

# **Voices: Religious liberty—Baptists’ hill to die on**

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There are hills to die on, hills to bleed on and hills to keep walking over, the popular leadership maxim goes. For historic Baptists, religious liberty has been a hill to bleed and even die on.

Baptists began as a persecuted minority more than 400 years ago and have suffered the consequences: shunned from society, rotting in prisons or being put to death. Baptists know first-hand the consequences and cost of religious freedom.

Brent Walker notes that Baptists have experienced the pain of persecution. “From jail cells in England, to stockades in Massachusetts Bay, to whipping posts in Virginia, the historical litany is familiar to our ears.”

## **Baptists & religious liberty in American history**

Leaders like Roger Williams—a Baptist for a season—came from England to Massachusetts Bay for the purpose of religious freedom, advocating for “a hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world.”

The Baptist John Leland boldly advocated for religious liberty and the separation of church and state. He played a crucial role in convincing our nations’ founders of the need to protect religious freedom through the Bill of Rights.

Other Baptists from Obadiah Holmes to Henry Dunster and Isaac Backus to

the Danbury Baptist Association serve as a cloud of witnesses for advancing the cause of religious freedom.

Founding Father James Madison wrote in 1819, “The number, industry and morality of the priesthood, and the devotion of the people have been manifestly increased by the total separation of church and state.”

## **Religious liberty in Baptists’ reading of the Bible**

Arguably, Baptists’ greatest contribution to Protestantism has been the principle of religious liberty.

Religious liberty flows naturally from our biblical understanding of human nature and how humans relate to God. Though the Bible does not explicitly delineate a doctrine of the separation of church and state, the seeds are present.

The history of Israel illustrated a God-given freedom to choose as the Israelites wavered between faithfulness to God and disobedience.

Jesus came to set the captive and persecuted free. Jesus said his kingdom is not a kingdom of this world (John 18:36). Jesus taught some things belonged to the emperor, and some things belong to God (Matthew 22:21).

Jesus never received a coin from Caesar or sought the approval of Herod in his ministry and mission. Jesus did not need government bureaucrats doing his work with the sword of the state behind them. Nor do we.

To be authentic, faith must be free. For faith to be free, government must keep out. Faith must be voluntary, and nothing but a voluntary surrender to Christ and voluntary service to him are acceptable.

# Religious liberty, a free church & a free state

A free church in a free state moves in both directions. The state should not dominate, control or become entangled with the church, and the church should not take over the state in a way that uses the power of government to proselytize.

However, religious freedom does not necessitate a divorce of religion from politics or excuse Christians from their duties of citizenship. Separation of church and state for the purpose of religious freedom does not necessitate the church lose its moral voice. In fact, a church that is free can have a stronger moral voice.

Brian Zahnd writes in *Postcards from Babylon*: “When the church colludes with the principalities and powers, it can no longer prophetically challenge them. A church in bed with empire cannot credibly call the empire to repent.”

Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention argues: “External conformity, backed up by government power, is easier to achieve than Great Commission gospel advance. It also leads nowhere but to death.”

A church under the authority of the state is a neutered church. As Christians, our first allegiance is not to a flag, a country or a person. Our allegiance is to King Jesus and his kingdom!

## The future of religious liberty

According to the Speak Freedom Center, a group that advances religious freedom internationally, 108 countries persecute Christians, 100 countries

persecute Muslims, and 81 persecute Jews.

The Pew Research Center found 83 percent of people live in a place with high or very high levels of religious persecution. The world needs Baptists today to bleed and die on the hill of religious liberty.

Looking forward, the ongoing temptation will continue to be aligning the church with the power of the state.

Only one offer for political power is issued in the New Testament, with Satan himself asking for the allegiance of Jesus in exchange for power. Baptists—and other Christians—must refuse Satan’s bait to align ourselves with the kingdoms of this world.

Additionally, we must be careful not to fall into the trap of advocating “religious freedom for me, but not for thee.” Religious freedom is like free speech: If you only support it for people whose views you like, you don’t support it.

Roger Williams, when standing up for the right of an unpopular minority in New England not to christen their babies said such freedom must extend to “the most paganish, Jewish, and Turkish.” Not only is religious freedom for Baptists, but it is for all faiths, including Muslims, Buddhists and those who choose no faith.

Monumental religious liberty issues continue to loom. Whether it’s the right of a baker to follow faith-based convictions, using public money to finance religious schools, teaching sacred texts in the public classroom, or standing up for the rights of oppressed Christians worldwide, the world needs Baptists today to stand tall for freedom of conscience and religion.

In 1820 George W. Truett preached on the Capitol steps words that continue to ring true: “Baptists have one consistent record concerning religious liberty throughout all their long and eventful history. They have

never been a party to oppression of conscience. They have forever been unwavering champions of liberty, both religious and civil.”

Religious liberty has been a great gift Baptists have given at the cost of blood, sweat and tears. Who will steward the gift of religious liberty in the decades to come, and how?

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