



Persecution Journal

A RESOURCE FOR PASTORS & CHURCHES

A PUBLICATION OF THE TEXAS ETHICS & RELIGIOUS LIBERTY COMMITTEE OF THE SBTC



Persecution Journal

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Foreword

IN JANUARY OF 2021 a pastor friend sent me a text message asking what the SBTC planned to do to help pastors and churches prepare for impending persecution. The SBTC staff exists to serve the churches as they work both autonomously and cooperatively toward Great Commission advance in Texas and around the world. But to be honest, and to my regret, I had not even considered the pressing need for SBTC churches to be prepared for persecution or the SBTC's role in such preparation.

It makes sense, though. As the world around us spirals further and further down the Romans 1:18-32 continuum of moral degradation, those churches that continue to hold fast to biblical inerrancy, inspiration, and authority will experience increasing hostility from the culture in which God has planted them. For some churches this is a hypothetical—albeit anticipated—possibility. For others, it is already very real.

As a pastor myself, I experienced a level of persecution. When our church's policies regarding gender identity and homosexuality wedged me between an openly same-sex-attracted teenager's desire to go to youth camp and what I believed was to the benefit of our other teenage campers, the slander and threats came on thickly and quickly. Looking back on the instance today, I realize how ill-equipped I was to even talk about the situation publicly, much less to lead through it prudently.

Over the past decade, with our western culture's continued morally leftward drift, several pastors and churches across Texas and the United States have been on the receiving end of real-time persecution. You will read about some of them in this journal. While the persecution of the saints in the West

has not yet reached the level of torturous injustice some of our brothers and sisters across the world endure today, there is no reason for us to minimize the persecution we have faced and expect to face. Nor is there a reason to fear it. For two thousand years, the persecuted church has thrived from culture to culture and nation to nation.

Whether the persecution your church faces or will face comes in the form of the insults and false accusations of which the Lord Jesus warned (Matthew 5:11), the financial penalties Jason and his fellow church members faced (Acts 17:9), the unjustified imprisonment Paul and Silas endured (Acts 16:23-24), or the ignominious and excruciating deaths which welcomed home faithful Old Testament saints (Hebrews 11:32-37), persecution affords us the opportunity to live in such a way that it might one day also be said of us, “the world was not worthy of them” (Hebrews 11:28).

In February 2021 the SBTC senior staff convened and, in response to the request for resources for impending pastor and church persecution, commissioned the Texas Ethics and Religious Liberty Committee to undertake the task of preparing these resources. The committee welcomed the challenge unanimously and took immediate ownership of it. Through research and prayer, they were able to pinpoint some key issues regarding current and anticipated pastor/church persecution in Texas and to enlist leading voices to contribute to the resource. This journal comes to you as a first installment from the committee: empowering, encouraging, and resourcing pastors and churches in Texas to discern and walk through various kinds of persecution in a biblical manner.

The Bible is the church’s textbook for persecution readiness, but we can also learn from and be encouraged by the experiences of faithful pastors and churches who are enduring persecution concurrently and others who have endured persecution through the years. That is the spirit in which this journal has been compiled. Some of its content is written from the perspective of watchmen on the wall. Other content comes to you from the hearts of faithful shepherds. Its contributors are, to our day, as the children of Issachar were to theirs, who, “understood the times and knew what Israel should do” (1 Chronicles 12:32).

I pray this persecution journal proves valuable to you and your congregation in readiness for and response to persecution, should God allow persecution to come your way. Know that your Southern Baptists of Texas

Convention staff are here to encourage and support you in every way we are able. We are here for you.

For the churches,

Tony Wolfe

Associate Executive Director

Southern Baptists of Texas Convention

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INTRODUCTION

Should We Be Surprised if Persecution Comes?

What Scripture Says

DAVID TRIMBLE AND JEREMY BARKER



Should We Be Surprised if Persecution Comes? What Scripture Says

BY DAVID TRIMBLE AND JEREMY BARKER

OVER THE PAST YEAR, opposition to Christian beliefs and practices that had previously seemed unimaginable in the United States has become an urgent concern for pastors, educators, and Christians in the workplace.

Opposition has taken many forms. Healthcare workers have been forced to violate oaths to “do no harm” and participate in the taking of life or the performance of elective surgeries to alter the human body. Schoolteachers have been removed from their positions. Christian colleges have faced lawsuits for upholding the orthodox teachings of Scripture on gender and sexual ethics. Inequitable government restrictions have kept the doors of some churches shuttered during the pandemic.

But these are only the tip of the iceberg of much deeper cultural trends and growing opposition to practicing the Christian faith in many domains of life. Much of today’s hostility is a clash of opposing worldviews.

Foundational, orthodox Christian teaching recognizes that all people, created in the image of God, have equal dignity and worth and are accountable to their creator. Those truths, introduced in Genesis and affirmed throughout Scripture, are a direct counter-narrative to contemporary culture that

prioritizes an untethered expressivism of a self-defined, self-created “authentic” identity as the highest good.

The mentality of the contemporary age looks much like what Paul foreshadows in Romans 1:18-32. The world does not want to recognize God as a source of authority; instead, it embraces a self-referential authority. As a result, it rejects the notion that God as creator makes demands on the lives of his people who, through exercising their faith, are accountable to him.

These bedrock affirmations, foundational to what it means to be Christian, put us at odds with the world’s values and place Christianity within a context in which the gospel may be increasingly repressed and those who embrace it may face marginalization, discrimination, or outright violent acts of persecution.

While we see the recent rise in opposition to Christianity as a lamentable turn for American society and a serious threat to fundamental democratic freedoms, we also recognize it as a call for Christians to be vigilant in the exercise of their faith. When we turn to the pages of Scripture, we realize that persecution for following Christ should be no surprise.

In the brief treatment that follows, we look to Scripture to understand persecution. What does Scripture have to say to us about persecution? Are we to be shocked, or is it to be expected? What does harassment or persecution for being a Christian say about our relationship with Jesus? How should Christians respond when government and society are ambivalent, if not outright hostile, toward Christianity?

Toward a Biblical Understanding of Persecution

Christian persecution may take many forms. For over two millennia, Christians within various contexts have been tortured, starved, silenced, driven from their homes, mutilated, enslaved, and put to death. But not all forms of hardship endured by a Christian should be understood as persecution.

For the purposes of this article, we will distinguish Christian persecution from general suffering, which in many instances (e.g., illness or disease, death, loss, anguish, loneliness) may be accounted for by the ravages of sin on the human condition. We also maintain that contravening worldviews do not alone constitute Christian persecution and neither do competing ethical or moral constructs that oppose Christian values.

From a biblical perspective, Christian persecution is active hostility rooted in the rejection of the gospel and antagonism toward those who practice it. It

is directed toward the truth claims of Jesus and those who live out those truth claims in society as his disciples. Jesus makes this very clear in his own teaching when he states in Matthew 24:9, “You will be arrested and handed over to be punished and killed. People all over the world will hate you because you believe in me” (ERV).

Today, the hatred of which Jesus spoke is on the rise across the world in forms of repression, intolerance, harassment, violent acts of extremism, and genocide. In America, cultural shifts affirming radical individualism and the elevation of ideologies that repress religion, threaten fundamental freedoms, and insist on silencing basic Christian teachings and values.

Expectation of Persecution in the Teachings of Jesus

In the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew 5-7 and Luke 6:20-49, Jesus lays out a kingdom ethic for his disciples. He addresses both the reality of coming persecution and a disciple’s appropriate response to persecution when it occurs. Jesus makes it abundantly clear that revilement and hostile acts toward his disciples should come as no surprise. They should expect it. Both then and now, followers of Jesus should expect persecution because of their union with him¹ and conformity with the truths of the gospel.

According to Jesus’ own words, his disciples are blessed or fortunate when they are persecuted because the attacks they endure are predicated on the disciples’ relationship to Jesus and loyalty to his teachings. Thus, it is only natural that a disciple’s reorientation of life toward righteousness would attract harassment and persecution.²

Blessed are those who are *persecuted for righteousness’ sake* for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely *on my*

¹The theme of the disciples’ union with Jesus becomes even more clear in John 15:1-6. That union is also later understood within the context of persecution by Peter as “sharing in the sufferings of Christ” (1 Peter 4:13) and by Paul who affirms that “the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance” (2 Corinthians 1:15).

²The word used most often in the NT for persecution (*dioko*) means “to run after, pursue”—typically for the purpose of inflicting harm. Thus it is used here in Matthew 5:10-11 and more than 25 other times in the NT. Elsewhere the NT uses a word that means “to press upon or afflict” (*thlibo* or *thlipsis*): 1 Thessalonians 3:4, 2 Thessalonians. 1:7, Hebrews 11:37. In all instances, the NT means deliberate acts that are active and hostile in nature. See William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:10-12 ESV, emphasis added)

In response to persecution, Jesus sets an expectation for his disciples that is antithetical to the cultural norms of any age. It would be typical for a person subjected to hatred and violence to respond in kind with malice and revenge. But Jesus makes it clear that *a disciple's response* to persecution is to be one of charity and love.

But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them. (Luke 6:27–31 ESV, see also Matthew 5:43-45)

Increased Persecution in the Early Church

It would not be long before Jesus' foreboding words about persecution would become a reality. The book of Acts recounts the first decades of the growth and expansion of the church and the hostility toward Christians. As the gospel advances from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, the story is marked with violence, opposition, imprisonment, and even martyrdom. As Ronald Boyd-MacMillan describes it, "the book of Acts doesn't make sense without persecution."³

Persecution would be Paul's experience throughout his ministry. As he delivers parting advice to Timothy for his pastoral work in Ephesus, Paul cannot help but recount the persecutions he faced in city after city on account of the gospel. With years of ministry behind him, Paul writes, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12 ESV).⁴

³Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, *Dangerous Faith: A 9-Week Study Through the Book of Acts*, Open Doors, <https://dangerousfaith.org>.

⁴Here again we encounter the theme of the disciples' union with Christ. By virtue of living *in Christ*, Paul understands that Christians participate in his sufferings through persecution.

The personal experience of other apostolic leaders in the early church led them to concur. Peter (1 Peter 3:13-17), James (1:2-4), Jude (17-25), and John (Revelation 6:9-11) all give witness to the reality that persecution and opposition are to be expected for those who follow Christ. The author of Hebrews sums up the reality his readers faced:

But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being *publicly exposed to reproach and affliction*, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had *compassion on those in prison*, and you *joyfully accepted the plundering of your property*, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. (Hebrews 10:32–36 ESV, emphasis added)

Conclusion

The New Testament is filled with accounts of Christians facing not only mere opposition but intense persecution for following Christ. The pages of history from the first century to the twenty-first century only add to that story.

Persecution is not simply hardship or suffering. Those are the realities of living in a world marked by the effects of sin. Persecution is not simply the world living in a way that rejects God and his people. Persecution arises when, on account of our beliefs and practices as Christians, active hostility comes against us whether from unjust government actions or a hostile society that increasingly pushes Christians to the margins.

In the face of such realities, Hebrews 13 offers wisdom and instructions appropriate for the church today.

Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. (Hebrews 13:13-16 ESV)

We can endure with joy knowing this world is not our home and we seek a city that is to come. While reproach and persecution may come, we are to be faithful in our time here, living lives with praise to God and in service to others.



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ANTICIPATING PERSECUTION

Expected Persecution

BART BARBER

**Is Persecution on the Horizon
for the Church in the West?**

THOMAS S. KIDD



Expected Persecution

BY BART BARBER

ARE AMERICAN CHRISTIANS PERSECUTED? If not, do current cultural trends portend forthcoming persecution against American Christians? Merely to pose the question is to provoke debate and finger-pointing, even among American Christians. On the one hand, our cultural milieu is palpably more hostile toward Christianity of the Evangelical stripe. On the other hand, no Christian community has been further removed from persecution than American Christians since the 1800s. So, online conversations about this topic feature accusations of illegitimate victimhood and of willfully obtuse heads in the sand.

The topic can be difficult because the history is complex and because the subject matter is inescapably subjective. Jesus' own words in Matthew 5:10-11 introduce some of the subjective elements. The persecution God sees and blesses must arise out of the proper cause ("because of righteousness") and must have a particular content (evil spoken "falsely" against you). People are going to disagree about what is and is not righteous as well as about what does and does not constitute a false allegation of evil. These differences in perspective may be insurmountable.

The historical complexity of persecution in church history is more objective. Reasoning about the varied forms of persecution perhaps offers better hope of reconciling these different parties in the "Are we persecuted?" debate than does any other strategy.

Persecution has varied in terms of geographical scope. Most of the persecution recorded in the New Testament was highly localized: a riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:28-41) or an expulsion from Rome (Acts 18:2-3). Sometimes, a persecution movement expanded to cover a region. Saul of Tarsus was once hard at work to engineer regional persecution (Acts 9:1-2). By the time that the New Testament canon was closing, the emperors Nero and Domitian had spearheaded waves of state-sponsored persecution that spanned the entire Roman empire.

Persecution has also varied in terms of targeted activities. The Clarendon Code in England in the 1660s didn't persecute people for being Nonconformists (Christians such as Baptists who rejected Anglicanism); rather, believers were persecuted for doing the things that Nonconformist Christians did. People couldn't have worship services that departed from the Book of Common Prayer or refrain from receiving communion at an Anglican parish.

In the Casamance region of Senegal, villages gladly accommodate Christian, Muslim, or Animist neighbors, and are willing to watch people convert at will from one faith to another, so long as they continue to participate in the animistic rituals that define village life. This perpetuates a pattern of persecution dating back as far as the Roman emperor Decius and the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 3). Groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Taliban in Afghanistan persecute people for merely being Christians, behavior notwithstanding.

The severity of persecution has also varied widely. In *Ill News from New England*, colonial Baptist pastor John Clarke described the vicious beating that the Boston religious establishment inflicted upon Obadiah Holmes. A generation later, Isaac Backus recounted tales of economic confiscation and imprisonment used to persecute Baptists.

Before the New Testament had been fully written, the number of Christian martyrs was significant enough for readers of the Apocalypse of John to comprehend a large gathering of martyrs under the altar in heaven, and later persecutions increased that number substantially. To this day, Christians sacrifice their own lives for their faith every year.

Religious persecution, therefore, has occurred in a wide variety of forms throughout Christian history.

Varieties of Persecution			
	Localized	Regional	State-sponsored
Economic	<i>Chick-fil-A v. San Antonio</i>	Isaac Backus, <i>An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty</i>	Dissolution of monasteries by Henry VIII
Imprisonment	Joseph Smith, Hancock County, Illinois	Martin Burnham, by Abu Sayyaf (Philippines)	John Bunyan
Torture	Paul and Silas in Philippi (Acts 16)	Boko Haram (Nigeria)	Spanish Inquisition
Execution	Stoning of Stephen (Acts 7)	Taliban (Afghanistan)	Perpetua and Felicity

With this background in mind, questions about religious persecution would be more productive if people were always clear about what kind of persecution they have in mind. The likelihood is low that the government of the United States of America will soon feed Christians to lions in public. That comforting truth notwithstanding, the probability that one category of religious persecution is unlikely to take place reveals very little about the risks of other kinds of religious persecution. Some forms of milder persecution against Christians have already occurred in the United States. Some other forms of persecution are well within reach.

The torture and execution of Christians for their faith is not soon coming to the United States, regardless of what some unstable person may have emailed you about Dearborn, Michigan, and Sharia law. Imprisonment is a different story. The American Bar Association is calling for a federal criminal law that would make it a felony for any person to try to dissuade any other person from choosing an LGBTQ lifestyle.¹

Experts in 2019 would probably have started and ended the list of vulnerable subject matters with the aggressive sexual orientation and gender

¹Faraz Mohamedi, "Protecting the Most Vulnerable Among Us: Why the United States Should Criminalize Conversion Therapy for Minors," *Criminal Justice Magazine*, January 11, 2021, https://americanbar.org/groups/criminal_justice/publications/criminal-justice-magazine/2021/winter/protecting-most-vulnerable-among-us-why-united-states-should-criminalize-conversion-therapy-minors/.

identity (SOGI) laws that are reproducing so prolifically, but then along came the COVID-19 pandemic, with the arrest of pastors like Rodney Howard-Browne.²

Reasonable Christians might disagree about the best way to disciple believers who are tempted by non-Christian sexual lifestyles or the best way to respond to governmental edicts that ban Christian worship gatherings. Indeed, most churches chose to observe some change in meeting schedule in response to the pandemic. And yet, three truths are unavoidable: (1) The proscribed activities arise from and are necessarily impelled by sincerely held religious beliefs, (2) the value an increasingly secular culture ascribes to religious liberties is declining, as tested when those liberties come into conflict with other doctrinaire convictions of the secular left, and (3) a significant population of Americans is ready to impose criminal penalties upon those who will not toe the line.

State-sponsored statutory imprisonment of believers is a viable threat in the near term. Indeed, the dam holding back the tide at the moment may be, rather than a commitment to religious liberty as an unalienable right, a strategic concern about overreaching that “could turn campaigners against LGBT rights into martyrs, giving them new platforms.”³

Economic persecution, although not yet widespread, is already here. Although Chick-fil-A complies fully with laws against discrimination in the company’s hiring and customer service practices, and although Chick-fil-A delivers a very popular product, the company faces widespread resistance simply because its founders and owners affirm the Christian view of human sexuality (which, indeed, was the prevalent view of all of western civilization until very recently). Even in Texas—a state not known for being politically and socially progressive—the city of San Antonio refused to allow Chick-fil-A to operate a restaurant in the local airport for this very reason.⁴

²Tamara Lush and Chris O’Meara, “Florida megachurch pastor arrested for holding services, defying social distancing orders,” *USA Today*, March 31, 2020, <https://usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/03/31/coronavirus-florida-megachurch-pastor-arrested-church-amid-orders/5093160002/>.

³Ryan Thoreson, “Why Banning Anti-LGBT ‘Conversion’ Therapy Isn’t Enough,” *Human Rights Watch*, May 20, 2020, <https://hrw.org/news/2020/05/15/why-banning-anti-lgbt-conversion-therapy-isnt-enough>.

⁴Acadia Coronado, “Chick-fil-A no longer pursuing restaurant at San Antonio airport after chain’s plans denied more than a year ago,” *USA Today*, September 14, 2020, <https://usatoday.com/story/money/food/2020/09/14/san-antonio-airport-chickfila-not-opening/5798396002/>.

Certainly, Chick-fil-A will survive—love of chicken wins—but these decisions impose an economic toll upon the company, and enterprises with less economic strength that encounter the same belligerence will fare differently.

The Equality Act (HB 5), presently pending in the United States Congress, would explicitly exclude religious liberty as a reason to make employment decisions. Although the 2012 Supreme Court decision *Hosanna-Tabor v. EEOC* seems to protect the employment decisions of churches, denominational entities and other ministries may very well find themselves required by law either to hire people whose sexual lifestyles contradict the organization's founding beliefs or to shut their doors forever. President Biden has promised to sign this law if it passes. State-sponsored economic persecution of believers is one vote away.

Increasingly, American advertising and communication infrastructure rests in the hands of a few mammoth companies. Another form of economic persecution that is already with us relates to the willingness of Facebook, Twitter, and other internet companies to shut Christian views out of the public square. What will become of Christian publishing if Amazon bans the sale of all Christian books? It is already happening. In recent weeks, Amazon removed Ryan T. Anderson's *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Movement*, declaring the new corporate policy that the company will not "sell books that frame LGBTQ+ identity as a mental illness."⁵ And yet, in contradiction to their stated policy, the original *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (referred to as DSM-I) remains for sale on the site in a 2008 reprint—a book which authoritatively defines homosexuality as a mental illness. Amazon's interest is not in purging this view from their site. To do so, they would have to remove the preponderance of books touching on this subject that are more than a decade old. Their intent is to silence people like Anderson who are engaged in the present debate on a different side from Amazon's own.

The economic impact upon churches, Christian non-profits, Christian educational institutions, Christian professors, and Christian speakers is growing and will be significant both economically and professionally. This is not

⁵Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg, "Amazon Won't Sell Books Framing LGBTQ+ Identities as Mental Illnesses," *Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 2021, <https://wsj.com/articles/amazon-wont-sell-books-framing-lgbtq-identities-as-mental-illnesses-11615511380>.

state-sponsored persecution, but it is growing bolder and more widespread regionally. At present, Microsoft's agreement for charity licensure requires an agreement not to discriminate in hiring or other policies, but it provides an exception for churches. How long will that exception be in place? At present, Facebook and Twitter are haphazard in their enforcement of their content-regulation guidelines, but how long will that last? What will become of churches in an environment in which the government can ban their gathering and the internet can refuse to host their livestreams? Economic persecution has not nearly realized its potential for harm, but the mechanisms for doing so are already in place.

Well-known personalities from the previous two decades have come to exemplify this sort of economic persecution. Kelvin Cochran, Barronelle Stutzman, Blaine Anderson, and Jack Phillips are at the vanguard of this movement, and some of them have found a friendly ear in the United States Supreme Court. Many of these victories have depended upon the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, so it is unclear whether the Supreme Court will be able to rescue Christians from the pending Equality Act if it should pass, but in any event, little hope exists for protection against Facebook, Twitter, or any other powerful economic monopoly or cabal who might impose economic harm upon people for their religious beliefs.

At its root, all persecution is personal. Even at the state-sponsored level, states impose sanctions against people of religious faith because their citizenry supports or demands it.

At its root, all persecution is demonic. The depiction of the angry dragon in Revelation 12 constitutes God's explanation of persecution against believers.

I once sat in a city park in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, with an elderly woman. A group of teenagers had summoned me because they were on the receiving end of hostile questioning from this woman. Montreal had suffered significant flooding, and the teens had offered her an armband with a website address at which people could get relief supplies if they had been affected by the flooding.

"Who is behind this?" the woman angrily wanted to know.

The teenagers were flummoxed by her ire, but I simply answered her, "We are from a church in Texas. We have come to help."

“I knew it,” she screamed. “We don’t want your help! We don’t need your help!”

“But ma’am,” I replied, “all we are doing is providing food and clothing to people in need.”

“The government will take care of us,” she spat. “Go home!”

Of course, people had been waiting five weeks for the government to “take care” of them, but none of that mattered to her. There are people who believe that if Christians are simply caring enough, generous enough, helpful enough, then all this persecution will be avoided or eliminated. People who hold that belief should go sit down with that Québécoise lady and see if they still believe that when the conversation is over. Or they should ask the Samaritan’s Purse volunteers who offered free medical care to residents of New York City during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The way forward for American evangelicals—for those who actually are American evangelicals, according to the theological meaning of the term—is the ancient way of patient endurance and unwavering commitment. We have enjoyed a rare season of nearly unbridled religious liberty. That season is waning. Even if persecution’s most severe potential is realized, we will still be at an advantage over many of our brothers and sisters around the world in terms of liberty and prosperity. There is therefore still reason for joy and gratitude on our part. Nevertheless, this must also be a season of resolve and preparation.



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Is Persecution on the Horizon for the Church in the West?

BY THOMAS S. KIDD

PERSECUTION IS A MUCH-DEBATED TERM in America today. Many religious groups, including evangelical Christians, are clearly experiencing persecution around the world in places including China, Russia, and Nigeria. Sometimes this persecution involves religiously motivated non-governmental groups, such as Boko Haram and their attacks on Christians. Sometimes persecution features state-backed harassment or imprisonment of members of religious groups, such as abuses wrought by Chinese authorities against house churches or against Uyghur Muslims, who have been detained in internment camps by the hundreds of thousands in recent years.

Persecution was a familiar experience in the early church, too. The early Christians endured a major outbreak of persecution recorded in Acts 7 and 8 after Stephen's forthright witness and martyrdom. And Paul matter-of-factly states in 2 Timothy 3 that "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (ESV). But persecution is challenging to define, since religion itself is usually only one factor in the harassment, legal intimidation, and outright violence committed against religious groups. Usually there are additional issues involved, such as ethnic animosity or clashing territorial claims.

How should we think about the threat of persecution in the West today? We ought to be mindful of our culture's social media-fueled tendency to exaggerate nearly every concern, including Christians' worries about persecution. Surely trivial episodes such as a store employee's failure to say "Merry Christmas" do not signal anti-Christian persecution. But are there reasons to think that actual persecution might be on the horizon, even in the United States?

Evangelical Christians, along with other religious traditionalists, are increasingly characterized as threats in America. This perception of an evangelical menace is not entirely new. For example, evangelicals (especially Baptists) suffered fines, imprisonment, and physical beatings in the decades leading up to the American Revolution. This was due to their aggressive evangelistic tactics and unwillingness to comply with established state churches in places such as Massachusetts and Virginia. But with the disestablishment of the state churches and the massive growth of evangelical Christianity through the 1800s, evangelicals (especially white evangelicals) became part of a new, informal cultural-religious establishment. Some historic evangelical political campaigns, such as efforts to stop Sunday mail delivery, to prevent the teaching of evolution in public schools, or to require prayer in schools, reflected that sense of a custodial relationship toward American society and government.

Recently, some evangelical Christians have also presented themselves as a political faction by their occasionally uncritical devotion to the Republican party, a relationship which came into its contemporary form (including among Southern Baptists) during the 1980s and the Reagan era. Whatever the merits of the alliance between White evangelicals and the GOP (and it certainly has been warranted on issues such as abortion), the evangelical-Republican fusion made it more likely that Democratic electoral success could mean potential legal and bureaucratic trouble for evangelicals.

There are also deep cultural reasons why evangelicals and other religious traditionalists regularly run afoul of political, corporate, and academic elites today. Most notably, religious conservatives tend to oppose radical expressive individualism and unfettered sexual activity, priorities which secular elites now regard as the era's most pressing civil rights agenda. Thus, many cultural elites demand that all Americans actively affirm the right to sexual expression and marriage for persons who experience gay, lesbian, transgender, or

other non-heterosexual desires. When religious traditionalists fail to comply completely with the LGBT+ agenda, lawsuits commonly ensue.

This journal is not the place to review the legal status of religious liberty versus the mandate of sexual individualism, but the record over the past decade has been complex and often contradictory. In the short term, a majority of the current Supreme Court justices are likely to be friendly to religious liberty claims. Still, some of the battles between traditionalists and secular elites have veered in the direction of overt persecution.

Persecution seems a fair term for what litigants and the Colorado Civil Rights Commission did to Jack Phillips, the Colorado baker and subject of the *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado CRC* case in 2018. The Supreme Court majority in that case asserted that the commission acted with “clear and impermissible hostility” toward Phillips’s beliefs. Other such clashes have generated civil rights complaints against business owners, Title IX actions against Christian professors, pressure to fire employees (or CEOs) who dissent against elite secular orthodoxy, withdrawal of government funding from traditionalist schools or charities, and more.

One could eventually envision such claims being made against conservative pastors and churches. However, the Supreme Court precedent in the *Hosanna-Tabor v. EEOC* case (2012) seems to provide churches more legal cover than parachurch groups, student ministries, or Christian-run businesses such as Jack Phillips’s bakery. *Hosanna-Tabor* unanimously affirmed that anti-discrimination laws do not apply to “ministerial” employees at churches and church-run schools. For example, churches that adhere to traditional Christian beliefs are not subject to punishments for hiring only men as pastors or for requiring ministers not to engage in sexual relations outside of heterosexual marriage.

These examples do not cover informal discrimination against Christians in business, education, entertainment, and other venues, however. Anecdotes of such discrimination grow more common all the time. Such cases are often hard to prove, but that doesn’t remove the sting of feeling that perhaps you weren’t hired because you are a Christian. But as America fully manifests its post-Christian culture, traditional believers will find themselves at times facing legal disadvantages—threats to businesses, schools, or charities—or scorn from those who differ from us. We shouldn’t rush to sensationalize these experiences as “persecution,” but neither should we be naive about

the risks to religious liberty. Yet we have great reasons for hope: Christians have been through such experiences before. They have often faced much worse treatment than most believers in the United States ever will encounter. Loving one's enemy, unfortunately, necessitates having enemies. Most importantly, the Lord ultimately remains in control of whatever tests we endure.

For further reading:

John Corvino, Ryan T. Anderson, and Sherif Girgis, *Debating Religious Liberty and Discrimination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

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SOCIAL FRONT

Cultural Persecution

BARRY CREAMER

**Tactics the Persecuted Chinese Church,
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**Is Persecution on the Horizon for the
Church in the West? A Christian
Response to Cultural Persecution**

STEPHEN PRESLEY



Cultural Persecution

BY BARRY CREAMER

WHEN AM I PERSECUTED SOCIALLY OR CULTURALLY? Where are Christians experiencing cultural persecution? Where might we expect to face persecution socially or culturally soon?

For brevity's sake, let's take persecution to be one individual or group imposing harm or suffering on another because of their identity. There is not much precision in that definition, but it does contain the key elements. When Christians are physically abused, jailed, or executed overseas because they refuse to deny Christ or because they worship in a gathering not sponsored or monitored by the state, we have no qualms identifying what they face as persecution. We are familiar with murders, executions, and imprisonments in North Korea and in some Muslim states. Friends of mine have been rousted by authorities simply for worshipping with other Christians in Israel.

Domestically, though, similarly overt cases of state-sponsored persecution are rare or non-existent. Naturally, then, there is a tendency to broaden our understanding of persecution from the narrow bounds of physical abuse, imprisonment, and execution to include acts less severe (although expressing the same kind of antipathy) and actors other than the state.

When those actors (persecutors) are not officially sanctioned, as we have grown accustomed to in the United States, their acts may be less severe, even if not less intentional, making persecution's definition less clear. Because

Christianity has been so influential in American culture for so long, we have not often imagined persecution of this type against Christianity. But a Jewish family facing anti-Semitic graffiti on their garage wall or business façade is facing persecution, even though the state may be willing to step in and prosecute the vandals. The violence done to the person's property, the threat and intimidation associated with anti-Semitism's history, and the violation of the family's (or business owner's) otherwise safe spaces are forms of persecution. Less overt acts bring less clarity, but still likely rise to persecution: when neighbors call for city inspectors to visit the Jewish home about potential violations (e.g., unkempt lawn, unapproved signage) but do not call the city on the similar imperfections of their non-Jewish neighbors or refuse to do business with a Jewish shopkeeper.

When such behavior is the product of more than an isolated individual's actions, and represents the sentiment of a neighborhood, class, or region, then the persecution is social. To clarify the term, take "society" as the interpersonal and public space within which people live together. We are vulnerable to social persecution to the same extent and for the same reasons we desire and require society. To thrive as a human being is to do so in a society: economically, physically, emotionally, and intellectually. To exclude people in any of those ways by virtue of their identity—in this case particularly their Christian identity—would be to practice social persecution. Whether overtly or not, social persecution happens all the time: Christian kids excluded from neighborhood activities or even harassed by their peers, Christian employees passed over for promotion because of their scruples, or, in one case, a professional athlete shunned by a league at least partially for being outspoken about his faith.

The odd thing about such persecution is that it is not unique to Christianity. Societies favor conformity, even if not uniformity. Every minority and every counter-culture experience persecution to some degree as a natural consequence of society's effort to maintain that conformity. Christianity threatened to break the conformity and stability of the Roman empire, just as the Civil Rights movement did to some significant aspects of 1960s America. The fact that persecution can be for causes other than being Christian is what Peter is getting at in his first epistle: "For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been


called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (2:20-21 ESV). Every person struggles with society for one reason or another. Only some struggle sufficiently to merit persecution. Peter tells believers to make sure the only struggle they have with society which merits persecution is the one they have because they are following Jesus.

Persecution can also have a less direct form than social disapprobation. If culture includes the intellectual, ethical, aesthetic, and religious product of a society, then the cultural persecution of Christians would not only include social persecution, but also acts intended to purge a society of the cultural influence of Christians. Paul implies to believers in Rome that discerning the will of God means not being conformed to the world. That world is the culture within which we live. If believers are different from the culture—if they live out values different from the culture’s—they will face persecution. If—and the conditional is hardly a given yet—the day comes that students who wish to attend Christian colleges with traditional sexual standards are excluded from loans and grants to pay for that education, then believers will be facing social persecution for cultural reasons.

There is one important caveat to add, though, before believers label every form of opposition to their faith “persecution.” Because we have spent the past four decades as culture warriors, we have put ourselves in a position where the cry of “persecution” is often not quite appropriate. When soldiers battle, even an upright soldier against an evil one, the losing soldier is not actually being persecuted. He is simply losing the battle he enjoined, knowing that whoever exerted force more effectively would win. For as long as believers have been in the culture war, we have made it as likely for people completely opposed to our values to cry “persecution” when our laws are passed as for us to cry it when theirs are. Losing an election is not persecution. Public policy negatively affecting both churches and bars is not persecution.

Christianity, even if merely cultural, held a hegemony in American society for so long that believers might be inclined to think we face persecution when, in reality, we face the same challenges much of society did when we were in power. That is, some things we think of as persecution may be akin to a king’s suffering because he now eats with commoners. I do not mention this caveat to minimize the very real opposition and persecution Christians already are and certainly will be facing in America. I mention it so that we

make certain, as Peter suggests we should, that when people are offended by us and respond with persecution, it is because of our affinity for the resurrection, not simply our fondness for a previous decade.



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Tactics the Persecuted Chinese Church, Amidst a Pack of Wolves, Offers the ‘Free World’ Church

BY BOB FU

“Maybe we irritated them [Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials] when we sang hymns,” Brother Dai Zhichao recalled. “With so many police officers present,” he said regarding his recent detention, “I felt like a sheep amidst a pack of wolves. Nevertheless, [amidst the persecution] God filled my heart with peace.”

EARLIER THIS YEAR, as they had done numerous times, Chengdu city police again summoned Brother Dai and several other Christians to the station. In the past while being detained, Brother Dai had shared the gospel with police officers and prayed for their repentance. Throughout his bouts of persecution, Brother Dai and Sister Shu had sung, sometimes verbally and, at other times, in their hearts and minds.

During a detention in May 2021, a plainclothes police officer, wearing a mask, punched Brother Dai with his fist and forcefully kicked him. Meanwhile, as Sister Shu ignored police threats and continued to sing hymns, several men assaulted her and repeatedly slapped her face.

Blows from the officers inflicted multiple injuries to Sister Shu’s neck and

arms, breaking her glasses. Nevertheless, Sister Shu, Brother Dai, and a myriad of others in China's church, persecuted for simply being Christians, offer the free world church a wealth of wisdom to prepare for the time when persecution and hostility come to our door. They show us how to persevere.

The message our Chinese brothers and sisters powerfully portray, based on 1 Peter 1, embraces three points I call the ABCs of prison theology.

A. Be aware and prepare. Don't be surprised. Expect persecution as it will arise.

B. Love others and extend forgiveness—even to the persecutors. Does this mean to forgive our enemies in the middle of political, cultural, and racial tensions? Must we forgive challenges to our faith and affiliation? Must we even forgive reverse discrimination in American society, even in the midst of a pandemic? Yes.

C. Sing aloud as well as in your heart with joy. Sing joyfully amidst wolves, amidst political elites and administrative state powers. Sing joyfully even as big tech leftist media platforms such as Facebook, Apple, and Google seek to expand their raw, unchecked power to spread ideology for partisan interests.

Yes, a resounding yes—Christ followers should still be able to forgive others and sing in the middle of our critical cultural mess in our democratic society. As difficult as it may appear to some regarding “feelings,” Christ has made no exception in his commands.

Four of ten Americans in China sense and many experience conflict between their religious beliefs and the mainstream culture.¹ As the current US culture arbitrarily targets Christians in America with persecution and hostility, although not as severe as in China, it threatens to attack, disperse, and destroy the church. As persecution intensifies and manifests itself through hostility and violence toward the church, the body of Christ, persecuted Chinese Christians remind the free world that Christians can experience joy—even in a hostile environment, even during times of persecution.

¹ “Views about Religion in American Society,” Pew Research Center, March 12, 2020, <https://pewforum.org/2020/03/12/views-about-religion-in-american-society/>.

As some sang at the start of 2020, the beginning of a new decade, the novel coronavirus, which initially broke out in Wuhan, raged throughout the world, causing many to socially distance and quarantine themselves from others. CCP authorities, however, did not distance themselves from, nor did they forego, persecuting Christians. Neither did they quarantine themselves from targeting those in mainland China who professed beliefs other than atheism. Instead, CCP authorities continued to increasingly persecute Christians, religious practitioners, and human rights activists.

The words of Hebrews 13:3 apply here: “Remember the prisoners as if chained with them—those who are mistreated—since you yourselves are in the body also” (NKJV).

In a sense, the current cultural hostility in America appears to be headed toward following the CCP’s stance regarding persecution in China. People concerned about the direction America’s culture appears to be heading often ask, “What can we do?”

“Start to practice Hebrews 13:3,” I encourage them. Remember and pray for those in prison. Remember them from your church pulpit. Remember and pray for them from your homes.

Log onto the websites of ministry partners such as chinaaid.org or persecution.com to get to know part of the suffering body of Christ.

You “may” also sing. The word *may* indicates that currently you get to decide to sing or not to sing.

One day in 1996, after CCP officials had imprisoned me for my stance on human rights and for taking part in the Tiananmen Square event, my back as well as my heart ached. Despite the pain I felt from the hostile treatment the CCP guards inflicted on me and others and from missing Heidi, my wife, I felt so thankful to God for his power and presence that I wanted to sing.

Without considering what my actions might cost, I cleared my throat and began singing a song from my underground house church days.

“Give thanks with a grateful heart,” I mumbled, causing those around me to, at least momentarily, break form and look at me. Typically, nothing unusual happened during the days we were detained. The most excitement we ever saw was when someone readjusted, or scratched his nose, or sneezed and got severely beaten if the guard happened to be walking by. That day, however, the guard didn’t seem to be near, and so I added the next few lines: “Give thanks to the Holy One, give thanks, because he’s given Jesus Christ,

his Son. And now let the weak say, 'I am strong.' Let the poor say, 'I am rich' because of what the Lord has done for us. Give thanks."²

When I finished my song, I looked at the gigantic iron gate and waited for the guard to come swooping in with his electric baton. I'm not sure if he was on break or just not at his station, but since I hadn't been punished yet, I started my song again. To my surprise, another voice joined in with me. I couldn't see who it was, but at first, the sound emanated from a few rows behind me. Then, another voice started singing from my left. We sang "Give Thanks with a Grateful Heart" three times in a row.

As we finished singing, the head security guard yelled at me, "What did we tell you about sharing the gospel?"

"You said not to speak a word of it," I replied.

"And yet," the guard said, "you led the whole prison in your superstitious songs?"

"Well, I didn't speak a word of it," I said. "I sang it."

Later, when guards forced us to sit like statues in our uncomfortable positions, I knew I'd get beaten if I sang out again. Instead of singing, I simply hummed the tune to "Give Thanks with a Grateful Heart." Once again, the other men joined in with my humming. Pretty soon, the prison resounded like a gigantic beehive of praise.

That day, as well as during others, like Brother Dai and Sister Shu, I found peace and joy from singing. Also, like Brother Dai, we may sometimes feel like a sheep amidst a pack of wolves. During those times, we need to remember and practice lessons from our persecuted brothers and sisters in China, particularly the ABCs of prison theology. We need to sing and give thanks, knowing that our good shepherd never leaves nor forsakes us, his flock. Even amidst a pack of wolves, even if we may irritate them?

Yes.

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² Henry Smith, "Give Thanks," Integrity's Hosanna! Music, 1978.



Is Persecution on the Horizon for the Church in the West?

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO CULTURAL PERSECUTION

BY STEPHEN PRESLEY

AS MANY HAVE OBSERVED, there is no longer any debate about the future of the West. As Charles Taylor notes in *A Secular Age*, the West is becoming secular at a steady pace that seems unlikely to turn around any time soon. In the words of pastor John Dickerson, the church, and especially the evangelical church, is staring into the ominous clouds of “a Great Recession.”¹ In these moments, it seems prudent to return to the earliest days of the church when Christians faced a similarly hostile culture.

Early Christians in the first few centuries were defined by the trials and tribulations of cultural oppression that compelled them to think carefully about political power and social engagement from a position of weakness.

¹ John S. Dickerson, *The Great Evangelical Recession: 6 Factors That Will Crash the American Church and How to Prepare* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 11.

While there are many actions and attitudes we could consider, I would sum up their response to persecution with three key postures: *a serious commitment to discipleship*, *a winsome and convictional engagement*, and *a fervent hope in Christ's return*. As we face the days ahead, each of these postures can help us think more clearly about how Christians should respond to cultural persecution.

First, it may seem counterintuitive, but the church would benefit from worrying less about what is going on outside its doors and starting to think seriously about what is going on inside. In the earliest centuries of the church before the rise of Christendom, there was a consistent emphasis on pre-baptismal catechesis, or discipleship. For example, in *On the Apostolic Tradition*, Hippolytus describes a three-year process of discipleship before baptism. The church wanted to be sure new believers understood the calling placed upon their lives and prepare them to face the hostile world. As cultural Christianity evaporates, a crisis of identities lies before us. Now is the time to redouble our efforts in discipleship and cultivate an unwavering commitment to Christian doctrine and morality. These are the things that distinguish us from the world and prepare us to give an answer to anyone “who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15 ESV).

Second, alongside a commitment to discipleship, the church needs to cultivate winsome and convictional engagement with the world. Facing persecution, Christians often embrace one of two opposing orientations to culture: flight or fight. The first tendency, though, suffers from a gnostic view of the world that treats creation as evil and longs to be rescued from it. The second is a militant view of the relationship between church and state that does not respect God's providence over both spheres. Neither is the way forward. The better path is learning the art of cultivating a view of citizenship that engages both the intellectual and social spheres with a winsome and convictional posture. This is the kind of social and political posture that Peter describes saying, “Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor” (1 Peter 2:17 ESV).

The early church respected God's providential care over creation, trusted that God instituted government for his own purposes, and worked as earthly citizens to live faithfully within the world. For example, the second century apologetic text, the *Epistle to Diognetus*, is layered with the intermingling of a dual citizenship:

They [Christians] dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.²

Though early Christians were hated, despised, and rejected, they followed the words of Paul and accepted political authorities and obeyed the established laws. At the same time, their earthly citizenship is qualified by their commitment to Christian doctrine and morality, so they endured immorality and sin as foreigners—transcending evil through their holy lives.


Finally, alongside a commitment to discipleship and engagement, enduring persecution means learning to have a patient trust in the providence of God. Though it may not seem like it at times, we believe the “Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all” (Psalm 103:19 ESV). Christians should not live in fear; they know how this story ends. From the prophets to Revelation, the Scriptures are infused with the expectant hope of the Lord’s return. Early Christians drew upon these texts for reassurance and hope. Take, for example, the early Christian martyrdom

²Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds./trans., *The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus from The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:26.

account the *Martyrs of Lyon and Vienne* that describes the brutal persecutions the church faced in that region in 177 AD. One woman in particular named Blandina inspired the church with a faithful testimony because of her hope in Christ.

Hope is a good thing, but too many times, in the midst of political upheaval and shifting cultural moments, the church can lose hope. In these moments, may we rest in the hope that Christ will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and he will establish a kingdom that will have no end.

There is no doubt that persecution is coming and that Christians need to respond. If we can learn anything from those who have walked this road before, I hope those lessons include a recommitment to discipleship, a winsome and convictional cultural engagement, and a firm hope in the Lord's return.



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LEGAL FRONT

**Punished for Your Faith:
A Look at Modern-day Persecution**
RYAN TUCKER

Frontiers of Legal Opposition
CASEY BLAIR

Ten Steps to a Better Protected Church
RYAN TUCKER AND SCOTT BLAKEMAN

Making Ecclesiological Choices
BEN WRIGHT



Punished for Your Faith: A Look at Modern-day Persecution

BY RYAN TUCKER

RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION IS ON THE RISE both at home and abroad. While this isn't stopping the church from doing the work Christ called her to do—the gates of hell can't overcome the church—we have a duty to protect people of faith from unjust persecution.

When considering religious persecution, it's helpful to think about it on a sliding scale between two poles: more extreme and less extreme. But when does religious persecution violate our legal rights? It's not always clear, so what follows are some examples that shed light on when religious freedom is being violated.

The Case of Asia Bibi

Asia Bibi worked as a farm laborer in Punjab, Pakistan. One day, after working long hours in the summer heat, she was sent to get water from a nearby well. On her way back, she took a sip. When the women working with her found out, they were enraged.

Asia was a professing Christian; her coworkers were Muslims. What seemed like an innocent sip of water was extremely offensive to her coworkers. In their eyes, Asia was impure because she wasn't a Muslim, so by taking

the first sip, she essentially spoiled the water. But more importantly, her action was an insult to the Muslim prophet Muhammad.

Five days after this incident, police forced their way into Asia's home. They dragged her outside, and an angry mob beat her. She was arrested and charged with blasphemy. She was subsequently found guilty and sentenced to death. Asia spent eight years on death row. Thankfully, her sentence was overturned by the Supreme Court of Pakistan in October 2018 and Asia eventually regained her freedom.

This is a case of extreme persecution. Although the United States doesn't have blasphemy laws restricting religious freedom, many countries do. Alliance Defending Freedom International, the global arm of the organization I work for, is committed to changing that and defending religious freedom worldwide.

While we may not have blasphemy laws in the United States, that doesn't mean religious persecution is nonexistent here. As American society continues to lurch toward secularism, religious freedom rights are being jeopardized at an alarming rate.

SOGI Laws

Throughout our country's history, churches have enjoyed great freedom thanks to the First Amendment to the Constitution. Unfortunately, those who seek to diminish that freedom are actively attempting to persecute the church through sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) laws. These laws elevate sexual orientation and gender identity to protected class status, often at the expense of fundamental freedoms.

Enacted under the guise of equality, SOGI laws pose a serious threat to fairness, safety, and religious freedom, as pastor Esteban Carrasco and House of Destiny Ministries found out firsthand.

In 2016, the Massachusetts legislature passed legislation adding gender identity to the state's nondiscrimination law. Government officials said the law applied to churches, forcing them to violate their religious convictions.

Pastor Esteban and his church wanted to open a women's shelter for survivors of domestic violence, but due to the SOGI law, they would have been forced to violate their beliefs and allow men who identify as female to use the same changing rooms, restrooms, and living facilities as these vulnerable women.

Texas is not immune from such challenges, either. In 2014, after a SOGI ordinance was enacted in Houston, the city attempted to subpoena the communications, including sermons, of several area pastors in a lawsuit they weren't involved in. City officials were upset over a voter lawsuit filed after the city council rejected valid petitions to repeal the SOGI law. The city demanded that the pastors turn over their constitutionally protected sermons, emails, text messages, and other communications with their congregants so the city could see if the pastors had ever opposed or criticized the city. The pastors prevailed, but their plight demonstrates the myriad of threats the church faces.

More recently, the Virginia Values Act, enacted in 2020, forces nonprofit ministries to abandon their core convictions in hiring and other policies or face fines up to \$100,000 for each violation. Under this law, churches, religious schools, and Christian ministries are compelled to hire employees who do not share, and live by, the religious organization's stated beliefs on marriage, sexuality, and gender.

SOGI laws are not just a threat on the East Coast or in larger cities. Numerous towns, counties, and states across the country have enacted them. At the federal level, a bill deceptively named the "Equality Act" was passed by the US House of Representatives in February and is now before the Senate. If signed into law, which President Biden has promised to do if the bill reaches his desk, the Equality Act would add "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" to many existing federal non-discrimination laws.

The Equality Act does not include any religious exemptions. It could directly impact churches and ministries by preventing them from being able to live out biblical beliefs about marriage, sexual morality, and the distinction between the sexes. It could force churches to open sex-specific facilities to members of the opposite sex. It could compel ministries and Christian business owners to pay for health coverage that includes procedures that go against their deeply held convictions such as gender reassignment surgeries. And it could even forbid houses of worship from ensuring that all their employees abide by their doctrines or fundamental beliefs.

Persecution during a Pandemic

As government officials enacted regulations to prioritize health concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic, some officials abused their power to discriminate against churches.

In Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Greenville, Mississippi, city officials banned drive-in church services but allowed drive-in restaurants to remain open. Police officers punished church attendees in Greenville by issuing them \$500 fines as they listened to a sermon in the church parking lot, even though they were inside their cars with the windows up.

In Wake County, North Carolina, churches were prohibited from taking in-person tithes and distributing communion, even if the elements were commercially prepackaged and little or no person-to-person interaction took place, while restaurants could hand out food and exchange money.

And when Nevada began reopening, state officials allowed casinos, restaurants, bars, theme parks, and gyms to reopen at half capacity, but churches faced criminal and civil penalties if they opened their doors to 50 or more attendees.

Even though the First Amendment requires that religious organizations be treated no worse than secular organizations, these and many other churches faced blatant discrimination and had to advocate for their fundamental rights.

Fighting for Freedom's Future

Religious freedom is good for the spread of the gospel and good for humanity. Whether it's at home or abroad, humans deserve the chance to live according to their deeply held beliefs and convictions. Advocating for that kind of freedom and combatting persecution wherever it may arise is what Alliance Defending Freedom is committed to, and we're not backing down from that anytime soon.



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Frontiers of Legal Opposition

BY CASEY BLAIR

THE SHEER NUMBER OF CASES that deal with the free exercise of religion and the First Amendment could fill a small library. To fit into the parameters of this article, we will limit the discussion to cases either currently pending or decided over the past twelve months. We will look at how government orders and mandates affect that free exercise of religion during a global pandemic and then examine if anti-discrimination laws limit religious ministries from serving in the areas of foster care and adoption.

COVID-19 Public Safety Orders

In March 2020, governments across the country issued stay-at-home orders. Only essential workers and services were allowed in public, and general citizens were ordered to remain in their homes. Churches were ordered to either shut down or significantly reduce capacity. Since these initial orders, courts and their rulings have constantly evolved as they struggle to keep up with the science and changing landscape.

The general rule in cases where government regulations affect places of worship has been that religious establishments must follow valid and neutral laws that are applied to the general public. Government cannot single out religious institutions for favorable or inferior treatment. Based on ev-

ery state's issuing public health orders limiting both secular and religious public gatherings, congregations around the country filed suits challenging these restrictions on the basis that they violated the free exercise clause of the First Amendment. These suits, however, were met with varying results as we moved through the pandemic timeline.

Two cases early in the pandemic were decided by the Supreme Court in July of 2020. Those cases were *South Bay United Pentecostal Church v. Newsom*¹ and *Calvary Chapel Dayton Valley v. Sisolak*.²

South Bay is in California, Calvary Chapel in Nevada. Both churches were challenging their respective state's public health order governing which businesses were allowed to stay open during the pandemic and the terms by which they were allowed to do so. Both cases were narrowly decided against the churches in 5-4 decisions, with Chief Justice Roberts casting the deciding vote in both.

In *South Bay*, the California law gave churches more favorable treatment than other secular institutions by allowing places of worship to reopen sooner, albeit with limited capacity. The Supreme Court reasoned that since similar or more restrictive conditions applied to comparable secular gatherings, that these restrictions appeared consistent with the free exercise clause. California's order was allowed to remain in effect since the institutions most like places of worship were treated the same or less favorably than religious institutions.

The Nevada law presented an argument on the other side of the general rule. Under the Nevada order, churches could not admit more than 50 people at a time, while institutions such as casinos and bowling alleys operated at 50 percent capacity. Calvary Chapel argued that they were not treated the same as similarly situated secular institutions and that places of worship were singled out for inferior treatment. The Court disagreed and ruled against any injunctive relief at the time.

A few months later in November, the court took up the case of *Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn v. Cuomo*.³ The Diocese challenged the New York governor's restrictions on in-person worship. The Supreme Court ruled

¹South Bay United Pentecostal Church, et al., v. Gavin Newsom, Governor of California, et al. 592 U.S. (2021).

²Calvary Chapel Dayton Valley v. Steve Sisolak, Governor of Nevada, et al. 591 U.S. (2020).

³Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, New York v. Andrew M. Cuomo, Governor of New York, 592 U.S. (2020).

in favor of the church, reasoning that New York could not allow all retail stores to operate with a percentage-of-occupancy limit while imposing hard caps on places of worship. The court further stated, “Even in a pandemic, the Constitution cannot be put away and forgotten.”⁴ At this point in the timeline, injunctive relief was granted. Armed with this new precedent, South Bay renewed their challenge to California, the nation’s only remaining state prohibiting indoor religious worship. On February 2, 2021, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the church, and California lifted its restrictions on indoor worship. As of the date of this writing, the state of Washington is the lone state imposing limits on indoor worship.

Foster Care and Adoption

Tens of thousands of children are awaiting adoption in the Texas foster care system. Agencies across the state aid in helping these children through the foster care system. Many of those agencies espouse religious beliefs and definitions of marriage from different faiths and denominations. The Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston is one of those agencies attempting to place foster children into foster homes. In 2016, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued a regulation that requires religious foster care agencies to place children with same-sex couples. The archdiocese, along with the state of Texas, filed suit in federal court challenging the HHS mandate, arguing that the mandate goes against its deeply held religious belief of the definition of marriage. That case is currently pending in federal district court, most likely awaiting direction from the Supreme Court on a currently pending case on the subject (*Fulton*).

On November 2, 2020, the Supreme Court heard oral argument in *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia*.⁵ *Fulton* and Catholic Social Services (CSS) sued the city of Philadelphia after the city announced that it would no longer contract with CSS to provide foster services. The city reasoned that CSS was in violation of the city’s anti-discrimination laws and the HHS mandate by not certifying same-sex couples to be foster parents. The city relied on a landmark

⁴*Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn v. Cuomo*.

⁵*Fulton v. City of Philadelphia*, 140 S. Ct. 1104 (2020) and *Sharonell Fulton, et al. v. City of Philadelphia, et al.* 593 U.S. (2021). Editor’s note: the Supreme Court ruled unanimously in favor of CSS, with Justice Roberts issuing the opinion on June 17, 2021, accompanied by concurring opinions from Justices Alito and Gorsuch.

case from 1990, *Employment Division v. Smith*.⁶ Justice Scalia wrote in the majority opinion in *Smith* that citizens could not claim religious exemptions to laws so long as those laws are neutral and generally applicable to everyone. Laws must be written in a manner that applies to all people equally, without regard to race, creed, sex, orientation, or religion. The city of Philadelphia believes the law meets that standard and citizens must comply with it despite any religious conviction to the contrary. The city further argues that CSS discriminates against same-sex couples and that the city's anti-discrimination laws are neutral and equally applied. The decision in *Fulton* will provide insight into the Court's thinking when rights guaranteed to the LGBTQ community differ with the strongly held religious beliefs of others.

In 2017, HHS put out an interim rule allowing for an exemption that protects religious ministries after the Little Sisters of the Poor successfully challenged the HHS mandate requiring all employers to provide contraception to employees free of cost.⁷ The ruling does not prevent the government from offering these contraceptive services to anyone who wishes, but it does accommodate an exemption from the mandate on religious grounds. So based on the ruling in *Little Sisters*, HHS finalized its mandate to allow an exemption for religious beliefs. It remains to be seen if that also applies to foster and adoption ministries and the anti-discrimination laws at issue in *Fulton*. The *Fulton* decision should give further guidance to ministries offering those services.

**Disclaimer: This article is meant to give a cursory review of the current status of religious liberty cases at the time of its writing. In no way is it to be construed as legal advice or that the author has taken any position on the subject matter.

The Honorable Casey Blair is the presiding judge of the 86th District Court of Kaufman County, Texas. He is also the administrative judge for Kaufman County.

⁶ *Employment Division v. Smith*, 494 US 872 (1990).

⁷ *The Little Sisters of the Poor Saints Peter and Paul Home v. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, et al.* 591 U.S. (2020).



Ten Steps to a Better Protected Church

BY RYAN TUCKER AND SCOTT BLAKEMAN

AS A CHURCH LEADER, you are continually focused on preparedness. Whether it's being prepared to give an answer for the hope you have, preparing a sermon for Sunday, or helping prepare your congregation for eternity, much of your ministry revolves around being prepared.

But, as our culture runs to embrace destructive secularism and a distorted view of sexuality, church leaders should consider this question: Is my church legally prepared?

What follows is a checklist of ten things you can do to help protect your church and steward its fundamental freedoms.

1. Create a statement of faith.

Adopting a statement of faith makes it more likely a court will conclude the church acted on its well-documented and sincere religious beliefs rather than on an improper motive. A statement of faith should be the foundational document for every church. The statement expresses the church's core religious beliefs and serves as evidence of those beliefs in the event that these beliefs are called into question in a lawsuit. Because of its importance, the statement of faith should appear in the church's bylaws or other policy documents.

2. Create a statement on marriage and sexuality.

Issues of marriage and sexuality now regularly confront churches. Churches are receiving requests to use their facilities for same-sex ceremonies or to endorse those views by admitting individuals in same-sex relationships into church membership. As a result, it is important that churches develop a clear statement on marriage and sexuality. Ideally, this statement will exist within the church's statement of faith. Every employee, church member, marriage applicant, and volunteer should be aware of the church's religious position on these issues prior to entering an official relationship with the church.

3. Create a statement on the sanctity of human life.

Churches should consider adopting a statement of belief concerning the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death. This statement should also exist within the church's statement of faith. Additionally, churches should review their policies and contact their insurance brokers and agents to ensure they are not inadvertently covering life-ending drugs and devices that violate their conscience.

4. Create a statement of final authority for matters of faith and conduct.

It is impossible to anticipate every doctrinal dispute that a church might encounter, and it's important for churches to be able to respond in a legally defensible way. So, each church should identify (1) the source of religious authority for matters of faith and conduct and (2) the final human interpreter of that source for the church. This type of a statement should provide a "catch-all" to cover unforeseeable threats that might arise in the future.

5. Create religious employment criteria.

Generally, churches have a First Amendment right to make employment decisions based on their religious beliefs. But every church should still establish written religious criteria for its employees and volunteers. Best practices include requiring all employees to be members of your church. Although exceptions exist for religious organizations who give employment preference to members of their own religion, the Supreme Court has yet to precisely

clarify the scope of these exceptions. This uncertainty in the law means that ministries must be careful in crafting their documents and policies.

6. Have employees sign your church's statement of faith and code of conduct.

At a minimum, the church should require all employees to sign a statement, on at least an annual basis, affirming that they have read, agree with, and are willing to abide by the church's statement of faith. Your church's employees should also sign a code of conduct rooted in your statement of faith. These steps are critical. Some Christian ministries have lost the freedom to select employees who live consistently with their faith because they hired individuals who did not share their same fundamental beliefs.

7. Create religious job descriptions.

The church should create written job descriptions for every employment position. The descriptions should explain how the position furthers the church's religious mission, what the responsibilities and duties of the position include, and what training or skills are necessary for the position.

Although every position within a church furthers its religious mission, for legal purposes, the link between an employment position and the church's mission cannot be assumed. Clearly articulate this link in writing.

Churches should take particular care to highlight responsibilities that involve teaching the faith or other spiritual duties that directly further communicating the religious message and spreading the religious mission of the church.

Employee job descriptions should also include any religious grounds for limiting employment opportunities, especially if the limitations involve any categories protected by law (such as religion or sex).

8. Create a facility use policy.

Churches can strengthen their religious liberty protections by adopting a facility use policy that outlines the religious nature of the building(s) and prohibits uses that conflict with the church's beliefs. This policy is clear evidence of the church's beliefs and practices regarding use of its property and why certain practices or activities are never permitted.

The facility use policy should apply to all facility uses, regardless of whether it is a long-term or one-time use, by members or non-members, or for a fee or without cost. Churches that charge outside organizations to use their facilities should do so at less than market rates. Even when charging less than market rates, churches are at greatest risk when allowing commercial or for-profit entities to use church facilities and should seek legal counsel before doing so.

Finally, it's important to take the time to craft a specific policy and then train your staff on the proper application of this policy.

9. Create a marriage and wedding policy grounded in your marriage and sexuality statement.

This policy, grounded in the church's statement on marriage and sexuality, should define biblical marriage, specify criteria for holding a wedding at the church, and clearly define standards for the marriages the church pastors may solemnize or otherwise participate in.

10. Create a church discipline policy.

Church members sometimes engage in behavior that demands church discipline. Such discipline is consistent with nearly every church tradition, though specific approaches may vary. Churches enjoy considerable freedom under the United States Constitution to govern themselves consistently with their faith, including when it comes to exercising church discipline. Clearly informing regular attenders, potential new members, and existing members what the church believes about church discipline before issues arise may help the church better navigate church discipline problems when they do occur.

Conclusion

Though nothing can completely insulate your church from threats to its religious freedom, taking these steps will better protect your church should it face a lawsuit. Ultimately, to best protect your church and its freedom, remember the three Cs: *clearly* communicate what your church believes to your congregation and your community, *create* core documents so that your beliefs and practices are memorialized in writing, and *consistently* apply those documents.

More robust preparation is available through a membership with ADF Church Alliance. We directly advise churches and advocate to keep the legal doors open for the gospel. For more information, please visit ADFChurchAlliance.org.



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Making Ecclesiological Choices

BY BEN WRIGHT

THE CHURCH MADE SOME MISTAKES. Nobody denies that. *Not* among those mistakes was the fact that the congregation made same-sex couples feel welcome at its services.

But when one same-sex couple asked to participate in a public baby dedication with their adopted child, the church refused. It offered a private ceremony instead. Soon, under pressure from national media, the church relented and invited the couple to participate in its next dedication ceremony.

This is a true story, occurring not long ago, about a church across town from mine. Somewhere between welcoming everyone and being forced to make that ultimate accommodation, the church made mistakes. But where did it go wrong? And what would you have done differently? I'm going to assume four facts about your church:

1. You want to obey the Bible.
2. You don't want to cause misunderstandings or unnecessary frustration.
3. You want to show authentic biblical love and pastoral care.
4. You'd rather not get sued.

This article makes no promises, especially about not getting sued. I've watched *Perry Mason* and *Matlock*. For some reason, I read an *amicus curiae* brief once or twice. So this is not legal counsel. It's pastoral counsel. Once in a while, lawyers and pastors agree. As you consider these suggestions, read your Bible, then talk to a lawyer. Then read your Bible again. At that point, you may face difficult decisions. Writing then, as a pastor, I ask you to consider these steps in order to obey the Bible, care well for people, and minimize opportunities for misunderstandings and frustration.

1. Decide what your church believes about church membership. When people join your church, are they making a meaningful commitment, or is membership just a long-standing tradition rooted in long-forgotten reasons? Do you assume that both the church and the new member understand what membership entails, or do you provide instruction through a class or a pastoral conversation? You may even need to amend your governing documents.

NOTE: No one in Southern Baptist life has taught us biblical doctrines of church membership and discipline more than 9Marks. For detailed help on those issues, ask them where to start. You may not agree with all their conclusions. But before you reject them, you should consider their arguments and know why, based on the Bible, you disagree.

2. Decide what your church believes about the difficult issues—premarital sex and cohabitation, divorce and remarriage, gender and sexuality. Older statements of faith may not help much, since the pressure points we face today weren't on the radar a half century or more ago. The Baptist Faith & Message 2000 is your friend.

3. Decide how your church will practice church discipline. This is important: You are not loving others if you let them persist, unchallenged, in a pattern of sin that God says he will judge. Do you know when you would discipline a member? Or are you making it up as you go along? Are you operating based on biblical principles you've explained to the congregation, or are you assuming everyone will know what to do when the time comes?

4. Formally adopt a statement of faith and church covenant. Be sure to incorporate expectations for what members must believe and how they

must live. Eliminate surprises as much as you can in a rapidly shifting culture.

5. Make sure your congregation is familiar with your church's statement of faith and church covenant. Teach about them regularly. Allude to them in sermons and Sunday School classes as appropriate. Affirm the covenant together by a congregational reading at member meetings and the Lord's Supper.

6. Practice what your governing documents say. Be consistent. If your covenant specifies regular attendance—and it should—then remove members for non-attendance, not just for unrepentant sin that your church members find offensive. And by the way, when a member sins but then repents, that ordinarily ends the discipline process. Repentance is what Jesus requires.

7. Take new members into fellowship deliberately. Read through every word of your statement of faith and covenant. Take extra time to explain the sticky parts.

8. Ask members to sign your statement of faith and covenant. For whatever reason, Baptists often don't like to sign stuff. Don't die on this hill. It's not in the Bible. But documenting what members have affirmed may save you later.

9. If your statement of faith doesn't explicitly address difficult issues, consider recognizing other faithful summaries of biblical, moral instruction. The Nashville Statement, published in 2017, is one option worth evaluating.

10. Keep good records. Document congregational actions in church minutes. But also, keep records of times, dates, and the substance of pastoral conversations whenever they might relate to difficult church decisions. Err on the side of caution and thoroughness.


11. Ask lawyers with expertise in your state's laws to review your documents. But whatever they may say, don't sacrifice biblical principle for legal expediency. You can't eliminate all risk. Ask lawyers to help you identify and minimize it.

12. Teach the tough topics to your members. There is far greater likelihood that our members will be oppressed in the workplace for their biblical convictions than that pastors will be imprisoned or churches closed. Avoiding the tough topics does not help our members obey all Jesus' commands. Lead them to believe that whatever price they pay for faithful obedience will be a price they're glad they paid a hundred years from now.

13. Remember that the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention is confessional. We've already decided what we believe on the most difficult issues. Capitulation is not an option.

14. Last, and probably least, cancel baby dedications. The Bible doesn't require them. Strong emotions are intertwined. Land mines are buried everywhere. At the very least, require committed, formal membership to participate. The parents, that is. We're Baptists, after all.

So if you want to obey the Bible, avoid misunderstandings, love people well, and maybe not get sued, here's my three-point summary. Be clear. Be consistent. And be courageous. That'll preach.



Ben Wright planted and pastors Cedar Pointe Baptist Church in Cedar Park, Texas. He and his wife Meredith have six children, four car seats, and no pets.



EDUCATIONAL FRONT

Religious Persecution in Education

KEISHA RUSSELL

**Church and Parental Response
to Persecution or Opposition in Education**

HUNTER BAKER



Religious Persecution in Education

BY KEISHA RUSSELL

TODAY, THOSE WHO RESIST and even despise the gospel fight to win the minds of the youth and ensure that the next generation is devoted to secular ideology. Christian schools are critical to training children in a biblical worldview. Thus, such schools face opposition from an increasingly hostile society that pressures schools to conform and threatens their ability to hire like-minded leaders. But even though over three-fourths of private school students attend religiously affiliated schools,¹ private schools account for only 25 percent of the nation's schools and enroll a mere 10 percent of all elementary and secondary students.²

Since the majority of young people are enrolled in public schools, Christians should be vigilant about how those schools treat Christianity. Currently, public schools persecute Christian students and teachers by censoring biblical viewpoints, denying young Christians the right to share their faith, and blocking other students from hearing the gospel. This article discusses persecution against private Christian schools and against Christians in public schools.

¹National Center for Education Statistics, Private School Enrollment, updated May 2020, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgc>; Council for American Private Education, FAQs About Private Schools, last accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.capenet.org/facts.html>.

²National Center and Council for American Private Education.

The Threat to Christian Schools

Christian organizations and schools today face intense social pressure. They face negative press and lawsuits designed to coerce them into altering their religious beliefs or assimilating to popular culture.³ Opponents challenge the right of Christian schools to hire only employees who adhere to biblical beliefs. But the Constitution's First Amendment protects the right of religious organizations to choose their ministers, leaders, and teachers of the faith.⁴ Since any school employee, whether principal, teacher, or janitor, could have a spiritual impact on the environment, all employees in Christian schools who perform vital religious duties should be considered "ministers," and a school's choice about who should fill these roles is constitutionally protected. Still, there are advocacy groups seeking to chip away at this fundamental constitutional protection.

Public Schools Censor Christianity

Public schools often persecute Christian students by censoring and banning their religious points of view. Schools ban religious organizations from the school building,⁵ ban students from using religious speech in their school assignments, and ban student religious expression at school events like graduation⁶ or football games.⁷ But students have a First Amendment right to free speech. The government does not have absolute control over private student speech, even when the speech is delivered in a public setting or to a public audience.⁸ In fact, Christian students have the right to express their religious

³ E.g., Complaint, *Hunter v. US Dept. of Ed.*, D. Or. (Mar. 29, 2021) (students suing the Department of Education for allowing students who receive federal aid to attend Christian colleges that uphold biblical standards for marriage); Hemal Jhaveri, "Oral Roberts University isn't the feel good March Madness story we need," *USA Today*, March 23, 2020, <https://ftw.usatoday.com/2021/03/oral-roberts-ncaa-anti-lgbtq-code-of-conduct> (arguing that a Christian school's biblical standards are "archaic," "discriminatory," and "hateful").

⁴ *Our Lady of Guadalupe Sch. v. Morrissey-Berru*, 140 S. Ct. 2049 (2020); *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church & Sch. v. E.E.O.C.*, 565US 171, 188 (2012).

⁵ See *Lamb's Chapel v. Center Moriches Union Free Sch. Dist.*, 508US 384, 391-93 (1993); *Perry*, 460US at 46; *Hedges v. Wauconda Cmty. Unit Sch. Dist. No. 118*, 9 F.3d 1295, 1298 (7th Cir. 1993).

⁶ E.g., Elizabeth Turner, <https://firstliberty.org/cases/elizabeth-turner/> (last visited Jun. 4, 2021); Savannah Lefler, <https://firstliberty.org/cases/savannah-lefler/> (last visited Jun 4, 2021).

⁷ *Kennedy v. Bremerton Sch. Dist.*, 139 S. Ct. 634 (2019) (high school football coach fired for praying silently on football field after games); *Matthews, on behalf of M.M. v. Kountze Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 484 S.W.3d 416, 417 (Tex. 2016) (school district reverses ban on Bible verses on run-through banners at football games).

⁸ *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530US 290, 302 (2000); *Board of Ed. v. Mergens*, 496 US 226, 248-50 (1990).

beliefs in class assignments, artwork, and at public assemblies and non-curricular events.⁹

Although Christian students have the right to assemble in groups or clubs, some students still face resistance from public school officials when they attempt to start Christian clubs.¹⁰ Federal law and the United States Supreme Court require that religious clubs receive the same recognition, access, and rights as other non-curricular clubs.¹¹

The public school's inclination to ban Christianity does not stop at the student. Schools may also infringe on the rights of Christian teachers and coaches. For example, Joseph Kennedy, a coach, was fired from a public high school after he prayed silently for a few seconds on the football field after football games.¹² The US Supreme Court issued a statement clarifying that, although the inquiry is fact-specific, teachers are not categorically prohibited from engaging in religious conduct just because they are in the presence of students.¹³

Stand Firm

Churches, pastors, and parents must prepare to fight to train children in a biblical worldview and prevent schools from censoring students who appropriately share their faith. The best weapon against persecution in the realm of education is to ensure Christian children, teachers, and leaders will endure through these experiences and fight those who seek to squelch the gospel.

⁹ US Department of Education Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, June 16, 2020, https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/religionandschools/prayer_guidance.html (last accessed June 3, 2021).

¹⁰ E.g., *Hsu by & Through Hsu v. Roslyn Union Free Sch. Dist. No. 3*, 85 F.3d 839 (2d Cir. 1996) (stating that an exclusive leadership requirement is protected religious speech under the EAA); Daniela Barca, <https://firstliberty.org/news/daniela-barca-story/>, (last visited June 4, 2021).

¹¹ See *Board of Education of Westside Community Schools v. Mergens*, 496 US 226, 236 (1990) (“Thus, even if a public secondary school allows only one ‘noncurriculum related student group’ to meet, the Act’s obligations are triggered and the school may not deny other clubs, on the basis of the content of their speech, equal access to meet on school premises during noninstructional time.”); *Prince v. Jacoby*, 303 F.3d 1074, 1086 (9th Cir. 2002) (requiring equal access to meeting spaces, fundraising activities, loudspeakers, and bulletin boards); 20USC. § 4072(3); US Department of Education Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, June 16, 2020, https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/religionandschools/prayer_guidance.html (last accessed June 3, 2021).

¹² *Kennedy v. Bremerton Sch. Dist.*, 139 S. Ct. 634 (2019).

¹³ *Kennedy v. Bremerton Sch. Dist.*, 139 S. Ct. 634, 636 (2019).

If you face religious discrimination in education, you can report it to the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice. Free legal representation is available through First Liberty Institute, the largest legal organization dedicated exclusively to defending religious liberty for all Americans. Since 1997, the organization has assisted thousands of individuals and organizations in living according to their faith. Visit www.firstliberty.org for more information or to request legal help.



Keisha Russell is counsel with First Liberty Institute concentrating on religious liberty in education and First Amendment rights.



Church and Parental Response to Persecution or Opposition in Education

BY HUNTER BAKER

WHEN JACK PHILLIPS'S CASE (*Masterpiece Cakeshop*) came before the United States Supreme Court, many of us hoped for a grand resolution to the question of the clash between religious liberty and human sexuality. I personally dreamed that Justice Kennedy would take the opportunity to author one final opinion setting straight so much of the confusion that had been generated by his opinions on the topic. It was not to be. Jack Phillips prevailed in a narrow sense. The court ruled against the Colorado Commission on Human Rights because of the way it treated Phillips. The commission showed open contempt and hostility for the baker and his attempt to vindicate his own integrity as he reasonably and rightly appealed to the First Amendment's protection of the free exercise of religion.

The contempt and hostility are important because they demonstrate a lack of respect both for religious belief and for the person who possesses it. In this case, the belief is one that the human race has held consistently (that marriage is a male-female institution) for virtually all of recorded history. Nevertheless, in a short span of years, advocates of the revolution in human sexuality have achieved a nearly complete victory in legal, corporate, and artistic sectors. With that victory has come confidence that adherents to the earlier view are not only foolish but are also malignant.

Given that perspective, traditional Christians (having earlier resisted sex education in schools and sometimes the teaching of evolution) have fallen to an all-time low in the public esteem. Certainly, that is true in public education, which has long been dominated by secular and politically progressive groups and individuals. The bottom line is that evangelicals have gone from being viewed as out of step oddities to being seen as practitioners of evil along the lines of the KKK. Certainly, this view is starting to characterize the political and educational establishment. As a result, various officials have gained confidence in pressing cases against Christians with biblically orthodox beliefs.

Individuals who are believed to be low-status (or “deplorables,” as one politician suggested) and a threat to the social order are easy targets for discrimination. As Aaron Renn frequently states, Christians have, in the space of a lifetime, witnessed a period where their faith was seen as a net positive, a neutral factor, and finally, as a net negative.

It is critical to understand that Christians do not occupy a position of strength in many areas of the culture. That lack of strength is evident in public schools. Attempts to provide for the teaching of an evolutionary counterargument—including critiques of Darwinism offered by advocates of intelligent design—been defeated. At best, parents troubled by frank and progressive sex education have been able to achieve the ability for their children to opt out (assuming parents are aware of what’s coming). It appears little can be done to prevent school districts from actively promoting alternate models of human sexuality and the family. For a period of several decades, many Christians have experienced changes in public education sensibilities as a kind of long defeat. Where they cannot affect the substance, they seek accommodation, but all the while it is clear that they are largely supplicants.

There are a few different approaches to keep in mind as parents. The most obvious, perhaps, is to do as homeschoolers and Christian schoolers have done and to disengage from the public system. Doing so offers the opportunity to raise one’s children with an undiluted Christian worldview while sparing them the indoctrination often evident in the public system. This strategy has been applied with significant success and has transformed education in the United States in important ways. When I left college in 1992 for example, the only homeschooler I had ever met was the child of hippies. Today, homeschooling is increasingly common. However, it is important to

acknowledge that as we withdraw, secular progressives find minimal resistance to their agenda.

Another strategy is to stay and aggressively fight. Christian parents with kids in public schools can shrug off the low regard in which they are often held and seek vindication of their rights everywhere they can find them. This entails being a kind of Christian watchman inside the system and raising alarms and challenges whenever possible. This approach is also extremely important because jurisprudence shapes the public's expectation about the rights people have in a society. While Americans have long valued free speech, it is only because of a long line of court cases that free speech became as thoroughly hallowed as it had become by, say, the 1990s. We are in a period where parental rights and religious liberty will come under increasing challenge. The stronger a corpus of law that can be built around those two values, the more careful secular progressives will have to be in their use of schools to implement their philosophical programs.

There is a third strategy that I think we don't discuss often enough, which is what we might call the Mr. Tibbs strategy. Some of you may be old enough to remember the Academy Award winning Civil Rights era film *In the Heat of the Night* (also later a long-running television show). In the film, Sidney Poitier plays an African American police detective from Philadelphia. The film's action takes place in Mississippi, with Rod Steiger playing a Mississippi sheriff tied up in tension with Poitier's detective as they investigate a murder. At one point, Steiger's character refers to Poitier's policeman as "boy" one time too many and garners an angry objection.

"What do they call you up in Philadelphia, boy?" Steiger asks.

"They call me Mr. Tibbs," Poitier thunders. The impact of the moment is that the Black man reminds the White man (clothed in power in the Mississippi of this period) of their shared status as image bearers created by the same God and endowed with equal dignity. We need to have some of our own Mr. Tibbs moments when we remind those who besiege us of our shared heritage as members of the family of reason, which is a gift of God. We, too, are citizens.

When we find ourselves set upon by aggressive officials and treated with disrespect, it is important to always bear ourselves with dignity and respect. We should demonstrate the love of Christ at all times, never degenerating into pure power politics or making nuisances of ourselves in such a way as

to make it harder for others to vindicate their rights. I have often reminded my students that the secular world sets the bar so low for people like us, it is not difficult to step over it. Whenever we disagree, whenever we face adverse action, whenever we have to make an appeal, let our words be gracious and seasoned with salt (Colossians 4:6) so as to give a right response.

It is easy for those who hate us to impose upon us when they see ugliness and vengefulness. We should make it more difficult by letting them see that they impose their ideological attacks upon reasonable and loving people who simply seek to live their lives with integrity. Let them feel the price in their consciences in imposing upon sincere, thoughtful, faithful people who simply seek to follow God.

Jack Phillips's simple decency surely played a role in helping him win a narrow victory at the Supreme Court. Let us clothe ourselves similarly.

Hunter Baker, JD, PhD, is the dean of arts and sciences and professor of political science at Union University. He is the author of three books on politics and religion.



CONCLUSION

**The Glory of Christ and the
Persecution of the Saints**

NATHAN LOUDIN



The Glory of Christ and the Persecution of the Saints

BY NATHAN LOUDIN

This journal was compiled in response to requests for resources from pastors and leaders in our convention. Today's challenges can seem overwhelmingly complicated. We hope you find these resources to be spiritually encouraging, intellectually insightful, and practically helpful for navigating troubled waters. More than anything, we hope this resource helps you keep faith in Jesus Christ, whose glory is the central purpose for all which God ordains.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was working to show that Christ is the purpose of all God's mandates and structures when he was interrupted by World War II. The war began before Bonhoeffer could complete what he believed would be his life's work, now published under the title *Ethics*. The Third Reich forbade him to speak publicly or publish any kind of written work. *Ethics* was first published by his student, Eberhard Bethge, in 1949 after portions were retrieved from a hiding place in his garden. Other parts of the work, presumably lost forever, were confiscated by the police before Bonhoeffer's arrest on April 5, 1943. Bonhoeffer wrote that every realm of God's ordered creation has one central purpose—the glory and reality of Christ.

The world, like all created things, is created through Christ and with Christ as its end, and consists in Christ alone. To speak of the world without speaking of Christ is empty and abstract. The world is relative to Christ, no matter whether it knows it or not. This relativity of the

world to Christ assumes concrete form in certain mandates of God in the world. The Scriptures name four such mandates: labour, marriage, government and the Church.¹

God has created each institution for Christ. As Christians, we play a part in each of these ethical realms. As we engage each of these tasks, remember that our sole purpose is not so much to “win,” but to boast of Christ. In the words of the apostle Paul, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him” (Colossians 1:15–16 CSB).

How can we make our way through the challenges before us? We trust you find these articles fit the particular challenges we are facing, though there is much more we could address.

Bonhoeffer offers a helpful summarization of Christian engagement: “The will of God is nothing other than the becoming real of the reality of Christ with us and in our world. The will of God, therefore, is not an idea, still demanding to become real; it is itself a reality already in the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ.”²

Brothers and sisters, boast of Christ’s glory, walk in Christ’s righteousness, preach Christ crucified and resurrected for sinners, and pray that others come to know him. By this, God may enable us, as stated in section XV of the Baptist Faith & Message 2000, “to bring industry, government, and society as a whole under the sway of the principles of righteousness, truth, and brotherly love” while on our way to be with him.

I trust this journal will be a help in following Jesus’ instruction to the sheep among wolves, “Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16 ESV). We may suffer little or much for the name of Christ. But “It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master” (Matthew 10:25 ESV).

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¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 204, Kindle.

²Bonhoeffer, 209.