



Baptists Champions of Religious Freedom

"...ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another." Galatians 5:13

The renowned Baptist pastor George W. Truett (b. 1867 - d. 1944) in a sermon on Baptists and religious liberty cited the American historian George Bancroft as having said, **"Freedom of conscience, unlimited freedom of mind, was from the first the trophy of the Baptists."**

The Bases for Religious Freedom

The Baptist devotion to religious freedom is closely related to other biblical truths that comprise the Baptist mosaic of beliefs and practices. Freedom is an integral part of these.

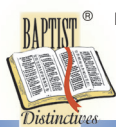
★**Freedom to follow Christ.** The Bible reveals that Jesus as Lord calls for people to follow him (Matthew 4:18-22; 16:24-25). This followship, however, is to be voluntary, never coerced. Furthermore, people should be free to follow Christ, not prevented by any church or government. Salvation in Christ is by a faith response to God's grace gift of his Son (Ephesians 2:8-10). The freedom to proclaim, hear, and respond to this good news ought never to be curtailed.

★**Freedom to read and interpret the Bible.** The Bible is authoritative for faith and practice. Baptists insist that each person who responds by faith in Christ becomes a believer priest with a God-given competency to understand and apply the Bible with guidance from the Holy Spirit. Neither church nor government officials ought to obstruct Bible study nor dictate what the Bible teaches. Each person should be free to do that for herself or himself.

★**Freedom to choose and support a church.** The Bible teaches that a church is a voluntary fellowship of baptized believers in Christ who voluntarily support its ministry (Acts 2:41-47; 2 Corinthians 9:7). Baptists, therefore, strongly oppose the concept of a state-supported church or of the use of tax funds to finance the ministry of a church. They also denounce any coercion related to baptism or decisions by persons about what church they choose to be part of.

★**Freedom to govern a church.** In Christ and through the Holy Spirit, believer priests are competent to govern themselves in an autonomous church (Acts 6:1-6; 13:1-3; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13). Therefore, they should be free to do so apart from efforts of control by either church or government authorities as long as public health and safety are not endangered.

★**Freedom to witness and minister.** Baptists believe that believer priests have responsibility to share the gospel with others and to minister to others in Christ's name. Thus Baptists insist that people ought to be free to evangelize and minister without interference from any church or government authorities (Acts 5:29-42).



The Struggle for Religious Freedom

In the earliest days of the Christian movement, government and religious officials severely persecuted Christians. Throughout the Middle Ages and the era of the Protestant Reformation, religious freedom was practically nonexistent. A union of church and state existed. Both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches enlisted the aid of governments to persecute those who disagreed with their doctrines.

The nature of the union of church and state varied through the centuries but one thing remained constant—all forms of religious expression except the “official” one were persecuted.

People who believed in freedom of religion, such as Baptists, were regarded as traitors by governments and as heretics by the government-supported churches.

The use of the power of the state to enforce religion sapped the spiritual vitality of the established state churches and added a host of unsaved people to the churches. Furthermore, efforts by governments to protect the established religion of a country resulted in wars and civil strife that undermined the governments. **Thus, the union of church and state was and is harmful to both.**

Baptists suffered severely under the union of church and state. They campaigned vigorously for religious freedom, not just for themselves but for all people. Their goal was freedom, not mere toleration. **They believed that the only way full religious freedom could be achieved was through a friendly separation of church and state.**

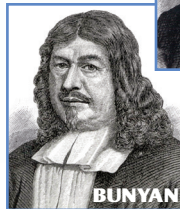
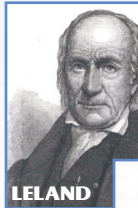
Concerning church-state separation, George W. Truett declared, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s” is one of the most revolutionary and history-making utterances that ever fell from those lips divine. **That utterance, once and for all, marked the divorcement of church and state.”**

Baptists and Religious Freedom through Separation of Church and State

The record of the Baptist struggle for religious freedom and the separation of church and state is a story of courage and persistence. A host of brave people stayed with their convictions in the face of stiff resistance from both religious and government authorities. They did so because they believed that they were being true to the teachings of the Bible.

For example, **Thomas Helwys** (c. 1556-1616), a Baptist pastor in England in the early 1600s, publicly advocated religious freedom. In England, the king was not only head of the government but also of the Church of England. Helwys insisted that the king had no authority over the spiritual dimensions of life. The king put Helwys in a terrible prison, where he died because he would not abandon his convictions. His wife, Joan Ashmore Helwys, also suffered imprisonment.

John Bunyan (b. 1628 - d. 1688), author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, suffered in an English jail for many years because as a Baptist pastor he **would not accept limits on religious freedom.** His wife Elizabeth’s pleas to the authorities for his release were rebuffed although she was destitute, caring for their children, including a blind daughter.

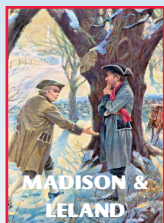


Religious persecution also existed in America where **Roger Williams** (b. 1603 - d. 1683) was forced to leave the Massachusetts Bay Colony because of his views favoring church-state separation. Williams established both the first Baptist church in America and Providence Plantation that became the colony of Rhode Island. The colony afforded religious freedom to all. Although he did not remain a Baptist he continued to advocate what he termed a **“hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world.”**



However, religious freedom was a scarce commodity throughout the New World. **Baptists launched efforts up and down the eastern seaboard to bring about religious liberty. Government officials publicly flogged, imprisoned, and fined Baptists. Unruly mobs, unsympathetic to the Baptist cause, ridiculed, attacked, and beat Baptists.**

Through efforts by Baptist leaders such as **Isaac Backus** (b. 1724 - d. 1806) in New England and **John Leland** (b. 1754 - d. 1841) in Virginia, the Baptist voice, joined by others, was finally heeded. For example, Leland reportedly met with James



Madison in Orange County, Virginia, and secured Madison's pledge to work for an amendment to the new Constitution to provide for religious freedom. The Constitution of the United States, at first flawed by its lack of guarantee of religious freedom, was amended under Madison's leadership to provide such a guarantee. The First Amendment to the Constitution states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

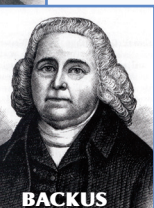
Some of the states, however, continued to maintain government-supported churches and Baptists continued to work for friendly separation of church and state and full religious freedom. Finally, in the early 1800s, all of the state churches were disestablished. For the first time in history a nation provided religious freedom for all of its citizens—not mere toleration, but freedom.

The Application of Religious Freedom

Baptists in the past paid a great price to help provide religious freedom for all. What should the Baptists of today do with this precious heritage?

★ **Appreciate the religious freedom that we enjoy in our nation.** This freedom has come to us at a great sacrifice. We ought never take it for granted. Jesus suffered in order that we through faith in him might be free from the power and penalty of sin. Baptists and others have suffered to make the good news of this freedom available to all.

★ **Guard religious freedom.** Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom, including religious freedom. It takes only a generation or two to lose by neglect what many generations gained through sacrifice.



★**Support efforts for religious freedom throughout the world.**

Many people still do not live where there is religious liberty. Persecution by religious and governmental authorities continues to exist.

★**Uphold the friendly separation of church and state.** A corollary of religious freedom is the friendly separation of religious organizations and government authorities in matters of faith and religious practices. Baptists have championed this concept, working sacrificially to make it part of the Constitution of the United States, and need to continue to do so for the sake of all persons.

★**Act responsibly with religious freedom.** Exercise freedom by careful study of the Bible, by being a supportive member of a church, by sharing the gospel with others, and by living in accord with the teachings of Jesus.

★**Use freedom for the benefit of others.** Paul wrote to the Galatian Christians, “Ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13). We ought to use our freedom, not selfishly, but to minister to the needs of people throughout the world.

“It is impossible to define Baptists apart from their devotion to the principle of complete religious freedom.”

William R. Estep
Why Baptists?

Conclusion

At great peril and huge sacrifice Baptists helped to provide religious freedom for multitudes in this generation. Now it is up to the Baptists of today to help preserve this precious heritage for the generations to follow.

For further information, see www.baptistdistinctives.org

The basic material in this leaflet originally appeared in a series of articles in the *Baptist Standard* in 2005. Wanting to share information about Baptist distinctives, Noble Hurley, shortly before his death in 2004, established the Jane and Noble Hurley Baptist Identity Fund to provide for publishing the series. He asked William M. Pinson, Jr. and Doris A. Tinker to prepare the articles. The financial assistance of The Prichard Family Foundation and Vester T. Hughes, Jr. enabled this series of nineteen leaflets to be produced based on the articles. Skyler G. Tinker designed and formatted the leaflets for publication. Each leaflet is for both individual and group study.

The topics in this series: (1) Baptists: Who? Where? What? Why? (2) What Makes a Baptist a Baptist? (3) The Lordship of Christ; (4) The Bible as Authority for Faith and Practice; (5) Soul Competency; (6) Salvation Only by Grace Through Faith; (7) The Priesthood of All Believers; (8) Believer's Baptism; (9) A Regenerate Church Membership; (10) Congregational Church Governance; (11) Church Autonomy; (12) Baptist Church Life: Organization, Worship, Officers, Ordinances; (13) Voluntary Cooperation; (14) Evangelism; (15) Missions; (16) Ministry; (17) Christian Education; (18) The Application of the Gospel; (19) Religious Freedom.

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