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By Marv Knox

Editor

ABILENE—Americans are besieged by lies about the relationship of church and state, Brent Walker insisted during the Maston Christian Ethics Lectures at Hardin-Simmons University’s Logsdon School of Theology, April 10-11.

“The lies I want to talk about are particularly insidious, because ... most of them have at least a grain of truth in them,” said Walker, c “That’s what makes them so hard to answer with a sound bite or a clever slogan.”

Two kinds of people perpetuate the lies, he said. “People who should know better” sometimes spread them intentionally, and “well-intentioned souls who simply have been misled” sometimes repeat them “with a pure heart and the best of motives.”

Brent
Walker,
executive
director of
the Baptist
Joint
Committee
on
Religious
Liberty.

Walker cited the “Top 10 lies that we hear about church and state”:

- **“Our nation’s founders were born-again, Bible-believing evangelical Christians, or our founders were Enlightenment rationalists who worshipped the ‘goddess of reason,’ or our founders were deists who posited a watch-maker God and were suspicious of religious ‘enthusiasms.’”**

Generalizing about the founding fathers is difficult and dangerous, Walker said.

“Some were orthodox Christians, some were rationalists, yes, some were deists, and even an atheist or two thrown in,” he said. “We must acknowledge that, although most of them came out of a Christian heritage and tradition, our founders were a mixed lot when it came to their religion. But we can say with confidence that they were committed to ensuring religious liberty rather than enshrining their own particular religious opinions.”

- **“We don’t have a separation of church and state in America because those words are not in the Constitution.”**

“True, the words are not there, but the principle surely is,” he said. Similarly, the words “federalism,” “separation of powers” and “right to a fair trial” are not in Constitution, but those ideas are represented there.

Some critics have played down Thomas Jefferson’s use of the phrase “wall of separation” to describe the appropriate relationship of church and state. But Walker pointed out that James Madison, “the father of our Constitution,” wrote, “The number, the industry and the morality of the priesthood and the devotion of the people have been manifestly increased by the total separation of church and state.”

- **“The separation of church and state comes from mid-19th century anti-Catholic bigotry and 20th century secularism.”**

“This is simply not the case,” Walker insisted. He acknowledged some separationists may have take up the cause “with less-than-honorable motives,” but the rationale of most separationists has “nothing to do with anti-Catholicism.”

“The concept of church-state separation preceded the 19th century,” he said, adding, “Many—including my Baptist ancestors—insisted upon separation to protect religion, all religions, from the coercive and corrosive influences of government.”

- **“The United States is a Christian nation.”**

“This is a whopper!” he contended. “The United States of America is not a Christian nation—in law or in fact.”

Although no one can deny the nature of Americans as a religious people, the Constitution is a secular document, he said. “We do not have a Christian theocracy,” Walker explained. “We have a constitutional democracy in which all religious beliefs are protected.

“And that’s good. The same Constitution that refuses to privilege any religion, including Christianity, protects the rights of Christians to proclaim the gospel to all who will listen. As a result, paradoxically enough, we are a nation of Christians because we are not a Christian nation.”

- **“Church-state separation only keeps the government from setting up a single national church or showing preference among denominations or faith groups, but not from aiding all religions on a nonpreferential basis.”**

Although an early draft of the First Amendment singled out the banning of a national religion, Congress repeatedly declined to narrow the scope of the amendment, he said.

“The founders adopted a much more expansive amendment to keep the new federal government from making laws even ‘respecting an establishment of religion,’” he added. “They did not merely want to keep the federal government from setting up an official national church or to ban denominational discrimination.”

- **“The First Amendment only applies to the federal government, not to the states.”**

While the Bill of Rights—of which the First Amendment is a part—originally applied only to the federal government, the 14th Amendment has been interpreted “to ‘incorporate’ most of the Bill of Rights and apply those provisions to the states,” Walker said.

- **“The Ten Commandments form the basis of our legal system.”**

Only three Commandments—prohibitions against killing, stealing and bearing false witness—“are the proper subjects of secular law,” he observed, noting the other seven are religious. “Remember, American law is based on the common law of England,” he added. “But these prohibitions

were already a part of Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence before England was Christianized.”

Also, numerous documents that influenced the U.S. legal system “say very little about religion and nothing about the Ten Commandments,” he said.

- **“God has been kicked out of the public schools.”**

“What a thing to say—to presume that Almighty God can be kicked out of anywhere,” Walker retorted. “No, as James Dunn (former executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee) is wont to say, ‘God has a perfect attendance record.’”

“It is only state-sponsored religion that has been banned from the public schools. Voluntary student religious expression is not only not prohibited, it is protected—as long as it does not disrupt the educational process and respects other students’ rights not to participate.” Numerous religious activities are permitted in public schools “from voluntary prayer, to teaching about religion, to studying religious holidays, to Bible clubs before and after school, to religious attire,” he reported.

- **“God has been kicked out of the public square.”**

“This is also a big lie,” Walker stressed. “The institutional separation of church and state does not mean a segregation of religion from politics or God from government or the right of people of faith to speak forcefully in the public square.”

In fact, “religious speech in public places is commonplace,” he said, citing a litany of places and occasions where religion is practiced or displayed in public.

“Candidates for (political) office can and do talk freely about their religious beliefs and allow them to influence their stance on public policy, as long as

the policy outcomes or government regulations have some secular justification,” he said. “... No, we do not have a ‘naked public square,’ as some have suggested. I’d say it’s dressed to the nines.”

- **“The Baptist Joint Committee cares more about ‘no establishment’ than it does ‘free exercise,’” the two religion clauses of the First Amendment.**

“This is not true,” Walker said, buttressing his claim with several examples of how the Baptist Joint committee has supported the free exercise of religion.

“For 70 years, the Baptist Joint Committee has pursued what most think is a balanced, sensibly centrist position on church-state issues, affirming both clauses in the First Amendment as essential to guarantee our God-given religious freedom. ...

“Full-blown, well-rounded religious liberty depends on the enforcement of both of these clauses, and that’s what we try to do every day.”

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