

# Eroding Religious Freedom

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The American Constitution provides for freedom of religion in the United States. Its first amendment concisely spells this out: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . . ." In 1802, in response to a letter from the Danbury [Connecticut] Baptist Association concerning religious liberty, President Thomas Jefferson wrote:

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God; that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship; that the legislative powers of the government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between church and State. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore man to all of his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.

Though it appears merely in a presidential letter, Jefferson's commentary on the religion clause of the first amendment has been the standard interpretation for nearly two centuries. As the new millennium begins, however, religious freedom in America faces heightened and persistent attack. Rather than yanking it wholesale from under Americans, liberal, humanist powers in education, social organizations and government have taken the strategy of unraveling this freedom one thread at a time.

## **Assault on God**

In this day of tolerance, multiculturalism and human rights, such an attack seems counter to the prevailing spirit of the times. We are urged to accept homosexuality, interracial dating and marriage, sexual license, and a host of "progressive" ideas and practices in the name of freedom and diversity. Conversely, we are told that Bob Jones University is bigoted and anti-Catholic, and the Southern Baptist Convention is misogynistic, because they base their beliefs on a literal reading of the Bible. It is a dirty, little secret that the liberality of the political/social left applies only to those who agree with it.

If America were truly a tolerant, free country, the government would allow prayer and the posting of the Ten Commandments in schools and government buildings. Creationism could be taught alongside evolution as a viable explanation of how the universe and life began. Groups like the Boys Scouts could deny participation to homosexuals or others who do not uphold its moral code. Moralists like radio talk-show host Dr. Laura Schlessinger would not be pilloried by the media for biblical views on homosexuality, adultery and family—considered "hate speech" by many. A person would not be judged as part of a "vast right-wing conspiracy" because he calls himself a God-fearing, Bible-believing Christian.

Lately, several incidents have brought religious freedom to the fore. Probably the most reported of these is Presidential-candidate and Texas governor George W. Bush's visit to Bob Jones University in

Greenville, South Carolina, not long before that state's primary election. By the mere facts that he spoke at the institution and did not condemn its biblically correct stands on interracial dating and the Catholic Church, he has been excoriated by the media. This guilt-by-association tactic is not only wrong but also untrue. Bush is only moderately religious (a mainstream Christian) and does not agree with the university's positions. In fact, Bush apologized later for not denouncing them.

It is less well known that the IRS denied tax-exempt status to Bob Jones University, a liberal arts church school, because of its beliefs. Normally, for a nonprofit organization to qualify for tax exemption, all it needs to do is prove that it is charitable, religious or educational in nature and does not engage in political lobbying. During the Carter administration, however, the IRS required private schools to sign assurances that they would do nothing that might make minorities feel uncomfortable. Bob Jones University would not do this because of its longstanding policy against interracial dating, and the IRS revoked its tax exemption.

A few years later, the Reagan administration's Justice Department ordered the IRS to restore tax-exempt status to the university, saying the IRS had no constitutional authority to add the minority litmus test to its requirements. The Democrat-led Congress, which has the duty to write laws, refused to cooperate by writing the nondiscrimination requirement into the law, so the issue went to the Supreme Court. Chief Justice Warren Burger, writing for the majority upholding the IRS requirement, said that organizations seeking tax-exempt status "must demonstrably serve and be in harmony with the public interest."

This ruling has significant, long-term ramifications for Christians. It means that the federal government now has the power to define what doctrines are or are not "in harmony with the public interest." If it disagrees with a particular belief, it, through the IRS, can threaten a church with denial of tax-exempt status, a huge financial blow to any nonprofit group that depends on contributions for support. Fortunately, the U.S. government has not chosen to use this power, but it is there should the need arise.

Bob Jones University, a conservative, fundamentalist institution, still operates without tax exemption. Ironically, the IRS has granted it to Planned Parenthood, the National Organization for Women Foundation, the Sierra Club, the Environmental Action Foundation and many other liberal, humanistic organizations. It seems abortion, feminism and radical environmentalism are in "the public interest," but biblical honesty is not.

### **Using Zoning Laws**

A second, underhanded trick in limiting religious freedom is using zoning ordinances to shut churches out of certain areas of cities and towns. This tactic seems reasonable on the surface, but the result is "prohibiting the free exercise" of religion. It has even been used to try to evict established churches from commercial areas or neighborhoods.

One town that has tried to do this is Jacksonville, Oregon. As of the beginning of March 2000, the city council there is restricting a church's hours of operation as well as its activities because a few people in the neighborhood complained about noise and traffic. In addition, the First Presbyterian Church must remain closed on Saturdays. The congregation wants to build a new building on 10 acres it owns within the town limits, but the council has ruled that it may not hold weddings or funerals at the new site, serve alcohol on the premises, or park more than 40 cars in its parking lot on weekdays.

Groves, Texas, is also using zoning laws to combat His House Family Church, which has been forced to sue the city to use its own building. The town planning and zoning commission has denied it a permit to operate because of the church's proximity to a middle-class neighborhood. Some residents have complained that the church attracts "unwanted elements" to their community and that the pastor has an unorthodox preaching style.

Grand Haven, Michigan, will not give the Haven Shores Community Church a building permit to remodel its storefront space in the South Village Plaza shopping center. City zoning officials told the pastor that his church could not even occupy the space because religious worship is not allowed in a business district. The zoning ordinance states that "private clubs, fraternal organizations and lodge halls" may exist in its B-1 districts, as well as "theaters, assembly halls, concert halls, or other similar places of public assembly"—but evidently not churches. The Grand Haven city council drove in the final nail by refusing to overrule the zoning board because it feared other churches might also want to relocate to B-1 districts!

These few examples are not the only ones in America. Similar uses of zoning laws to keep out or control churches have occurred in Massachusetts, Florida and Illinois. Though this means is a minor persecution, it drastically shortens the step to more virulent anti-Christian behaviors.

### **Coming: Persecution**

In recent years, the church of God has not been troubled by restrictions of its religious freedom, but that does not guarantee it will not happen, even in the near future. As American society becomes more perverse and intolerant, the church should stand out in stark contrast. While most of the church groups are small and relatively ineffective in witnessing to the world, we are safe and at peace, but if that should change, the church will clash with the powers that be.

Our Savior prophesies about the coming religious persecution in Luke 21:12-13, 16-19:

But before these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and rulers for My name's sake. But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony. . . . You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will send some of you to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But not a hair of your head shall be lost. In your patience possess your souls.

His prophecy parallels the fifth seal in Revelation 6:9-11:

When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" And a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.

As time speeds toward the return of Christ, we can expect religious persecution and even martyrdom to intensify. Society is already humanistic, and human nature "is enmity against God" (Romans 8:7). It is no great leap from the current atmosphere of hostile tolerance to outright violence. An objective

observer of those debating abortion, homosexuality, animal rights or environmentalism can discern that the veneer of civility is quite thin. A misstep at any time could plunge America over the edge of tolerance into the abyss of religious persecution.

However, it is encouraging to notice Christ's instructions to us when this time comes:

But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony. Therefore settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist. . . . In your patience possess your souls. (Luke 21:13-15, 19)

His advice: We should not be overly concerned if this should happen to us because He will be with us to comfort us and inspire us in our answers. The truth we will speak will be so wise and right that our persecutors will have no retort. This may incite them to more violence, even to killing us, but if we patiently endure it, we will surely save our eternal life. Our entrance into God's Kingdom is what really matters. If we are martyred for it, our reward will reflect our unflinching faithfulness to God and His way of life.

The apostle Peter shows the proper godly attitude toward persecution:

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try [test] you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. . . . Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator. (1 Peter 4:12-14, 19)

We need not fear the coming days when our religious freedom will be stolen. They will be dreadful and dark, and some will lose their lives. But, if we commit ourselves to living righteously, we have the assurance of our faithful Creator that we will receive salvation and great reward in His Kingdom!