



Episode 1,426: Can You Be Christian and Libertarian?

Guest: Jacqueline Isaacs

WOODS: I'm very interested in this project. It's right up my alley. I've just read the whole title and subtitle to everybody. And you've got a very important, maybe even foundational contribution to this work, and that's what we're going to be talking about today. So first of all, why a project like this? Are there really people out there who are giving you a hard time about or are skeptical of whether somebody can be a Christian and a libertarian?

ISAACS: Yes, which is always a funny situation, right, because nobody questions whether or not you can be a Christian and a conservative or even anymore if you can be a Christian and a democratic socialist. But there's this common question of can you be a Christian and a libertarian. And there's six of us that contributed chapters to this book, and each of us had our own experience of someone telling us that they didn't think we could be a Christian and a libertarian. For one of my coauthors, it was a college professor at a Christian university. For myself, it was a coworker when I worked at a libertarian think-tank in DC, telling us that they did not think you could be a Christian and a libertarian, or even a person of faith and a libertarian. And this sort of brought the six of us together originally.

We've been working on this project dating back to 2013, and we initially started developing some of these ideas to go talk to a group of college students. There was a libertarian conference for college students in DC, and they reached out to the editor of our book, Elise Daniel, and asked if she had an idea that could possibly fill – they had one more panel that they needed speakers for. And looking over the different events at this libertarian conference, there weren't any other panels talking about faith or talking about Christianity and libertarianism. So she threw out the idea: well, why don't we do a panel about Christianity? And the title was something along the lines of "Is Christianity Coercive?" so something really that a young libertarian would sort of perk up on, not liking the idea of coercion.

And we didn't have particularly high hopes about this panel. It was like 9am in the morning, and these are college students who were probably out late into the night before. We had a couple other big panels that we were going up against, and we just thought this would be a great opportunity for us to go talk to the handful of students that showed up. But the room was packed out. We were pulling in extra chairs. There were more students there than I think we anticipated, that the event planners anticipated turning out to hear this conversation. And it turned out that most of the students in the room either were Christians or they were raised in a Christian environment and now maybe were questioning their faith. And this question just really hit home with them, and they could all relate to this experience of being told that you can't be a Christian and a libertarian.

And one of the questions that we kept getting asked during that panel was what materials we would recommend for them to read or that they could take back to their college campus or their college libertarians group on campus and discuss with their libertarian friends, or similarly, go back to their parents and discuss with their youth group friends or their church friends or their family about faith and libertarianism. And, I mean, we had a lot of ideas of those big economic books, you know, Thomas Sowell, philosophical books. But these are college students, and they didn't want another large reading assignment. And that's when we realized there wasn't just a to-the-point book that directly answered the questions that libertarian Christian college students might be having about how their faith and their political philosophy came together.

So we left that event in 2014 and decided that we needed to write this book. And that whole process took time. But we wrote the book, *Called to Freedom: Why You Can Be Christian and Libertarian*, sort of out of those conversations that we had with these college students, but also from our own experiences as young libertarians or primarily Christians, and how we've had to articulate and defend and explain how we bring those two together.

So the book came out a couple years ago, and as you've mentioned, it's available online. But the audiobook version just launched this week and is available online, as well. And I wrote one chapter of the book, but I voiced the entire audio book, so if anyone downloads the audiobook, they would get many hours of listening to me. I'm not sure if that's a selling point or not, but it's the book.

WOODS: Well, I'll link to the book and the audiobook version at TomWoods.com/1426. Now, the follow up question to this is: if all these people are insisting to you that you can't merge these two things and it doesn't make sense and you're betraying either one or the other, what are their major arguments?

ISAACS: Yeah, there's arguments from both sides, and we talk about the libertarian perspective that you can't be a Christian and a libertarian, which typically boils down to the idea of submitting to authority and rejecting that freedom is not the ultimate end in life, that there's freedom as a political means to a greater end, which the Christian would say is knowing God and pursuing God and living out his word. A lot of that doesn't fit well with libertarianism, specifically the objectivist branch of libertarianism.

So a significant part of the book deals with sort of this agnostic, atheist, objectivist libertarianism. But that's not really all libertarianism is. Objectivism is its own worldview, right? It claims to tell you the story of all of life. And libertarianism is a political philosophy, which is a subset of a worldview. So we sort of work to break out which of these arguments is actually objectivism, which of these is more like Randian, versus what is actually libertarianism. What would be a libertarian political philosophy and directly looking at: is that compatible with Christianity?

But then on the other side, there's several arguments from Christians, like I mentioned, this Christian college professor. I had a Christian blogger from the Acton Institute blog about me saying that I couldn't be a Christian and a libertarian. And that also sort of came down to this idea of authority. But in that situation, a lot of it was conflating libertarianism with libertinism, the idea that you don't want to be coerced into moral behaviors, which is not what it means to be a libertarian. That's again on that sort of atheist, objectivist side, saying that nobody should coerce me to behave morally. And not all libertarians believe that,

especially not a Christian and a libertarian. We would say that the government shouldn't be coercing you to behave morally, but there are certainly institutions in society that can and should be coercing us to behave morally, because we want to become more Christlike. And those responsibilities fall to the Church and our communities and our families. So taking some of those arguments from both sides.

And then chapter two my coauthor Jason Hughey goes into a little bit of a deeper dive on some of the specific scriptural references. So I won't ruin it for you, but Romans 13, 2 Peter, all of those good ones that talk about the authority or that appear to talk about the authority of the state, he goes through and tackles them head-on. And not just saying, you know, this is what Romans 13 is actually saying or this is what it actually means to "render unto Caesar," because one thing that we try and keep in mind throughout this whole book is that we are not experts; we are just people who are personally working through these questions. So we're not going to come in here and claim to be experts and say that we absolutely know what nobody else has figured out about Romans 13. So what he does is sort of take different possible interpretations of Romans 13, what different experts have said, and tackling if each of those would or would not be compatible with libertarianism. So it's a pretty thorough assessment on both sides.

WOODS: Let me nitpick just a bit, and you tell me if this is a legit nitpick. When you say that we don't want the state coercing us, but there are other institutions that we may want to coerce us, the way I would word that instead is: I certainly don't want the political class – I mean, my gosh, the political class of America – telling me how I ought to live and what the correct moral principles are. What a nightmare. But yeah, that doesn't mean that, therefore, I want to be completely adrift and take no advice from anybody, just because I don't want to take it from Nancy Pelosi. So I can understand that I would say: I look to other sources for guidance on moral questions. But if I have an institution that, let's say, strongly encourages me to behave a certain way but can't physically punish me for not and can't put me in jail for not, then is that really coercion?

ISAACS: Right, no, that's a good question, and that is definitely something that we address in the book, that there isn't another institution that can coerce to the same extent that a government can. So we're not really talking about physical coercion, and if we were, like if we were talking about someone locking you in your house so you can't go out and sin, that would not fit what we're looking for here. That would violate the nonaggression principle –

WOODS: Okay, I just wanted to clarify that for everybody.

ISAACS: Yes. But that does bring up an interesting point, though, because we also do a thorough job of defining what the government is. This seems to be a difficult subject for some people. I mean, there's obviously the famous instance of former-President Obama saying that government is the things that we do together. But I was also very dismayed – I reviewed a Christian political science textbook in the most recent edition of the *Libertarian Christian Review*, which is a journal by the Libertarian Christian Institute. This is a Christian textbook for Christian college students about political science. And it basically had the same definition of government, that it was things that citizens of a particular nation just choose to do cooperatively.

And that's pretty obviously wrong, right? That's not a very critical thought process about how do we define government. So we go into it a little bit more specifically about, government is

the institution that has a geographical monopoly over your specific area and can use a threat of force to levy taxation and enforce its laws. There's no other institution that fits that definition. The church doesn't. Your community doesn't. Other community groups don't. That's specifically what the government does.

And that's actually, I think, a very important part to understand, because if you just say the government's things that we do together, then yeah, it's easy to say that we are called to work together and we are called to collaborate and care for the poor, so why can't we be democratic socialists or whatever? But if you really understand that the government is not just the things that we do together, it's the institution that can use force to whatever ends it desires – to tax, to enforce moral behavior, etc. – then that lends itself to a much more libertarian view of government, because those are generally not things, certainly, that most Christians would be supportive of, but most freedom-loving Americans probably wouldn't either.

WOODS: My view of the matter is that if you go through the Bible, there is no socialism in it whatsoever, that even the parts that they think are socialism are really not, because a voluntary decision to share resources is not socialism, because as practiced in the modern world or ever, with the exception of a few utopian communities here and there, nobody was asked his consent, 'Do you want to share your resources with the community?' It was always done violently? So there's no socialism in it. There's no advocacy of socialism in it.

ISAACS: Right.

WOODS: But at the same time, I could understand somebody going through the Bible – which is not really meant to be a text in political theory, and saying, well, I don't really see much in here that gives me a whole lot of guidance one way or the other as to what the state ought to do or not to do. I know what I ought to do. I'm told what I ought to do. But I don't really see a lot about what the state ought to do. So how are you able to get that out of that source?

ISAACS: Well, that's absolutely correct, and we say pretty upfront in the book that we are absolutely not saying that the Bible is a political textbook. We're not even making the claim that a Christian ought to be a libertarian or that the most proper political expression of Christianity is libertarianism. I know many of our authors do you think that, but that's not necessarily the case that we're making in the book. The only thing we're saying in the book is that you *can* be a Christian and a libertarian, that these are not mutually exclusive identities, and in fact, that there might be some supporting scriptures and philosophies sort of both ways. So along those lines of this is simply saying you *can* be a Christian and a libertarian, we look through what the Bible does say about government; like I said, he talks about Romans 13, "rendering unto Caesar"; all of those sort of hot-button ones that specifically talk about government.

But then also, we just look at sort of the bigger principles and what – in my chapter, Chapter One, I lay out what does the Bible say about us, about humanity, about what we're supposed to be doing on the earth, and looking at everything from what's called the Four-Chapter Gospel: creation, the Fall, redemption, and restoration. This whole story of Scripture that tells us that in the beginning, when we were created in the image of God, we were created to reflect him, reflect his creative work. We are not like God in that we can't create things out of nothing, but we can emulate God and create things out of the resources that we've been given. And in fact, we're called to do that, that that's part of what Christians are supposed to

be doing in the world. And that says a lot about how we should be engaging, in terms of creating value.

But then that we are tainted by the Fall, that our image of God that we were created with has been shattered because of sin. So we're never going to be able to fully emulate God. We're never going to be able to fully bring about heaven on earth because of the reality of sin, and that has a lot to say about how we should be entrusting power to people how we should be understanding – you know, our leaders are fallen and sinful humans, just like the rest of us, right?

But that's only half of the story of Scripture, right? The second half of the story of Scripture tells us about Christ's redemption, that we are being reconciled with Christ, that we have this opportunity for salvation, and that that changes how we should interact with people, right? That not only are we sinful, and not only are these other humans that you're interacting with through business or through the marketplace, that they're fallen and sinful, but that all of us have the potential for salvation and reconciliation. And then the last part of the story of redemption, that looking ahead, that God will be making all things new. And the work that we're doing here now is not in vain, but it's helping build towards restoration when Christ returns.

So we lay all of that out in chapter one, which partly was to frame the book so that we understand sort of this big picture of Scripture and understand that Scripture and the story that God's telling is much bigger than our politics. But also because we hope that there will be people reading the book that may not be Christians, or may have been raised Christian but are sort of in that questioning phase, or are of the objectivist libertarian side and are reading the book because they want to know: can my Christian friends actually be libertarian? So, in Chapter One, we try and lay out a very clear gospel presentation so that anyone who reads the book who may not have heard the good news can't get through Chapter One without being told.

WOODS: How did you yourself get pushed toward libertarianism?

ISAACS: Yeah, that's a good question, and I tell my story in Chapter One. I grew up in Oklahoma, a very conservative state, and with a very conservative family. I was very involved with Republican Party politics. I worked on many campaigns. I actually interned for the Republican Party when I was in college. I mean, that was me. And as I was studying more and learning more, both about my faith and about politics in general, the inconsistencies I think became more and more clear, that a person shouldn't be advocating for liberty in one arena, say, economic liberty, but then not advocating for liberty and other areas, say, moral issues. And so I was questioning that, but I didn't really know what the alternative was. The environment that I grew up in was very, you know, Republican-and-Democrat, blue-and-red, right?

Thinking outside of that paradigm was hard, and it sort of took me getting pushed. When I was a teenager, I read *The Law* by Frederic Bastiat for the first time. And that was that was a classic libertarian text that sort of started getting me exposed to some of the more libertarian writers, libertarian ideas. And by the time I graduated college, I was pretty, definitively a libertarian. I would call myself a libertarian.

But I hadn't really been exposed to this issue that we address in the book of being told that you couldn't be a Christian and a libertarian yet, until I moved to Washington, DC after college, and I started my first job at a libertarian think-tank. I was working there as a research assistant, so pretty low level. You know, I would do a little research and then I would fill coffee and sort mail. But it was a great environment for me to be exposed to sort of the libertarian experts and libertarian thought, and that was where I was first told by one of my coworkers at this libertarian think-tank that I could not be a Christian and a libertarian. And so I tell that whole story in my chapter about why he told me I couldn't. And it sort of caused a crisis for me, because I was new, I was young, this was my first job out of college, and suddenly, I'm being told by my coworkers that they didn't think I could be a libertarian. And I just felt like I was failing some purity test here and wasn't going to be good enough to be considered a libertarian, because I believed in a higher power. So that sort of is what caused me to start wrestling with, like, why can't you be a Christian and a libertarian?

And, yeah, I already mentioned that that led me into a blog war with someone from the Acton Institute, going back and forth about Christianity and libertarianism. And honestly, going through that experience – and my other coauthors tell their own versions of their stories – probably really equipped each of us to then talk to young adults now who are in similar places or who are hearing similar arguments from their families or from their professors or from their coworkers, because we can say like, yes, I was told that, I heard that argument, and I spent years going and researching it, and here's what we found. And that's why we wanted to put it all together in one book, so that it would be easy to recommend to people.

WOODS: Let me ask you one more thing before I let you go, a sort of devil's advocate question.

ISAACS: Mm hmm.

WOODS: It could be argued I think by Christians that it's not clear that the Christian message – now, as you say, I understand that you're not saying that a Christian is obligated to be a libertarian or that his religious theological views compel him to be libertarian. But all the same, I could imagine somebody saying what comes through more clearly in Christian texts is the need to avoid sin, much more than the need to avoid political coercion. So therefore, what I conclude from that, somebody might say, is that the idea that I would want to maximize individual choice, including the choice to do all kinds of things, which from the point of view of Christianity are immoral, is simply putting the individual in a situation that is rife with temptation. And we should do that just to satisfy your ideological side project? I mean, shouldn't we instead say, choice is in general a good thing, but for the sake of social order and the good of a person's soul, there are some choices that we shouldn't tempt people with, and we should simply ban them, because that will help to form their souls better, and that does sound like something that's more demanded by Christian texts than political liberty? So how would you answer that?

ISAACS: Yeah, I would personally respond by, instead of referencing back to Scripture, because to your point, depending on how you read it, you could infer something more along those lines, that it's more important to avoid sin, and therefore, we should have the government limit those choices for people. So I would not necessarily try and argue with someone like that about Scripture.

I would turn more to economics and say, if that's what you are taking away as the priority – to limit people's choices from being exposed to opportunities to sin – is the government really good at doing that? Have we seen examples of the government succeeding in fostering more virtue in society because of limiting people's options or people's exposure to temptation and sin? And I don't think you could find a single example where that's the case. In fact, most of the efforts made to enforce morality in society backfire stupendously. I mean, there's the obvious examples of prohibition, both of alcohol in the past, but also drugs in the present.

But then there's also situations like defining marriage. Conservatives for so long thought that this was the right thing to do, was to define marriage, like make an amendment to the Constitution or something that would define marriage as between a man and a woman. And because they were so adamant about codifying the definition of marriage, that led to what happened with the Supreme Court and the Obergefell decision, that the definition of marriage got codified the exact opposite of what conservatives were hoping for. And as a libertarian, I'm sitting on the outside of this debate, saying I'm not really sure it's the government's place to be codifying a definition of marriage at all. And this is clearly not how conservatives wanted this to come about.

So if someone is going to make the case that it is important to be limiting exposure to sin and government should do that, I would challenge them to find any example where it succeeded and any sort of evidence or appeals to economics or anything else that they could come up with to try and explain why that would be an efficient use of government time. And I don't think you can make a case on that front either.

WOODS: How do people get the book? They can get it on Amazon, right? The print version and the electronic version?

ISAACS: Yep. And the audiobook version is available now, and you can go to CalledtoFreedomBook.com for all that information.

WOODS: Okay, so we'll do that. I'll link to all that at TomWoods.com/1426. Well, Jackie, thanks for your time today and best of luck with the book.

ISAACS: Thank you, Tom. Have a great day.