement that employers must provide contraceptives as part of their health insurance. The Green family, owners of Hobby Lobby, objected to the requirement as it was contrary to their deeply held religious belief against abortion.

While this was a significant victory, the left has relentlessly engaged in a legal strategy to make “equality” for minority groups a higher priority in the law than

religious freedom in America.

One example of this is their argument that since the U.S. Supreme Court has given gays the right to marriage, then they must not be made to feel excluded or inferior by the heterosexual majority. Consequently, when a Christian baker in Colorado and one in Oregon declined to make a cake specifically for a gay marriage, anti-discrimination statutes were evoked. In both instances, the bakers were fined into financial ruin. Thankfully, the Supreme Court overturned the ruling in the case of the Colorado baker in a 7-2 decision.

But make no mistake, the right of conscious and religious freedom is still under attack.

It is important that Christians recognize the left's tactics which seek to weaponize anti-discrimination statutes to intimidate and force conformity to gay rights dogma.

In a 2016 report released by the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, the Obama appointed chairman of that federal agency, Martin R. Castro, equated the legal term "religious liberty" as "code words" for "homophobia," "Christian supremacy" and "intolerance."

In short, in just the last few years, the Christian culture in America has become synonymous with intolerance. This is not an isolated view. In the spring of 2018, George Washington University announced it would host a training session about "Christian privilege" and how white Christians receive "unmerited perks from institutions."

It is clear that the intent of our founding fathers to preserve religious liberty and Christian values is under assault. In fact, the left is trying to completely eradicate the foundation on which this country was established. So let us review the conversations of our founding era.

Elias Boudinot was New Jersey congressman, and one of

presidents of the Confederation Congress. He was also a member of the first U.S. House of Representatives who voted on the Bill of Rights. He summed up what the majority of the Founding Fathers believed when he stated that the settlement of America fulfilled the divine purpose of being “an asylum for the Church of Christ” and that America had been raised up for the “protection of God’s people.”

Remarkably, Boudinot even foresaw that part of the divine plan for the United States “in the latter days” was to assist in bringing the Jews back to their homeland which today is known as Israel.

The tragic irony is one of the key liberties that defined the existence of America as an asylum for Christians and freedom of conscience is now trying to be purged from existence through the vehicle of equality for gay rights. By assaulting the freedom of conscience, the left is attempting to purge Christian morality and Christian expression from the public square.

An influential sermon written in 1744 by Elisha Williams explained in depth the profound significance of the “liberty of conscience.” William’s words rumble through time and seem written uniquely for the situation of today.

“It has commonly been the case, that Christian liberty, as well as civil, has been lost by little and little; and experience has taught, that it is not easy to recover it, when once lost. So precious a jewel is always to be watched with a careful eye; for no people are likely to enjoy liberty long, that are not zealous to preserve it.”

If the Christians influence in 2018 is purged from American culture, then America will have become a soulless police state—the exact opposite of the design at her creation. We should heed the insightful observation of the only clergyman who signed the Declaration of Independence, John Witherspoon,

who on the eve of independence saw that civil liberty and religious liberty were directly tied together when he said, "There is not a single instance in history in which civil liberty was lost and religious liberty preserved."

When it comes to defending religious liberty, it is a short distance from 1700s to 2018. In the era in which we live of "rights" and "equality," we must remember that those rights include Christianity.

As we celebrate America's Independence, we would do well to remember the price that was paid to secure our religious freedom. America was designed to be a safe harbor for Christianity. It is up to us to continue that fight for our freedom of conscious and rightful heritage so that it is not stripped away.

Brent Olsson holds a Juris Doctor degree and a Bachelor of Arts in history. He has practiced law for 30 years, specializing in litigation. He has litigated religious liberty issues and has assisted the Alliance Defending Freedom. He has also taught on America's religious heritage. He is married to Jene, and they have three children. For additional articles on America's history and freedoms, go to: