

# LOSE THIS ONE FREEDOM AND YOU'LL LOSE THEM ALL

Dr. Robert J. Pacienza



The D. James Kennedy

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STATESMANSHIP

Augustine once said that a nation is known by its supreme love, by that one thing around which it orders everything else. With regard to the United States, historically, that supreme love has been *liberty* and, in particular, *religious liberty*—the belief that each person has intrinsic soul-value, is free to keep his or her own convictions about ultimate reality, and should be guaranteed the right to organize his or her life around those convictions.

We recognize this love for freedom in the Founding Fathers' refusal to be shackled by the King of England or to be put into bed with the Church of England. We see it in the very first amendment to our Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." We experience it in most of our nation's laws and Supreme Court rulings until the 1960s. Only in the last few years, has the Court begun to respect religious liberty again.

Indeed, historically, Americans have viewed religious liberty as the "first freedom" because it strikes at the heart of what it means to be human. If a person is free to make decisions about the nature of ultimate reality, and to live in accordance with those decisions, every other freedom will fall in place. Conversely, if religious freedom is abolished or even subtly undermined, every other freedom is threatened as well.

## **Threats to Religious Liberty**

Which brings us to our present era, in which religious liberty has been threatened repeatedly. For decades now, special interest groups on the Left have tried to undermine religious liberty by reinterpreting it as the mere freedom of "worship." The problem with this move is that the First Amendment doesn't merely secure the right to "worship" but also the right to "exercise" or act in accordance with our convictions.

In recent years, the Supreme Court of the United States has been one of the most significant offenders. Consider the *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) case in which a majority ruled that same-sex individuals have the right to marry one another. This ruling is problematic, first of all, because the left-leaning court pretended to be interpreting the Constitution when in reality they were creating a "right" out of thin air. But second, it is problematic because the majority purposely undermined religious liberty by refusing to guarantee that religious dissenters would be granted the freedom to respond to the phenomenon of same-sex "marriage" in a way that aligns with their convictions.

In a dissenting opinion, Chief Justice Roberts wrote: "The majority graciously suggests that religious believers continue to 'advocate' and 'teach' their view of marriage. The First Amendment guarantees, however, the freedom to 'exercise' religion. Ominously, that is not a word the majority uses."

In an even sharper dissent, Justice Alito wrote: "I assume that those who cling to old beliefs will be able to whisper their thoughts in the recesses of their homes, but if they repeat those views in public, they will risk being labeled as bigots and treated as such by governments, employers, and schools. ...[T]he Nation will experience bitter and lasting wounds."



Likewise, state governments have been significant offenders. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, California implemented a ban on indoor church services. Fortunately, the Supreme Court ruled against California's ban on indoor church services in February 2020. But the incident revealed the Left's hand: religion is replaceable and religious liberty is discardable.

Finally, and quite ironically, the United States Commission on Civil Rights is among the worst offenders. In a [report](#) entitled, "Peaceful Coexistence: Reconciling Nondiscrimination Principles with Religious Liberties," Chairman Martin Castro argued that the concept of religious liberty functions as a mask for hypocrisy, discrimination, intolerance, racism, homophobia, and Christian supremacy, and thus it should lose its status in American public life.

Castro has it wrong. While there certainly must be some individuals out there who mask their hatred behind a pretense of "religious liberty," a truly evangelical concern for religious liberty comes from a place of love rather than hate. We are motivated by a sincere desire to honor the Lord not only in our homes and places of worship but also in the public square.

If Castro and other leftists have their way in demoting religious liberty, the negative consequences will affect everyone in the nation—not just Christians. If religious liberty is discarded, then one ideology, Secular Progressivism, will become the *de facto* official religion of the United States. This move will destabilize our nation in perpetuity, given the fact that Secular Progressivism is an ever-morphing phenomenon, whose views will soon be discarded in favor of tomorrow's "trending" views.

## **Practical Ways to Safeguard Religious Liberty**

So, what can everyday Christians do to safeguard religious liberty?

We can show up on Election Day to cast our vote for politicians who support the free exercise of religion. We can speak in favor of religious liberty in our coffee shop conversations, on our Facebook pages, and in our parent-teacher meetings. And we can make the best use of the religious liberty we have right now to show our neighbors the solidity and attractiveness of an authentically Christian way of life.

The reason our American experiment has worked for so long is its safeguarding of religious freedom. When religious liberty is undermined, every other freedom is threatened as well. If freedom of religion disappears, so will freedom of speech, association, and press. And once these freedoms evaporate, the only liberty remaining will be the government's freedom to impose on us whatever it wishes.

## **For the Sake of Our Children and Grandchildren**

Augustine was right. A nation is known by its supreme love. For the United States, that supreme love has been liberty. Throughout history, this cherished freedom has shaped our nation's values and character. It is incumbent on each of us, therefore, to stand up for religious liberty, safeguarding the very foundation upon which our republic was built. In doing so, we uphold the



Founders' ideals and secure for our children and grandchildren the right to align their lives with their deepest convictions—freely, openly, and without fear.

