

Testimony: HR 194
House State and Local Committee

Name: Pastor Kirt Henman

Testimony: In Support of HR 194

Chair Wiggam, Vice Chair John, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the House State and Local Government Committee thank you for the opportunity to be here. My name is Pastor Kirt Henman. I am the senior pastor of Grace Chapel located in Minerva, Ohio.

And, I am here testifying in favor of HR 194 and my hope in doing so is that my perspective may be helpful to you in some way as you assess and determine what your actions should be.

And so to that end, I think perhaps the most relevant question is: **Why should we care?** Why should we get involved? In answering that I want to put forth quickly 5 reasons for your consideration.

The first reason is that it gives us the opportunity to refresh and clarify our values. That is, your actions will get some press. There will be some conversation. And so, acting in favor of this resolution creates a clarifying conversation here at home. It is an opportunity to fan the flames of freedom in our hearts.

That is, it has been my experience that people today have a diluted understanding of religious freedom afforded by our Constitution. That is, they think it is something that we have to just tolerate. But, there is a difference between toleration and liberty.

That is, toleration assumes that government gives or withdraws permission for someone to practice their religion. That is, they tolerate it or not. Whereas, liberty proclaims that religious freedom, as well as other freedoms, is an inherent natural right that is irrevocable by the government.

And so, I hear in much of the public discourse today in Canada and in America for that matter more of the tone of tolerating versus the tone of liberty. Because there has been such an assault that religion is nothing but a hassle. It is bad for society.

And, I would want to push back on that and say not in my experience. In my hometown, the healthiest and strongest families are people of faith. The leaders in our community are people of faith. The ones volunteering in service organizations, in coaching little league and YMCA programs are people of faith. The people who give most generously to the poor, to our service organizations, to the YMCA, to the betterment of our community are people of faith.

That is, the majority are good people, just living their lives and taking care of business day in and day out. They love of our country. They care about our community. And, they want a good future for their kids in Ohio.

That is, faith taught right and modeled right gives good values. And, faith taught right and modeled right calls one to be a good and productive citizen. And, we know that freedom thrives with this foundation of goodness in its' people. But it falls apart without it. Because, without it, you have to have more laws and more controls in order to maintain society.

Now, I feel like I need to add that I understand that there has been a lot of bad done in the name of religion. And, there still is and I am sure there will be. There are unfortunately bad people who use religion.

And so, I understand that the government does have to and should limit religious freedom to protect people and prevent harm and to protect the common good when absolutely necessary.

And so, there is a purposeful tension set up in our Constitution to separate the church and the state. And, we don't solve that tension by just giving power to the government or by giving a free for all to religious freedom or by making the state and religion one.

We manage that tension. We make adjustments as we go. And, you certainly have and you do that here in Ohio. And, that is what this resolution is. It's a recommendation of concern that Canada make an adjustment that they do not seem to be making well themselves.

The second reason is that it seems to me that we can say less and less what happens over there does not affect us here. Given the global nature of our world. Given that the direction of our world is that global problems require global solutions. And so, nations are coming together like never before in my lifetime. And, I think that we saw that in the relatively common messaging from governments across the world in response to Covid.

And so, given the closeness of Canada and given our close relationship, I think this is even more so. I know personally, as I watched what has happened in Canada and even in some counties in California, I have had conversations with my wife that I could see how easily and quickly things could go to that extreme even here given the right conditions.

Now, in saying that I want to thank you for all your efforts for that not happening in Ohio. However, these past few years have definitely highlighted that freedom is fragile. It is easily trampled upon. And, it seems to be human nature that power centralizes; that the natural flow of government is to centralize; that the bent of government left unchecked is towards authoritarianism.

And so, given that, it is sometimes for good intentions. I mean as a leader if you believe you know what is best then democracy can be frustrating and messy. And so, leaders try to go around it or the worst-case scenario they try to do away with it to accomplish their agenda. And sometimes it is for bad reasons. That is, you have leaders that just like power and do things for their own wealth and selfish reasons. Either way, the temptation is to limit freedom or trample it a bit to get what needs to be done, done.

Now, let me add, that I have extended my remarks to freedom in general. Because I believe our freedoms are interdependent. They overlap on one another. And so, when you see religious freedom being punished. You also see freedom of speech being canceled and the freedom of the press being controlled. And, I think we have seen examples of that as well in Canada. And certainly, we see some of these battles here in America. And so, again, I think this resolution helps clarify our values and guide our conversation in our nation, as well. It speaks to freedom here. And it speaks to freedom in Canada and the rest of the world.

The third reason is that we need to clearly define our values and defend them in the global community. That is, President Joe Biden recently said, “There is a new world order coming and we want to lead it.” Well, if that is the case, part of us leading well is defining and defending freedom in our current partnerships with other nations and in our partnerships to come.

And I would add for me that because of our affinity with Canada, they should be held to a higher standard. Listen, not in a negative way, but in a ‘we expect better things from you’ way. That is, I always held my kids to a higher standard than anyone else. I hoped better for them. I expected better for them. And so, in my home, I know that their mother and I loved them and we instructed them and we sacrificed for them to be honorable and to be responsible and to have every opportunity to succeed.

And so, if they lied or they were irresponsible, I did not treat them the same as everyone else. I expected better. Now, listen, I wasn’t ungracious or unmerciful. Don’t misunderstand. But, because of their opportunities, I expected better. That is, because of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, we expect better of them than another country that doesn’t have that rich history or government.

And so, yes, Canada’s grievances are not like China or North Korea. But we expect better from a sister democracy. And I think we could ask, ‘Do we wait until they are that bad to speak?’ I think not.

The fourth reason is that we stand for liberty everywhere. I mean, the statue of liberty has stood as a beacon for freedom to the world for over 200 years. And, our choices increase the light in lady of liberty’s lamp or we dampen it a bit. And so, yes to this resolution seems to me to be doing what we have always done. Championing freedom at home and abroad and putting a check on power.

The fifth reason is that this seems like an appropriate action. In my understanding of USCIRF (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom) from their website, this would be the appropriate channel to highlight this concern. Also, the Special Watch List is for the lower-level concerns. And, I would say even if USCIRF does not put Canada on the Special Watch List. You have still put them on their radar. They still monitor countries that are not put on the list. They still testify before Congress on these issues. They still engage in international meetings and highlight religious freedom issues in the media. And so, ultimately, it seems appropriate to say something. Because silence says something as well.

