

Good Reasons to Be Baptist:

Religious Liberty

Psalm 47; Matthew 22:15-22

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This morning's good reason to be Baptist is as alive and controversial today as it was when the first House of Representatives met to discuss the Bill of Rights. James Madison presented to the new Congress some amendments to the Constitution that had been suggested by the states. There were ten of these amendments, and this, in part, is the first: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

What was important to the colonists who came to the new world? Freedom was important to them, religious freedom in particular. It was so important that the first amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America would safeguard this precious freedom.

Now, over 230 years later, the debate continues to rage and enrage. Should a federal judge be permitted to display the Ten Commandments or any other religious documents in his or her courtroom? Should state owned schools sponsor or organize public prayers at football games or graduation ceremonies? May the local courthouse display a Nativity scene or a Star of David on the front lawn? These are but a few of the religious liberty issues our country struggles with today, and they are fraught with controversy.

I hope you have seen the theme of freedom running through this series of sermons about our Baptist beliefs. Baptists are a freedom loving people. That is why we do not affirm the creeds of the broader church. We grant each other the freedom to deal directly with God and determine within your own heart what you believe. Baptists do affirm the priesthood of every single Believer, your right and responsibility to deal directly with God. Today we go the next step and affirm this religious freedom not just for ourselves but for all people. This is another of those places where our fore fathers and mothers drove down a stake. As Baptists, we believe in religious liberty for all people. That is, we believe that for faith to be genuine it must be freely chosen. The state has no right to legislate your or my membership in a state church or attempt to force our religious beliefs in any way. Even if the state passed a law dictating that everyone must be Baptist, that legislation would not make anyone's allegiance to the Baptist church or their faith in God authentic. While laws may control our behavior,

laws cannot control our heart, and faith is a matter of the heart. That is why Baptists believe that every individual must be free to respond to God without coercion or force from the state. For that reason we believe in freedom of religion, freedom for religion, and, yes, freedom from religion.

Robert Baker, one of our Southern Baptist historians, said in 1958, "The first appeal for religious liberty in the English language came from Baptists." (*The Baptist March in History*, p. 128) Of course, he was referring to people like Thomas Helwys who helped start the first Baptist church. In 1612 he went to prison because he dared challenge the right of King James I to force people into the Church of England by state decree. The King declared, "I will make them conform themselves, or I will harrie them out of the land...." (*Report from the Capital*, May, 1989) Helwys was considered a dangerous radical because he believed a person ought to be free to choose his own church and beliefs. By the way, Thomas Helwys died in that prison.

And he was referring to people like John Bunyan who in 1660 was arrested by King Charles I. He languished in a Bedford prison for twelve years, all because Bunyan believed church and state should be separate. He was freed when Parliament passed the 1672 Indulgence, giving dissenters a one year respite. Who knows how long he would have been in prison otherwise.

Roger Williams in 1644 challenged the state church in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Did you know that we once had an official state church in this country? You may remember from history that Roger Williams was banished from Massachusetts because of his beliefs and lived through the winter among the Indians. He almost died. He eventually purchased land from the Indians and established what became the state of Rhode Island. The town where he and others settled was named Providence, in the belief that they were led there by the providence of Almighty God. It was in Providence, Rhode Island, that Roger Williams started the first Baptist church in America. There he preached that the priesthood of every believer demanded that individuals be free from the dictates of the state in religious matters.

The list of Baptist voices crying for religious liberty is long. Obadiah Holmes, who was whipped for the crime of refusing to allow his infant child to be baptized by the state church. Dr. Henry Dunster, dismissed as president of Harvard University because he became a Baptist. Isaac Baccus, put in jail because he refused to pay church tax. John Leland of Virginia, who convinced James Madison of the importance of religious liberty. All these Baptists endured persecution, ostracism, and even death because they believed that genuine faith could not be forced by state decree. The only

real faith, they believed, is faith that is personally and freely chosen, a radical idea that eventually won in the United States of America, leaving behind the model of a unified church and state.

Early Baptists always had strong biblical support for their beliefs. Religious liberty was no exception. In fact, those early Baptists were sometimes referred to as "Matthew 22 people" because that is the text they used to support their claim for religious liberty. I say that it is important that Baptist today understand this teaching of our Lord.

Matthew 22 records an incident involving two parties. Jesus was one of the parties, and a group of Pharisees and Herodians was the other. The Pharisees and Herodians conspired to trap Jesus. It was an unusual alliance. The Pharisees were the religious leaders. The Herodians, though, were a secular group, a kind of political party. They were supporters of King Herod, as their name *Herodians* suggests. This was an alliance of religion and state. Its purpose was unholy. In their attempt to trap Jesus, the representatives of this unholy alliance asked Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" It was a Catch-22 question. If Jesus answered "yes," he would fall into disfavor with the common people, who hated paying taxes to Rome. If he answered "no," then he could be charged with treason and imprisoned. It was the perfect question. No matter how he answered, Jesus' work would be damaged.

"So what do you think, Jesus? Should we pay taxes to Caesar or not? Come on! Give us your answer!"

Matthew notes that Jesus recognized their evil motive. He asked for a coin, a coin used to pay taxes. As they all looked at that coin in Jesus' hand he asked them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" And of course they all said, "the emperor's." Then Jesus responded to their trap question with these words that so deeply affected early Baptists, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." And Matthew says that they marveled at his wisdom.

"Render to Caesar that things which are Caesar's, and to God the things which are God's," the older translations read. With that statement, Jesus distinguished between two realms, the realm of Caesar (secular government) and the realm of God (religion). He acknowledged the legitimacy of both. There is a proper place in life for the state. It is not inherently evil, not according to the Bible. It is appropriate that we render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

But let's not omit what Jesus said next: "Give to God the things that are God's." That's the other legitimate realm, the realm of faith where we give allegiance and service to God.

Early Baptists believed that Jesus gave legitimacy both to government and religion, two legitimate entities that exist each in its own realm. The state must not meddle in the affairs of the church. Let them keep their hands out of our business. Likewise, the church must not ask the state to carry out the church's work. Teaching the Ten Commandments is the job of the church, not the federal courts. Praying for our children is the job of the church, not the state owned school system. The Baptist ideal, as it is stated in our Baptist Faith and Message, is "a free church in a free state." Let everyone freely render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. And let everyone freely, without any coercion from the state, render to God the things that are God's. Then religious faith will be authentic. That is why Baptists believe in religious liberty for all people.

One of Baptists' greatest voices for religious liberty and the separation of church and state was Dr. George W. Truett, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas long ago. On May 16, 1920, on the East Steps of the U.S. Capital, Dr. Truett delivered what is arguably his most famous sermon. It was entitled "Baptists and Religious Liberty." In that sermon he told a story of a teenage boy and his father who were engaged in conflict. The father called his son in and said with a stern voice, "Son, sit down!"

The son looked his dad in the eyes and respectfully replied, "I prefer to stand."

The father said again, this time more forcefully, "Son, sit down!"

Again the son replied, "I wish to stand."

So the father reached out, placed his hands on the son's shoulders, and forced him down into the chair. Then the father said, "Now you're seated!"

The son said to his father, "I may be seated on the outside, but I am standing on the inside."

In religion, it's the inside that counts, and that cannot be forced. Laws cannot force it. Prison cannot force it. Even the threat of death cannot force genuine religious faith. Laws may control our behavior, but they cannot control our heart. The human heart, the conscience, must be free. A free heart responding to the wooing of a loving

God—that is the formula for vibrant spirituality. And that is where I leave you this morning. Listen for the wooing call of our loving God. You are free. How do you respond?

Closing Prayer

Wooing, searching, calling God, our free hearts are open to you. In response to your love, we freely, joyfully give ourselves to you. Amen.