



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on November 19, 2025

Maine Mom Challenges Court Order Forbidding Her to Take Daughter to Church

The Maine Supreme Court heard arguments last week in a case challenging a lower-court order barring a mother from taking her daughter to church because the girl's father, who never married her mother, claims it is causing her "psychological harm."

Unholy Father

Eleven months ago, Matthew Bradeen secured an order from the Portland District Court giving him the exclusive power to decide which religious activities his 12-year-old daughter, Ava, may participate in.

Bradeen's relationship with Ava's mother, Emily Bickford, ended before Ava was born. Bickford has primary custody of Ava; Bradeen has visitation rights.

Bickford and her daughter have been attending Calvary Chapel, an evangelical Christian church in Portland, for more than three years. After Ava told her dad last year that she was planning to be baptized, he went to court to stop it.

According to Liberty Counsel chairman [Mat Staver](#), who is representing Bickford, Bradeen took his case to a judge who is "a former ACLU president" and obtained expert testimony from Dr. Janja Lalich, "a Marxist former sociology professor from California."

Bradeen claimed that, after she began attending Calvary Chapel, Ava "started having severe panic attacks and exhibited alarming psychological signs — like leaving notes around the house that said 'the rapture is coming,'" wrote Maine's NBC affiliate [WCSH](#).

[Liberty Counsel](#) noted that Lalich, an "expert on cults,"

testified that she had "studied" Calvary Chapel Church and found that the church's pastor was a "charismatic" speaker, spoke "authoritatively" in his messages, and ... asserted his messages were objective truth. Because of this, Dr. Lalich perceived the church to be a "cultic" organization[.] Despite not being a psychologist, Dr. Lalich testified it was "evident" that the church posed a potential for psychological harm to the girl.

[Newsweek](#) reported:

The court found that teachings and depictions used in the church's services and youth materials — including images of "fallen angels" and messages about "eternal suffering" — had caused psychological distress to the child.



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Accordingly, the court concluded that exposure to those teachings created a risk of “psychological harm.”

Anti-religious Order

However, observed Staver:

The judge found that Emily is a fit parent *EXCEPT for the fact that she is a Christian*. The judge mocked Ava and Emily’s faith by purposefully refusing to capitalize the word “God” — something I have never seen. The judge even chastised Emily for allowing the church pastor to pray for Ava. And the judge ruled that Emily could not take Ava to ANY church unless Matt approves. And Matt has steadfastly refused to approve ANY church. [Emphasis in original.]

The “unusually sweeping custody order” (as *Newsweek* put it) went far beyond mere church attendance. Under it, Staver wrote:

Ava cannot associate with any of her church friends or any member of Calvary Chapel Portland.

If Ava meets a new friend outside of Calvary and that person begins attending Calvary, Ava must cut ties with that friend.

Ava cannot attend ANY Christmas, Easter, or any other Christian event or celebration at ANY church, including any wedding, funeral, or even hospital visits with anyone associated with Calvary Chapel.

Ava cannot have any contact or participation with ANY religious organization (which would include Salvation Army or a food bank, homeless shelter, or crisis pregnancy center).

Ava cannot read the Bible or religious literature or be exposed to any “religious philosophy.”

Yet Bradeen’s attorney had the audacity to tell the Maine Supreme Court Thursday that the district court had “narrowly tailored its restrictions.”

Going to the Mat

Meanwhile, penned *Newsweek*:

Staver told the justices that the district court’s findings fell far short of the showing required under constitutional standards: “There is no finding of abuse or neglect,” he said, and the record showed only that the child “at one time was observed to have anxiety,” once had “an observance of a panic attack,” left “notes around the house,” and wrote in a workbook “that this demon image was scary.”

“It cannot amount to immediate and substantial harm, justifying this drastic change and taking away from a fit parent the right to the religious education of their child,” declared Staver.



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Furthermore, as Liberty Counsel [summarized](#) its [brief](#) to the high court:

Under the U.S. Constitution, federal law, and numerous Supreme Court precedents, unmarried parents both have the right to instill their religious beliefs into their children during their respective custodial time.... Legal precedents protect a parent's custodial rights even when one parent's religious beliefs are in opposition to the other parent, or even in opposition to the American mainstream.

Bench Press

Newsweek indicated that the justices challenged both parties' arguments. "One justice asked whether the 'best interest of the child' standard conflicts with religious-freedom principles," while "another justice questioned where the line should be drawn if a particular religious practice is alleged to be harmful."

Staver, for his part, wrote:

The majority of justices said the order is hostile toward religion and that it used a "nuclear option" by taking all decision-making away from an unquestionably fit parent regarding the religious upbringing of her daughter.

"[Ava] would like to come to church. She misses her friends, and I really hope that this gets overturned," Bickford [told reporters](#) after Thursday's hearing. "It needs to be. It's unconstitutional."

The court said it will issue a written decision in the case "in due time." Until then, the order will stand. But given the judge's clear anti-Christian animus and the many precedents in Bickford's favor, does it stand a prayer?



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