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TUESDAY, APRIL 14, 2015

COLUMNS

What 'religious freedom' used to mean

Today it's becoming the cry of the privileged and powerful concerning what they can deny someone else because of religious beliefs.

By *Corey Fields*

At the turn of the 17th century, an English lawyer named Thomas Helwys had become part of a separatist congregation in Lincolnshire (it is to this congregation that many Baptists trace their roots). They were dissenters from the Church of England, established by King Henry VIII. In what is considered the first written call for religious freedom in the English language, Helwys wrote, "If the King's people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all humane laws made by the King, our Lord the King can require no more: for men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves; the King shall not answer for it, neither may the King be judge between God and man."



According to William M. Pinson Jr., "[King James I] had Helwys thrown in Newgate Prison, a terrible place, filled with rodents, insects, disease, filth, and hardened criminals. Helwys, a devout pastor and peaceful citizen, had done nothing violent or immoral to warrant such punishment." He died in prison.

Across the Atlantic, a few decades later, Anglican clergyman-turned-separatist Roger Williams had developed his own religious convictions that put him at odds with the Puritans. In the Massachusetts Bay Colony, you were subject to whippings or imprisonment for not attending worship or other offenses against the church. You could not vote if you were not a member of the correct church. Your taxes supported the church. Pinson writes, "The attitude of those in power in Massachusetts was that if people did not agree with the ruling saints, they could leave." (Sound familiar?) If you chose to stay but insisted on a different way of worshiping and believing, "the consequences were severe. For example, four Quakers were hanged in the colony."

Roger Williams (not Thomas Jefferson) was the first to speak of a "wall of separation" between church and state, and wrote that "an enforced uniformity of religion throughout a nation or civil state, confounds the civil and religious, and denies the principles of Christianity" Williams was threatened with exile, so he fled to modern-day Rhode Island, where he not only established the first Baptist church on American soil but chartered the first colony that guaranteed complete religious freedom for all people. He knew firsthand what religious persecution was.

Once upon a time, "religious freedom" was the cry of the oppressed minority when basic human rights were being denied them by their own government because of their religious beliefs. Today, in the United States, "religious freedom" is becoming the cry of the privileged and powerful concerning what they can rightfully deny someone else because of religious beliefs. It has been a radical shift, and it is an embarrassing travesty.

Religious freedom used to be about gaining the protection of the law, not putting oneself above the law. In the late 1700s, Baptist minister John Leland wrote, "Let every man speak freely without fear — maintain the principles that he believes — worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods; and let government protect him in so doing."

Even the 1993 federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), widely seen as a correction to an unpopular Supreme Court ruling in *Employment Division v. Smith*, came about as an effort to protect religious minorities from undue marginalization. It was not meant to allow

Christian business owners to remove from within the reach of their tentacles anything or anyone offending their religious sensibilities.

Unfortunately, that's the space we've entered. In 2014, under the guise of "religious freedom," and stemming from a medically dubious claim about abortifacients, Hobby Lobby won the right to micromanage what kinds of contraception their female employees can obtain with their employer sponsored insurance.

Recently, we've seen a new string of so-called "religious freedom bills" in the states. Even though elected officials like Governor Mike Pence of Indiana disingenuously claim their state RFRA bills are not about LGBT issues, anyone paying attention knows what's going on. In the last few years, a number of local cases involving Christian bakers, photographers and florists refusing to serve gay couples gained national attention. Lo and behold, new state religious freedom bills were introduced in state legislatures shortly thereafter. The "fix" in Indiana was not a well thought out policy but a hasty response to intense pressure that has left both sides unsatisfied.

Despite claims that Indiana's bill did not differ significantly from the federal RFRA, it did in several ways. Most notably, it extended the issue of religious freedom beyond the context of citizens and their government. For those who wrote and fought for the First Amendment, the context of religious freedom was the struggle to gain the right to worship in the place and manner of our choosing, and govern our churches as we choose, without government interference.

Being required to conduct your business fairly and within commerce regulations does not constitute the loss of freedom or religious persecution. As Helwys expressed in his writing, citizens should obey "all humane laws," asking only that the state let God be the judge of their religion. For help with determining whether you're suffering religious persecution, see Emily C. Heath's 10 question quiz.

J. Brent Walker's advice seems prudent: "Try loving your LGBT neighbors unconditionally and understand that providing them goods and services in the marketplace is an act of Christian hospitality, not an indication of approval of their nuptial decisions." One must also wonder why we don't see the same Christian business owners singling out other perceived sins.

Those of us who can worship when and how we choose need to realize what side of privilege we're on. Religious persecution is still very real today. Let's not diminish and insult the experience of those who actually suffer. American Christians tend to confuse criticism with persecution.

Jesus said to his followers, "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles" (Matt. 5:41). This teaching was delivered within the context of first-century Palestine under Roman occupation in which impressment was common; i.e., a Roman soldier conscripting someone to carry his equipment. I can imagine such acts made the Jewish people feel complicit in Rome's oppression, yet Jesus told them to go the extra mile.

Can we, who enjoy a much better situation and amazing religious freedom, find it within ourselves to be just as gracious? Let's not just bake one cake, but two.

OPINION: Views expressed in Baptist News Global columns and commentaries are solely those of the authors.



Corey Fields

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Corey Fields is associate pastor of First Baptist Church in Topeka, Kan. His doctoral work at Central Baptist Theological Seminary focused on developing a congregational vision for missional ministry. In the summer of 2014, he completed a Louisville Institute sponsored sabbatical study on Christian Community Development.

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Sarcasm_101 · 12 hours ago

Well written and full of that rarity from "Christian" writers... The truth.

5 ^ | v · [Reply](#) · [Share](#)

Timothy McPherson · 2 days ago

I commend you for taking such a wonderful view on serving others! Blessings on your ministry! You are right. We should look at our

business as an opportunity to serve others and not question them about their lifestyle.

7 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Arbuthnaught → Timothy McPherson • a day ago

I think it is one thing for a baker to gladly and with cheerfulness sell anyone who comes into his bakery a dozen donuts. It is quite another thing to force that baker by force of law to make a gay themed wedding cake.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Larry Grey • 2 days ago

Excellent article and several excellent points, Serving others and ministry must be our goal, it is not the job of the church to condemn or point fingers, and as Americans we really have a lack of understanding as to what persecution really is.

8 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

FA Minitier • a day ago

Well said! This article is a good review of history, an excellent comment on the state of the law, and a refreshing reminder of what it truly means to be a Christian.

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

DesertLady48 • a day ago

Thank you for being a sane voice!

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Tommy Hammond • 11 hours ago

What this pastor states is dangerous for Christianity in that he tries to make the point (for political correctness) that the Religious Freedom Acts are being passed to discriminate against LGBT's which, "anyone that is paying attention", knows is simply nonsense and is no where near reality. However I agree with these statements: "J. Brent Walker's advice seems prudent: "Try loving your LGBT neighbors unconditionally and understand that providing them goods and services in the marketplace is an act of Christian hospitality, not an indication of approval of their nuptial decisions."

I say, baking a stupid cake does NOT mean you are advocating or promoting something that is against your religious beliefs - but this needs to be applied equally to Muslims, skinheads, atheists and all - LOVE EVERYONE AS JESUS TAUGHT US TO LOVE - "BAKE THE CAKE!!"

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Jonathan Waits • 2 days ago

Two more thoughts for you. 1. Your link to other sins which should lead these folks to refuse weddings doesn't make your point at all but rather reflects a near complete lack of understanding of why these folks would refuse to participate in a gay wedding. Yes, part of it is a reflection of their belief that homosexual behavior is sinful. But part of it is a reflection of their belief concerning what marriage is, namely a covenantal relationship between a man and a woman. In each of those examples there is a man and a woman getting married. There may be problems with it, but it's not the business of the business owner to comment on that--that would be negatively discriminatory. For these folks, though, a homosexual marriage is a contradiction of terms. Try and understand how your ideological opposites think when you criticize and don't rely on straw men. 2. You are right that criticism isn't persecution. But, being told that you have to do something you believe to be morally objectionable or pay \$150,000 in fines or lose your source of livelihood does strike me as persecution. Being told that you have to violate a deeply held religious conviction and having you and your employees forced to go through sensitivity training courses (i.e. behavioral modification sessions) or lose your business strikes me as persecution. Furthermore, arguing against defining persecution going on here rightly because it's much worse in other places is a logically flawed argument. Religious persecution is religious persecution whether big or small and we shouldn't stand for it no matter where it happens. I'm glad for your thoughts in this article, but you have written an entirely one-sided piece. I hope you'll consider the other in future columns. Thanks, Cory.

4 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Dwight George • 2 days ago

Corey there are a lot of things wrong with your article. You have a lot of assumptions that simply are not true. Oppression can be by a minority upon a majority. Look at South Africa. Look at the homosexual lobby in the United States. We were warned about these small groups getting power by James Madison. Who controls this country? It is small wealthy elites - entertainment industry liberals, the liberal media, and the homosexual lobby all of them very rich and powerful.

4 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

etseq → Dwight George • 7 hours ago

White Supremacy is alive and well! So the real victims of South African Apartheid were the whites? Thank you for proving

the authors point!

8 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Jonathan Waits • 2 days ago

Cory, you seem to be under the impression that homosexuals as a group are a mistreated and weak cultural minority while evangelicals are a culturally dominant force reflecting the majority of the country. I think perhaps that you have been watching a different culture than I have. The exact opposite is closer to the truth. All the cultural power right now is in the hands of the gay rights crowd whereas as Nicholas Kristoff recently put it, "in liberal circles, evangelicals constitute one of the few groups that it's safe to mock openly." What conservative evangelicals are seeking is the freedom to live public lives--whether in business or elsewhere--that are consistent with their belief that homosexual behavior is sinful which includes the freedom to not be forced into participating in any way in a homosexual wedding. For the cultural powers that be, that's a bridge too far. The response has been that they should be forced to do it anyway or else forced out of business. That kind of totalitarian response seems to be exactly in keeping with what Roger Williams wanted to avoid. Yes, the recent spate of RFRA's are intended to protect these folks. The only people talking about a flood of businesses refusing to serve gays in any way, shape, or form are gay rights advocates and their allies who are using an entirely hypothetical red herring to drive the conversation and the law in their direction.

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Antonio Cordova • 2 days ago

I would submit that the baker who does not want to provide services to a homosexual wedding is not a privileged and powerful person. To the contrary it is now the homosexual lobby and their friends (Cory) that have the power. Hobby Lobby pays their employees well and gives them good benefits. Because they did not want (to pay) for certain contraceptives is not micromanaging. The employees in question can still purchase the products on their own. No one is stopping them or forcing them to buy anything. To the contrary they are being forced to purchase something they don't want to buy. It is neither love nor hate that says I don't want to provide services to this behavior any more than if a person entered Cory's church and wanted to worship in the nude. No one would say leave him alone - just love him. This issue has gotten out of hand. Homosexuals comprise less than 5% of the population and of all the issues to talk about this one has been chosen. Why? Tocqueville spoke of the tyranny of the majority but now we have the tyranny of the minority and elitist.

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

arobinson • a day ago

I enjoyed the article. If we want a fact check on the persecution of Christians by Christians of differing faiths; we need but go to the council of Nicaea. The Trinity Doctrine, which has no biblical or apostolic reference to the Faith of early Christianity as establish by Christ. More lives lost as the combined Jewish Holocaust and the African Slave trade combined. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathe...>

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Arbuthnaught • a day ago

Helwys used the word humane in his quote to qualify the word laws. He did not say obey all laws but only humane laws. Helwys view was that humane law was based on scripture and not the potentially arbitrary word of the king. To Helwys, Christians had a prima facie moral duty to determine which laws were humane and which were not. What would Helwys say about a state that compels a baker against his conscience to produce a gay themed wedding cake? Some how I don't think that meets Helwys view of a humane law.....

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

RAY DYMUN • 16 hours ago

Dr. Fields, while making some points has, nevertheless, failed to see the fact that religious freedom also entails the protection of one religion from another, and that the cultural religion of autonomy is seeking capitulation from all other world views. It further appears as disingenuous that Christian florists, bakers, photographers, etc., who for the most part knowingly serve LGBT customers, gladly in the marketplace, are threatened within an inch of their economic lives for declining to take part in a ceremony they may personally feel is sinful. The couples usually have suffered no real harm. They have had their weddings catered, photographed, or arranged by others. No, it is a repeat of that time: "When you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument, you must bow down and worship the gold statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Anyone who will not bow down and worship will be immediately thrown into a furnace of flaming fire." So friends, regardless of what service you provided previously, if you fail to bow, as Frank Bruni puts it, prepare to be thrown into the furnace.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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Preston Urbahns · Medical Support Assistant at Pittsburgh VA Healthcare System

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