

Right or Wrong? Religious Bigotry

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Some Baptists cite Baptist patriarch Thomas Helwys' 17th century advocacy for religious liberty for all, but they still make racist comments about Jews and/or Muslims. How can we help them reconcile this contradiction?


Thomas Helwys' letter to
King James.

Thomas Helwys had firsthand experience with religious bigotry. Unwilling to compromise sincerely held religious convictions that differed from the prevailing law and social sentiment of his native England, he emigrated to Holland. This experience taught him the value of liberty of conscience. Helwys, a lawyer, wrote one of the first treatises on religious liberty and then returned to England to publish it and face the king. He sent King James a copy of his book with a handwritten note that said: "Men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves; the king shall not answer for it; neither may the king be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure."

Helwys summarized bedrock Baptist beliefs about the kind of relationship God wants with human beings. God desires a direct and personal relationship with us. Christ alone mediates between the heavenly Father and mankind. God alone is judge over the hearts and souls of men and women.

Helwys' appeal was for liberty of conscience for all people. Implicitly, he called for everyone, high and low, to acknowledge that each individual

bears responsibility for prayerfully examining her/his own heart and relationship to God. Explicitly, he called for everyone, high and low, to respect each person's God-given liberty either to turn toward their Savior or else continue turning away from their Creator.

Unfortunately, many Baptists affirm Helwys' convictions but fail to  practice what he preached. Many Baptists denounce foreign governments for restricting the work of Christian missionaries in one breath and then, in the next breath, demand that our own government place restrictions on the life and work of persons of minority faiths. Not only do they give mere lip service to Christ's command that we love our neighbors and even our enemies, but they also violate the most basic and elementary requirements of the Golden Rule. Such hypocrisy serves to destroy the integrity of our Christian witness and to undermine the credibility of the gospel in the eyes of unbelievers.

The best remedy for the fear of the "other" that leads to prejudice and bigotry is sincere interfaith dialogue. Those who conscientiously develop face-to-face relationships with persons of other faiths normally develop a healthy appreciation for the liberty of other consciences. Respectfully engaging in mutual dialogue about religious convictions also serves as a catalyst toward deeper comprehension and a stronger commitment to God.

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?Right or Wrong? is co-sponsored by the Texas Baptist theological education office and Christian Life Commission. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to bill.tillman@texasbaptists.org.