

# **2nd Opinion: Baptist Joint Committee's consistent witness needed now more than ever**

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I am proud to be a board member of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. Like many Baptists, religious freedom is one of my foundational theological beliefs instilled in me by my family. The BJC carries on the historic Baptist tradition of fighting for religious liberty for all people, a mission made more difficult by the partisan jockeying over defining the term "religious liberty."

Unfortunately, in the current climate, many are trying to co-opt religious liberty as a short-cut to a desired outcome. Instead of evaluating each religious liberty issue individually, some groups view our first freedom through the lens of another special interest.

The Baptist Joint Committee avoids this trap and has a long history of considering cases, legislation and executive orders through the sole question of what is best for religious liberty for all people. Sometimes doing so puts them on a side dominated by Democrats, other times by Republicans.

## **Baptist Joint Committee forges partnerships with diverse groups**

Because of the breadth of groups that the Baptist Joint Committee has worked with in the past, it is not hard to find ideological boogymen to use to taint the reputation of the BJC as guilty by association.

I, for one, am proud to be associated with a Baptist group known for its ability to forge partnerships with diverse groups. I wish more organizations emulated this in their advocacy approach rather than hiding behind an issue purity checklist, requiring agreement on all issues before working together on any issue.

## **Baptist Joint Committee’s advocacy for religious accommodations**

It is impossible in this forum to thoroughly describe the more than 80-year record of the Baptist Joint Committee in defending and extending religious liberty for all, so I’ll focus on one issue: religious accommodations.

The BJC is known for its advocacy for finding practical solutions—or “accommodations”—for religious objections to government policies. When the U.S. Supreme Court declared that Americans do not have a right to ask for an accommodation to a law that unfairly burdens religious exercise, the BJC led the coalition to pass the federal [Religious Freedom Restoration Act](#) in 1993. RFRA requires the government to take religious objections seriously and work to accommodate them.

In recent years, one of the most discussed and dissected religious accommodations is found in the Affordable Care Act. In keeping with its tradition, the Baptist Joint Committee never took a position on the ACA as a whole but defended the accommodation provided to religious nonprofits who objected to the contraceptive mandate.

In the [Zubik v. Burwell](#) case, the Baptist Joint Committee filed a [brief](#) supporting this accommodation that allowed religious nonprofits to opt out of paying or referring for any contraceptive coverage that an employee—in consultation with her physician—may choose.

The BJC opposed the argument that simply notifying the government of your objection (so that the government could create an alternative way to provide contraceptive coverage) was a “substantial burden” on a religious exercise.

The brief was written by Professor Doug Laycock, who is not only a preeminent religious liberty scholar but one of the most robust defenders of Free Exercise rights in the country. He currently teaches at the University of Virginia School of Law, where my son attended, but previously taught at the University of Texas at Austin.

## **Baptist Joint Committee’s attention to detail**

I know the staff at the Baptist Joint Committee and respect their careful attention to detail. They never take a position before fully considering all possible angles.

Some religious accommodation cases, such as allowing [Muslim female employees](#) to wear a hijab, are easy and enjoy wide support from a number of advocacy groups. Most cases, however, are difficult and require the ability to sift through the noise to see how something impacts religious liberty for all people.

The Baptist Joint Committee carefully evaluates every religious liberty issue, writing strong and focused briefs as well as creating educational resources for individuals and churches.

At a time when people fall into the trap of tribalism, the Baptist Joint Committee’s singular focus on religious liberty and commitment to defending it for all people is a breath of fresh air.

The nonpartisan witness of the Baptist Joint Committee is needed in

Washington, D.C., now more than ever.

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: To learn more about amicus briefs, such as those filed by the BJC, click [here](#).*