

# Why religious liberty matters to the black church

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## What is religious liberty?

The Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC) defines religious liberty as our God-given right to choose how, when, where and if we worship. It is the freedom of the individual conscience to choose to worship God, or not, according to the dictates of one's heart and mind. Religious liberty enables one to embrace biblical truth freely (or one's sacred scripture or no scripture). For American citizens, it is also a right protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

## What does the Constitution say about religious liberty?

The First Amendment provides two clauses with safeguards for religious liberty. The first 16 words state: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

## What does "make no law respecting an establishment of religion" mean?

This is known as the Establishment Clause, and it prevents the federal government from establishing a national religion or state-controlled church. It also prevents the government from advancing, privileging or funding religion.

## What about "prohibiting the free exercise thereof"?

This is known as the Free Exercise Clause, and it keeps the government from unnecessarily interfering with religious practices.

## Why is this important to the black church?

The black church has always struggled for its freedom in the U.S. This struggle is our heritage; it is in our DNA. Since the days of slavery, African-Americans have fought to worship God freely: first in secret and then through small plantation churches under the master's watch. Our struggle for religious liberty is connected to our struggle for freedom and justice in America. Since we historically have experienced this injustice, it is important for us to fight for the religious freedom of all Americans and faith traditions.

## How can the black church help support the cause for religious liberty in America?

Religious liberty is a civil rights issue — its moral basis is the recognition that freedom of conscience is fundamental to human dignity. The black church should continue in the tradition of advocating for "the least of these," which also should include those whose religious freedoms are being compromised. A threat to *anyone's* religious liberty is a threat to *everyone's* religious liberty.

## How can my church support the cause for religious liberty in America and stay informed?

- Invite the BJC to speak to your congregation about religious liberty issues. Email us at [bjc@BJCOnline.org](mailto:bjc@BJCOnline.org).
- Help the BJC educate young people about religious liberty by asking your church to support the BJC's ministry through its mission budget.
- Subscribe to the BJC's bi-monthly magazine, *Report From the Capital*.



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“Religious liberty suggests that a person is free to choose from any number of religious traditions active within a society, and the government works to protect the rights of all of them to operate according to their own conscience.”

**Rev. Dr. Marvin McMickle**

Author of *Pulpit and Politics: Separation of Church and State in the Black Church*, president of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School and the keynote speaker at the BJC’s 2015 Religious Liberty Council Luncheon

“While a constitutional framework protects our rights to freedom of conscience and belief, we must never forget the unspoken and painful history of slavery during the time of the drafting of the First Amendment. Ignoring the omission of human freedom over spiritual freedom creates potential threats of discrimination against racial and religious minorities in today’s political climate.”

**Dr. Sabrina Dent**

Director of admissions and recruitment at the Religious Freedom Center of the Freedom Forum Institute and a 2015 BJC Fellow



“The black church historically has used its moral conscience and prophetic voice both to speak to government officials for justice and against unjust, immoral policies. The BJC is a trusted partner of the PNBC: protecting our mandate ‘to lift our voice for the voiceless’ in our pulpits as well as in the public square.”

**Rev. Dr. Timothy “Tee” Boddie**

General secretary of the Progressive National Baptist Convention and member of the Baptist Joint Committee Board of Directors

“In the quest for freedom and justice, and at a time when many would confuse God and government, Dr. King said that a time comes when silence is betrayal. I submit that, for the black church – a church born fighting for liberty and religious liberty – indeed for all of us, regardless of race or religion, that time is now.”

**Rev. Dr. Raphael Warnock**

Senior pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta and the keynote speaker at the 2016 BJC Symposium titled “Religious Liberty and the Black Church”

