

VISION FORWARD



THE PATTERN OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

To be a Christian is to be a “little Christ”. It is to be Christ-like. It is the image of Christ being reflected in us. It is, as Paul declares, “Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

The Christian life, therefore, should take on the pattern of the life of Christ, especially as in his death, burial, and resurrection. In other words, as Christians and disciples of Jesus, our life will always be going through one of these three phases or seasons: death, burial, or resurrection.

DEATH

The great and overarching call of every disciple is to “take up your cross”. This is what Jesus did, literally. And upon that cross He was then crucified in our place for our sins. “Not my will but yours be done” was explicitly displayed on the cross.

In Jesus the disciple has also been crucified on the cross. There are things in us that must be put to death and done away with. Whether attitudes of the

heart, habits of the flesh, patterns of the mind—the work of dying to ourselves and losing our lives in obedience to Christ is an ongoing process in this life.

The work of the cross is hard work. It is painful and not always quick and easy. But it is necessary.

In the very early years of our marriage I was not good with money. Some debt began to accumulate. I prayed to God to help me. What I really meant was, “God, do a miracle and rescue me from my foolishness.” But God had a better plan than miraculously making my debt disappear. He wanted to change my heart. The long process of working foolishness out of my heart by discipline began. The dying was hard and long, but it was necessary. A miracle would have bypassed the work of the cross in my heart. This season of life was essential.

BURIAL

When his body had been placed in a tomb, the women who had loved and followed Jesus began to prepare spices for his body. But on the sabbath,

Luke tells us, they “rested” (Luke 23:56). The Sabbath was that holy day celebrated by Israel when God “rested” from His finished work of creation (Genesis 2:2). When God rested, He delighted in His finished work. I imagine He took a deep breath, sighed deeply, and smiled like we might do when after a long hard day’s work we’ve finished something of significance to us.

The disciples that were near enough to the cross could not imagine what Jesus meant when he breathed his last words, “It is finished.” What was finished? What work of significance had just been accomplished? The work of salvation. But that work was beyond what they could see or comprehend in that moment. And the body of Jesus was laid to rest in a tomb. And there was silence and there was stillness. Between Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday there was the Sabbath.

After we have taken up our cross, after things have been put to death in our life, there comes burial, a season of silence and of stillness. There’s no sound, there’s no movement. It appears God is absent, doing nothing at all. We wonder, we doubt, we reflect, we try to figure things out. Yet, all along God is at work—beneath, behind, beyond all we can see, hear, feel, and comprehend.

In the dying it’s often easy to recognize what God is doing. It’s hard to hide our sin sometimes. We can’t deny we just lost our temper or lied or gave in to temptation again. But in the burying of some of these things it’s not easy to see how or if God is at work. Don’t give up hope, though. Remember the pattern of Christ’s life: that after death and burial comes resurrection.

Maybe at the death of His Son, God in heaven looked down upon that finished work of salvation, sighed deeply, and smiled and said, “At last. His work is finished.” Maybe God rested and delighted on that Sabbath, too.

RESURRECTION

As Christians, we can at all times look upon the cross, sigh deeply, and rest and delight in the finished work of Christ. All that is crucified will be resurrected. Nothing that is not crucified can be resurrected. If we have been crucified with Christ, surely we will rise with Him.

After death and burial comes resurrection. Underneath the hard surface and ground of our old heart new life begins to grow and emerge. What we have taken to the cross and buried, now rises out of the ground transformed. The seed that is planted looks nothing like the tree that it produces. New

attitudes, habits, and patterns begin to emerge in and out of us by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Resurrection and the Life has come (John 11:25) and now lives and dwells within us.

The season of resurrection is an exciting season! All that is springing up is bold and exciting! God is on the move! There is renewal and transformation, a growing and maturing into “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). This is a lifelong process, which brings us back to where we began.

The Christian life will take on the pattern of the life of Christ, as seen especially in his death, burial, and resurrection. In other words, as Christians and disciples of Jesus, in this life we will always be going through one of these three phases or seasons: death, burial, or resurrection. Have no fear. Be of good courage. Rejoice. Take hope. Jesus is in charge

THE EQUALITY ACT: BE FAMILIAR

The following is an excerpt from a written testimony of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention at a recent Senate hearing. I realize we as Elim Grace are not Baptists and do not belong to the Baptist denomination, but this testimony, in my estimation, accurately sums up some of the inherent dangers of The Equality Act or H.R. 5 bill. This is a bill you should be familiar with as an American, but especially as a Christian, since it poses immediate and serious impact upon churches and all who aspire to sincerely live and conduct their life in faith and obedience to Christ and His Word.

OVERVIEW

The Equality Act would curtail religious freedom protections, violate the consciences of pro-life healthcare professionals and faith-based hospitals, undermine civil rights protections for women and girls, and ultimately overrule the consciences of millions of Americans.

The ERLC affirms the full dignity of every human being. At the 2018 Annual Meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Messengers passed a resolution to “reaffirm the sacredness and full dignity and worthiness of respect and Christian love for every single human being, without any reservation.” The SBC’s commitment to love of neighbor is grounded in the truth that “God created man in His own image; He created Him in the image of God; He created them male and female.” (Gen. 1:26-27)

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

The Equality Act threatens (two) critical American ideals (the separation of church and state and liberty of conscience).

The separation of church and state means that the government is not empowered to dictate or suppress doctrine and practice. This benefits all Americans by placing clear boundaries around the state's authority. This bill would not merely erode but dissolve those boundaries, bringing the full weight of government against religious institutions and individual Americans simply for holding fast to their fundamental beliefs about anthropology and personhood. As Russell Moore, president of the ERLC, has said, "A government in the business of running the church, or claiming the church as a mascot of the state, invariably persecutes and drives out genuine religion." Similarly, when the government stifles the freedom to dissent, whether from religious doctrine, political ideologies, or views related to human sexuality, it abandons its constitutional duty to protect civil liberties.

John Leland, a Baptist champion of religious liberty, challenged James Madison to ensure that religion and rights of conscience would be protected under the United States Constitution. Madison subsequently introduced the Bill of Rights as amendments to the Constitution, and Baptists have been faithful and ardent supporters of these bulwarks of freedom. Pluralism is a defining feature of our nation, and Baptists have long recognized that neither ideological conformity nor religious coercion are necessary for effective government. Instead, tolerance and persuasion are the instruments of civil discourse. The freedom of expression and robust and vigorous debate are critical elements of American society. The Equality Act would not advance but eradicate these instruments and ideals.

It is difficult to describe how tragic it would be for the Senate to pass a bill that repudiates the moral center of American government. The very premise of the Bill of Rights is that human beings, simply by their nature, enjoy fundamental liberties that the government has an obligation to protect. The Equality Act does more than threaten these freedoms; if enacted, it will contradict them explicitly. No American should ever be forced to compromise his or her religion or violate conscience to avoid punishment at the hands of their government. This legislation would needlessly penalize and discriminate against millions of Americans who possess no animus toward those this bill purports to aid. As law, the Equality Act would undermine pluralism, legalize coercion, imperil religious liberty,

eliminate conscience protections, and erode the very freedoms enshrined in the First Amendment.

ANALYSIS OF H.R. 5

1. If enacted, the Equality Act would bring sweeping and historic changes to religious liberty with devastating effects to this foundational freedom.

Through the Equality Act, Congress would punish faith-based charities for their core religious beliefs about human dignity and marriage. While the proposed intention of H.R. 5 is to protect individuals who identify as LGBT, the bill fails to respect people's freedom of conscience. H.R. 5 erodes foundational constitutional freedoms in its pursuit of fleeting cultural ideas.

H.R. 5 threatens the efforts of faith-based adoption and foster care agencies. The legislation would explicitly curtail the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993, which would force faith-based child welfare organizations to either abandon their deeply held religious beliefs or be shut down. The state forced closures of such agencies is especially harmful at a time when multiple societal crises increase the need for children services.

H.R. 5 hinders the work of healthcare professionals and faith-based hospitals. While religiously affiliated hospitals routinely serve patients of any background, including those who identify as LGBT, providers who hold moral or religious beliefs cannot perform every procedure a patient requests. For example, doctors and nurses who object to gender reassignment surgeries for moral, religious, or scientific reasons would be forced to provide the procedure or risk losing their jobs.

2. The Equality Act would be the most pro-abortion bill ever passed by Congress.

The Equality Act would force healthcare workers and pro-life healthcare providers to participate in and provide abortions. Central to a Christian's understanding of government is that government exists to secure rights granted by God. One of these inalienable rights is the freedom of conscience, not to be infringed by the state. H.R. 5 would redefine the term "sex" to also include "pregnancy, childbirth, or a related medical condition." This language would roll back federal law that protects the consciences of pro-life nurses and physicians who object to participating in abortions because of their deeply held religious or moral beliefs. These conscience protections carry decades of bipartisan consensus—a consensus that no person should be compelled to participate in an act they believe to be gravely immoral.

H.R. 5 would also jeopardize the longstanding Hyde Amendment that protects federal taxpayer dollars from funding abortion. There is nothing equalizing about forcing Americans to fund abortion through taxpayer dollars. Preventing taxpayer dollars from abortion protects consciences, saves lives, and respects the freedom of Americans to seek to persuade one another without state-sanctioned conscience intrusion. Every person is made in the image of God, and the United States has a responsibility to reflect that truth in its laws.

3. H.R. 5 undermines decades of hard fought civil rights protections for women and girls.

The Equality Act disregards the privacy and safety concerns that women rightly have about sharing sleeping quarters and intimate facilities with the opposite sex. Single gender spaces, such as locker rooms or shelters, would no longer be protected by law. This departure from a legal understanding of gender as male and female makes women and girls vulnerable to biological males being in their private spaces. For example, shelters for those women and girls escaping domestic abuse or homelessness would be forced to house biological men who identify as female.

Another example of the harm this legislation poses to women and girls is in athletics and academics. Since 1972, Title IX has advanced women's sports and scholarship in remarkable ways. If enacted, the Equality Act would threaten female competition as both areas would then be open to biological males as well.

In sum, H.R. 5 would undermine the ability of Americans who disagree to work together for the common good. These legislative changes represent a dramatic departure from the foundations of tolerance and civil discourse. If enacted, the Equality Act would bring sweeping and historic changes to religious liberty with devastating effects to this foundational freedom. As Russell Moore often notes, "A government that can pave over the consciences of some can steamroll over dissent everywhere."

What can you do? Call your state Senator. But especially pray, knowing that "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will." (Proverbs 21:1)

OUR MAIN PROBLEM IS NOT POLITICS

Having included the above on The Equality Act, I want to state as emphatically as possible that I do not believe the main problem in this country (or any country) is politics. If that were true, then the main solution would also be politics, but I don't believe that either.

The main problem is the the human heart and the ONLY THING that can change that — that can change any of us! — is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Politics are not to be elevated to the same level of Scripture and Scripture is not to be lowered to the same level of politics. From the pulpit we proclaim Christ crucified and resurrected, not political solutions or saviors. But from the pulpit we must also speak to sin issues, in particular to those that plague our hearts as Christians and the church. Inevitably this will at times be "political". So be it.

The church has always thrived wherever it holds no privileged political place in a society. Wherever it has been given political favor and authority, though, it has often found its spiritual power and witness weakened. We live in a day and society where the church and Christianity has no privileged space. So may it be that we seek and find ourselves being strengthened, empowered, and equipped by the Holy Spirit and Word of God. We were born and born again for such a time as this, Elim Grace.