

## Article 17: Religious Liberty

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and He has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are contrary to His Word or not contained in it.

Church and state should be separate. The state owes to every church protection and full freedom in the pursuit of its spiritual ends. In providing for such freedom no ecclesiastical group or denomination should be favored by the state more than others.

Civil government being ordained of God, it is the duty of Christians to render loyal obedience thereto in all things not contrary to the revealed will of God.

The church should not resort to the civil power to carry on its work. The gospel of Christ contemplates spiritual means alone for the pursuit of its ends.

The state has no right to impose penalties for religious opinions of any kind. The state has no right to impose taxes for the support of any form of religion. A free church in a free state is the Christian ideal, and this implies the right of free and unhindered access to God on the part of all men, and the right to form and propagate opinions in the sphere of religion without interference by the civil power.

Baptists as a people were forged from the fires of religious persecution. The first Baptist church began in Amsterdam, Holland. The church was formed by John Smyth and Thomas Helwys and 40 other congregants who fled from England to escape the persecution and create a life where they could worship God based solely on their own conscience. This took place in the winter of 1607. The first Baptist church was founded with a strong belief in religious liberty. Notice a couple of quotes from those founding pastors:

*"The prince must leave the Christian religion free to every man's conscience."* John Smyth

*"Let them be heretiks, Turcks, Jewes or whatsoever it apperteynes not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure."* Thomas Helwys

The Baptist church in America began under the direction of Roger Williams in Providence, RI. In fact the First Baptist Church in America is still operating there today (1638) Roger Williams and John Clarke, another Baptist minister, were the founders of the Rhode Island Colony. Look at what the charter of that colony said regarding religious liberty.

*"A most flourishing civil state may stand and best be maintained with a full liberty in religious concernments."* Rhode Island Charter, 1663

So religious liberty has been a deep and abiding principle guiding Baptists on both sides of the pond for centuries.

Read from page 162 in Book

## **I. The PERSON of our Religious Freedom**

*God alone is Lord of the conscience, and He has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are contrary to His Word or not contained in it.*

We recognize that a person's conscience and religious affections are solely provided to them by God himself. Each person has been created in God's image, and as God's image bearers he provides for us the means to image forth, or reflect, his purposes.

*God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. Gen. 1:27, 2:7*

*So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. John 8:36*

Notice, however that we affirm one's own right to worship according to his conscience through the grid of the Word of God. We as Baptists have always been a "people of the book" who have sought to worship, live our lives, and organize our churches directly upon the principles and directives from the Bible.

But among Baptists we have a broad spectrum with regard to the influence of the Bible. We have some who call themselves Baptists whom I would identify as liberals. They do not view the Bible as authoritative, inerrant, or even relevant to the way they live their lives. Still others who call themselves Baptists I would identify as legalists. Their interpretation of Scripture is so restrictive and limiting it removes the possibility of freely enjoying the life God has given us.

In some ways legalism is more restrictive than the Bible.  
In some ways it is less restrictive.

Example: Legalism says, "Do not go to the beach."  
Holiness says, "Dress in modesty everywhere."

Legalism says, "Don't go to rated-R movies."  
Holiness says, "Don't watch anything that is unclean."

Legalism says, "Don't smoke cigarettes."  
Holiness says, "Don't do anything that causes your brother to stumble..."

Liberty in Jesus is not the freedom to sin, but to NOT sin.

So religious liberty means every human has the right to worship, or not worship, as they see fit in their own mind. As Baptists we recognize that our lives as believers in Jesus are guided by the Word of God. With that in mind, religious liberty as Baptists does not mean we have abandoned the responsibility to hold our brothers and sisters in Christ accountable to live biblically. Just the opposite. Our religious liberty in a free state gives us the freedom as a church to hold our brothers accountable to living righteously.

## **II. The PROTECTION of our Religious Freedom**

*The church should not resort to the civil power to carry on its work. The gospel of Christ contemplates spiritual means alone for the pursuit of its ends.*

Does it surprise you that we believe in the separation of church and state?

We do not believe the state should have any control over the church whatsoever.

Separation of church and state does not mean the separation of God from government.

We do not find the words "separation of church and state" anywhere in our US Constitution. We do find these words in the first amendment: "*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.*"

The Bill of Rights are worded as restrictions on the GOVERNMENT...not on the PEOPLE.

Does anybody know where the phrase "separation of church and state" originated from? A letter from Thomas Jefferson to some of his Baptist constituents, the Danbury Baptist Association. *Read Letter*

Rights do not flow from government to people.

Rights flow from God to people. Endowed by the Creator! (Declaration of Independence)

*For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; Philippians 3:20*

*First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. 1 Timothy 2:1-2*

## **III. The PROVIDER of our Religious Freedom**

*Civil government being ordained of God, it is the duty of Christians to render loyal obedience thereto in all things not contrary to the revealed will of God.*

*Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities for there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. Romans 13:1-2*

As Christians we understand the source of the government's authority, God Himself.

*They said to Him, "Caesar's." Then He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's." Matthew 22:21*

A key Christian principle is that we live according to the law's established by the God-ordained governments. We pay taxes, we obey the law. The only time that principle is not followed is when the following of law will prohibit us from biblically following God. We see that in the example of Peter and John.

*But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." Acts 4:19-20*

#### **IV. The POWER of our Religious Freedom**

*The church should not resort to the civil power to carry on its work. The gospel of Christ contemplates spiritual means alone for the pursuit of its ends.*

We do not depend on the government to fulfill our Christian mandate from Jesus.

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. Romans 1:16*

There is something unique about the gospel of Jesus Christ that separates it from any other program or plan. The gospel is the only thing that brings SALVATION. What is salvation? It is a change. Not a change of social standing, or financial standing, or relational standing, or educational standing. All those things are well and good, but they don't bring the type of lasting change that answers the deepest need of the human heart.

You see with all the government programs that exist, and all the programs and plans that are created, and as much as the politicians offer policies that they believe will better your life, they can't offer to you or to me or to anyone the real change that we need. Because the deepest need of the human heart is not lower gas prices. The deepest need of the human heart is not protection from global terrorists, better education, affordable healthcare. The greatest and deepest need of the human heart is that every person born on this planet is dead in their trespasses and sins, separated from God, and destined for hell. No government program can help that. Only the gospel has the power to provide such a great salvation and the gospel of Christ is THE message of the church. When churches cease to communicate the gospel, churches cease to be fulfilling their purpose as Christ has commanded.

#### **V. The PURSUIT of our Religious Freedom**

*The state has no right to impose penalties for religious opinions of any kind. The state has no right to impose taxes for the support of any form of religion. A free church in a free state is the Christian ideal, and this implies the right of free and unhindered access to God on the part of all men, and the right to form and propagate opinions in the sphere of religion without interference by the civil power.*

Switzerland, which is the oldest democratic government in the world established in 1291, has a federal church tax to support the state church. All pastors are employees of the federal government.

The ideal response from government leaders is that they see the way the church is making a positive impact on society that they would not seek to hinder the practice of the church. That was Peter's encouragement:

*<sup>12</sup>Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation. <sup>13</sup>Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, <sup>14</sup>or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. <sup>15</sup>For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. <sup>16</sup>Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God. <sup>17</sup>Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.*  
1 Peter 2:12-17

The statement of faith says, *A free church in a free state is the Christian ideal, and this implies the right of free and unhindered access to God on the part of all men.* This principle on personal worship of God is what Jesus intended in Matthew 6:6

*But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.*  
Matthew 6:6