

FREE TO BELIEVE

The Battle Over Religious
Liberty in America

SNEAK
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SAMPLE
ONLY

LUKE
GOODRICH

Praise for
Free to Believe

“Religious freedom is one of the most important civil rights issues of our time, and Luke Goodrich is at the forefront of the battle. If you want to understand religious freedom and how to protect it, you need this book.”

—ERIC METAXAS, *New York Times* number one best-selling author
of *Bonhoeffer*, *Martin Luther*, and *If You Can Keep It*

“Religious liberty is too important to be just another culture war skirmish. If the soul is not free, every other freedom is in jeopardy. We live in a time when religious freedom is rarely discussed without either alarmism or dismissal. Luke Goodrich is one of the nation’s most respected thought leaders in the arena of liberty of conscience. In this book he reframes our context, connecting us with generations past and prognosticating on the challenges of the future. I hope many people, both religious and secular, will read this volume and recommit to a society where all consciences are free to believe, to worship, to serve, and to live.”

—RUSSELL MOORE, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty
Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

“With the religious freedoms that Americans have long taken for granted now under fierce attack, Luke Goodrich not only sounds an alarm about the challenges ahead but also offers practical guidance on how to confront them. This wise, faith-filled, and eminently readable book should be in the hands of everyone who values religious liberty.”

—MARY ANN GLENDON, Learned Hand Professor of Law at Harvard
University and author of *A World Made New*

“Today more than ever, thoughtful citizens need a clear, credible, and intelligible text that makes the case for preserving the precious gift of religious

liberty. In *Free to Believe* Luke Goodrich provides this much-needed narrative.”

—MOST REVEREND JOSEPH E. KURTZ, DD, archbishop of Louisville
and former president of the United States Conference of Catholic
Bishops

“The first time I heard Luke Goodrich speak about religious freedom, I realized he was inviting me into a conversation I had never had before. Luke’s teachings on religious freedom are based not on fear, tradition, or partisanship but on Jesus. He has opened my eyes, as a pastor, to the reality that religious liberty is not something invented by our US Constitution but is deeply embedded in the Bible, the gospel of Jesus, and the heart of God. Pastors, this book is a gift to us! It’s a remarkable tool that helps us reimagine for ourselves and our congregations what it means to respond to the religious liberty conversation through the lens of the gospel.”

—KYLE COSTELLO, lead pastor of Mariners Church Huntington Beach

“As a journalist who writes about religious liberty issues, I often despair over how little Christians know about dire looming threats to our most fundamental freedom. Luke Goodrich’s book is the smart, plainspoken, biblically literate, and legally sound guide that churches, Christian schools, and business-owning believers desperately need to read as the conflicts between the faith and its enemies intensify. Buy this book and read it closely: the institution you save may be your own.”

—ROD DREHER, author of *The Benedict Option*

“Today religious liberty is more likely to be carelessly disregarded as a special interest than faithfully upheld as a fundamental human right. People who love freedom need compelling arguments to offer in response—the kind of arguments that Luke Goodrich makes in *Free to Believe*. In addition to offering biblical and theological reasons that all people (not just Christians) should have freedom of religious conscience, Goodrich uses his

experience as a lawyer with a winning record before the Supreme Court to address the most challenging religious liberty issues that our culture faces today.”

—PHILIP RYKEN, president of Wheaton College

“Free to Believe is a book for Christians struggling to understand biblical principles of freedom of religion—a freedom that extends to all faiths and even to unbelief. Authors who truly understand the principles of our First Amendment are rare, and those among them who know and love the Scripture are rarer still. Luke Goodrich, one of America’s top litigators in religious freedom cases and a devoted servant of Christ, is both, and his book offers insight, faith, passion, and above all clarity.”

—MICHAEL MCCONNELL, director of the Constitutional Law Center at Stanford Law School and former circuit judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit

“Religious freedom is the quintessential firewall against totalitarianism. In his new book Luke Goodrich equips us with this truth: freedom to believe stands as the facilitative womb from which all other freedoms flow. This book will not only inform you but also inspire you to stand as an advocate for religious freedom, not just for our generation but for generations to come.”

—SAMUEL RODRIGUEZ, lead pastor of New Season, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, author of *You Are Next*, and executive producer of the movie *Breakthrough*

“Goodrich’s defense of religious liberty is compelling for four reasons: it’s comprehensive about today’s challenges to our First Amendment; it’s filled with both an unvarnished realism and hope grounded in deep faith; it’s shaped by the author’s keen legal intellect and rich experience with the law; and it’s wonderfully readable. The United States is a republic founded on the commonsense and fundamental rights of everyday citizens. This is a

vitaly important book for all of us who value those rights and the best ideals of our nation.”

—MOST REVEREND CHARLES J. CHAPUT, OFM CAP., archbishop
of Philadelphia

“As a top attorney with Becket, our nation’s premier religious liberty appellate advocacy law firm, Luke Goodrich has been on the front lines in the battle to protect the rights of people of every faith and shade of belief. With the basic human—and constitutional—right to religious freedom under assault from many different quarters, it is a difficult and ongoing struggle. As Goodrich recounts in his marvelous new book, there have of late been some important and exciting victories in the Supreme Court and other federal and state tribunals. But enormous challenges lie ahead. In meeting these challenges, having an informed and engaged citizenry is critical. That’s why *Free to Believe* is such a blessing.”

—ROBERT P. GEORGE, McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence
at Princeton University

“Should Christians defend the religious liberty of non-Christians? And if so, why and how? These are but some of the crucial questions on which Luke Goodrich focuses his formidable intellect in his important new book, *Free to Believe*. Goodrich brings to bear his experience as one of the country’s premier religious liberty litigators and his lifelong love of the Scriptures. The result is a book that no one, on any side of these questions, can ignore. And it’s a great read besides.”

—KEVIN J. “SEAMUS” HASSON, founder and president emeritus
of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and author of *The
Right to Be Wrong*

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For the church.

*Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit,
says the LORD of hosts.
—Zechariah 4:6*

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Introduction

No one told me the lawyers' table in the Supreme Court is so close to the justices. I could almost reach across the massive mahogany bench and touch them. I sat just feet from Justice Breyer, studying his face and listening intently—when suddenly he suggested my client should lose.

My heart dropped into my stomach.

Had we come so far only to lose at the last moment? Our team had spent months preparing our legal arguments. The *Wall Street Journal* called it one of the “most important religious liberty cases in a half century.”¹ Now we were finally in front of the justices, and no one knew how the case would end.

But I knew how it began—with a simple disagreement that could happen at any church.

This time it was Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church in Redford, Michigan. The church had 150 members and a small grade school with seven teachers. The fourth-grade teacher, Cheryl Perich, fell ill and missed the first half of the school year. To keep the doors open, the school initially combined three grades in one classroom. But when parents complained, the school hired a replacement teacher and asked Perich to consider taking the rest of the semester off and returning to work the following school year.

Perich wasn't happy. She presented a doctor's note saying she was cleared for work, showed up at school, and demanded her job back. When

the school explained that it couldn't just fire the replacement teacher, Perich threatened to sue the church.

This behavior was deeply troubling to the church. Perich had a long-standing relationship with the church, and she knew they had no lawyer and no money. More importantly, she knew they were a *church*—a group of Christians who are supposed to love one another, not sue one another.

Unable to reconcile with Perich, the school board met with church leadership. Together they met with the congregation and Perich. After much prayer and discussion, the congregation voted to remove Perich from her teaching position.

It was a hard decision, with hurt feelings on both sides. But it wasn't an unusual decision. Churches have to make hard decisions like this all the time. Most of the time, people move on and life returns to normal. But this time life didn't return to normal: Perich sued the church.

Perich claimed the church had discriminated against her by not letting her return to work immediately and by firing her when she threatened to sue. She demanded her job back, along with hundreds of thousands of dollars in damages and attorneys' fees.

In response, the church said Perich was no longer qualified to be a teacher because she had threatened to sue the church in violation of 1 Corinthians 6:1–8, which instructs Christians not to sue one another in secular court. It also argued it would be unconstitutional for a court to force the church to employ a teacher who had violated church teaching.

By the time the case reached the Supreme Court, the stakes couldn't have been higher. The case was no longer about a small Lutheran church in Michigan; it was about the freedom of *all* churches to choose their leaders in accordance with their beliefs. Could a church be sued for discrimination if it hired only male pastors? Could a Christian school be sued for discrimination if it dismissed a teacher for having an extramarital affair?

These are the kinds of questions the justices debated as we sat among the massive marble pillars of the Supreme Court.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Before I tell you the outcome, I'd like you to consider a few questions:

First, have you heard of this case before? It was decided in 2012 and is one of the most important religious freedom cases in a generation. Yet most Christians haven't heard of it. Why do you think that is?

Second, how do you think the case *should* turn out? And, more importantly, how would you explain your answer to a skeptical friend?

As for the first question, most Christians haven't heard of the case because they're busy with other important things—family, work, school, church, and so forth—and don't have time to follow every new religious freedom case. What they know about religious freedom comes mostly from what they hear in the news, see on social media, or learn from family and friends. Religious freedom is not their top priority.

As for the second question—how *should* the case turn out and why?—many Christians would struggle to give a confident answer. Some instinctively side with the teacher because she lost her job and claims to be a victim of discrimination—and we all know discrimination is bad. Others tend to side with the church because, well, it's the church. Most have a hard time explaining who should win and why it matters.

These responses are neither surprising nor unreasonable. Religious freedom is only one of many important issues affecting our lives, and we can't be experts on everything.

But this also means most Christians are very poorly informed about religious freedom. We may have been told that the Supreme Court removed prayer from public schools or that there is yet another lawsuit challenging a nativity scene at Christmas. We may have heard that a county clerk got in trouble for refusing to issue same-sex marriage licenses or that a baker was sued for refusing to bake a cake for a same-sex wedding. But most of this information comes to us as mere background noise. We have a vague sense that religious freedom conflicts are increasingly common

and that maybe we should start paying more attention. But we don't know where to start.

As long as life keeps humming along normally and we never face a violation of our religious freedom, our inattention won't be a problem. But if things change—if our culture shifts and we start facing violations of our religious freedom—we'll be caught unprepared.

AMONG CHRISTIAN LEADERS

This point hit home when I attended a gathering of Christian leaders who were concerned about religious freedom—pastors, theologians, university presidents, and ministry CEOs, many of them prominent leaders in the Christian world. We gathered as courts across the country were starting to legalize same-sex marriage.

The fear in the room was palpable. These leaders were *not* apathetic about religious freedom; they were on full alert. They had a deep sense of responsibility for the organizations they led and the people they served. They also had a deep sense of concern that our culture is changing and that the climate for religious freedom is deteriorating. Some of these leaders had already been confronted with religious freedom conflicts of their own: their organizations had been kicked off university campuses, penalized by local governments, or pilloried in the media.

Although these leaders were on high alert, they were also unprepared—and they knew it. They asked basic, sometimes misguided questions. Few had solid answers. Most didn't know what legal risks they faced or how to prepare for them. Even among the pastors, many seemed to lack a theological understanding of religious freedom or the tools needed to equip their congregations for the challenges ahead.

I don't mean this as a criticism. It is simply a description of fact. When religious freedom is secure, we don't give it much thought—just like when I had no children, I didn't give parenting much thought. But when I found

out my wife was pregnant, I realized I'd better start learning! Otherwise I'd be unprepared.

Many Christians are now in the same position. We've long lived in a country where religious freedom was secure, and we didn't need to give it much thought. Now we're realizing the country is changing and we might not enjoy the same degree of religious freedom forever. If we don't start thinking about it now, we'll be unprepared.

GETTING PREPARED

That's why I've written this book. Our culture is changing. Religious freedom is not as secure as it once was. And the church is unprepared.

What can we do about it?

As I spoke with the gathering of Christian leaders, I realized the pastors, theologians, university presidents, and ministry CEOs in the room felt ill equipped to help the church prepare. They were just waking up to the issue themselves.

This reminded me of what C. S. Lewis once said about church leadership on social issues. He wrote that people often want the church to take the lead: "But, of course, when they ask for a lead from the Church most people mean they want the clergy to put out a political programme. That is silly. . . . We are asking them to do a quite different job for which they have not been trained."²

Instead, Lewis said, "the job is really on us, on the laymen. The application of Christian principles, say, to trade unionism and education, must come from Christian trade unionists and Christian schoolmasters; just as Christian literature comes from Christian novelists and dramatists—not from the bench of bishops getting together and trying to write plays and novels in their spare time."³

The same is true of religious freedom. The clergy has a crucial role to play in equipping the faithful and walking with them through difficult

times. Yet to understand religious freedom at a deep level and to help prepare the church for the challenges ahead, we also need Christians who are steeped in the field of religious freedom.

I've been steeped in nothing but religious freedom for over a decade, serving as an attorney at the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, the nation's only law firm dedicated to protecting religious freedom for people of all faiths. During that time, I've helped win four Supreme Court cases and many more lower court cases. I've taught and debated religious freedom at universities and on television. I've published articles about religious freedom in academic journals and newspapers. Most importantly, I've walked with faithful, courageous Christians and people of other faiths through some of the most difficult trials of their lives.

My hope is that this experience can be used to help the church understand religious freedom at a deeper level and prepare for the challenges ahead.

A PLAN

Based on many conversations with Christians over the years, I believe we have three primary needs that must be met before we're fully prepared.

First, we need a theology of religious freedom. Too often we begin thinking about religious freedom as a legal, cultural, or political problem without first recognizing that it is a theological problem. Our thinking about religious freedom must be grounded first in the truth of God as revealed in Scripture. You might be surprised at how much Scripture has to say about religious freedom. So part 1 of this book offers a theological understanding of religious freedom, drawing on the doctrine of God, the doctrine of man, and examples of religious freedom conflicts in Scripture.

Second, we need to understand the unique religious freedom challenges of our current culture. Our challenges today are different from the religious freedom challenges of fifteen years ago and different from those

in other countries. We can't be prepared for our challenges if we don't understand what they are. Thus, part 2 applies our theology of religious freedom to the five most pressing religious freedom challenges in modern culture: (1) religious discrimination, (2) abortion rights, (3) gay rights, (4) Islam, and (5) the public square. As a lawyer on the front lines in these conflicts, I'll explain what the key legal problems are, how they can be resolved, and what Christians can expect from our legal system in the coming years.

Finally, we need to take action. Our faith is not a set of abstract principles; it's a calling covering every aspect of our lives. How should we, as Christians, live our daily lives when religious freedom is under threat? What can we do about it?

American Christians haven't faced serious violations of their religious freedom for a long time, but much of Scripture was written to Christians who were facing just that. To live our faith in modern culture, we need to reclaim and reacquaint ourselves with what Scripture says to the persecuted church. Thus, part 3 is practical. Drawing on Scripture's message to the persecuted church, it addresses how Christians should live when religious freedom is under threat.

A FINAL WORD

Before we begin, I should tell you how the Supreme Court case involving the teacher and the church turned out.

We won—unanimously. The court ruled that churches must be free to choose “who will preach their beliefs, teach their faith, and carry out their mission.”²⁴ The decision stands as one of the greatest religious freedom victories in the last fifty years.

In that spirit, I want to begin with a word of hope.

When I met with that gathering of Christian leaders, they were burdened by fear. They felt the culture changing around them, and they were worried about the serious religious freedom challenges ahead. Even now

you can find any number of Christian books and blogs that play on these fears, warning that our culture is lost and that our rights will soon vanish.

But that is not this book. This is a book of hope, not fear.

Why?

As Americans, we can be tempted to place our hope in human institutions. Compared with the rest of the world, we have a stable legal system with broad constitutional guarantees of religious freedom. We have laws that protect our freedom to worship, to evangelize, to found Christian ministries, and to run businesses in accordance with our faith. Our Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled in favor of religious freedom. We think if we can just preserve those institutions . . . win the next election . . . get the right Supreme Court justices appointed . . . then we have hope.

But that kind of hope is hollow. As soon as we lose an election or lose a big case, that hope is replaced by fear.

And what about Christians elsewhere? As I write this, Christians in China face harassment, arrest, and imprisonment for worshipping in the underground church. Christians in Egypt risk death at the hands of suicide bombers who target their churches. Christians from Iraq and Syria are fleeing genocide at the hands of Islamic militants. Christians throughout history have suffered terrible persecution. Yet Scripture calls *all* of us to “rejoice in hope” (Romans 5:2), whether we live in North America or North Africa. Where does that hope come from?

That hope is not rooted in any human institution. It is not rooted in fair laws, favorable election results, or friendly Supreme Court justices. It is rooted in a person: Jesus Christ. He has already conquered every enemy we’ll ever face, and He has promised us an imperishable inheritance in heaven. So even when we’re “grieved by various trials,” we still “rejoice with joy that is inexpressible” (1 Peter 1:6–8).

This doesn’t mean we become Pollyannas, pretending everything is good when it isn’t. Nor do we become Nero, fiddling indifferently while the world around us burns. Instead, we fully acknowledge the evil in the

world even as we hope in the Savior of the world and join in His work in the world.

That is the spirit in which I offer this book.

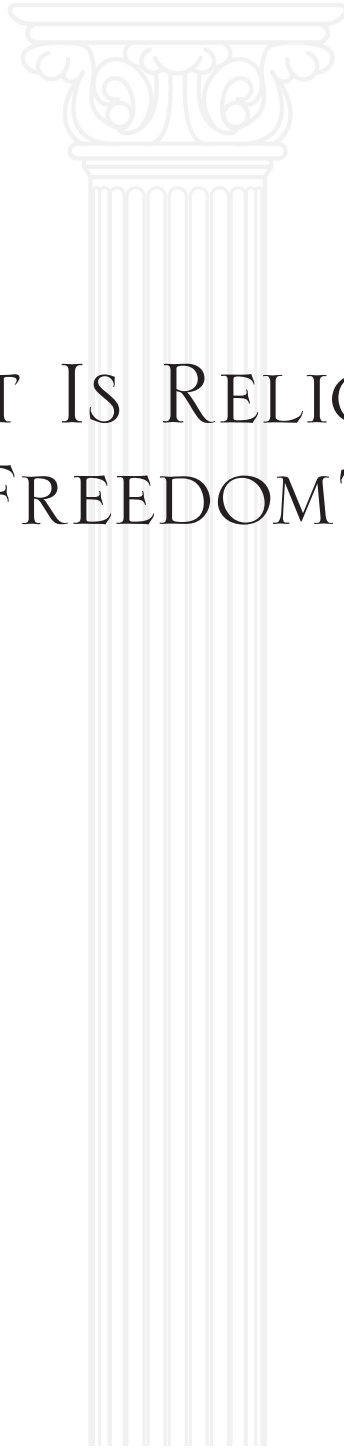
We worship a Savior who is a realist. He told us, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33, NIV). And when it comes to religious freedom, we *will* have trouble.

But that is not cause for alarm, because we worship a Savior who is also triumphant. The One who said “In this world you will have trouble” also said “Take heart! I have overcome the world” (verse 33, NIV).

That is the message we must remember as we consider the religious freedom challenges ahead: “Take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Part 1

WHAT IS RELIGIOUS FREEDOM?



How Christians Get It Wrong

Why does religious freedom matter? Ask three Christians, and you might get four answers. Some will say religious freedom allows Christianity to flourish. Others will say it's a founding principle of our nation. Still others may question whether religious freedom matters at all, given that the church flourishes under persecution.

This is because we all approach the question of religious freedom with different assumptions about what religious freedom is and why it matters. These assumptions are not always clearly articulated or well grounded in Scripture, so before we explore what Scripture says about religious freedom, we must examine our own assumptions.

At the risk of overgeneralizing, I would say most evangelical Christians (and many nonevangelicals too) fall into one of three “camps” when it comes to religious freedom. These are not well-defined schools of thought, nor does every Christian necessarily fall into one of them. Still, they describe common tendencies in our thinking, and they're each mistaken in different ways. I call them the “Pilgrims,” the “Martyrs,” and the “Beginners.”

PILGRIMS

Pilgrims believe religious freedom is a founding principle of our nation. In their view, our nation was founded by Christians from Europe who were fleeing persecution. They came to America to be free to worship God as He

commanded. And although they experienced some bumps along the road, they ultimately succeeded: religious freedom was enshrined as the “First Freedom” in our Constitution, and America has enjoyed a level of religious freedom unseen anywhere else in the world.

Some Pilgrims go further, arguing that America is a chosen nation, a city on a hill, and a unique instrument of God to bring freedom and blessing to the world—perhaps even the modern equivalent of Israel in the Old Testament. Others, more modestly, say America is at least a Judeo-Christian nation—that most of the Founding Fathers had a Judeo-Christian worldview and that America has reaped tremendous blessings from its Judeo-Christian heritage.

All Pilgrims would say Christianity is right and true and it’s wrong for the government to restrict it. Some think it might even be good for the government to promote it, at least in mild ways. For example, the government should be free to acknowledge that Christ is the reason for Christmas by displaying a nativity scene in the public square; it should be free to honor the religious foundation of our laws by displaying the Ten Commandments in prominent places; it should be free to foster religion by initiating prayer in public schools. At a minimum, they say, these practices are important acknowledgments of our Judeo-Christian heritage, and they shouldn’t be stamped out.

For Pilgrims, the bottom line is that Christianity deserves a special place in our society because it’s true and because we’re a Judeo-Christian nation. Religious freedom is important because it allows Christianity to flourish and preserves the blessings of our Judeo-Christian heritage.

PILGRIMS’ PROBLEMS

I love the Pilgrims. I was raised a Pilgrim, and the Pilgrim view contains some important truths. But it also has significant problems.

The first problem is biblical. The Pilgrim view tells us Christians deserve a privileged place in society—that we should expect the government

will protect us and the rest of society will accept us. But Scripture teaches just the opposite. It says we should expect to be persecuted; we should expect to be scorned; we should expect the lowest place. Jesus said, “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). And Paul wrote that “*all* who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus *will* be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). This doesn’t mean we should desire persecution or be indifferent to it. But it does mean we shouldn’t be surprised by it or expect a privileged place in society simply because we’re Christians.

Second, the Pilgrim view has historical problems. Historically, Christianity hasn’t been dominant, at least in most of the world; it has been persecuted. Even in America, the Founding Fathers weren’t exclusively Christian, and in many cases they weren’t particularly devout.

Nor does America have an unblemished record of protecting religious freedom. Take just a few examples:

- The Puritans—our heroic forebears who fled to America from persecution in Europe—brutally persecuted the Quakers. They threw Quakers in prison, whipped them, mutilated them, and publicly hanged four of them at Boston Common.¹
- American Protestants have a long history of persecuting Catholics. They barred Catholics from voting or holding office in the early colonies and sometimes banned them altogether. They expelled Catholic children from public schools in the mid-1800s for refusing to read from the Protestant Bible or recite Protestant prayers. And anti-Catholic rioters attacked and burned Catholic churches.²
- Similarly, the early colonies banned Jews from voting or holding public office. The first religious freedom case after ratification of the Constitution held that Jews could be fined substantial sums if they refused to testify in court on the Sabbath.³

This doesn’t mean our nation isn’t special. It means our nation isn’t perfect. The idea that we’ve enjoyed over two hundred years of unbroken

religious freedom is a myth, just as the idea that religious freedom will continue indefinitely is a myth.

Third, Pilgrims need to be careful what they wish for. A government that promotes Christianity sounds good in theory but typically works out badly in practice. When the state supports the church—by giving it a privileged legal position and exclusive financial support—it inevitably tries to control the church. The church becomes accountable to the state, and the church gets lazy. This was true of the government-supported churches in the early colonies, and it is true of many government-supported churches in Europe today.

In fact, at the time of the founding, the most vocal advocates of state-supported churches were the Enlightenment rationalists, who were deeply suspicious of faith. They wanted the state to support religion precisely to *tame* it—or, as David Hume put it, “to bribe [its] indolence.”⁴ That is why one of the first acts of the French revolutionaries was to pay clergy as employees of the republic.⁵ By contrast, the most vocal advocates of church-state separation were fervent evangelicals who were fresh off the Great Awakening. They believed getting the government out of religion would allow religion to flourish. Today’s Pilgrims sometimes seem to believe the opposite.

Finally, the Pilgrim view can have some unfortunate practical effects—both on those who hold it and on the rest of society. First, it often produces fear. Many Pilgrims see society changing around them; they see Christianity losing its favored place, and they’re afraid. They’re afraid that they or their children may soon face persecution and that our society will descend into decadence and chaos.

The Pilgrim view can also produce anger. If Christianity deserves a special place in society, then the loss of that place can feel like a personal attack on Pilgrims and on what they hold dear. When someone attacks you, it’s natural to feel angry.

It’s also natural to want to fight back. So the Pilgrim view can also tend to make Christians belligerent. As Christianity loses its privileged

place, it feels like a loss of valuable rights. That makes Christians want to fight back, fueling the culture war.

Last, because of the anger and belligerence it can produce, the Pilgrim view can alienate nonbelievers from Christianity and from the idea of religious freedom generally. Rightly or wrongly, nonbelievers see Christians as more interested in fighting for their rights than in laying down their lives. And they see religious liberty as just a thin disguise for trying to maintain Christian dominance.

In sum, the Pilgrim view tends to turn religious freedom into a means of maintaining a privileged place in society for Christianity. That is not a sound view biblically or historically, and it is not good for religious freedom or for Christianity.

MARTYRS

Martyrs are in some ways the opposite of Pilgrims and, in some cases, a direct reaction against them. Martyrs say Christians shouldn't expect or seek a position of cultural dominance. That's contrary to the way of Jesus. Instead, the church should be countercultural. Jesus and the early church were persecuted; we should expect the same. In fact, when we're persecuted, we're blessed.

Martyrs reject the idea that America is a uniquely chosen nation. (My wife, acting on her Martyr tendencies, once spray-painted her car to read "God bless *South* America"—her way of saying God doesn't love the United States more than the rest of the world.) Even if America is a Judeo-Christian nation, it's not a very good example of one. Our nation brutally massacred thousands of Native Americans, systematically denied women equal treatment, and forcibly enslaved millions of human beings. Just because our Founding Fathers valued something—whether religious freedom or the Three-Fifths Compromise—doesn't make it right.

Martyrs are also quick to quote Tertullian, the early church father who

famously wrote that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.⁶ They note that the gospel first spread beyond Jerusalem because of persecution. The first-century church grew explosively under persecution. And other churches, such as the Chinese church, have seen rapid growth under persecution. The American church, by contrast, is arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned. Perhaps a little persecution would wake us up.

Martyrs are also tired of the culture wars. They see that Jesus said a lot about caring for the poor and downcast, turning the other cheek, and identifying with the broken; He said much less about gay rights or Ten Commandments monuments. Martyrs don't want to preserve a special place for Christianity in American culture; they want to be *countercultural*.

So when you ask a Martyr, "Why does religious freedom matter?" the Martyr might reply, "Yeah—why *does* religious freedom matter?" They suspect that religious freedom is just an excuse for trying to maintain a position of cultural dominance, and just one more front in the culture war. They're tired of fighting those battles.

MARTYRS' MALAISE

I love Martyrs too. Some of my good friends are Martyrs. (Not literally.) The Martyr view reflects important truths. But it also contains significant errors.

First, it distorts the teaching of Scripture. To be sure, Scripture teaches that we should expect persecution and rejoice when it comes. Paul said, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus *will be persecuted*" (2 Timothy 3:12, NIV). Jesus said, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you. . . . Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven" (Matthew 5:11–12).

But Scripture does *not* teach that persecution is a good thing. It's an evil thing that God can use for His purposes, and it's an injustice that God will rectify. We see this most vividly in Revelation 6:9–11:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

The saints in heaven aren’t rejoicing at having been killed; they’re crying out with a loud voice for God to avenge their blood. And later in Revelation, God does just that.

Second, the Martyr view breaks with centuries of Christian tradition. The early church didn’t view persecution as a good thing. Although the apostles rejoiced after they had been beaten for preaching about Jesus (Acts 5:41), they also “made great lamentation” when Stephen was killed (8:2) and prayed fervently for Peter to be released (12:5). The famous line about the blood of the martyrs being the seed of the church comes from a document in which Tertullian demanded that the Roman governors *stop* persecuting the church. And it simply isn’t true that the church always flourishes under persecution. Persecution in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East has often decimated the church.

Third, the Martyr view can negatively affect those who hold it. Some Martyrs judge Pilgrims rather harshly, writing them off as more loud than loving and more Republican than righteous. (Some Pilgrims, of course, judge Martyrs too.) Martyrs can also tend toward cynicism—disparaging the voices of those who are concerned about religious freedom and downplaying the stories of those who have suffered a violation of it. Or they can become apathetic, caring little about an important form of injustice.

In short, while Martyrs rightly reject the idea that religious freedom should be valued as a means of maintaining Christian cultural dominance,

they can go too far in the opposite direction, viewing religious freedom as a luxury that can be abandoned lightly.

BEGINNERS

Many Christians don't find themselves in either the Pilgrim or the Martyr camp. They're unsure what to think about religious freedom or simply haven't given it much thought. But they're beginning to take an interest in it. These I call the Beginners.

Beginners tend to think religious freedom is important, but they may struggle to articulate why. They agree that persecution is bad. They know that religious freedom is in the Constitution. They might even say that religious freedom gives us more opportunities to spread the gospel. But ask them whether a county clerk should have the right to refuse a same-sex marriage license or whether a Muslim congregation should have the right to build a mosque on Main Street, and they're not sure how to answer.

This uncertainty can lead to fear. Beginners may hear about restrictions on religious freedom and may be afraid of what will happen in the coming years. Or their uncertainty can lead to disinterest. Conflicts over religious freedom can seem like distant events that are irrelevant to everyday life.

The Beginner view may be fine when religious freedom is fully protected and there's no need to think about it. But when times change—as they're changing now—the Beginner view isn't enough. Religious freedom is an important issue on which Scripture has much to say. It also has important implications for how we live our everyday lives. Thus, we need to move beyond the Beginner mind-set.

A BETTER WAY

This book is written for Pilgrims, Martyrs, Beginners, and everyone in between. The question of why religious freedom matters is vital, and as society changes around us, we need a solid answer.

My answer is simply stated.

Religious freedom is not, as Pilgrims would have it, a tool for maintaining Christian cultural dominance.

It is not, as Martyrs would have it, a luxury that can be abandoned lightly.

It is not, as Beginners might treat it, a pretty good idea that we don't need to think much about.

Rather, religious freedom is a basic issue of biblical justice, rooted in the nature of God and the nature of man.

What do I mean by that? Simply put, human beings are created for relationship with God, and God desires relationship with us. But a relationship with God can never be coerced. It must be entered into freely. So God Himself has given human beings freedom to embrace or reject Him.

That is where religious freedom comes from. If God Himself doesn't coerce us into relationship with Him, then how much less should the government? In fact, that is the very definition of a violation of religious freedom: when the government uses its coercive power to interfere in the relationship between God and man. When the government does that, it's violating the created order and perpetrating an injustice.

This understanding of religious freedom has profound implications for Christians—theologically, culturally, and practically. That is what the rest of this book is about.

I hope this book will accomplish three things. First, I hope it will help ground Christians in the deep scriptural and theological underpinnings of religious freedom. I hope Pilgrims will realize religious freedom isn't about maintaining Christian cultural dominance, Martyrs will realize religious freedom isn't just a culture-war issue, and Beginners will realize religious freedom isn't something they can ignore. Instead, I hope the church will unite behind the truth that religious freedom is a basic issue of biblical justice.

Second, I hope this book will help the church understand the most important legal and cultural threats to religious freedom in the coming

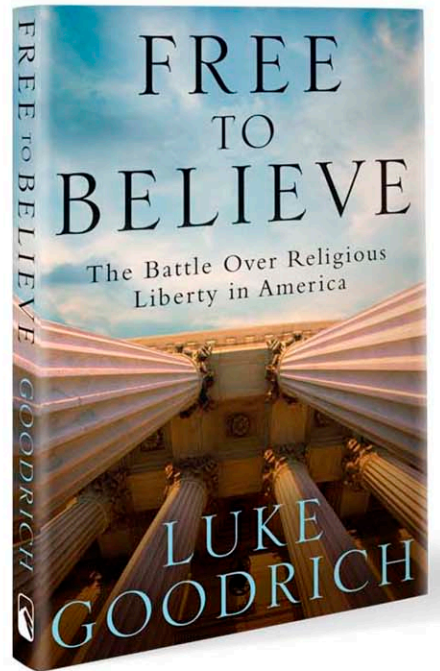
years. The sky is not falling. America is not about to become Communist China. But real and significant threats do exist—and they might not be quite what you think.

Finally, I hope this book will help equip the church—practically—to live out our faith within a changing culture. Much of Scripture was written to the persecuted church, and we need to reacquaint ourselves with that message. It is a message that teaches us to seek neither cultural dominance nor martyrdom but to entrust ourselves to God and seek the common good.

We'll begin with a simple but crucial question: Where does religious freedom come from?

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