

## **ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE**

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus  
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska  
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### ***Religious Liberty: A Liberty Undergoing Fatal Stress?***

The LGBTQIA movement and Religious Liberty are on a collision course within American culture. One of the most recent examples of this occurred in Atlanta. In early January, Atlanta's Mayor, Kasim Reed, fired the chief of the Fire Rescue Department, Kelvin Cochran. Cochran had written a book, *Who Told You That You Were Naked?*, in which he condemned homosexual acts as an affront to God. Cochran had distributed several copies of the book to Atlanta workers, all fellow Christians, plus to three other employees who had not requested a copy of the book. Mayor Reed had suspended Cochran for a month without pay in November, pending an investigation into whether Cochran had violated Atlanta's nondiscrimination policies. In firing Cochran, Mayor Reed argued that Cochran's "personal religious beliefs are not the issue." His acts, the Mayor stated, violated Atlanta's nondiscrimination policy, which is "nonnegotiable." There is absolutely no evidence that Fire Chief Cochran acted in a discriminatory manner toward any employee in the Atlanta Fire Department or any other Atlanta city employee. Further, Mayor Reed did not present any tangible evidence to that effect. So, Mayor Reed did fire Cochran because of his religious beliefs. He did not extend his concern about non-discrimination on religious beliefs to Chief Cochran, who stated quite clearly in his book that his views on human sexuality were sourced in the Bible, the basis for his religious beliefs.

Kelvin Cochran, who is an African-American, has been a firefighter for more than three decades, and was chosen to lead Atlanta's fire department in 2008. He had taken a short leave of absence from his Atlanta fire department responsibilities to serve 10 months as fire administrator for the United States Fire Administration. Cochran is also a member of a Southern Baptist Church.

The response to Cochran's firing has been significant. Understandably, the Southern Baptist Convention regards this as a serious violation of Cochran's religious liberty. But what is most interesting is the response of the editorial board of the *New York Times*. The *Times* declared categorically that "This case is not about free speech or religious freedom." Further, Frank Bruni, a columnist and op ed editorial writer for the *Times*, equally rejected that this case is any threat to religious liberty. In fact, Bruni argues that this case and the surrounding discussions about it from religious leaders "[are] an example not of religion getting the protection it must but of religious people getting a pass that isn't warranted. It's an illustration of religion's favored status in a country that's still working out this separation-of-church-and-state business and hasn't yet gotten it quite right." He further strongly suggests that churches and their leaders should not "inject themselves into political debates while enjoying tax-exempt status," and laments that "churches have been allowed to adopt broad, questionable interpretations of

a ‘ministerial exception’ to anti-discrimination laws that allow them to hire and fire clergy as they wish.” He ends his op ed piece with “And I support the right of people to believe what they do and say what they wish—in their pews, homes and hearts.” The point? Religious Liberty in the United States does not mean you can believe and say what you wish about your religious convictions anywhere except in the privacy of your home or in your church building. The strong inference is that there is no protection or freedom to do so in any other place or in any other forum!!! Is that what the Founders of this nation meant in the First Amendment when they wrote, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religious or ***prohibiting the free exercise thereof***” (emphasis and italics added)?

The title of Bruni’s op ed piece is “Your God and My Dignity.” The term “dignity” needs discussion. Mark Regnerus, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, categorizes discussion about “dignity” as Dignity 1.0 and Dignity 2.0. Dignity 1.0, the conception of Christianity, natural law theorists and others, refers to the idea that humans “have inherent worth of immeasurable value that is deserving of certain morally appropriate responses.” Dignity is thereby an inalienable value. Human dignity is not based on whether you believe it or not; it remains real even when neglected or violated. Dignity 2.0 entrusts individuals to determine their own standards. “Wants become needs. Freedom, under Dignity 1.0, did not mean the ability to do as one wishes but—as Christian Smith writes—the ability ‘to flourish as the person one is and should become’ and to help other persons to do the same. Standards come from somewhere [or Someone] else.” Dignity 2.0 is embodied in the famous dictum of Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, who aligned dignity more closely with human autonomy and the right to define oneself, one’s own “concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” Dignity 2.0 now informs virtually all discussions about human sexuality—it is at the core of Bruni’s op ed piece—, about euthanasia—“death with dignity”—, and all discussions about the rights of the mother to the total exclusion of the rights of her unborn child, who has no dignity or protection of law.

Indeed, Regnerus writes profoundly: “Witness, as an example, what is happening to marriage in the West, where the power elite has aligned behind Dignity 2.0 and its novel conclusions about the nature and structure of a timeless institution. The basis of Dignity 2.0 in the West does not rest on external standards, on traditional restraints such as kinship, neighborhood, religion, or nation, which are all stable sources of the self. Rather, it is based upon the dis-integrated, shifting ‘me,’ subject to renegotiations, reinvention, and reconstruction.”

Finally, theologian Albert Mohler correctly observes that “While promising to respect ‘freedom of worship,’ Bruni openly implies that congregations should not have the right to hire and fire ministers or clergy on the basis of their sexual orientation or beliefs. What kind of liberty is that? It is no liberty at all. The argument spells the end of religious liberty in any meaningful sense. What about the right of religious schools to hire, admit, and house on the basis of Christian moral judgment? If Bruni complains about congregations having the right to ‘hire and fire clergy as they wish,’ we can only imagine what he would want to see mandated in terms of religious schools and institutions.”

The firing of Kelvin Cochran and the subsequent opinions of the editorial board and op ed writer Frank Bruni of the *New York Times* do indeed demonstrate the re-definition of human dignity occurring in America and the genuine threat to religious liberty within American civilization. The “free exercise” of religion—the bedrock of religious liberty—is now vulnerable in American civilization.

See news report by Richard Fausset on Cochran’s firing in the *New York Times* (7 January 2015); editorial by the Editorial Board of the *New York Times* (13 January 2015); Frank Bruni’s op ed, “Your God and My Dignity” in the *New York Times* (11 January 2015); Mark Regnerus “The Mission Creep of Dignity” in [www.thepublicdiscourse.com](http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com) (12 January 2015); and [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com) (12 January 2015).

[I am currently preaching a series in my church, Steadfast Bible Fellowship, on **The Bible and Human Sexuality**. What follows is the outline from last Sunday’s (1/11/15) message. It provides the biblical foundation for human sexuality and marriage. It also provides the biblical basis for human dignity and value.

#### **THE FOUNDATION: GOD’S CREATION ORDINANCE, Genesis 1:26-27; 2:18-25**

##### **I. God created the human body and gender as a dimension of being in His image (Gen. 1:26-27)—“male and female He created them”**

- Gender is a specific, intentional feature of God’s creation.
- Two complementary sexes (male and female) is the first mentioned fact in connection with the “image of God” concept.
- In Matthew 19:4-6, Jesus cites Genesis 1:27 as the normal pattern for marriage that God expects.
- The Creation Ordinance and both Jesus and Paul’s citation of this Ordinance strongly imply sexual intercourse as a bond between a man and a woman brought together in a “one-flesh” union.

##### **II. God created woman as a complement to man in the marriage bond, Genesis 2:18-24**

- The importance of the term “helper” (*‘ezer*), which means she adds strength to the areas where the man is weak—and vice versa.
- The result is a complementary union of two different human beings (“male and female He created them”), each with unique physical, emotional, and psychological characteristics. The result is a marriage bond in which both are stronger and more capable of serving God together in their integrity.

##### **III. The One-Flesh Principle, Genesis 2:24**

- Genesis 2:22-24 connects the creation of Eve from a part of Adam's body with the one-flesh sexual union between a man and a woman in marriage. Note the important term "therefore" in v. 24. It is the union of two constituent parts—male and female— into a sexual whole.
- Jesus stresses this connection between the two different sexes—"male and female"—when He addresses marriage in Matthew 19:4-6 and Mark 10:6-8.
- The logic of sexual intercourse requires a sexual complement. The male is incomplete without the female and the female is incomplete without the male.

#### IV. God performed the first marriage

- The result is Genesis 2:25—there is no shame, no self-centeredness or selfishness; only total innocence and other-centeredness. This is God's ideal and His goal.

#### Concluding Assumptions about Marriage from Scripture:

1. Marriage is the fundamental institution God created for organized civilization. It is tied to His creation and His purpose for the human race as His image-bearers who have dominion authority over His world.
2. Marriage is monogamous and heterosexual, and, from Jesus' perspective, permanent—"what God has joined together, let no man separate", Matthew 19:6.
3. Marriage is a commitment before God, regarded in Malachi 2:14 as a "covenant" commitment over which God stands as a "witness." Indeed, Jesus states in Matthew 19:6 that "God has joined together" this union. The man and the woman have a new status before the Lord—they are husband and wife together.
4. It is therefore logical to assume that some kind of public commitment is a necessary part of marriage. Society must regard the man and the woman as a couple, now bound together; they are no longer single. Therefore, sexual intercourse alone does not constitute a marriage. Cohabitation alone does not constitute a marriage. There must be some kind of public commitment recognized by God and by the community.
5. Marriage is a metaphor, an archetype of the covenantal relationship between Jesus Christ and His church—see Ephesians 5:32.