

Christian business and religious freedom

By [David Williams](#)

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The ongoing uproar over legislative actions in Indiana and Arkansas over the rights of businesses to serve or not serve customers based on religious preferences will echo in our ears for a while longer.

The question, of course, is Why? Why this strange sprawling mess, in which conservatism manages to make itself look terrible? Religious freedom is kind of a bedrock value in the United States, and the right to believe as you wish and act accordingly is one that is central to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Yet this has been botched, with "standing up for liberty" now morphed into "wanting the freedom to refuse business to people I think are sinners."

This is mostly couched in terms of wedding-stuff. What about the infidel-weddings? Could you refuse to provide flowers for a Muslim wedding? Or a Jewish wedding? Or the nuptials of a Buddhist and a Bahai? I mean, they're all supposed to be going equally to hell, right? None of those would be Christian weddings, right?

And...we're talking mostly about businesses that serve *weddings* here, not marriages. Is the wedding-industrial-complex suddenly a *religious* thing? Or is it a cultural accretion, one that's nice and purty and astoundingly expensive, but has no more bearing on the dynamics of a healthy, lasting marriage than the brand of limo that takes you to your reception?

Christian marriage ain't about having a [Jesus cake](#), people.

I don't know how this would even work, honestly. Could a Christian restaurant owner be justified in refusing service to a man and a woman who might possibly be meeting for dinner before an extramarital tryst? Would the Christian owner of a roadside motel do the same? How would you check, without offending every customer you have?

As I read through one in the now nearly endless series of writings on this issue, something else struck me. [The author, a fellow pastor, was genuinely baffled as to how and why anyone would make an issue of this.](#) "I've never understood why separation and ostracism seem to be the posture of choice," he wrote.

In response, I found myself wondering if it might go beyond theology. Perhaps, in some way, it is also a peculiar and unintended fruit of the "Christian business" concept.

Here, I'm not talking about folks who are businesspeople and Christians, or who view core Christian virtues—welcome for the stranger, wisdom, honesty, patience, kindness—as defining their business ethics. To be honest, I think we could use more of that and less self-serving greed and short-term profit-maximization in the C-suites of American business. If you're that kind of Christian businessperson, you're a blessing.

I'm referring to that peculiar trend within Christianity, in which businesses actively advertise themselves as Christian, with the intent of developing and connecting to other Christians as their primary customer base.

As a pastor, I see those [directories](#) come through, on a regular basis, filled with [lists of businesses that can be "trusted."](#)

It's an output of that strain of Christianity that views itself as fundamentally at odds with the world, and that carefully seals itself off from corrupting influence by creating a mirror-economy run by and for Christians.

AmeriChrist, Inc., I call it.

You listen to Christian music, you watch Christian film, you frequent Christian bookstores. You find your mate on Christian dating sites, you hire Christian plumbers and electricians, you vacation at Christian resorts, and make your life about Christian everything. It's about creating an economic circle of like-thinkers.

For those Jesus folk who want no connection to the world, that way of being can reinforce the faith. But it also creates insularity and disconnection from the broader life of our republic. If everything you see mirrors back yourself and your way of speaking, and you will only do business and have exchange with people who think and speak as you do, then it becomes easier and easier to rationalize actions that

only make sense within your own echo-chamber.

Which is why, I think, so many of the folks behind this initiative seem genuinely confused at the uproar. Living within their own separate economy, they have lost the capacity to connect, or to understand how they are heard.

And as someone who genuinely and deeply cares about sharing the Way of Christ, I must also ask: What impact does that insularity have on our ability to articulate the good news to those who aren't already "in"?

Lord help us.

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