

Editorial: It's July 4, but winter is coming

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People who suffer from hypothermia often do something strange and unexpected. They strip off their clothes.



Marv KnoxThe behavior is called “paradoxical undressing.”

Experts offer two theories for why it happens. The simplest suggests exposure to cold leads to loss of judgment. The more complex explains why undressing might seem like a good idea: Smooth muscles that cause a cold person to shiver to stay warm eventually tire and relax. Then blood held in the core of the body flows to the extremities, making the person feel warm and want to undress.

So, a freezing person is likely to take the single action most likely to hasten death—strip naked.

“Paradoxical undressing” came to mind while thinking about presidential candidate [Donald Trump’s recent summit with about 1,000 evangelical leaders](#). Set aside whether you think Trump could or should be president. The specter of Christian leaders coveting power, privilege and position so lustily they turn the definition of religious freedom upside down is alarming, at best.

Of course, evangelical Christians have been on a roll for quite some time.

Most are white, and white people have run this continent 400 years. Evangelicalism is a branch of Protestantism, and except for, oh, Maryland in the colonial period, Protestants have maintained social and political control. And at least since evangelicals lent their votes to Ronald Reagan in 1980, they have enjoyed unhindered access to the conservative wing of federal and state government.

Starting to freeze

But the 1,000 evangelical leaders feel like they're freezing.

Demographically, white control decreases by the year, if not the day. Our nation is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. Eventually, even gerrymandered legislative districts and secretly funded political action committees won't control votes and access to power.

They feel a chill wind.

Religiously, our culture is becoming increasingly plural. Muslim mosques and Hindu temples have popped up in communities once monopolized by Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians and the occasional Catholics.

They flinch as sleet pecks their cheeks.

Even though the First Amendment long has protected the wall separating church and state, government officials often winked and looked away, providing Protestant evangelicals favor commensurate with their demographic dominance. But today, people of other faiths demand equal treatment, and even people of no faith will sue to ensure the First Amendment is applied fairly and equitably.

A shiver slithers up their spines.

This has been building a while, and the evangelical leaders have grown tired of shivering. Their political muscles have relaxed, and the theological

blood that kept their core warm has flowed to their extremities. They feel hot, and they somehow think stripping off their ethical clothing and [parading in their skivvies before a would-be ruler](#) is a good idea.

What they wanted to hear

Trump told them what they wanted to hear. He played the warming notes of entitlement and prestige and, of course, power.

Here's part of what Trump said to the 1,000 evangelical leaders: "This is such an important election. And I say to you folks because you have such power, such influence. Unfortunately, the government has weeded it away from you pretty strongly. But you're going to get it back. Remember this: If you ever add up, the men and women here are the most important, powerful lobbyists. You're more powerful. Because you have men and women, you probably have something like 75, 80 percent of the country believing. But you don't use your power. You don't use your power."

(Ironically—and one wonders if any of the 1,000 evangelical leaders thought of this—Jesus never talked about exercising political power. He never wooed followers by implying he would multiply their power and influence.)

Trading religious influence for supposed political power will be like stripping naked just before freezing to death. It's futile, pointless and humiliating.

The temptation is to trade political endorsement for religious privilege. This would align with the narrative that says Christians are losing their "religious liberty." What that means is they are losing their control over religious and cultural conversations in America. So, they are redefining "religious liberty" to mean freedom to exert their religious beliefs over the rights of others.

Wrong all over

Seeking religious and political favor is wrong on at least five levels:

- It defies and weakens the First Amendment, which guarantees religious freedom for all Americans by declaring government cannot establish religion but also cannot prohibit the free exercise of religion.
- It denies the innate right of all people to relate to God—or even not relate to God—according to the dictates of their conscience.
- For Baptists, it flies in the face of 400 years of advocacy for the religious rights of all people, not just ourselves.
- It imperils religious liberty for U.S. Christians in the future, because what the majority can grant, it also can take away. When demographics turn the tide, and another faith holds power, it will be tempted to do to Christians what Christians did to them.
- It unsettles the balance of liberty that has enabled the United States to enjoy the most vibrant, strong, life-giving religious culture in the history of the world.

In the coming week, we celebrate Independence Day. The weatherperson may say July 4 is one of the hottest days of the year. But if Americans redefine “religious liberty” to mean privilege for only one group of citizens, winter is coming.

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