

January 2023

The following article is worth a read. It was written by LCMS president Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison. It was featured in the official paper of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod:

Reporter.

- *Pastor Suggitt*

Respect for Marriage Act: Misnamed Law Threatens Religious Liberty

By Matthew C. Harrison

As we in the church have been keeping busy with our myriad daily vocations and tasks — contemplating the Advent of Christ as a babe at Bethlehem, His continued coming to us in Word and Sacrament, and His return in glory — the U.S. Senate has passed, and the U.S. president has signed, the misnamed Respect for Marriage Act. This bill's genesis is related to the U.S. Supreme Court's decision this June on *Dobbs v. Jackson*, which overturned *Roe v. Wade* and caused incalculable alarm.

Some suggest that if the Court could find reason to overturn a half century of legal precedent in *Roe*, a recent ruling like *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which codified same-sex marriage on alleged constitutional grounds, could likewise face judicial extinction at the hands of the more conservative court. The bill was passed in the U.S. House of Representatives without debate. It faced a greater potential challenge in the Senate, but to overcome the hurdles, an amendment was proposed and passed to protect the religious freedoms of those who dissent (like The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod [LCMS] and her agencies, schools and institutions). On Dec. 13, President Biden signed the bill into law.

Critics — and I'm one of them — view the alleged protections as no more than window dressing and believe the bill will make our future more difficult, requiring more legal action for those claiming First Amendment rights (i.e., the free exercise of religion). Amendments that would have offered significant protections failed in the Senate.

For the church, the chief issue at stake is not the troubling rapid drift of America away from Christianity or morality. The chief issue involves government and society on all levels defining what is moral or not for the church, and particularly for churchly institutions that interface with government. The Respect for Marriage Act will invite challenges to the nonprofit status of our faithful agencies of mercy and provide impetus for continued challenges to our schools and universities. This may even affect our congregations, since all of them have nonprofit status. This trend is already a concern for our military chaplains, whose First Amendment guarantees are being squeezed to the conscience-breaking point.

The Gospel is at stake. Christ preached, "The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). The apostles preached the same thing. Preaching repentance is integral to preaching the Gospel. We will not yield to any man, government, legal authority or human threat. We must preach the Law and call out sin for the sake of repentance. We must proclaim the Law and repentance in order to preach the blessed Gospel of free forgiveness in Christ. The Law of God condemns us all, including those tempted to homosexual sin. And the Gospel is for all.

This is not about "those" people getting "holy" like us! What Phariseeism we are often guilty of! Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). I will preach as directed by the Word of God. The Gospel is at stake. Compassion and eternal life for all is in the balance. "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17).

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.
(1 Cor. 6:9–11)

We live in the end times. It is an era of mass delusion and deception. Transgenderism has increased a thousandfold in recent years and is largely a social media-driven phenomenon, as I've pointed out previously. The depression and suicide rates of these young people are astronomical. Hermann Sasse wrote about lies in Germany —precisely in the church — in 1936:

The lie is the death of man, his temporal and his eternal death. The lie kills nations. Through their lies, the most powerful empires of the world were laid waste. History knows of no more unsettling spectacle than the judgment which comes to pass when the men of an advanced culture have rejected the truth, and are now swallowed up in a sea of lies. As was the case with fading pagan antiquity, where this happened, religion and law, poetry and philosophy, life in marriage and family, in the state and society, in short, one sphere of life after another, fell sacrifice to the power and curse of the lie.

Where man can no longer bear the truth, he cannot live without the lie. Where man, even when dying, lies to himself and others, the terrible dissolution of his culture is held up as a glorious ascent, and decline is viewed as an advance, the like of which has never been experienced. If, according to the irrefutable testimony of history, this is the judgment of God on the lie, should God then not also punish the lie in His church? Truly He who is the Judge of all the world will do this! For the power of the lie extends even into the church. Since the days of the apostles

there has been lying in the church as in the rest of the world. For people in the church too are and remain poor sinners until their death. ("Union and Confession," The Lonely Way [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002], 1:265)

The world remains the world. Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). He also said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Mark 12:17). Christians are to be good citizens. Our participation in our communities as decent neighbors cannot be undervalued. But in many cases, we will have to make difficult choices, especially for our children when public schools intend to indoctrinate them to believe that Christians, even their own parents and grandparents, are bigots.

What do we do?

- We shall pray and believe, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Let's hold to the sacred Scriptures no matter what. Jesus said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone'" (Luke 4:4). Jesus also said, "From the beginning [God] made them male and female" (Matt. 19:4).
- We shall realize we live in a post-Constantinian period. The Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in A.D. 325. He brought great strength and blessings to both the church and the state. On the downside, in the Western world, the church and the state were radically mixed and confused. While the state was viewed throughout much of Western history as a "protector" of the church, most often government "protection" meant the demise of the Gospel. We Christians know this reality from the New Testament. "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).
- We shall be people of compassion, after the model of our Savior, Jesus. We shall proclaim Christ in Law and Gospel — come what may — for the salvation of many. And

we shall be compassionate to all. Government policies like the Respect for Marriage Act cause unending harm to marriage and family life and encourage lives at odds with both reason and the New Testament. Individuals are confused and hurt terribly. Christ saw the revulsion of the sinners, strangers, lost, hurt, lepers, sick and others, and He was drawn to them. We are witnesses of true love in the name of Jesus.

- We shall remember that we are sinners. Our minds and hearts are every bit as filled with sin and filth as any outward life we encounter. Our message is not, “Get holy and join us holy people!” Our message is, “Stop acting as though you were sinless. As Luther said, ‘Christ dwells only in sinners.’ Join us sinners. Repent and believe the Gospel.”