

RIGHT or WRONG? Church-state separation

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I've heard that if the First Amendment were up for a vote, it would not pass and many Baptists would lead the charge against it. But my understanding is that separation of church and state—which the First Amendment protects—is a traditional Baptist tenet. So, how can we re-establish Baptist support for church-state separation?

Why would any Baptist want to overturn the [First Amendment](#)? I cannot imagine any Baptist inviting government oversight of our preaching and worship services, so I don't believe any would want to discard the [Free Exercise Clause](#), which denies Congress the power to "prohibit the free exercise" of religion. Some, however, want to at least modify the [Establishment Clause](#), which prohibits Congress from establishing religion as a state project. Why? Clearly some Baptists want to use the power of the state to reassert a religious influence in our land in hope that such an influence would stem the tide of what they consider to be the serious moral decline of our culture.

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Concern for such moral decline is well founded. The question, though, is whether such a strategy for moral transformation is either appropriate or

effective. Until recently, the dominant Baptist answer to this has been a resounding “No!” Any reassertion of this traditional Baptist outlook will come through courageous pastors and adult Sunday school leaders who will have to counter powerful voices that have influenced many Christians through various media channels.

What resources might leaders in Baptist churches employ? One resource is better acquaintance with Baptist history regarding the origins of the First Amendment. The influence of early Baptists in America, such as Roger Williams, Isaac Backus and John Leland, should be noted. An invaluable resource in this regard is [William R. Estep's Revolution within the Revolution](#). Estep explains the First Amendment is “basic to all else that follows in the Bill of Rights.” He further shows that “at every point in the struggle for religious freedom in the colonies, the Baptists led the way.” Leaders need to (re-)acquaint people in the pews with what is a central feature of our Baptist heritage.

A second resource often is overlooked—Baptist architecture. Baptist churches generally have a baptistry, not a baptismal font. This design feature reminds us we practice believer’s baptism out of the conviction that faith is not something someone else can do to you. Our use of the baptistry, in which candidates for baptism are called upon to make personal confession that Jesus Christ is Lord, expresses this most central Baptist conviction that no coercive power such as government can accomplish what Christians believe is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Ultimately, however, it must be our Baptist commitment to biblical teaching that shapes our vision and practice on how we can positively affect our world. What does Scripture have to say about how moral life is to be shaped in light of God’s will? Is it through law backed up by the coercive power of the state? That is what the pre-Christian Paul believed on his way to Damascus. Commitment to law backed by the threat of punishment drove him to persecute early followers of Jesus. How different was his

strategy after his encounter with the resurrected Jesus! We must learn from the Apostle Paul the lesson that it is gospel, not law, the work of the Spirit, not the state, new life in Christ, not the instruments of the flesh, that will transform lives and our world.

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Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to btillman@hsutx.edu.

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