

Voices: Lessons I learned from my grandparents about religious liberty

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My grandparents were extraordinary people. I wish you could have known them—my maternal grandparents in particular.



James Hassell

Grandad Hanna was born and raised near Canadian, Texas, and Grandma was reared on a cotton farm outside of Gould, Okla. They were hard workers and had the scars to prove it. Grandad basically was kicked out of the house after high school graduation and wound his way to the Santa Fe Railway yard in Amarillo. There he found Grandma working at the phone company.

The rest is history. They never left Amarillo until they went to heaven and were faithful at Buchanan Street Baptist Church and then First Baptist Church.

I learned a lot about practical theology from the Hannas. I played at their house every Thursday afternoon before kindergarten interrupted the

routine. Weekly visits continued, however, until I left for Hardin-Simmons University. Grandad taught me how to fish, tinker with things in the garage, keep a nice yard, play baseball, develop a love for country music, grill a mean hamburger and pull pranks. It was Grandma's and Grandad's course in theology that stuck the most.

Memorable theology



Here are a few of the more memorable teachings:

- Treat people fairly by taking turns.
- Don't hit, but stand up to a bully.
- Be nice to enemies, and if they don't want to be friends, still be nice.
- You don't have to yell and pitch a fit to prove a point.
- Be committed to the church, and get yourself to Sunday school and worship unless you're sick.
- Give food to the hungry by volunteering your time to do so.
- Be a good citizen by voting and committing to education.
- Give away most of your saved-up money, and take care of your family with the rest. The money is God's anyway.
- Laugh at yourself whenever possible.
- Greet people with a smile and a handshake, never speaking of yourself.

- Enjoy the outdoors, because God created it all.
- And hard times will pass.

Religion and politics

These teachings are just the tip of the iceberg. I could go on a while, but perhaps one of the most important lessons had to do with religion and politics. Yes, we talked about these two things at their house. They weren't bashful. In fact, I think they would be appalled and outspoken about some of the political problems in our nation today, as well as how those problems have spilled over into some of our churches.

Specifically, they would have balked at both the state trying to increase its control over people and the church attempting to co-opt the freedom of conscience for anyone in our country who is not a Christian. Religious liberty is not liberty when someone has no freedom to worship according to the dictates of his/her conscience.

Keep in mind my grandparents were some of the most patriotic people I ever met. Grandad grieved until his death that he could not go overseas in World War II because a blood disorder kept him from the armed forces. His war service, however, was to drive trains.

Defending freedom

They knew it was patriotic for them to defend the freedom of others who were different than they were. Patriotism did not include wrapping a cross in our churches up in a flag. Both biblical and historical evidence show that when we lessen the tension between church and state, every citizen loses, especially those in the minority. When the tension is pulled too tightly, we snap.

Therefore, let's take a lesson from the Hannas in Amarillo.

Don't hit, but stand up to the bully who wants either to keep the church out of the state or to make the state into the church. Stop all the yelling in order to prove your point. Get back into a church that wants to make disciples of the kingdom of God, not the kingdom of America. Give, vote, educate yourself and our kids, greet, laugh, enjoy our land. And remember, these hard times will pass.

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