

Q. Does the Bible say I should refuse to serve or hire people in my business because of their sexual orientation? Are Religious Freedom Restoration Acts biblical?

A. These questions are based on a controversy raging in the United States as I write. Several states have already passed, and others are in various stages of trying to pass, what are being called Religious Freedom Restoration Acts. In general, these acts are designed to define the right of "persons" to act according to their religious beliefs or consciences in their businesses, so long as doing so does not conflict with a "compelling state interest." In some of these bills, such as that in Indiana, "person" means more than just an individual. Person is also defined as "a partnership, a limited liability company, a corporation, a company, a firm, a society, a joint-stock company, an unincorporated association" organized and operated for profit or nonprofit purposes that can sue and be sued. Many assert that the motive behind such legislation is to legalize discrimination for religious reasons against people based on their sexual orientation.

I am not going to give an opinion on whether these acts should be passed or whether they're constitutional. That will be for the individual states and courts to decide. I am also not going to say whether non-Christian religions should support such bills. That's for their theologians to debate. But the question I will address is, what does the Bible say about the idea that Christians have a right to refuse hiring someone or serving someone in a business because of the person's sexual orientation?

Let's give a couple of scenarios. These are commonly used when discussing this subject.

A Christian wedding photographer is asked to take the pictures for the wedding of a gay couple. He refuses their business citing that it would violate his conscience to take pictures at the wedding because the Bible says that homosexual practices are a sin and/or the Bible defines

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marriage as between a man and a woman. It is certainly true that the Bible defines homosexual practices as sinful and that it defines marriage as between a man and a woman. Nevertheless, is the photographer right to refuse?

A Christian couple own a clothing store. They advertise for a salesperson. A woman who is openly lesbian applies for the job. The couple refuse to hire her because the Bible says her lifestyle is a sin. Are they using the Bible rightly?

1 Corinthians 5:9-13

Does the Bible support the positions the Christians in these hypothetical cases have taken? The answer very plainly is no.

Paul addresses these questions very succinctly in 1 Corinthians 5:9-13:

I wrote to you in my letter to have no company with sexual sinners; yet not at all meaning with the sexual sinners of this world, or with the covetous and extortioners, or with idolaters; for then you would have to leave the world. But as it is, I wrote to you not to associate with anyone who is called a brother who is a sexual sinner, or covetous, or an idolater, or a slanderer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner. Don't even eat with such a person. For what have I to do with also judging those who are outside? Don't you judge those who are within? But those who are outside, God judges. "Put away the wicked man from among yourselves."

1 Corinthians 5:9-13

Paul is here distinguishing between how believers are to handle sin within their assemblies and how they are to treat unbelieving sinners outside the assembly. Members of the assembly are to have "no company" with brothers who are committing gross sin until the sinner repents. To understand this properly, we must know that "company" is from the Greek word *sunanamignumi*. This word does not mean mere casual contact. It literally means to "mix up together" and, thus, is used to mean to "have habitual contact with." So, contrary to the strict shunning practiced by some religious sects, casual contact (e.g. saying "hello" on the street but not eating a meal together—see verse 11) with sinning brothers and sisters is permitted. What about the "sexual

sinner of this world, or with the covetous and extortioners, or with idolaters"?

Paul specifically says that his instruction to have "no company" does not apply to outsiders, specifically the "sexual sinners of this world." This means that habitual contact, thus even daily contact, with the sinners of the world is allowed. Taking the wrong-headed notion of not having company with worldly sinners to its logical conclusion, Paul says that, to really accomplish this—to keep apart from the sinners of the world—"you would have to leave the world."

Paul doesn't leave the matter there. He explains further about the sinners of the world beginning in verse 12: "For what have I to do with also judging those who are outside?" It is not the Christian's calling to judge the unbelieving sinners of this world. It is not our place to point our fingers at them; it is not our place to refuse to conduct business with them; it is not our place to refuse to hire them; it is not our place to treat them as pariahs.

Business partnerships, marriage, and membership in the assembly are a different matter. Look at 2 Corinthians 6:14: "Don't be unequally yoked with unbelievers, for what fellowship have righteousness and iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?" This refers to more than just doing a job for someone you know is a sinner, serving someone in a store, or even hiring that person as an employee. The yoke pictures an actual partnership. Unbelievers must not be allowed membership in the assembly, and believers should not be members of unfaithful churches. Believers should not marry unbelievers (but marriages that predate belief should continue if possible—1 Corinthians 7:12-15), and believers and unbelievers should not form business partnerships. But, other than such yoking, the Bible does not forbid business transactions with unbelievers, even the "sexual sinners of this world."

So, what about our scenarios? The Bible does not support the wedding photographer who refuses to take pictures at a gay wedding. The homosexual couple would rightly perceive his refusal to transact business with them as a judgment or condemnation, the very thing Paul says Christians are not to do toward those who are outside the assembly. His photographing the wedding is not an endorsement of the relationship. I doubt if anyone at a heterosexual wedding considers the photographer's presence there an endorsement of the wedding. He is there as part of a business transaction.

This is why the Scripture most often cited by advocates of Religious Freedom Restoration bills simply doesn't apply. The Scripture is 1 Corinthians 8:10: "For if a man sees you who have knowledge sitting in an idol's temple, won't his conscience, if he is weak, be emboldened to eat things sacrificed to idols?" The argument is that a weak Christian who learns that I have taken pictures at a gay wedding or who knows that I have a lesbian working for me is going to be tempted to run out and become homosexual. Who would ever believe such an argument?

Also, to be consistent, the wedding photographer who is concerned about avoiding sinful weddings would have to ask every couple who wants his services whether either of them has been divorced and whether the divorce was on biblical grounds, and whether this is a wedding between a believer and an unbeliever. But is any of this the photographer's business? No.

What if the homosexual behavior at the wedding (e.g. same-sex kissing) embarrasses or repulses him? This is another matter, and one I can understand. I think I might be embarrassed, too. But we must not confuse personal embarrassment with Christian offense. If the photographer knows the Bible, he should know that he is not being asked to do something that violates his faith; he is merely taking pictures. So, he must either overcome his discomfort or he must conclude that, for the world we live in, he's in the wrong business. It is dishonest and it misrepresents biblical teaching when a Christian hides his personal embarrassment behind a sham wall of religious offense.

And what of the Christian store owners who refuse to hire a lesbian? Again, the Bible does not support their stand. It is highly unlikely that her sexual orientation will affect her job performance. The Bible expressly permits their daily interaction with "the sexual sinners of this world." And, frankly, what this woman does in her private life is none of their business. Again, to be consistent, they will have to ask all who interview for jobs whether they have committed fornication or adultery, or have been covetous, or have lied, or have been disobedient to their parents, or have been angry without cause, and so on. And if the applicants answer honestly, the owners will have to eliminate every one of them for being sinners.

Following Jesus' Example

Jesus Christ was accused by the self-righteous Pharisees of eating and drinking with sinners (Mark 2:16; Luke 5:30). We should not be

ashamed to be accused along with Him. How can we tell sinners that Jesus Christ gave His life on the Cross for sinners while also telling them we refuse to do business with them or hire them in our workplace?

Yes, in our Christian assemblies we are to be careful to put away the wicked from among ourselves, but other Scriptures tell us that even this is to be done in love and with the hope of restoration (2 Corinthians 2:6-8; Galatians 6:1). But God knows the hearts of men, and He knows whom He has chosen from before the foundation of the world (Acts 1:24; Ephesians 1:4). He will judge those who are outside (1 Corinthians 5:13).

Paul was a businessman. He made tents (Acts 18:3). The Bible gives no indication whatsoever that he ever refused to make a tent for anyone because he suspected that person might commit homosexual acts within it. Paul's lesson as it applies to Religious Freedom Restoration Laws can be summed up this way. If you are going to live in this world, and especially if you are going to run a business in this world, you must expect to do business with and hire sinners. Otherwise, what will you do? If you refuse to hire or accept the patronage of gays, mustn't you also then refuse those who practice any other sin? So, who then can you accept as a customer? Who will you hire? Only those for whom Christ died? But how do you know that Christ did not die for these other people and that your treating them kindly and setting a good example as a follower of Christ isn't just the thing that may spark their interest in the Gospel?

But if you are still inclined to protect yourself from these people with the laws of the kingdoms of this world (John 18:36), I caution you to be careful or you may find that the Gospel has gotten to them without you and that the "tax collectors and the prostitutes [and the homosexuals] are entering into God's Kingdom before" you (Matthew 21:31).

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