

On Being a First Baptist: Freedom First Baptists

By Robert B. Setzer Jr.

A sermon for Religious Liberty Day 2004

Psalm 8:1-9; Matthew 22:15-22

In his book, *Too Great A Temptation*, Joel Gregory likens pastoring a Baptist church to playing poker, an interesting analogy, to say the least. According to Gregory, every time a pastor displeases his congregation, he loses some poker chips. When the stack of chips gets low, wise pastors know to avoid divisive issues until they can replenish their chips through dedicated care of their flocks. To survive long in a sometimes-perilous profession, pastors must have an intuitive sense of how many chips they have left and how many they are about to lose.

Well, I suspect with this morning's sermon, I'm going to lose some poker chips. Because today in our series on Baptist distinctives, we come to the Baptist passion for religious liberty and the separation of church and state. There has been a sea change of opinion on this issue in the last quarter of a century and Baptists have been swept up in the swirling tides like everyone else. Thus, these days, preaching a sermon on religious liberty that would do early Baptists proud, means sacrificing some poker chips. Many Baptists, it seems, have forgotten the rock from which they were hewn.

Let me give you a few examples of the sea change I'm talking about. When I was a boy growing up in the 60s, it was unthinkable for Baptists to support tuition vouchers. That was regarded as a government subsidy of Catholic schools. Today, many Baptists are active proponents of tuition tax credits for private schools. Why? I suppose the reasons are many, but among them is the fact that many Baptist churches now have their own private schools, and they want a piece of the action like everybody else.

Example number two: When Baptists talk glowingly of "faith-based initiatives," our Baptist forebears are turning over in their graves. They fought tooth and nail against state churches, an early form of faith-based initiatives. We're told such programs are effective because they're *faith*-based. Well, if that is so, won't they lose that spiritual credibility and power once the state, rather than *faith*, is subsidizing them? To me, it's passing strange that folks who generally believe big government messes up nearly everything it touches, don't blink an eye about Uncle Sam meddling in the most precious of realms, the spiritual.

Example three: On the steps of the U.S. Capitol in 1920, George W. Truett offered an impassioned defense of religious liberty and the separation of church and state. Truett said Jesus' command, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's," was one of the "most revolutionary and history-making utterances that ever fell from those lips divine." (Walter B. Shurden, *Four Fragile Freedoms*, 1993, p. 52.)

Sixty years later, Truett's successor as pastor at First Baptist, Dallas, W.A. Criswell, said in a television interview, "I believe this notion of the separation of church and state was the figment of some infidel's imagination." (*Four Fragile Freedoms*, p. 51-52.)

Now maybe Brother Criswell didn't realize it when making that charge, but in calling the separation of church and state the "figment of some infidel's imagination," he was talking about family. That understanding of church-state relations is in the First Amendment because of 18th century Baptist agitators like John Leland of Virginia.

Now I'm not suggesting one must agree with my take on these three issues to be a true Baptist. I'm simply suggesting that when good, God-fearing Baptists disagree on such fundamental church-state issues, we've come a long way from our beginnings as the nation's most radical proponents of religious liberty. Sadly, in the popular mind, Baptists are not seen as freedom fighters for oppressed religious and even irreligious minorities, but believe it or not, once it was so.

How have we come so far from our beginnings as the nation's most ardent defenders of religious liberty? I believe two factors are at play. One is the loss of a particular reading of the Bible that arose when Baptists were an oppressed religious minority. And the other is a loss of confidence in the Gospel that has us looking for Big Brother to do what only God can do.

First, let's ponder that reading of the Bible that arose when Baptists were being flogged, fined, and handcuffed for their religious convictions. Baptists arose in the early 17th century as members of the radical Reformation. They went beyond early reformers such as Luther and Calvin, in demanding full religious liberty for all people. Luther foisted a state church upon Germany, Calvin did the same in Switzerland, as did Knox in Scotland and Thomas Cromwell and Henry VIII in England. By contrast, early Baptists demanded the state stay out of the religion business, believing God, and not the king, was Lord of the conscience.

The first tract in English demanding full religious liberty was published by a fiery Baptist named Thomas Helwys. In the year 1612, he wrote in defense of Roman Catholics, then the embattled religious group:

"Our Lord the King has no more power over their consciences than ours, and that is none at all; for our Lord the King is but an earthly King, and if the King's people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all human laws made by the King, our Lord the King, can require no more. For 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 whatever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure." (updating Walter B. Shurden, *How We Got That Way*, pamphlet published by the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, p. 6.)

Helwys paid dearly for his radical views. Good King James I, the benefactor of the King James Bible, promptly threw Helwys into prison where he died. But the king was

powerless to imprison Helwysøtruth that religious liberty was Godø gift and therefore not under the jurisdiction of any earthly power.

Helwys and other early Baptists made much of the biblical teaching that man and woman were created in Godø image (Genesis 1:26), ða little lower than the angelsö (Psalm 8:5), or as the phrase can also be translated, ða little lower than Godö (NRSV). In other words, man and woman are like God in ways other creatures are not. And one of the ways they are like God is that they are free to love and obey God or disobey and disown their maker.

A pair of anxious parents sent their new first-grader to school with a note pinned to his shirt. The note read, ðThe opinions expressed by this child are not necessarily those of his parents.ö I suspect God sometimes wishes for such a disclaimer. But as it is, God, the first parent, knew true love must be freely given. So God settled for being loved truly and freely, or not at all.

The belief that freedom is the birth-right of every person was enshrined in the Declaration of Independence: ðWe hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, *Liberty* and the pursuit of Happinessö (italics mine). Believe it or not, that conviction was forged first not by Enlightenment philosophers, but by headstrong Baptists and others who insisted religious liberty was at the heart of being fully human.

But of course, when we come to church-state issues, religious liberty is not the bugaboo. Most everyone reveres the religious and civil liberties we Americans hold dear. The thorny issue is how to best preserve and protect religious liberty as part of the American experiment. And it is here that the much-maligned phrase, ðseparation of church and state,ö rears its lovely head.

Granted, the phrase does not appear in the Constitution. Neither does the phrase ðthe separation of powersö or ðthe right to a fair trial,ö for that matter. (*A Shared Vision: Religious Liberty in the 21st Century*, pamphlet published by the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, et. al., October 2002, p. 3.)

ðSeparation of church and stateö is an expression Jefferson coined to summarize the religious protections in the First Amendment: ðCongress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.ö

Like it or not, that portion of the First Amendment has Baptist fingerprints all over it. It was Baptists who confronted the Continental Congress with the hypocrisy of fighting a revolution over ðno taxation without representation,ö and then taxing its own citizens to support state churches they abhorred. In the North, Baptist agitator Isaac Backus was a religious Paul Revere, sounding the alarm for complete religious liberty, not just toleration. Toleration implied the government had the right to give or withhold religious sanctions, while Baptists knew religious liberty was bequeathed by God alone.

In the South, John Leland, a Virginia Baptist, led the charge. When it came to the separation of church and state, Leland had a rapier sharp tongue worthy of old Tom Helwys. He wrote that "government has no more to do with the religious opinions of men, than it has with the principles of mathematics." (*How We Got That Way*, p. 7.)

Or try this Leland one-liner on for size. See if it fits your Baptist spirit. "Let every man speak freely without fear, maintain the principles that he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods; and let government protect him in doing so." (*How We Got That Way*, p.8.)

Baptists became radicals on the separation of church and state because they were a besieged religious minority in a nation peppered with state churches. Having been fined, flogged and imprisoned by civil governments for religious convictions, they championed the view the state should keep its grimy hands off the church, and the church should not co-opt the state into doing the master's business. Had not Jesus himself intoned, ever so clearly, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God, the things that are God's?" (Matthew 22:21). Sounds mighty close to "separation of church and state" to me. And you can bet, colonial Baptists read the Bible that way. Indeed, it was John Leland's lobbying of James Madison, on behalf of Virginia Baptists, that finally resulted in the First Amendment being added to the Constitution.

That then is something of the proud heritage of Baptists on the matter of religious liberty and the separation of church and state. God's creation of man and woman free agents means religious liberty is a God-given right. And the needed political protection of that theological conviction is the separation of church and state: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

But where do Baptists stand today? Many seem to feel these core commitments, religious liberty and the separation of church and state, are no longer workable in a post 9/11 world. Given the threats in the larger world, and the seeming deterioration of family life and the educational system at home, might we need a new marriage of church and state, rather than keeping these two at a respectful distance? Each person must wrestle with this question for himself or herself. But me? I am a radical on this one. I do not want Caesar's help in bringing in Christ's kingdom. Every time the church asks government to do her bidding, the church is compromised and weakened while Big Brother grows bolder and more brazen still.

Here's where I lose some of those poker chips I mentioned at the beginning, in applying the Baptist commitment to religious liberty and the separation of church and state to some contemporary issues. For one, I am very wary of so-called "faith-based" initiatives. For all the talk of not funding religion directly, I know religious institutions from the inside. And I know you cannot construct a rigid wall between so-called social services and religious claims. Further, why would any self-respecting church want to do such a thing? We are called to care for the world in the name of a particular Galilean, not become the functionaries of another government handout.

Further, as the late Dean Kelley pointed out, "With the King's shilling, comes the King." (A Shared Vision, p. 10.)

Does anyone really believe the federal government is going to fork over megabucks without expecting something in return? It's never happened before, to my knowledge.

I am also very uncomfortable with talk of a Christian America. Such a designation is both bad theology and bad policy. It is bad theology because applying to America Old Testament promises to Israel implies we are now God's chosen people. But the New Testament is emphatic, the new Israel, God's chosen people for transforming the world, is not America but the church, a body drawn from every land and nation. Further, talk of a Christian nation implies America is a religious union when in fact, she is the most religiously pluralistic nation on earth. And that is not her shame, but her glory! Because that means we are indeed, the "the land of the free and the home of the brave."

Does this mean Christians should keep their religious convictions in the closet? Absolutely not! They have every right, indeed, the responsibility to take their convictions into the public square and lobby for their views. That after all, is how our Baptist forebears ensured we would have a First Amendment! But we advocate our views as respectful citizens of a democracy, and not as the privileged elite who think they alone speak for God.

The bottom line? We Baptists have a particular history, a history of once being an oppressed religious minority. And that means we of all people should know the hard questions to ask those eager to collapse the kingdoms of Christ and Caesar into one. Did not our Lord tell us, "My kingdom is not of this world?" (John 18:36). No, there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Ephesians 4:5), and the national, yea international, symbol of this movement is a cross.

G. K. Chesterton, that most quotable of British writers, once said of humanity, "We are all in a small boat on a stormy sea and we owe each other a terrible loyalty." The same is true of Christians blessed to live in a democracy. We owe our nation a terrible loyalty. We are called to remain clear-eyed that Christ is not Caesar and Caesar is not Christ. And those who confuse the two do no service to their country, nor to their Lord.

Rather, as the early Christians wrote after the martyrdom of their beloved bishop, Polycarp, at the hands of Caesar's minions, "Polycarp was martyred, Statius Quadratus being proconsul of Asia, and Jesus Christ being king forever!" (James S. Stewart, *The Wind Of The Spirit*, 1968, p. 55.)

Thank God we live in a nation where we can make that confession without fear, while others who withhold that confession, answer not to government, nor to us, but to God.

"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." No nation in history has done so much as our own to enshrine that principle in its political life. Pray God, we are not the generation to sacrifice this precious legacy.

Robert B. Setzer Jr. has served as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Christ, Macon, Georgia, since 1996. Previously, he served churches in Kentucky, Virginia, and Georgia. He is moderator-elect of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and author of Encounters with the Living Christ: Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of John (Judson Press, 1999). A native of Greensboro, N.C., he received the Doctor of Ministry degree from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1992. He was graduated from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky in 1980 (M.Div.) and from Gardner-Webb College in Boiling Springs, N.C. in 1977 (B.A., Religion).