

AN EDUCATIONAL UPDATE FROM
THE SOUTHEAST LAW INSTITUTE™, INC.

To: Interested Persons
Date: January 2019
From: A. Eric Johnston
Re: A Discourse Perspective on the New Year

There is a new era in the United States and a continuing discordant colloquy in public and political discourse. Tradition values, often Christian, are at odds with the developing culture. We must engage in debate in the public square. Christians should ask themselves several questions about why it is important and how it should be done. Recently, we gave an interview to *The Alabama Baptist* newspaper. Here is part of what we said.

Why is it important for Christians to speak up regarding matters of public policy/moral issues? Christians must be salt and light in a fallen world. If we reserve our values only to ourselves, we cannot help others. The Great Commission requires the freedom to exercise our religious beliefs. We constantly fight for this freedom in the courts and legislative arenas. Christianity teaches the freedom to choose. Christians must not be prohibited by restrictive laws that keep us from telling others about Christ or about the values we hold dear.

Putting this in less abstract terms, the rights to express our beliefs are continuously restricted by state and local governments. The best example of this is witnessing on public sidewalks. Many ordinances have been passed to prohibit this. These always must be challenged. The government sometimes abridges our religious beliefs by requiring persons to do things that violate their beliefs. This was the example of the *Hobby Lobby* case when the Green family did not want to supply abortifacients to their employees. They challenged the law and won.

The issue of same-sex marriage presents new issues for churches and Christians. The Bible and Christian doctrine have held for millennia that marriage is between one man and one woman, a union ordained by God. Gay advocates are saying you can be a Christian and still engage in homosexual conduct and relationships. Many cities are passing ordinances that prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. This will affect even the smallest employers who may be required to condone those activities. Exemptions for churches have been less than adequate. These issues must be addressed.

Children have rights in public schools. The annual “Meet You at the Pole” is now well settled law, allowing public school students to meet before school on an appointed day and have public prayer. Even so, many school districts attempt to restrict this activity. Hardly a year goes by that we do not address this.

The sanctity of life is a very important issue for Christians. The Bible teaches that the Lord knew us in the womb. Yet, whenever efforts are made to regulate abortion or to protect women who are in that difficult situation, courts strike those efforts down. As Christians, we must continue to protect the unborn, the elderly and the infirm.

Many misunderstand Christianity as a lifestyle. Christians are not attempting to force their values on anyone. We are merely attempting to preserve those values which have been the basis for western culture, particularly the United States. More importantly, it is our religious beliefs and activities we must protect.

Would there ever be an occasion for a Christian to remain silent? There is a time and season for everything. There are appropriate times to speak out on issues. The fora for speaking out must always be carefully chosen. This is true because not only you may lose an argument in a particular forum, but also it may offend someone and cause more discord than if you had not spoken at all. On the other hand, when an important value is at issue, it is never appropriate to stand silent and let that value be diminished or destroyed.

How should Christians model thoughtful and respectful ways to discuss/debate a public matter? While you may disagree with your opponent, you must respect his position. Through the years we have found that those who believe in ways differently than we do often believe just as fervently as we do. We have a right to disagree. Ultimately, it is not the position of the Christian to harshly judge the other person, but to reach out to him in an effort to convince him of his error. Opponents in the public square are often very worthy and we must respect their position, as well as their capability and their character. On the other hand, those who lie, misrepresent and fraudulently present their positions should not be honored and it is usually better not to engage in debate with them for they may be viewed as “fools,” whom you do not answer in their folly and be like them or make them wise in their own eyes. Pr. 26:4-5.

Being well prepared and strategic in your efforts is a necessity. Issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion are very difficult issues, for example, and require great care and preparation in the way that we approach them. We want to earn the respect of our opponents, while at the same time making important points.

There is no reason for the discordant and malicious public debate today. The constitutional freedoms we enjoy compel us to be civil, but committed. SLI will always approach issues this way. We are hopeful 2019 will see genuine comity in public debate.