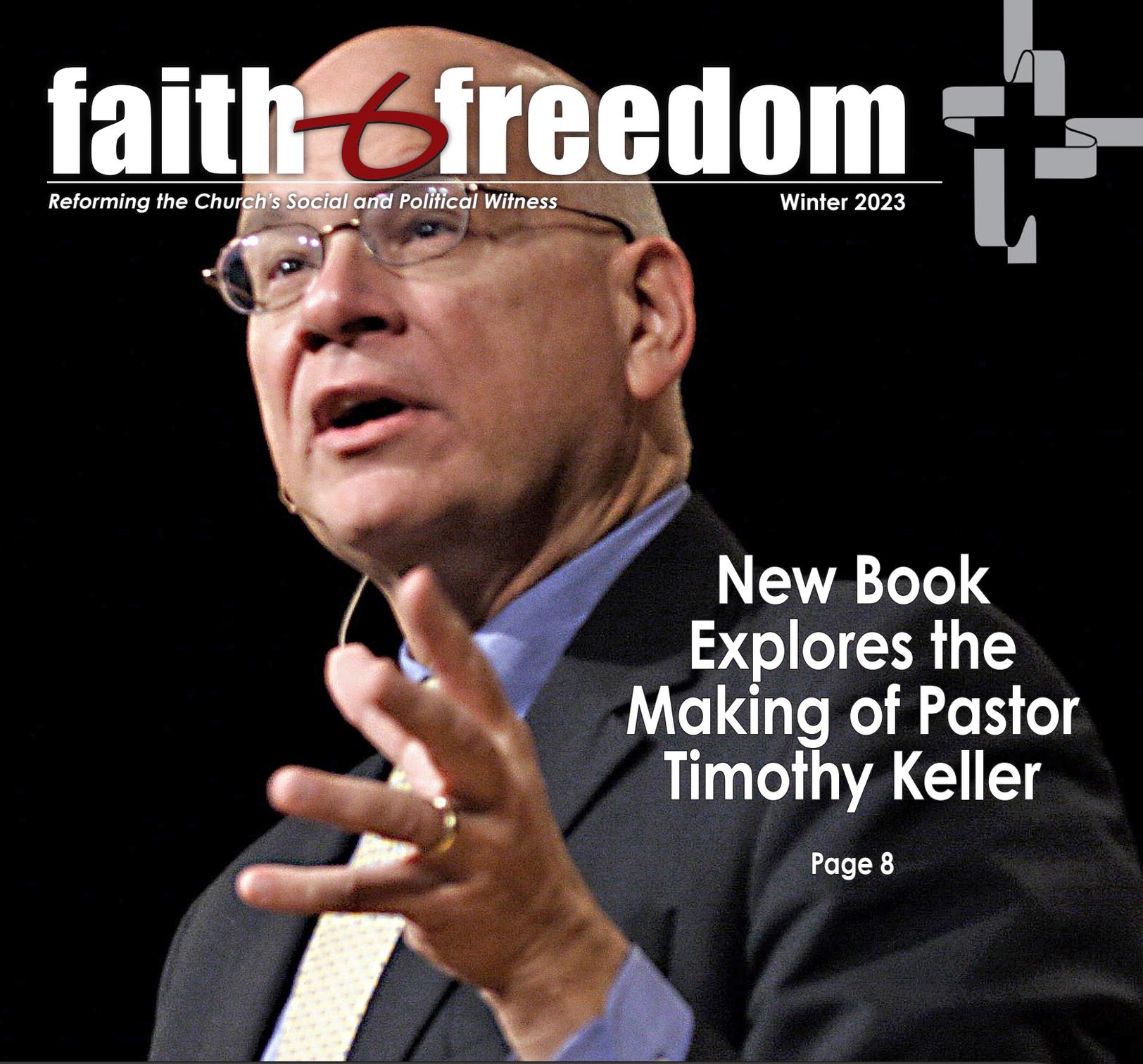


faith & freedom

Reforming the Church's Social and Political Witness

Winter 2023

A photograph of Timothy Keller, a bald man with glasses, wearing a dark suit, a light blue shirt, and a yellow patterned tie. He is speaking and gesturing with his right hand, which has a gold ring on the ring finger. The background is dark.

New Book Explores the Making of Pastor Timothy Keller

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Retired Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire Gene Robinson processes into the sanctuary of The Falls Church Episcopal on Sunday, October 30, 2022. (Photo: YouTube screen capture / The Falls Church Episcopal)



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Church Pastor Timothy Keller taken
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Post-Denominational America

American denominationalism is fading. Non-denominationalists are now the largest non-Catholic religious group in America. Nearly all denominations are declining. Liberal ones are declining faster than conservative ones. Nearly all growing congregations are non-denominational.

What is the impact on American society?

We at IRD have for more than 40 years mostly focused on denominations. From the start in 1981 we have been ecumenical, including Mainline Protestants, Evangelicals, Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. We critiqued the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches, which are mostly comprised of Mainline denominations. We sometimes collaborated with and sometimes critiqued the National Association of Evangelicals, which is mostly comprised of denominations, although congregations and parachurch groups can join.

For many people, IRD is mostly associated with Mainline Protestantism. Critiquing its political witness and working for its reform was a big part of our work. We had special renewal projects for United Methodists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians (PCUSA) that focused on the legislation at their governing conventions. Eventually, in the early and mid 2000s, traditionalists lost their battles in these denominations and either left, created new denominations, or yielded to the new reality. The exception was United Methodism, where traditionalists never legislatively lost, but who are now exiting, mostly for a new denomination, realizing the U.S. part of the global denomination is unfixable.

The new denominations that emerged from Mainline Protestantism are lean, don't have bureaucracies, and themselves reflect in many ways America's post denominationalism. Perhaps America has only one remaining "great" denomination, which is the Southern Baptist Convention. A "great" denomination is national, has millions of members, has universities and colleges, seminaries, publishing houses, journals, and transgenerational brand loyalty. But the Southern Baptist Convention annually loses hundreds of thousands of members. Many of its most successful congregations now disguise their denominational ties. And even many ardent church members no longer relate strongly to the denominational brand. They and their children move seamlessly among evangelical congregations. Many if not most nondenominational churches are effectively Baptist in theology and polity, governed congregationally, through elders, and practicing believer's baptism.

There are some growing denominations, such as the Assemblies of God, which is Pentecostal and very multiethnic. But its adherents don't necessarily strongly identify with the denomination. They regard themselves as Christians, or maybe as Pentecostals, who relate to their congregation but give little thought



Church photo: An 1862 stone church and 1894 frame church atop a hill outside Nerstrand, Minnesota. (Photo: McGhievery / Wikimedia Creative Commons)

to their denomination, if they are even aware of it. Why should churchgoers think much about their denominations if their clergy don't talk a lot about them, if they are not going to denominational gatherings, if they are not attending denominational schools, if they are not reading denominational literature, and if there are no major denominational leaders with high profiles?

The decline of American denominationalism is sad in many ways. The Mainline Protestant denominations, with the Baptists and a few others, have been the pillars of American religion and for much of American civil society since the beginning of our republic. All successful movements and communities ultimately need multigenerational institutions to sustain and transmit their message. Christianity, if orthodox, cannot be divorced from institutions.

But the decline of American denominations does not necessarily herald the decline of American Christianity. Most of today's denominations emerged from the ferment of the Second Great Awakening, or were breakoffs from those denominations, or emerged from the Holiness and Pentecostal revivals of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The rise of post-WWII evangelicalism generated a new wave of denominational activity, although much of the action emanated from independent parachurch

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Mark Tooley



Mark D. Tooley is the President of the Institute on Religion and Democracy

Episcopal Attendance Crashes as COVID Restrictions Take Toll

Masked, socially distanced, and shuttered Episcopal Church congregations were hit hard by COVID-19 closures and delayed reopenings, according to statistics released in late November by the Office of the General Convention.

Data from 2021 parochial reports shows that domestic membership fell 56,314 persons to 1,520,388 (-3.57%) from 1,576,702, while average Sunday attendance fell in an unprecedented rate of decline of 165,328 persons to 292,851 (-36.08%) from 458,179 in 2020. A total of 62 congregations were permanently closed.

Median Average Sunday Attendance in the denomination dropped from 55 persons in 2017 to 21 persons in 2021.

Long-term, 88% of Episcopal parishes saw their attendance decline 10% or greater in the past five years, and 90% of congregations report attendance of less than 100 persons.

The 2021 statistics are the first attendance numbers affected by COVID-19 restrictions (in 2020, the church only reported attendance data for the pre-pandemic period January through early March).

Episcopalians track attendance alongside membership and plate-and-pledge as three objective metrics year-over-year. Finances were the only metric to move in a positive direction, with the average pledge growing from \$3,226 to \$3,360 (+\$134). Plate-and-pledge grew

3.33% in 2021 after declining 4.3% in 2020. This reflects an inflation-adjusted loss; however, the 3.3% rate of growth trailed the 4.7% average inflation rate in 2021.

Across the past decade, only the Diocese of Navajo Missions has reported any increase in membership, with some domestic dioceses reporting declines in that time period of up to 75%.

In 2021, dioceses posting the largest year-over-year membership declines were found across different regions: Maine (-12.1%), Vermont (-10.6%), Albany (-12.6%), Kentucky (-9.6%), South Dakota (-11.6%), Eau Claire (-9.9%), Iowa (-10.3%) and even in otherwise fast-growing states including Idaho (-11.4%). Attendance similarly declined across all domestic dioceses, but was especially pronounced in Oregon (-56.2%), Newark (-48.2%), Maryland (-49.4%), Easton (-46.7%), Lexington (-50.8%), North Carolina (-52.8%), and Iowa (-48.9%).

Gender identity, sexuality, and race continue to be prominent topics of discussion in the denomination. In October remarks given before the church's Executive Council, House of Deputies President **Julia Ayala Harris** warned members to "brace for impact" and that they "are facing a collision."

"We are finally beginning the truth-telling around racism and white supremacy in our beloved church," Harris declared. The newly-elected legislative officer recalled an LGBTQ+ listening session of the Executive Council held in 2022.

"We listened to our trans and non-binary relatives tell us their stories about their lived experiences in The Episcopal Church. They helped us understand how we can move forward as a church to be more inclusive, especially when it comes to the right use of names and pronouns." ✚



Masked deputies participate at the Episcopal Church General Convention held July 2022 in Baltimore, Maryland (Photo: Cynthia L. Black / courtesy of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark)



Leading Bishops Link United Methodism, Disaffiliations, Club Q Murders

by John Lomperis

*Statue of Simon of Trent, associated with anti-Semitic blood libels
(Photo: Wikimedia Commons)*

The United Methodist Church's slow-motion split is accelerating, with over 2,000 congregations having disaffiliated from the denomination. As the split progresses, tensions are worsening, with bishops at the center of the controversy.

In November, the Western Jurisdiction elected openly partnered gay activist **Cedric Bridgforth** and then the Western Jurisdiction bishops formally consecrated him as a bishop. Both actions openly defy our denomination's long-standing rules. This came when all five of the UMC's U.S. jurisdictions simultaneously met, officially endorsing LGBTQ liberationist ideology, seeking to purge orthodox believers from leadership, and blocking even moderate theological conservatives from inclusion among the many new bishops elected. The first new bishop elected was the North Central Jurisdiction's **Kenneth Biggam-Tsai**, who declared that in the UMC, "it is not important that we agree on who Christ is." The final bishop elected was the Western Jurisdiction's **Dottie Escobedo-Frank**, who actually "calls for heretics and edge-dwellers to lead the church forward."

Then in late December, Bishop **Sue Hauptert-Johnson** ended her heavy-handed tenure as bishop of the North Georgia Conference by suddenly declaring that her conference leadership will refuse to allow congregations to disaffiliate from the denomination under a "gracious exits" provision that expires this year. Evidently, she panicked over how many

congregations were rushing to leave the liberalizing denomination, and so chose to act like a tin-pot dictator who suddenly closes polls and professes concern about unspecified irregularities to prevent people from voting against her.

Meanwhile, two leading bishops used the mass shooting at Colorado's "Club Q" gay nightclub to attack traditionalist Methodists.

Within 24 hours of the massacre, while the facts were still emerging, partnered lesbian Bishop **Karen Oliveto**, president of the UMC's Western Jurisdiction College of Bishops, connected the mass murder to UMC disapproval of homosexual practice and recent disaffiliations of theologically orthodox congregations. "There is a blood red thread that runs through all this, that eventually gives rise to violence and death," she insisted.

Then Bishop **Latrell Easterling**, president of the Northeastern Jurisdiction College of Bishops, disseminated Oliveto's statement, expressing her cross-country agreement.

At the time of these bishops' statements, it was not yet clear if the murders were any sort of anti-LGBTQ hate crime. After all, the primary suspect was a member of the LGBTQ community.

Even if these murders were motivated by anti-gay hatred, it is absurd to suggest that United Methodism—and billions of Christians over the centuries—are connected by some "blood-red thread" of blame

The awful reality is that hate crimes target all sorts of ethnic, religious, political, and cultural groups. Anyone can decry such evil acts without necessarily affirming the distinctive beliefs or practices of the targeted group. People who disagreed with the political platform of Norway's Labor Party were not automatically complicit in **Anders Breivik's** slaughtering dozens of its supporters in 2011.

Liberal officials claim that the UMC will still have "a place" for traditionalist believers. But what sort of "place"? A preview was provided when November's North Central Jurisdiction subjected all delegates present to a lengthy re-education session about the alleged evils of churches failing to embrace secular LGBTQ liberationist ideology. The clear message was that you cannot be truly loving if you hold more traditional theological and moral values.

Like that re-education session, Oliveto and Easterling talk sanctimoniously about the need for conservatives to have "open hearts to listen deeply to stories" of *particular kinds* of sexual minorities. But have such UMC leaders ever sought to "listen deeply" to the stories of formerly transgendered individuals who have "de-transitioned," of theologically orthodox same-sex-attracted Christians committed to celibacy, or of those who have experienced dramatic diminishment of previous same-sex attractions?

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The Rev. Richard Cizik addresses a September 28, 2022 Interfaith Alliance event held on Capitol Hill and entitled “Christian Nationalism is on the Ballot in 2022.”

Ever since January 6, 2021, much blame has been attributed to “Christian Nationalism.” This ideology is frequently cited as a primary motivation of those who stormed the U.S. Capitol Building.

But what exactly is Christian Nationalism? And how do we, as citizens and as Christians, address it? That was the topic at “Christian Nationalism is on the Ballot in 2022,” a September 28, 2022, Interfaith Alliance event held on Capitol Hill.

The Interfaith Alliance is a group of left-wing clergy and religious activists who critique the Religious Right. Instead of thoughtfully analyzing Christian Nationalism, their event predictably painted all religious conservatism as dangerous.

The Rev. Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, the recently named President and CEO of Interfaith Alliance, began by defining the subject. “Christian Nationalism has its roots,” he said, “in the dangerous myth that we were founded as a Christian nation, and because of that, enjoy special favor from God.”

The ideology, Raushenbush continued, “seek[s] a fusion of religious and civic life, to the detriment of both,” and its adherents “favor declaring the U.S. a Christian nation, tearing down the wall of separation

Christian Nationalism: A Theology of ‘White Supremacy’ and ‘Racism’?

by Collin Bastian

between church and state,” and “instituting prayer in schools.”

As examples of what Christian Nationalism looks like in practice, Raushenbush noted that Christian

Nationalists in power have advanced “the suppression of voting rights, the promotion of white supremacy, and the policing of personal privacy, including the right to abortion and same-sex marriage.”

Raushenbush then introduced the panel of speakers who continued the conversation, emphasizing the partisan nature of various disagreements between the Interfaith Alliance and adherents of Christian Nationalism.

The panel was comprised of Muslim writer and Senior Fellow with the Western States Center **Wajahat Ali**; political activist **Taylor Coleman**; Executive Director of Interfaith Alliance of Iowa **Connie Ryan**; and the **Rev. Dr. Richard Cizik**, the President and Founder of the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good (Cizik previously served as Vice President for Governmental Affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals until he resigned in 2008 over his support for same-sex civil unions).

Ali recounted his being educated by Jesuits in an all-boys Catholic high school. He recalled that “the Jesus that I encountered in high school was a prophet who would love and embrace all immigrants and refugees, not use them as cruel political stunts or demonize them as invaders,” referencing Florida Governor

Ron DeSantis’s transporting roughly fifty migrants to Martha’s Vineyard last September.

“That Jesus in Christianity that I encountered in high school,” Ali said, “made me into a better Muslim.” But Christian Nationalism, a “movement of hate, has hijacked Jesus and transformed Him into a radicalized, weaponized mascot” who would “use violence if necessary to restore order and supremacy in America for God’s chosen stewards: white men.”

As an example of the dangers of the Christian Nationalist movement, Ali highlighted the recent Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, which found that the U.S. Constitution does not include a right to abortion, as a “violat[ion]” of “the religious freedoms of Jews and Muslims.” Other key dangers of Christian Nationalism, per Ali, include threats to “marriage equality and the right to use contraceptives.”

Ryan, meanwhile, saw the recent shift towards Republican dominance in the state of Iowa as an example of the instantiation of Christian Nationalist values. This development, Ryan contended, led to a massive increase in legislation affecting issues such as public education, “civil rights...particularly for folks who are LGBTQ,” and “the right to access abortion.”

Ryan saw Christian Nationalism’s denial of transgender identity as particularly egregious. “Trans women are women, and they should be able to participate in women’s sports,” Ryan declared, referring

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to a bill signed by Iowa's Republican Governor **Kim Reynolds** that restricted biological males with female gender identities from participating in sporting events intended for women.

The subsequent Q&A with the panel evinced similar attacks against Christian Nationalism. Responding to a question about the theological underpinnings of the tenets of Christian Nationalism, Coleman responded that "racism" undergirded its motivations, insofar as it "could be considered a theology." Ali went further, stating that the root

of Christian Nationalist theology was "white supremacy."

It is of course valid to scrutinize Christian Nationalism and any ideological movement that seeks to tie the success of the one true faith so strongly to the fate of any one nation. But it is unhelpful to describe Christian Nationalism in such strongly pejorative terms, denigrating any who are pro-life or favor traditional views of marriage as bearing the imprint of "racism" and "white supremacy," as is the penchant of missionaries of progressivism.

Instead, persuasive critiques of Christian Nationalism presented by sober-minded individuals who consider faith, history, and citizenship are needed. The church can, and should, lead the way in these efforts. ✚



Collin Bastian directs the Institute on Religion & Democracy's campus outreach program.

Leading Bishops Link United Methodism, Disaffiliations, Club Q Murders

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Christians of all stripes *must* extend compassion to people experiencing same-sex attractions or gender dysphoria. Progressive Christians do not have a monopoly on love.

But Oliveto and Easterling maintaining "a blood-red thread" connects the Club Q murders and the United Methodist *Discipline*, painting biblical values on sexual morality as "eventually giv[ing] rise to violence and death," using such rhetoric as "If LGBTQ+ persons are truly of sacred worth, there can be only one answer" shuts down genuine dialogue and critical thinking.

These United Methodist bishops say truly valuing the lives of members of the LGBTQ community "requires us" to not only acknowledge that all people are created in the image of God, but to go much further by agreeing with their unbiblical and theologically universalist view that all people are automatically "children of God."

At one point, Oliveto and Easterling targeted conservative congregations "that have chosen to leave The United Methodist Church" with judgmental questions, asking if they will really be compassionate towards hurting LGBTQ+ members after this massacre.

Oliveto and Easterling may offer an instructive window into the motivations of many liberal United Methodist officials. If the faith of orthodox United Methodists and the Club Q murders are really closely connected by "a blood red thread" and if the former truly "eventually gives rise to violence and death," then the religion believed and practiced by traditionalist Methodists is inherently evil, harmful, and dangerous.

At the 2019 General Conference, Oliveto and Easterling's now-fellow Bishop **Tom Berlin** (the first elected in recent bishop elections in the previously conservative-leaning Southeast) infamously characterized traditionalist values of biblical morality and Wesleyan accountability as a dangerous "virus" like Ebola that would spread and sicken the church.

And what do you do with a deadly virus? You do not, in the analogy of "big tent UMC" propagandists, even-handedly support those who choose infection and celebrate their thriving alongside the non-infected. No, you seek to eradicate the virus! You may take extreme measures to forcibly isolate the infected until you make sure they are "cured." And if you find anyone intentionally spreading the virus, you punish them harshly.

With such rhetoric from Bishops Oliveto, Easterling, and Berlin, along with oppressive re-education efforts by the NCJ leadership, how can anyone expect the liberalized UMC to indefinitely welcome traditionalists into leadership, tolerate our spreading orthodox values, and give up on converting us to their opinions?

Failing to acknowledge the activity of the devil easily leads to demonizing human opponents, seeing *those people* as primary sources of evil. Not believing in the need to leave room for the very real wrath and judgment of God adds extra fierceness to one's treatment of people perceived as evildoers. And failing to see oneself as a sinner who needs unearned forgiveness through the blood of Jesus easily leads to hateful judgmentalism.

Our denomination's slow-motion separation has all the ingredients for an increasingly nasty, bitter divorce. ✚



John Lomperis directs the UMAction program at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

Collin Hansen on Tim Keller

an interview with Mark Tooley

RD President **Mark Tooley** interviewed Gospel Coalition editor **Collin Hansen** about his recently published spiritual biography of one of America's most famous pastors titled *Timothy Keller: His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation*.

Mark Tooley: Tim Keller, the famous and celebrated founder of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, has had an outsized influence on American Christianity as a successful church planter, author, speaker and a public theologian. Tell us about this book.

Collin Hansen: This is not exactly a traditional biography, because the interesting thing about Tim is that he does not like to talk about himself. Most biographies are about long past figures. But, though Tim continues to battle pancreatic cancer, the latest news has been very positive for him. We hope we have him for a long time. This book primarily explores influences in his life, stories that nobody knows, and things that explain so much of what makes him who he is and has made him so influential as a pastor. Tim and his wife Kathy vouched for me to talk with a number of their friends and even family members, including Tim's sister.

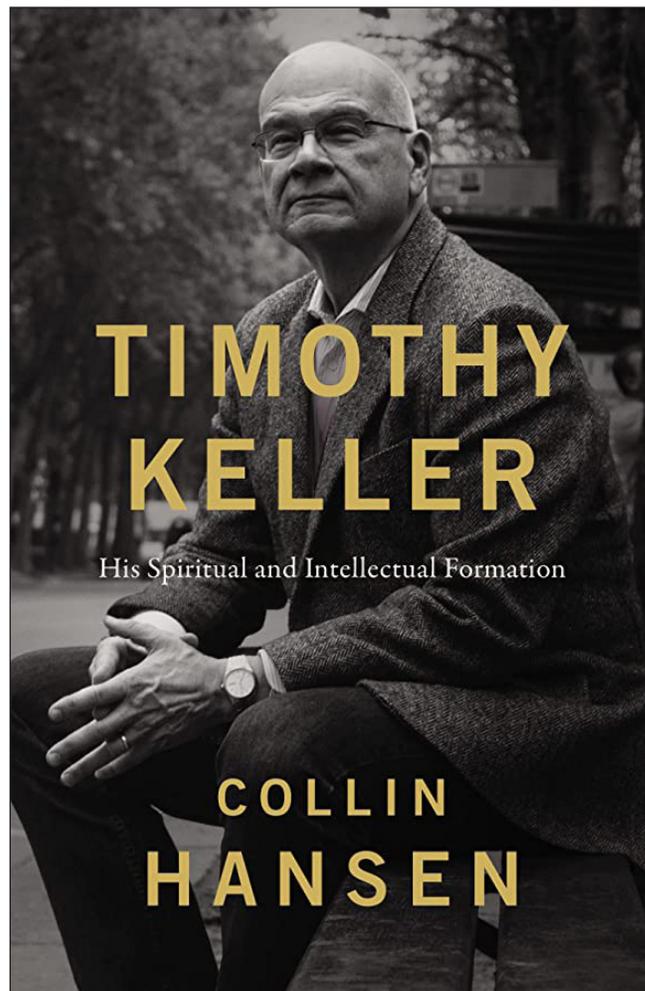
I got perspective on his theological life growing up. Tim is a conglomeration of American religion because he was baptized Roman Catholic by his mother, who was one time an Italian Catholic, but then she also had him baptized in the Keller's historic German Lutheran Church in eastern Pennsylvania. He was confirmed Lutheran as well. His mother shifted away from the Lutheran Church in dissatisfaction about Liberal political activism as well as theology. This was the 1960s. They had a new Lutheran pastor come from Gettysburg Seminary, and they shifted to

the Evangelical Congregational Church, more of a holiness type tradition, where he finished high school. He becomes a Christian through InterVarsity, and then becomes a Presbyterian minister in this brand-new domination, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA).

I tell the story of the mid- to late twentieth century into the early twenty-first century of evangelical religion through Keller's experiences, which covered a lot of that ground.

Mark Tooley: Explain why Keller is so important, having first been pastor to a medium-sized church in Petersburg, Virginia, then founding Redeemer Church in New York City 30 years ago, which has been extremely successful, and a model for dozens if not hundreds of other churches, as well as writing bestselling books. Perhaps he's one of the most important Protestant pastors in America today.

Collin Hansen: A lot of people don't know, Mark, that in the 1980s New York City was a very different place than it is today, or at least than it has been in the last 20 years. I talk about *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, the rise of Wall Street, and the Yuppie Revolution in New York. There were few evangelical congregations in Manhattan in the 1970s and 1980s compared to today, and a lot of that stems directly from Keller's ministry through Redeemer. Not only that, through Redeemer Presbyterian Church was launched Redeemer City to City, a global church planting network in



the largest cities. I mentioned in the book that when the *New York Times* publishes an obituary of Keller, the lead essentially is that he's more responsible than anyone else for engaging Evangelicals in urban ministry. You've been doing ministry long enough, Mark, to know what that looked like in places like New York or Washington, D.C., in the 1980s versus today. When you throw on top of that the fact that he is one of the most high-profile evangelical authors, read by people of different denominations. He's one of the few evangelical figures today who transcends a lot of our differences, theologically and otherwise. Look at other things that he's done: co-founding the Gospel Coalition, which has become one of the largest Christian websites in the world. He's been a major figure in the rise of Reformed theology, especially among young people.

Mark Tooley: You're right. Even here in Washington, D.C. I grew up in this area, and 25 years ago there were almost no

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evangelical churches in the city itself. Now there are dozens, most of them disproportionately very young. Grace DC is a PCA congregation. I'm sure it was very much connected to Keller, and I would say almost all of Evangelical DC is Reformed, and perhaps Keller should be credited for that influence. The same is true for dozens of cities around America. How do you explain the success of his model in terms of these Generation X pastors who planted these churches 25 years ago, and appeal to educated young professionals?

Collin Hansen: The kind of Reformed theology that Keller represents is really neo-Calvinism that goes back to the late 19th, early 20th century, especially in the Netherlands, associated with figures like **Abraham Kuyper** and **Herman Bavinck**. Seen in these figures is a combination of being modern and orthodox. It's that combination that's proved to be so potent, because without orthodoxy, without a connection to the Bible as our ultimate authority to the historic tradition, certainly Protestantism, but more broadly, the Ecumenical Councils, and going all the way back to the early church, without that we are completely unmoored. We are unanchored in a changing time. That's what's happened with theological Liberalism.

It's that perspective of being anchored to the biblical witness, ultimately. But then, second, doing that in a modern way. It's bringing that theology to bear on all of life. That's what the neo-Calvinists did, and that's very much what Keller does. An example: in the early years at Redeemer, the most controversial issue was premarital or extramarital sex. It wasn't so much homosexuality at the time, it was that it was a complete incomprehension that you would abstain from sex outside of marriage. Tim doesn't accommodate

the teaching to be able to allow for that. He challenges that on the basis of biblical historical, sexual ethics. As he does that, he also challenges the default assumptions about how everybody needs to be married, and he goes back to the biblical witness and points out that singleness is highly valued, and in some ways even seemingly preferred for the purposes of

still attend and admire him. How has he successfully managed this balance?

Collin Hansen: Keller decided early on that in these increasingly post-Christian settings, especially in cities, it is important to emphasize those things that separate Christians from non-Christians as opposed to Christians from other Christians.

Now you might hear that and say, "oh, well, that means he doesn't have his own theological tradition." No, I mean he's very much not Roman Catholic, very much not Eastern Orthodox. He is very much a Reformed Protestant. But it means that most of what he talks about are those basic Christian doctrines. Yes, with a Protestant emphasis on things like justification by faith alone, and the inerrancy of Scripture, and the penal substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. He was teaching more of Christianity than a particular denominational view. For example, at Redeemer, if you were going to be an officer in that church, a staff member, certainly an elder, and be ordained, you had

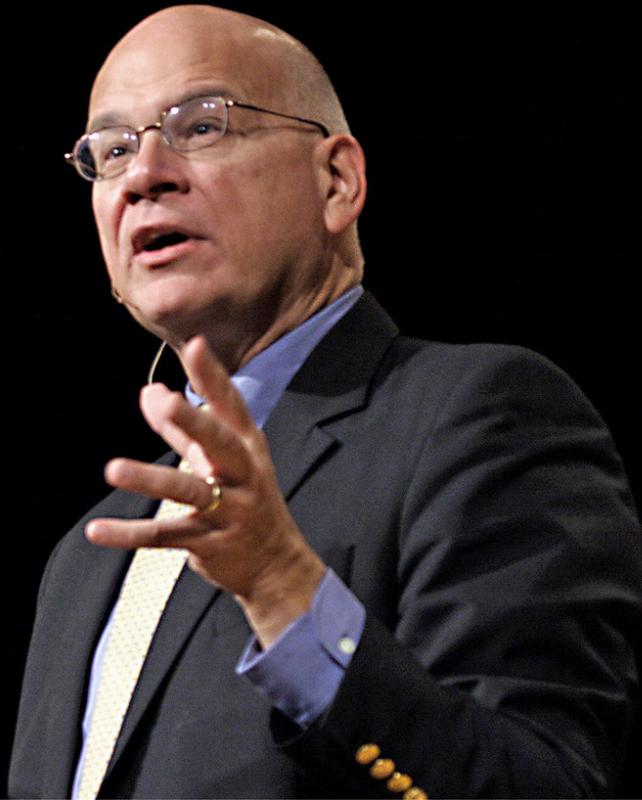
to be right down the line on all of those beliefs. But they were not emphasized in the same way for every member of the congregation. Now, in part, that's because that's the way Presbyterians work. That's not a big deal for Baptists that might have been different because of congregational voting. But essentially, it's exactly what you said. The church majored on [the essentials]. The majors didn't always push people on those things that they deemed to be non-essential, and that did give them quite a bit of flexibility. It helped them to stay focused on the things that were offensive enough, which is the exclusivity of Christ, the reality of hell, the substitutionary death, as I mentioned earlier, of Jesus, and the necessity of submitting to

This book primarily explores influences in his life, stories that nobody knows, and things that explain so much of what makes him who he is and has made him so influential as a pastor.

Gospel ministry, as the Apostle Paul writes. At the same time he's affirming biblical truth he also pushes back on cultural accretions that have accumulated over time and assumptions. It's that [mix of] modern and orthodox that seems to appeal to people of genuine spiritual conversion, but not necessarily in the same way as the church traditions that they may have found stultifying, especially in cities where many of them did not grow up but moved away from their homes.

Mark Tooley: As you note, he founded and sustained these successful evangelical ministries remaining theologically orthodox and upholding traditional Christian teaching about moral issues, and in very socially liberal areas. Presumably many of his church's members don't completely subscribe to his perspective, and yet they

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Redeemer Presbyterian Church Pastor Timothy Keller taken September 30, 2006. (Photo: Frank Licorice / Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic {{CC BY-SA 2.0}})

God's word when it comes to everything, including our sexual ethics. [The church] really majored on those things, and just didn't make such a fuss about everything else, and I think that's proven to be pretty flexible, and also effective for ministry.

Mark Tooley: But he's had his critics, more on the right than on the left. Some accuse him of being squishy in his supposed desire to be winsome, saying he has not sufficiently emphasized the distinctions of Christian teaching. His model of "winsomeness" may have worked in the 1990s and the early 2000s, they maintain, but it is no longer relevant today in a more polarized culture. How do you respond?

Collin Hansen: I think Tim would be the first person to say that not everything he did will translate in the same way going forward, and so there may be some things that he didn't talk about as much that we're going to have to talk about more in the future. One thing I talk about a lot, Mark, is a concept of theological triage, the first order or second order, third order, kind of issues. While the first order issues never change—things like the Trinity and Scripture—second and third order issues

sometimes do change. Certain issues will come to the fore while other issues diminish. Even though Tim faced opposition, certainly in New York, he would be the first to say that the levels of opposition are deeper now than he had experienced before, and that was even at a time when Manhattan was nearly thirty percent no religion when he got there, which is a little bit larger than the country as a whole.

Some of the criticism of Tim supposes that he believed in a cultural engagement strategy that "if we're just nice enough, we're going to get a seat at the tables of power," even though he is in Manhattan, doing that ministry with powerful people. There was an assumption from the very beginning that this ministry was deeply countercultural in New York. What Tim always said is that it was a counterculture for the common good. I think that's what some of the critics miss, and what many people from early Redeemer emphasized to me, which is that yes, we were a counterculture. I remember them telling me about the all-night prayer meetings they had during the first Gulf War in 1991. They expected this to be countercultural, but the things they prayed about were

things like crime in the city, that it would go down. When they saw the broken window policies of Mayor Giuliani and changes in New York, they took that as a positive answer to prayer. I think that's what people miss. They assumed that it was only this common good, "let's be nice to everybody, so that they'll be nice to us" policy. No, it was always built on a counter-cultural conversionist, evangelistic strategy, that would result in love of neighbors in obedience to God and love of the city. I think partly, Mark, why people don't resonate with Tim is that Evangelicals have always had a pretty strong skepticism, at least since the early twentieth century, towards cities and part of what you're seeing is Tim gets caught up a bit in our culture wars and divides that are so prominent in our politics today.

Mark Tooley: Do you think that some of his critics have a point that his era served a purpose over the last three decades, but perhaps that era is closing, and we're entering a new age that others will have to appeal to with a different style and message?

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Collin Hansen: Yes, I think Tim would be the first person to say that. That was one thing that he said to me. We were meeting in December of 2019. He said, “I’m just not sure, Collin, if everything that I did is going to translate very well because of how much the culture has changed.” The way he typically describes it, Mark, is that there were not many dots being connected between biblical truth and our popular cultural beliefs back in 1989, and when he founded Redeemer Presbyterian Church, but there are even fewer of them right now. We have to start from further behind in those issues. And so, I would say that if you look at Tim’s life, he recognizes that.

I wish some of the critics were more concerned about those deeper cultural problems than they are with some of the political issues that they discuss so often. But at the same time, another thing that you’ll see pretty clearly is that I wouldn’t say that race and racism were a major theme of Tim’s ministry. Now he has written on those subjects, but he’s written about it more recently. In some ways he did write his book *Generous Justice* years ago, but a lot of his explorations have been more recent. I would say that’s why, in some ways, Mark, both Left and Right have criticized him, saying, on the Right, “Hey, you didn’t talk enough about abortion, especially the high rates in New York” or, on the Left, “You didn’t talk enough about race.” But in all my years of talking with Tim, he’s usually the first person to be able to acknowledge criticism and to encourage younger generations that they’re going to have to figure things out themselves by God’s grace. And so, I think that’s a good challenge for the rest of us to take up, and I encourage people to treat Tim the way we want to be treated by the people who follow us because we’re

probably not going to emphasize things the way that younger generations would want us to either.

Mark Tooley: He appealed, I think it’s fair to say, mostly to Generation X. In terms of millennial pastors, what does he bring to the table that they should heed? And who are the next young Tim Kellers out there if there are any?

I wish some of the critics were more concerned about those deeper cultural problems than they are with some of the political issues that they discuss so often.

Collin Hansen: Yeah, definitely, Gen X in a lot of ways. You think about that *Friends/Seinfeld* generation. That was the sweet spot of Redeemer Presbyterian Church. What younger pastors need to heed from Tim is the wide breadth of his reading: He would continue to grow like rings on a tree. But he never lost that first love of Jesus. He’s never lost that first love of the Gospel. Even though he gets interested in new and exciting things, it doesn’t mean that he departs from that. I think a lot of younger pastors, especially in the internet age, tend to get fascinated by new shiny objects and to run after new trends, and they tend to change their mind a lot. The thing about Tim is that most of his theological beliefs were set early,

and he’s been consistent with those. I would encourage people to give a lot of thought early on to these things and not be so swayed by different trends.

If we want to see the next generation of Tim Kellers, consider that when he started, the Presbyterian Church in America was a small, largely regional southern denomination, which now has a substantial reach across North America on campuses through Reformed University Fellowship and in church planting all over. That would probably be the best legacy that Tim would want to leave behind, as those people are doing that kind of ministry not just in New York, but in all kinds of different places. Now I can look at my alma mater Northwestern University and see a thriving Reformed University Fellowship chapter there, an official ministry of the PCA. I think, Mark, how excited I would have been if I could have benefited from that when I was an undergraduate. But to think that now, in almost any major campus, you’re going to find that kind of ministry. I think [Keller], more than anybody else, has inspired that kind of work from a younger generation of millennials and Gen Z pastors.

Mark Tooley: Thank you very much for a very interesting interview, and I encourage all of our listeners to get this book. ✨



Mark D. Tooley is the President of the Institute on Religion and Democracy



Retired Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire Gene Robinson processes into the sanctuary of The Falls Church Episcopal on Sunday, October 30, 2022. (Photo: YouTube screen capture / The Falls Church Episcopal)

Gene Robinson Takes Victory Lap at Falls Church Episcopal

by Jeffrey Walton

Jesus Christ was crucified because he was a feared political revolutionary, according to a controversial openly gay Episcopal Church bishop who preached at a worship service of a formerly large, traditionalist Episcopal parish outside of Washington, D.C.

“Jesus was not crucified because he preached ‘love thy neighbor as thyself,’ he was crucified by the Romans because he was a threat to their political structure,” retired Episcopal Church Bishop **Gene Robinson** preached at The Falls Church Episcopal (TFCE) in Falls Church, Virginia, on Sunday, October 30. “He could have easily led a revolution against the government.”

The former bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire forcefully argued for the centrality of political action within the life of the church, reciting a litany of policies favored by the political Left as the correct application of biblical justice. He also highlighted gratitude for an invitation to speak at a parish that had prominently opposed his election and consecration.

“When I got this invitation from [TFCE Rector] **Burl [Salmon]** I could hardly believe my ears and all day yesterday,” Robinson exclaimed. “I just kept pinching myself: ‘you’re actually at the Falls Church in Virginia, oh my God.’”

In advance of Robinson’s visit, Salmon wrote to parishioners: “There is no greater figure identified with the struggle for justice for queer people of faith than Bishop Robinson, and his election and consecration as Bishop of New Hampshire in 2003 was the deciding factor for some Episcopalians, unhappy with the broadening inclusion of this tradition, to break away from the church and affiliate with bodies outside the Anglican Communion. The Falls Church was one of those parishes.”

The majority of members of The Falls Church departed the historic property in 2012 following a court decision to award ownership of the disputed buildings and parish financial accounts to the Episcopal Church. Those former Episcopalians argued that election and consecration of

a bishop in a same-sex partnership was a presenting issue for deeper disagreement about the authority of Scripture and the identity of Jesus as the unique Son of God. The Falls Church Anglican completed a new campus in 2019 and is a parish of the Anglican Church in North America.

‘Raging Streams of Injustice’

Robinson processed on Sunday, October 30, past row upon row of empty pews in a sanctuary built to seat 800 for what was once among the most-attended parishes in the Episcopal Church.

In noting the reading of Isaiah chapter 1, Robinson dismissed sexual “perversion” as a chief objection of the Old Testament prophet against the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, instead insisting that their sin was a lack of hospitality.

“Somebody had to work really hard to define it as having something to do with sexual perversion, because right in the text from Isaiah and reconfirmed in the Book of Ezekiel are these words: ‘this

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was the guilt of your sister Sodom: this was the guilt she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease but did not aid the poor and needy.' I'm guessing that describes a lot of us, so welcome to the world of sodomites," Robinson interpreted. "God found that worthy of destruction. That's why Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed."

Robinson pivoted to focus on Isaiah's words to seek justice and correct oppression.

"Justice, you see, is systemic work," Robinson preached. "There are lots of raging streams of injustice.

"Well now we've crossed the line haven't we? We've brought politics into church. I don't know a single clergy person who has not been criticized for bringing politics into the church, but here's the truth: justice work is politics. How we treat one another, our fellow citizens, is politics and it's part of being Christ-like," Robinson declared. "We're either fighting injustice or we're collaborating with it."

Robinson also spoke at a forum the proceeding morning, recounting his experience as the first partnered gay man elected to be a bishop in the Episcopal Church and the worldwide Anglican Communion. A *Washington Post* reporter dutifully provided coverage of the Saturday forum but struggled to find a newsworthy angle as "Bishop Gene Robinson stood before dozens" recounting events nearly two decades past.

Robinson and his husband divorced in 2014. The denomination shrank from a high of 3.6 million adherents in the mid-1960s to 1.5 million in 2021, with attendance having plummeted to 292,851. In Robinson's New Hampshire diocese alone, he witnessed a nearly 20 percent drop in membership during his nine-year tenure—outpacing the church's national decline.

Robinson served at the liberal think tank Center for American Progress

following retirement. During his Sunday sermon, he upheld his own small parish, St. Thomas Dupont Circle in Washington, D.C., which has a chapel named in honor of him, as a model for biblical justice.

"On Saturdays we greet the busloads of migrants shipped to us by the governor of Texas [Greg Abbott] in hopes to shame us into changing the immigration laws."

Robinson claimed that racism "haunts our entire society." He urged

"Justice, you see, is systemic work," Robinson preached. "There are lots of raging streams of injustice."

"disavowing what can only be described as white Christian nationalism" and "fighting your [Virginia] Governor [Glenn Youngkin]'s attempts to lessen the protections for transgender kids."

Cash Crunch

It remains unclear how TFCE could distance itself any further from those who chose to depart the Episcopal Church. All clergy serving at TFCE identify as gay, and Salmon has sought to form an LGBTQ outreach. Progress flags (a variation on the rainbow pride flag) have been placed on the parish signage alongside the Black Lives Matter logo. Salmon serves as chair of the Clergy Advocacy Board of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

Financial challenges became more pronounced at TFCE in the past year. The church reduced two staff positions to half-time while slashing its outreach budget and diocesan contribution. The longtime Director of Music announced her resignation soon after that position was scaled back.

"The fundamental core of our imbalance is that we spend over \$900,000 on staffing and administration compared to total giving of around \$600,000," TFCE Treasurer **James Weatherly** told parishioners at a July worship service.

"Our pledge revenue is well below budget," Salmon wrote in a July 28 newsletter.

The parish has operated in the red for the past decade, approving a \$280,000 deficit for the 2022 budget. That recurring deficit is offset by money that was in the accounts of The Falls Church at the time of the parish split and was awarded by court action to the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia at the conclusion of litigation.

The Episcopal congregation reported average Sunday attendance of 115 in 2021. The pre-split congregation's average attendance was nearly 1,700 with an annual budget of approximately \$5 million (Falls Church Anglican has an operating budget of \$7.45 million).

"There is some greater thing at work in the cosmos," Salmon wrote to parishioners. "As a person of faith who has seen Her immense power, I have come to understand that thing at work is the Holy Spirit, alive and unpredictable and capable of the impossible.

"The Holy Spirit has been at work in The Falls Church to build a community defined by radical welcome," Salmon continued. "Give praise to the Holy Spirit, who has brought the Bishop and The Falls Church together at last. God is indeed doing a new thing!" ✝



Jeffrey H. Walton is the Communications Manager and Anglican Program Director at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

Same-Sex Marriage Bill: A Deceptive Claim of Protection for Religious Freedom

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ruled that possibility of a secular exemption in the law mandated a religious exemption. But Catholic Charities could be sued under the RFMA for providing children only to opposite-sex married couples.

Denominational Positions

The Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention both continue to maintain that homosexuality is sinful. The relevant bodies in both groups issued statements against the RFMA. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops opposed the legislation. They observe that the **Obergefell** decision “created countless religious liberty conflicts,” but the RFMA will result in yet more litigation, and it does not have adequate religious liberty protections.

The Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission pointed out that RFMA “raises serious religious liberty concerns for [religious] individuals and organizations” which “are in contract with, funded by, or working jointly with the government.” It noted that the bill only protects against repercussions for refusal to solemnize same-sex marriages, and does not recognize that religious organizations that work closely with the government (e.g., adoption and foster care agencies) must deal with marriage-related issues but never facilitate weddings. It also noted that RFMA merely reiterates religious liberty protections already existing in law, while introducing new threats of lawsuits.

On the other hand, the National Association of Evangelicals, while maintaining belief in opposite-sex only marriage, praised the efforts of senators to include religious liberty protections. But these protections, as noted above, are not substantial.

One religious group that vigorously supported the legislation is the Mormon Church. It continues to believe in opposite-sex only marriage, and historically has strongly opposed homosexuality. But

since 2015, it has favored solutions like the “Utah compromise,” worked out to enact the state’s SOGI law. Utah’s legislation protects religious organizations from performing same-sex weddings, protects religious counseling, and shields secular counselors in their non-professional expressions of traditional morality in exchange for LGBT antidiscrimination housing and employment law.

Another religious supporter of RFMA that maintains a belief in opposite-sex only marriage is the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. While expressing support for the religious freedom provisions, the church did not recognize that these protections already exist in law, as was noted by critics.

Religious bodies embracing homosexuality enthusiastically supported the legislation. This included The Episcopal Church Office of Government Relations, United Church of Christ activists, and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

The divide in the Evangelical world between liberalizing “Evangelical elites” and the rank-and-file who are committed to straightforward biblical doctrine was revealed by a recent article in *Christianity Today* supporting RFMA while the *Christian Post* ran an article opposing it.

Conclusion

Public clarity about the new law is not helped by the resolute mainstream media support for LGBT liberation. The Associated Press maintained that claims that RFMA would result in the revocation of tax-exempt status are false, and that there are substantial protections for religious liberty. As Severino explained, the law doesn’t, of its own operation, revoke tax-exempt status, but it provides the basis for a government agency to do that, holding same-sex marriage to be national policy.

The first reason the new law is wrong is that it effectively states that religious

doctrine about marriage is wrong. Most religions have historically held non-marital intercourse (referring to opposite-sex marriage) to be radically wrong. Under the new law, choice of sex in one’s marriage partner is a matter of justice, and violations of it are unjust. The very word “respect” conveys that. Any religious liberty protections granted are exceptions to a rule of justice. It is hard to see how this can last if the law is countenancing injustice.

Of course, the *Obergefell* decision says the same thing, but that was the opinion of five lawyers, imposing their will on the nation and acting on the basis of their own sensibilities. RFMA is the nation speaking.

Secondly, religious liberty protections are deceptive because they apply only to same-sex weddings and nothing else. People across the political spectrum maintain that clergy should not be required to perform same-sex weddings. LGBT liberation is giving nothing up in exchange for a threat of lawsuits against organizations that cooperate closely with the government, and possible loss of tax-exempt status, for not recognizing same-sex marriage, rather than performing weddings. It is a compromise that is no compromise at all.

Some, of course, think there should be no compromise with religious freedom. **Rachel Laser**, President of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, maintained that RFMA is a “vital step in our nation’s march toward freedom without favor and equality without exception.” The problem here is that everyone has religious freedom. Even atheists have freedom not to be religious. If religious freedom means anything, it means that people cannot be required to act against religious precepts. It is by definition wrong to take action believed sinful or evil. And that is what complicity

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in sin involves, as Jesus clearly says (Matthew 18:7-9).

If the new law's congressional sponsors were serious about respecting religious liberty, they would have included Sen. **Mike Lee's** (R-UT) amendment that actually would have protected religious organizations from lawsuits and denial of government benefits. The rejected amendment reads "the Federal Government shall not take any discriminatory action against a person, wholly or partially on the basis

that such person speaks, or acts, in accordance with a sincerely held religious belief, or moral conviction, that marriage is or should be recognized as a union of— (1) one man and one woman; or (2) two individuals as recognized under Federal law."

The fact that the new law's supporters were unwilling to consider this shows that they are not serious about protecting religious liberty, or even balancing it against other interests. Christians should resist the new law as far as we can. If faced with

ruinous lawsuits, court judgments, or institutional closure, we should obey God rather than men and take the penalty the state imposes, knowing that our overriding duty is to God. ✚



Rick J. Plasterer is a staff writer for the Institute on Religion and Democracy

Post-Denominational America

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ministries, contributing to our current post-denominational times.

Such evangelical entrepreneurship, expressed through radio, television, schools, and other independent missions, helped dethrone the centrality of denominations. But so too did the failures of denominations. Mainline Protestant structures were liberalized in the early 20th century, became hostile to populist piety, and began their irreversible membership plunge in the 1960s. Conservative denominations initially benefited from post-WWII evangelical resurgence but eventually, over the last 20 years, suffered from evangelicalism's frequent indifference to tradition and ecclesiology. From the evangelical perspective, focused on individual conversion and experience, why were denominations needed? Weren't they actually a distraction?

Irrespective of denominational failures, nearly all human institutions have a limited shelf-life. None of the Protestant denominations claim a permanent authority like Roman Catholicism. They were all born in particular cultural contexts, which all evolve with time. Schism, growth, sclerosis, mergers, decline and death are part of the rhythm of Protestant denominationalism.

For contemporary American Christianity, national religious institutions with

large bureaucracies, strong brand loyalty, famous leaders, and a self-sustaining subculture are deemed not very relevant. Of course, aspects of the old denominationalism will continue. Many Southern Baptist seminaries are quite strong and will produce clergy for post-denominational America. And many denominations will survive on a much smaller scale, with very lean structures, and often deemphasizing their denominational brands. In their place, there will be growing congregationalism attenuated by informal church networks. Christians, individually and congregationally, will rely on online resources that are not specific to any denominational traditions.

While the importance of denominations and their structures decline, the traditions that birthed them will not. Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anglicanism, Wesleyanism, Restorationism, and various flavors of Baptists, will continue and often will thrive in America, if not always carefully stewarded by denominations. And while post-denominational, contemporary populist piety will always thrive, behind it there will always be more rigorous outlines of orthodox Protestant theology providing some ballast.

For IRD, whose mission is to shape Christian political witness that strengthens democracy, the task is in some ways

more complex. Christians no longer look to centralized structures and prominent church leaders for societal guidance, if they ever really did. Their sources of reference and authority are now diffused across a swirling ocean of websites, independent publishers, social media, parachurch groups, and new schools. In this mix are every form of horrors and virtues.

Reaching individual Christians is now easier. There are no more denominational filters. IRD publishes online materials, hosts talks and conferences, and organizes hard copy books. We strive to reach Christians who are particularly concerned about principled Christian political witness rooted in permanence and tradition. The great Protestant traditions, if not the old denominations, remain our reference, supplemented by Catholic teaching and other historic Christian frameworks.

Ultimately, American Christianity will shift and reorganize in ways that best serve American Christians and other spiritual seekers. It may appear messy and disconcerting. Much of the old Christianity is dying. But new forms of Christian vibrancy are emerging.

American Christianity has always been entrepreneurial and adaptable. Its transitions may often look like decline. But often they are preambles to new spurts of growth and the creation of new institutions. These evolutions are intrinsic to Protestantism, especially in America, a nation whose churning restlessness is rooted in the endless Protestant quest for improvement. ✚

Same-Sex Marriage Bill: A Deceptive Claim of Protection for Religious Freedom

by Rick Plasterer

The Respect for Marriage Act, which codifies same-sex marriage if the Supreme Court decision *Obergefell vs. Hodges* is ever overturned, is worse than it appears. It can be appealed to as national policy, with real consequences for religious or other objectors to same-sex marriage. Hard-nosed policy analysts **Gregory Baylor** of the Alliance Defending Freedom and **Roger Severino** of the Heritage Foundation have carefully studied the new law and find it gives no new religious liberty protections while leaving religious organizations that work closely with the government (such as adoption agencies) vulnerable to attack in federal court.

Evaluation of the New Law

If justice requires that any two adults may marry to achieve personal fulfillment, then it follows that polygamy, polyamory, child brides, or incestuous marriage should also be legal. Marriage becomes an association of two or more people who are somehow committed to each other. While RFMA now excludes polygamy, it still requires acceptance of any state's definition of marriage (such as California's child bride law).

The U.S. Constitution says nothing about sex, marriage, or the family. Both the *Obergefell* decision and the recent Congressional action are unconstitutional. The only basis for the imposition of same-sex marriage was an appeal to justice overriding strict constitutional interpretation.

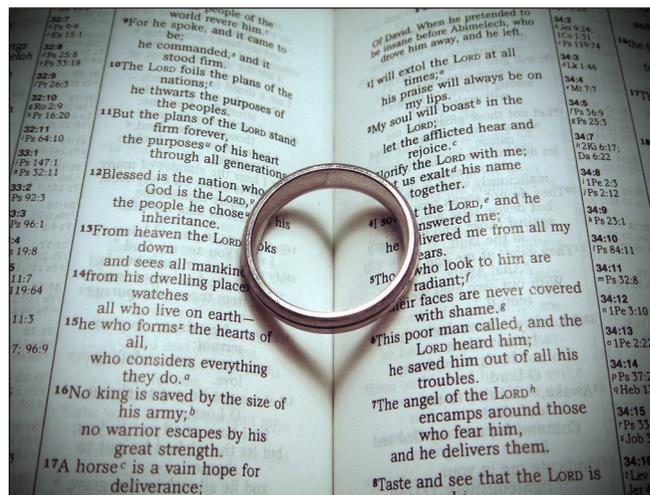
This irrationality shows why same-sex marriage is different from interracial marriage, which was also "protected" by the RFMA. Interracial marriage involves the union of one man and one woman. Same-sex marriage does not. Civil War-era constitutional amendments mandate racial equality, and reasonably justify

1964 did not require the revocation of Bob Jones University's tax-exempt status. But it was revoked by the IRS due to the school's prohibition of interracial dating.

The government benefits secured for religious organizations, and the different types of religious organizations protected, mean little, because they are only secure from the action of the law itself, not from a federal agency's determination that opposite-sex only marriage is contrary to national policy. Further, all that is secured is protection against adverse action because of refusal to solemnize same-sex marriage, not refusal to recognize it.

This last problem leads to another threat posed by the new law, namely, the right it establishes to private lawsuits for violations of the law by organizations that act "under color of state law" (i.e., organizations working closely with the government, as adoption agencies arguably do). This makes it a kind of national sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) law, not as bad as the Equality Act, since it applies only to same-sex marriage, not homosexuality or transgenderism in general, but nonetheless dangerous. Contentious litigation against Christian organizations can be expected.

A good example would be Catholic Charities of Philadelphia. The Supreme Court unanimously found that it does not have to provide foster children to same-sex couples, because the court



(Image: Crosswalk.com)

interracial marriage, and the *Loving vs. Virginia* decision (1967) secured it. There was little reason to include interracial marriage in the RFMA, except to tar opponents of same-sex marriage with the label of prejudice.

As Severino noted, as national policy, same-sex marriage can be used to take away tax-exempt status, accreditation, licensure, government contracts or grants, or other government benefits. The law explicitly says it does not require this, but it can be done by the IRS. Other government benefits (e.g., contracts or grants) can be denied by other government agencies. The Civil Rights Act of

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