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By Robert Marus

ATLANTA (ABP)—Although often difficult to negotiate, drawing the proper line between church and state is worth it for both institutions, according to experts in the topic.

A panel of religious-liberty advocates addressed a small-group session of the Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant Feb. 1. They said that religious is Baptists' birthright—but that the church-state separation that protects religious freedom is imperiled and need Baptists' advocacy.

"Whether we have a wall or a zone or a rickety fence or whatever, we must continue to have at least a strand or two of barb-wire to keep the institutions of religion from cozying up to the institutions of government," said James Dunn, a professor at Wake Forest University Divinity School.."

• [See latest photos and the latest video clips from the New Baptist Covenant Meeting. \(And go \[here to see our complete coverage of the event\]\(#\)\).](#)

While some evangelicals promote the idea that the separation of church and state is a “myth,” Dunn said, there are four reasons why it is not.

The church and the state should be separate because both have separate constituencies, separate purposes, separate sources of funding and separate methodologies, he said.

“The Constitution is indeed godless, thank goodness!” said Dunn, who is also the retired executive director of the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty.

But drawing proper lines between church and state can be difficult for Baptists, according to Jeffrey Haggray, executive director-minister of the

District of Columbia Baptist Convention. Baptists, in particular, sometimes have difficulty defending their birthright because of other strong characteristics of their own tradition.

“Our prophetic tendencies give rise to activism—activism within the public square,” he said. Due to that tendency, he noted, Baptists can sometimes succumb to the temptation to involve themselves in electioneering from the pulpit.

Second, Haggray said, “Baptists are missional people,” and as a result start ministries and social programs that politicians point to as models for the delivery of social services. In recent years, political leaders at the state and federal levels have attempted to change laws to allow churches and other houses of worship to receive government funding for such services.

Finally, he added, Baptists have a strong evangelical strain and “we love to share the good news about Jesus Christ—and that evangelical strand gives rise to strong preferences in the public arena for the Christian faith.”

But all three temptations ultimately hurt the church if indulged, Haggray said.

While prophetic preaching is important in calling the state to account—Haggray noted that a Baptist preacher from Atlanta and his ministerial colleagues fomented the Civil Rights Movement along—Haggray said giving in to partisan politics actually causes Christians to forfeit their prophetic role.

“When we align ourselves and our credibility and influence” with one political party or candidate, he said, the entanglement that ensues can cause the church of Jesus Christ to end up appearing like just another special-interest group. “Ultimately our credibility and influence are more important than any one endorsement.”

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