

# Baptists support separation of church and state, but what does it mean?

June 25, 2009

WASHINGTON (ABP)—Baptists have, since their earliest days, been advocates of religious liberty and its corollary, the separation of church and state. But different groups of modern-day Baptists in the United States interpret church-state separation—and the Constitution’s provisions for it—in different ways.

Brent Walker, executive director of the Washington-based [Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty](#), explains in an interview the differences between Baptist groups on this issue.

**Q: What are the main schools of thought on church-state separation in the United States, and how do different Baptist groups fall on those lines?**

Brent Walker is executive director of the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty.

**A:** Seventy years ago, the original partners in the Baptist Joint Committee—Southern Baptists, Northern (now American) Baptists and National (historically African-American) Baptists—adopted “The American Baptist Bill of Rights.” In it, they outlined four different conceptions of the relationship between church and state:

- *Church above the state—a theocracy in which religion controls the government.*
- *State above the church—a secular government that is hostile to religion.*
- *Church alongside of the state—where one particular religion is privileged, with toleration for others.*
- *Church separate from the state—(which the document said has been) “championed by Baptists everywhere and held by those governments that have written religious liberty into their fundamental law.”*

Clearly, these three Baptists groups—and I would hazard a guess 99 percent of Baptists in the pews—thought that the fourth conception was the right one, the Baptist one and the American one.

This is the understanding of the church-state separation that finds its roots in Roger Williams, expression in the writing and life witness of (early Baptist champions of religious freedom) John Leland and Isaac Backus, fruition in (Texas Baptist pastor) George W. Truett’s Capitol Hill speech in 1920, and life today in the work of the Baptist Joint Committee.

This view sees the separation of church and state as an insurance policy protecting our God-given religious freedom. It is not an end in itself. This view of separation, on the constitutional level, takes seriously both protections in the First Amendment for religious liberty: no establishment and free exercise. That is, the government should not try to help religion (no establishment) and it should not try to hurt religion (free exercise), but should be neutral towards religion. Just leave it alone.

Today, there is less agreement on church-state separation among Baptists than there was in 1939. Some Baptists embrace the third model expressed

in the American Baptist Bill of Rights. They are all for government staying out of the churches' business and protecting individual's free-exercise rights, but are quite willing to accept government's help in the form of posting the Ten Commandments or funding religious ministries.

Not many Baptists, however, would embrace the other theories. I see very few who really would like to have a theocracy—even a Christian theocracy—and I know of very few who would want a highly secular government in which religion would be completely banished from public life.

**Q: While many conservative, historically white Baptist groups have gotten involved in secular politics in the last couple of decades, African-American Baptists have long been politically active. Does this stem from a historical difference in the way white Baptists have viewed church-state separation?**

**A:** For most Baptists, the separation of church and state has never meant the divorce of religion from politics or the stripping of the public square from religious discourse. The antipathy to political engagement historically has been more the hallmark of our Anabaptist cousins than our Baptist forebears. Baptists, from the very beginning, have been willing to be engaged in public life. This has been reflected over the past half century or more in African-American Baptist life. Fundamentalists' aversion to engaging in the political arena before the 1970s was more an exception to the historical practice of Baptists than an expression of it.

**Q: Do you envision increasing immigration—and increasing numbers of foreign-born Baptists in our ranks—to further change the way Baptists in the United States interpret their heritage of church-state separation and the First Amendment?**

**A:** Baptists from around the world have varying opinions on church-state

separation. Many who emigrate from countries fleeing persecution, either at the hands of a theocracy or anti-religious totalitarian government, are much more willing to embrace the traditional Baptist understanding of the need for church-state separation. They know existentially what it's like for a religious minority to suffer under the tyranny of the majority—something many Baptists in this country have forgotten.

Baptists from other parts of the world—such as the British Commonwealth, where Christianity has been privileged by government—will bring that understanding in, as well, and are more open to accepting government support for religious activities even if they remain adamant that government should not interfere with the free exercise of religion.

In sum, Baptists continue to be nearly unanimous in their insistence that government not interfere with the autonomy of Baptist churches or burden the free exercise of religion. They tend to disagree when it comes to how much, if at all, government should support religion in general or their religion in particular.

The challenge of the Baptist Joint Committee is to make sure all Baptists understand that the First Amendment goes both ways. Just as our grandparents understood in 1939—and before—religious liberty is much threatened when government tries to give religion a helping hand as when it tries to hurt religion.

As soon as government meddles in religion—for or against—or takes sides in religious disputes—favoring one over another—someone's religious liberty is denied, and everyone's is threatened. We Baptist should be as concerned about the religious liberty of others as we are for our own.