

# **Baptists and Religious Liberty**

The Baptist Heritage Series

By: Stan L. Haste

Should churches pay taxes? Does government have the right to demand that churches and church agencies and institutions comply with anti-discrimination regulations? Should church agencies be required to disclose to government their financial records? Is government in a position to determine which church agencies and institutions truly fulfill the mission of the churches? Should Congress regulate the lobbying activities of the churches? Ought government to provide tax relief to those who send their children to private, sectarian schools? Does government have the right to force children to pray in school?

These and many other questions asked today point to the growing importance in American society of religious liberty and proper church-state relations. They are questions which Baptists have addressed throughout their history and for which this pamphlet seeks to present some answers.

## **Religious Liberty: The Biblical Basis**

A basic distinction must be made between two terms – “religious liberty” and “separation of church and state” – which are often mistakenly used as if they have the same meaning. These terms are not twins; they are more like close relatives.

Religious liberty is a theological concept rooted in Scripture. Separation of church and state is the method devised by the nation’s founders to implement the principle of religious liberty. Religious liberty comes before separation of church and state, both in historical sequence and in theological importance.

Put another way, religious liberty is God’s gift to humanity. Separation of church and state is the nation’s means of providing the political atmosphere which allows that gift to be expressed.

The American doctrine of separation of church and state is connected to the biblical view of liberty, and Baptists had a significant role in securing acceptance of that doctrine. Baptists played an essential role in securing separation of church and state in the nation’s formative years precisely because of the freedom they believed God had given them and all others.

This conviction was based on the theme of human liberty found throughout Scripture. That biblical theme includes such precious concepts for Baptists as the creation of man in the image of God, the voluntary nature of true faith, the prophetic role of religion in life, and the priesthood of the believer.

The theme of freedom begins with the creation narratives themselves. Genesis 1:27 declares that “god created man in his own image” (RSV). Genesis 2:7 explains that creative act by stating that “the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (RSV). To be created in God’s own image indicates that human beings are made of God’s own essence, and part of that essence is that humans are free to make choices as they will.

In giving the Hebrews instructions for celebrating the golden jubilee of their entrance into the promised land, God directed that the fiftieth anniversary year was to be hallowed and the people were to “proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants” (Lev.25:10, RSV).

The Old Testament prophets warned God’s people that they were going to be judged for abusing the freedoms with which the Lord had blessed them. Isaiah reminded them:

“Hark to me, you who pursue deliverance, you who seek the lord; look to the rock from which you were hewn and to the quarry from which you were digged” (Isa. 51;1, RSV).

George W. Truett, famed pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, said that like the ancient Hebrews we would do well to take an “occasional backward look,” for to do so “would give us poise and patience and courage and fearlessness and faith.”

The New Testament is full of references to the freedom Christ brought and brings. At the outset of his public ministry following his baptism and the wilderness temptations, Jesus declared in Nazareth:

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19, RSV).

Jesus also gave us a clear picture of the proper relationship between church and state. In an incident described in Matthew 22, Pharisees and Herodians tried to “entangle” Jesus by asking: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” Jesus insightfully pointed to a coin with Caesar’s inscription and declared: “Render...to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 2:17, 21, RSV).

The writings of the Apostle Paul include many passages in which the freedom given by Christ serves as a cornerstone of the apostle’s theology. Nowhere is the theme of liberty more prominent than in the letter to the Galatians, thought by many New Testament scholars to be Paul’s first epistle. There he declares: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1, RSV).

### **Religious Liberty: A Baptist Distinctive**

Although Baptists in America cannot claim all the credit for the triumph of religious liberty and separation of church and state, responsible and prominent historians give Baptists a large share of the credit.

Anson Phelps Stokes, perhaps the most renowned church-state historian in this century, has sated that “No denomination has its roots more firmly planted in the soil of religious freedom and Church-State separation than the Baptists.”

Charles Evans Hughes, Chief Justice of the United States and a prominent Baptist layman, declared at the laying of the cornerstone of the National Baptist Memorial Church in Washington, D.C., in 1922 that the contribution of religious liberty “is the glory of the Baptist heritage, more distinctive than any other characteristic of belief or practice.”

George W. Truett, in an address delivered in 1920 from the steps of the United States Capitol, called religious liberty “the supreme contribution” of America to the rest of the world. He went on to declare that “historic justice compels me to say that it was preeminently a Baptist contribution.”

What led these and other church-state observers to make such sweeping claims about the Baptist role in securing religious liberty in America for all can best be explained by pointing to the contributions of selected Baptist leaders in the colonial period of our nation’s history.

### **The Struggle for Religious Liberty in Colonial America**

Baptists in the United States can trace their roots to seventeenth century England. Our Baptist ancestors in that country became convinced that the only valid baptism was that of believers, a conviction sharply different from that of the established Church of England. Their nonconformist posture made them unwelcome in England.

Some of them eventually found their way to the shores of the new world. Here, as in England, they found religious freedom to be elusive. The church of England was already established in many of the colonies as the official, state-sponsored religion. In others, Congregationalism was state supported. In Maryland the Roman Catholic Church enjoyed official sanction.

Historical facts dispute what has been one of the most deeply believed myths about American history, namely, that the English Pilgrims found perfect liberty awaiting them on the shores of the new world. Indeed, the final victory of religious liberty over established churches was not won until 1833, when Massachusetts became the last state to rid itself of state-sponsored religion.

### **Williams, Backus, and Leland**

As has already been noted, historians give Baptists a lion’s share of the credit for the eventual victory of religious freedom and separation of church and state in the United States. Three men played a significant role in achieving this victory: Roger Williams, Isaac Backus, and John Leland.

Roger Williams (c. 1603-1683) was a professed Baptist for only a brief period during his life. He called himself a “Seeker” after moving beyond his Baptist experience. Although some have seen him as something of a secularist, Williams in truth demanded absolute separation of church and state on theological grounds. He insisted on what he called “soul liberty” for the individual. In so doing, he put forth the view that the state should neither support the church nor exercise authority over it.

Forced to leave Massachusetts because of his radical views, Williams founded the colony of Rhode Island and led in forming the First Baptist church in that colony as the first Baptist church on American soil.

Isaac Backus (1724-1806), an itinerant Baptist preacher, was an influential figure during the meeting of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, where he and other Baptists lobbied the Massachusetts and other delegations for a guarantee of absolute religious liberty.

He also rallied Baptists throughout the colonies to the cause of liberty. He traveled tirelessly, visiting churches and convincing all who would hear that state control over church affairs invited tyranny.

Backus lived enough to see the Bill of Rights incorporated into the Constitution in 1791, but died long before his native Massachusetts disestablished the state church in 1833.

John Leland (1754-1841), like Backus a native of New England, made his primary contribution in Virginia. As an advocate of absolute religious liberty and separation of church and state, he helped mold the thought of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, both of whom played key roles in the victory for religious freedom.

Leland's influence on Madison was particularly significant. When the original draft of the United States Constitution was sent to the colonies to be ratified, Leland put himself up as a candidate to the Virginia constitutional convention. He was opposed by Madison, a neighbor in Orange County. Madison favored ratification of the Constitution as it was then written, while Leland wanted Virginia to reject the proposed document because it contained no specific guarantees of religious liberty and other personal freedoms. After a meeting between the two men, Leland withdrew as a candidate when Madison promised to support attaching a Bill of Rights to the Constitution which would include religious liberty.

Madison went on to become the principal author of the Bill of Rights, which begins with the declaration that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Leland, who returned to his native Massachusetts in 1791 after the Constitution had been adopted, continued the battle against state-sponsored religion there and lived to see the final victory in 1833, when Massachusetts at last gave up its state church.

### **Religious Liberty: 1833-1939**

Once the battle for religious liberty had been won, Baptists generally saw little need for emphasizing the subject until the mid-twentieth century. Between 1833 and 1860, Baptists made few pronouncements on the subject. One explanation is that they were occupied with the more pressing problem of slavery and the controversies between Baptists of the North and South.

From 1860 to 1900, the advances of the Roman Catholic Church at home and the persecution of Christians abroad prompted renewed Baptist concern over the questions of religious liberty. The first two decades of the twentieth century witnessed some degree of attention to the question for similar reasons. Stokes, the church-state historian, makes no mention of Baptist activities between 1833 and the middle of the next century.

In 1939, however, a major document on religious liberty was adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention, the Northern Baptist Convention, and the National Baptist Convention. Called "The American Baptist Bill of Rights: A Pronouncement Upon Religious Liberty," this statement reviewed the history of Baptist involvement in the struggle for religious liberty. It also issued a call for

“absolute religious liberty” for all, including Jews, Roman Catholics, and even unbelievers. Baptists must adopt such a posture, the document concluded, because they believe religious liberty to be an “inalienable human right” which is “indispensable to human welfare.”

### **The Rise of a Religious Liberty Agency for Baptists**

During the late 1930's a group of Baptists, North and South, black and white, began meeting in Washington, D. C. , in an effort to monitor important developments affecting religious liberty at home and abroad. Certain persecution of Baptists overseas was in fact the immediate concern of this group, convened by Rufus W. Weaver, the executive secretary of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention. Weaver had earlier served as pastor of Washington's First Baptist Church and as president of Mercer University, Macon, Georgia.

Out of this group emerged a new Baptist agency when in 1946 Joseph M. Dawson, of Texas, was called to become the first executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, located in Washington, D.C. From its beginning, the primary focus of this denominational agency has been the preservation and extension of religious liberty. Dawson, who had been pastor of the First Baptist Church of Waco, Texas, before going to Washington, served the Baptist Joint Committee from 1946 to 1953.

Jointly sponsored by several Baptist bodies, the agency was then headed by C. Emanuel Carlson, formerly dean at Bethel College, St. Paul Minnesota, Carlson led the Baptist Joint Committee to expand its programs and services to Baptists. He was succeeded in 1972 by James E. Wood, Jr., who had served previously on the faculty of Baylor University and had founded that school's church-state department.

From the late 1930's until the present, this denomination agency has monitored developments within the United States government and abroad which affect religious liberty and church-state relations.

### **Religious Liberty and Church-State Issues Today**

Although our nation's history and tradition have been influenced by the Judeo-Christian heritage, what made America unique among the nations of the world was the wise decision of the founders to make church and state separate. This does not mean that Christianity and the churches have nothing to say about the social and political order. On the contrary, the gospel itself demands such involvement.

What the separation of church and state in America does mean is that government is not to sponsor religion nor is it to prohibit the free exercise of religion. How does that translate into practical realities?

An excellent example is the controversy over prayer and Bible reading in the public schools. In 1962 and 1963 the United States Supreme Court ruled that government may not require religious exercises in the public schools. Immediately a cry went up that the high court had banned God from the schools. In fact, the court made a wise decision to forbid government from writing prayers and demanding that they be read to students in the classrooms. That decision

was perfectly consistent and harmonious with the First Amendment to the Constitution for which our Baptist ancestors fought so hard.

The place of government is neither to inhibit religious expression nor to sponsor it officially. That will guarantee to future generations the remarkable freedom which our people have always known in religious matters.

Nevertheless, that freedom is being tested today as at no time since the colonial period of American history. With the growth of government at every level, and especially at the federal level, has come a new day when Baptists and other concerned citizens must be at their best to insure that church and state find that delicate balance which marks their proper relations.

In recent years, a number of agencies of the federal government have, for the first time, begun to demand that churches and church agencies and institutions meet certain requirements made of secular institutions receiving public funds. For example, the Internal Revenue Service has sought to require certain church agencies to file financial information on a regular basis. That information, according to recent federal legislation, would then be open for the public to inspect upon request.

Baptists and others concerned about such developments have protested vigorously, not because the churches wish to hide their financial affairs, but because the First Amendment requires that government not entangle itself in the affairs of the churches. If a federal agency were permitted to require the filing of such information, the churches would be acknowledging that government has the right to determine which church agencies are legitimate to fulfilling the mission of the church.

Likewise, Baptists and others have objected. During recent years to efforts within Congress to require the churches to disclose in detail their lobbying efforts in Washington. The position of the churches is that government may not monitor the churches' efforts to influence legislation being considered by Congress.

Another key church-state battle in Congress during recent years has been the persistent effort to have government provide tax relief to parents who choose to send their children to private, religious schools. Baptists have opposed all such schemes because of their view that church institutions ought to be supported by the churches and not by government. This opposition is necessary for two reasons. First, to support sectarian institutions unduly entangles government with religion. Second, for religious institutions to accept public funds endangers their freedom from government regulation and control.

The position held by Baptists through the years remains valid today; religious institutions, in order to be free, ought to avoid at all costs accepting public funds. To receive public money is to invite government control and the loss of religious identity.

## **Conclusion**

One of the truly distinct and noble elements of our Baptist heritage has been our historic emphasis on absolute religious liberty. That emphasis results from our interpretation of Scripture and the bitter experience of churches throughout history which have been dominated by government. Baptists have a

special obligation to seek to preserve and extend the precious gift of religious liberty for all people everywhere because of our unique history.

In a day when our religious liberty is under challenge, we need to be reminded in Wendell Phillips' words, that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

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