

# Editorial: Religious freedom calls for rejecting Abbott's 'ask'

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Baptists have a long history of championing religious freedom. To ensure that freedom, we also have a history of championing the separation of church and state. See Baptist historian Carol Crawford Holcomb's [recent article](#) clearly recounting this history.

Our historic stance is being tested.

As clearly seen in our 400-year history, Baptists do not see separation of church and state as meaning church and state will not be in dialogue. Baptists are not opposed to religion and government relating to each other and even influencing each other.

What many Baptists are opposed to is the church seeking to govern through the state and the state seeking to govern through the church. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's Sept. 19 [tele-townhall](#) with Texas pastors suggests an example of the latter.

## The politics

Dave Welch—who founded the Houston Pastor Council, Texas Pastor Council and [U.S. Pastor Council](#)—hosted the call. It was not clear if the call was at the initiative of the Texas Pastor Council or Abbott's office.

During the call, Abbott appealed to a pastors' desire "to shape more than just any particular church ... but to shape our entire community." He called those listening "to come together and unite and achieve a better state for all families across the entire state" by advocating for "school choice."

Abbott noted polls in support of “school choice” and said he would call a special session in October for the purpose of passing “school choice” legislation. “School choice” is a euphemism for using public funds to pay for private education through such things as [education savings accounts](#).

He expects legislators to fall in line and claimed “votes seem to be lining up.” If they don’t line up in the upcoming special session, Abbott will call another special session for the same purpose.

And if that doesn’t work, Abbott threatened to “have everything teed up in a way where we will be giving voters in a primary a choice. They can choose someone who supports school choice, or they can support someone who is against school choice.”

“There’s an easy way to get it done and a hard way to get it done,” Abbott continued. The easy way is to approve Abbott’s agenda in this upcoming special session. The hard way is to call Abbott’s bluff and face being voted out of office.

And Abbott wants pastors to be a mouthpiece for this bully tactic.

## The ask

A Sept. 19 [press release](#) from the governor’s office designated Sunday, Oct. 15, as School Choice Sunday. Clearly, this is a play at the thousands, if not millions, of people Abbott hopes will hear his message through their pastors’ mouths.

[Abbott asked those listening](#) to speak, and to encourage other pastors to speak, “on Sunday, October the 15th ... to your congregations about the issue of parental rights, parental involvement and school choice.”

He urged the pastors listening to “go to the pulpit, speak from the pulpit to your congregation, and let them know how important this issue is to the

fabric of the future of Texas.”

It’s one thing for a national denomination such as the Southern Baptist Convention to designate specific Sundays for specific causes and to encourage churches to teach and preach on those topics on those days. I don’t like it, but at least it’s coming from within the denomination.

It’s another thing for a state governor to try to commandeer the pulpit—however nicely—for political purposes. At a minimum, Baptists should bristle at this. Really, they should go beyond bristling and reject Abbott’s “ask”—however politely.

He claimed his “ask” is “not going to be something laden in politics where you’re supporting a candidate or a party. ... You’re supporting a cause or a cause that aligns with what God expects of us.”

That last sentence of Abbott’s is a classic example of spiritual coercion. The implied message is: “If you want to be on God’s side, you’ll be on mine.” That’s also a form of spiritual abuse, even if Abbott sincerely believes—religiously speaking—God expects “school choice.”

## **The problem**

Abbott claimed, “The fundamental principle that God created for us is to have family units ... not state bureaucrats, making decisions that are best for families.”

We should not lose sight of the fact it is a state official saying that. Also, whether our government is Democrat- or Republican-controlled, it will be state bureaucrats making decisions they think are best for families.

Regardless where one stands on the issue of education funding, allowing a government official to set the agenda for even one Sunday morning is the camel’s nose under the tent—or is like [giving a mouse a cookie](#), to borrow

from Laura Numeroff.

Allowing the state to erase the distance between itself and the church is an invitation to the state to decide a whole lot more than one Sunday's sermon topic. It's a boundary transgression and should be rejected.

Whatever a pastor preaches on Sunday, Oct. 15—or any Sunday—ought to come from God, not from the governor.

## **The principle**

In response to other editorials I've written on similar topics, more than one respondent has told me to stay out of politics. When a state governor takes politics directly to the pastors, however, don't expect a Baptist editor to stay out of politics.

Baptists don't need to be of one mind about "school choice"—and we aren't—to see Abbott's latest attempt to appropriate pastors for his purposes is an inappropriate foray of government into the church.

Abbott has said he intends to get his way one way or the other, and by going to Texas pastors, he's essentially said he intends to use the church to do it.

If we are to continue championing religious freedom and separation of church and state, we should reject Abbott's "ask."

*Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard. He can be reached at [eric.black@baptiststandard.com](mailto:eric.black@baptiststandard.com). The views expressed are those of the author.*