

Religion Today  
April 1, 2015  
***“Religious Freedom and Christianity”***  
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There may be a lot of smoke, but the fire is pretty small. The nationwide political tempest around Indiana's new Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) is much bigger than the law itself deserves. The bill's proponents touted this as law to “protect” the religious rights of Christians (in particular) who do not want to support gay weddings because they do not believe in same-sex marriage. The bill's opponents argue that it is a license to discriminate.

Neither is correct. An RFRA law is a tool that allows the accused in a discrimination lawsuit to use religious belief as a defense. It does not require the judge or the jury to agree that the belief provides the defendant a compelling reason to discriminate. In the 20 years since the first RFRA was passed (in federal law), no court case has been successful in permitting anti-gay discrimination.

In other words, RFRA laws provide no automatic right to discriminate on a religious basis. All they do is provide the mechanism for a case that would determine whether a person's belief rises to a threshold sufficient for such discrimination. Never have anti-gay views, in any form, risen to that threshold.

Of course, future court cases may be different. But, it will be a long and arduous legal process, and the outcome may well be that RFRA laws do NOT permit religious discrimination against homosexuals by individuals or corporate entities.

Since the Indiana law gained national attention, a lot of ink (both physical and virtual) has been spilled discussing it. RFRA laws have become a political symbol in the ongoing national debate over same-sex marriage but, given their actual wording, they are a rather hollow symbol.

Why do Christians need protections from homosexuals? The president of the Family Research Council, Tony Perkins, gave one common answer: “The government shouldn't force religious businesses and churches to participate in wedding ceremonies contrary to their owners' beliefs.”

Are Christians so fragile that they are harmed by being

employed in weddings they do not theologically agree with?

Jesus taught his followers to be tougher than that. Should they be oppressed through violence or compulsion, they should not rise up and resist. If hit on one cheek, they should offer the other. If forced to walk a mile, they should go a second (Matthew 5:38-42).

Jesus continued this set of ideas by concluding, “Give to him who begs from you.” How does this apply? When a same-sex couple asks a Christian photographer to photograph their wedding, he or she should say yes, and be glad they are willing to pay!

Jesus consistently taught his devotees to love their neighbors. When questioned about who was a neighbor, he told the parable of the Good Samaritan. A Samaritan, a class of people despised by Jews, stopped to help a Jew who was beaten when no one else would. He even paid for medical treatment (Luke 10:25-37). And Jesus' moral for this story? This is what a person must do to “inherit eternal life.”

Just so that his followers would not mistake his point, Jesus even required them to love their enemies, saying that otherwise they were no better than tax collectors (Matthew 5: 43-47).

When he describes his role in the Great Judgment, Jesus makes clear that he is on the side of the oppressed, of those who suffer discrimination. He identifies with the oppressed and says, “As you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:31-46)

So, what would Jesus do? It is clear, from his own words, that Jesus would not approve of Christians discriminating against anyone. Those who do are in danger of losing their access to eternal life. Instead, they should be helping those they disagree with, even when they disagree with the outcome.

In the end, the question facing American Christianity is what do Christians want to be known for? Is Christianity the religion of discrimination, of treating people as second-class citizens, or is it the religion of loving neighbors and enemies as Jesus taught?