

## **"In Search of America's Baptists"**

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“Dear Sir,” the letter began. “Start looking for a new job. The moral majority is going to put you and President Carter type of Christians out of a job.” This letter, written in August 1980 by a man from Dallas, was addressed to Jimmy Carter’s religious liaison, Robert Maddox, a Baptist. “Any staunch Christian would not support gays, would not support the ERA which contradicts God’s plan for women and would support voluntary prayer in the school. You guys are real bummers. You don’t even deserve to be called Baptists.”<sup>1</sup>

Even with the benefit of hindsight, it’s difficult to locate with any precision exactly when so many Baptists in America ceased being Baptist. Some people, I suppose, would point to the storied gathering in Houston in 1979, when busloads of Southern Baptist “messengers” began electing a succession of denominational presidents whose commitment to church-state separation was, shall we say, tepid.

Others might cite the changing views of Wallie Amos Criswell, longtime pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas. In 1960, during the heat of the presidential campaign, Criswell declared: “It is written in our country’s constitution that church and state must be, in this nation, forever separate and free.” Religious faith, the redoubtable fundamentalist declared, must

be voluntary, and “in the very nature of the case, there can be no proper union of church and state.” Twenty-four years later, however, on August 24, 1984, during the Republican National Convention, Criswell changed his tune: “I believe this notion of the separation of church and state was the figment of some infidel’s imagination.”<sup>2</sup>

Still others might quote the head of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. “We’ll see who represents Baptist views,” he declared recently, taunting his ecclesiastical adversaries. “I know I represent the views of overwhelming numbers of Southern Baptists.” The appellation Baptist apparently belongs to whoever can rally the largest following.

Let’s review. It’s my understanding – admittedly from the perspective of an outsider – that a Baptist has two fundamental convictions: a belief in adult (or believer’s) baptism and a conviction about liberty of individual conscience and the separation of church and state. These notions have a long and rich history, going back (arguably) to the New Testament and certainly to the era of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, when Anabaptists were persecuted for their beliefs.

The Baptist tradition in America, of course, can be traced to Roger Williams, who arrived in the New World in 1621 to become pastor of the Puritan congregation in Salem, Massachusetts. Williams, however, quickly ran afoul of the theocratic aspirations of the Puritan divines, who sought the collusion of the church with the state. Williams understood the dangers of this configuration and argued against it. He sought to protect what he

called the “garden of the church” from being contaminated by the “wilderness of the world.” His strategy for doing so was the construction of what he called a “wall of separation” between the two.

The theocrats of Massachusetts were in no mood to listen to Williams’s objections. They expelled him from the colony, whereupon he went to Rhode Island (which the Puritans regarded as a kind of cesspool of religious heresy) and founded there a colony that enshrined Baptist principles of liberty of conscience and the separation of church and state.

The founders of this nation, in their wisdom – and due in part to the agitation of Isaac Backus and John Leland, both of them Baptists – decided to encode William’s ideas into the First Amendment to the United States Constitution: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Although it is probably fair to say that Thomas Jefferson and James Madison were more concerned to protect the new nation from religious factionalism, it’s worth remembering that Roger Williams wanted to shield the integrity of the faith from the meddling of the government.

That is a quintessential Baptist idea. So too is liberty of conscience and the protection of the rights of religious minorities. “Our sentiments are uniformly on the side of religious liberty,” the Baptists from Danbury, Connecticut, wrote to President Jefferson in 1801. “Religion is at all times and places a matter between God and individuals.” Although this letter, signed by Nehemiah Dodge, Ephram Robbins, and Stephen S. Nelson, is less

widely quoted than Jefferson's famous "wall of separation" reply, it provides a good summation of Baptist views. The Danbury Baptists emphasized that "no man ought to suffer in name, person, or effects on account of his religious opinions."<sup>3</sup>

So much of the discussion surrounding the First Amendment in recent years has focused on protecting public policy from religion. And it is a sentiment that has received a good bit of play recently in the hysterical fulminations of a passel of secular fundamentalists, notably Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens. Their putative concern about religion posing a threat to democratic institutions worries me not at all. Our form of government has proven itself remarkably durable for more than two centuries now. And I believe that our unique form of representative democracy in a pluralistic setting actually benefits from the calisthenics of being stretched and pulled in various directions. Besides, whatever threats we face these days emanate not from people of faith but from those who regard the Constitution as an impediment and civil liberties as a nuisance.

My concern about the various attempts to compromise the First Amendment is quite the opposite. I worry that the integrity of the faith is diminished by its entanglement with the state. By taking such a position, I'm confident that I stand with Roger Williams, the progenitor of the Baptist tradition in America, and a long line of Baptists stretching from Williams and Leland and Backus to George Washington Truett, James Dunn, and Brent Walker.

Let's revisit, for example, the issue of prayer in public schools. First, it's time, once and for all, to put much of the nonsense about school prayer behind us. The Supreme Court did not outlaw prayer in public schools. That's a canard, and it's high time we say so. As long as there are algebra tests, there's going to be prayer in schools. The issue is prescribed public prayer in public schools. In the early 1960s, the Court ruled, correctly, that such activity threatens the establishment clause of the First Amendment – and, in so doing, it endangers the integrity of the faith.

I attended a meeting a few years back where a representative of the Religious Right in this town actually proposed that the way to maneuver around the Supreme Court was to have schoolchildren recite a Hindu prayer on Monday, a Jewish prayer on Tuesday, a Christian prayer on Wednesday, and so on. No real Baptist would stand for such tomfoolery, for Baptists, following the lead of Roger Williams, recognize the perils to the faith of too close an association with the state. I, for one, have no interest in having my daughter or my sons recite a Shintō prayer at the beginning of each school day, much less a prayer written by Congress or by the state legislature or even by a local school board. Baptists, of all people, understand that making prayer rote and obligatory makes prayer into a mockery.

So too with the rage to post the Ten Commandments in public places. Why the Decalogue, first of all? Why not the Sermon on the Mount, for those who want to make the argument that the United States is a “Christian nation”? The Sermon on the Mount, after all, is the highest expression of

Christian ethics, although it does contain some of that unfortunate language about peacemakers and those who show mercy and turning the other cheek and loving one's enemies and storing treasures on earth. It also talks about the dangers of praying in public, after the manner of the hypocrites. Perhaps that's why we prefer the retributive justice of the Ten Commandments over the ethic of love outlined in the Sermon on the Mount. Still, the soaring aspirations of the Sermon on the Mount surely would comport better with the American temperament than the prohibitions of the Ten Commandments.

But why not post the Decalogue in public places? Because, quite simply, it trivializes the faith and makes the Ten Commandments into a fetish. I was one of the expert witnesses in the Alabama Ten Commandments case, where Roy S. Moore, chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, plopped a two-and-one-half-ton granite monument emblazoned with the Decalogue into the lobby of the Judicial Building in Montgomery. Moore, who had run for office as the "Ten Commandments judge" and who claims to be a Baptist, repeatedly refused the requests of other religious traditions to have their sacred texts represented in the Judicial Building. And he also refused to acknowledge other precedents for American jurisprudence: the Code of Hammurabi, the Justinian Code, or the English Common Law tradition. He wanted only the Decalogue.

My testimony in that case was that religion has flourished in the United States as nowhere else precisely because the government has stayed out of the religion business. The First Amendment to the United States

Constitution set up a free market for religion, and the happy effect is that we have in America a vibrant, salubrious religious marketplace unmatched anywhere else in the world. The economic metaphor is especially apt: Adam Smith in his pivotal treatise on free markets, *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, used religion to make his point about the value of free markets. The religious vitality we see in the United States is due in large measure to the fact that, throughout our history, we have abided by the venerable Baptist principles of church-state separation and liberty of individual conscience.

The lesson of Montgomery, Alabama, is that when religion looks for sanction from the state, religion is diminished. Faith is reduced to a fetish. Some of you may recall that after Judge Thompson ruled, properly, that “Roy’s Rock” violated the establishment clause of the First Amendment, and workers were preparing to remove it, one of the protesters screamed, “Get your hands off my God!”

Unless I’m mistaken, one of the Commandments etched into the side of that granite monument says something about graven images.

Too many Baptists in America have lost their way. They have been seduced by leaders of the Religious Right into thinking that the way to advance the faith in this country is to surrender Baptist principles and seek the imprimatur of the state. This subversion takes many forms, ranging from the chimera of the so-called “school choice” movement and the attempt to

prescribe prayer in public schools to posting the Decalogue in public places and supporting the mischief of faith-based initiatives.

There is even a movement afoot among counterfeit Baptists like David Barton and Rick Scarborough to ignore the First Amendment and to deny that the founders ever intended church and state to be separate. I've come to equate these people with the Holocaust deniers and those who debunk global warming – not to suggest that there are moral parallels among these groups but merely because of the brazenness of their denials in the face of overwhelming and irrefutable evidence to the contrary.

On the face of it, it's not difficult to understand why even Baptists would be tempted to compromise Baptist principles. With the election of a Roman Catholic to the presidency in 1960, the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the changes to immigration laws the following year, and the rise of the counterculture in the late 1960s, Baptists and others discerned that America was changing. Specifically, they recognized the eclipse of the religious hegemony that Christians, especially Protestant Christians, once enjoyed. The free marketplace of religion had always worked to their advantage, in part because Baptists and other evangelicals know better than almost anyone else how to compete in the arena of popular discourse. But the arrival of others into this gorgeously diverse and pluralistic nation meant that Baptists and Protestants and Christians no longer had the field to themselves. Rather than rely on the time-honored principles of the religious free market and rather than compete on a more-or-less equal footing, they sought to change the rules to their advantage.



And when Jimmy Carter, a true Baptist, refused to play along with their ruinous scheme, many Baptists elected to abandon Baptist principles in favor of policies that would, ostensibly, advance the cause of the faith. But as Roger Williams understood centuries ago, collusion with the state is a Faustian bargain. In this case, a succession of Republican politicians, from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush, exploited religious voters in the interest of their own political ambitions. The identification of the Religious Right with the Republican Party has deprived the faith of its prophetic voice. Where are the Baptist voices of conscience decrying this administration's immoral war in Iraq, the relentless assault on civil liberties, and the abomination of torture?

In too many cases, the answer is that those voices have been co-opted by the promise – very often the mirage – of access to political power. They have traded the foundational Baptist principles of church-state separation and liberty of individual conscience for the illusion of political influence. The Religious Right has ransacked the faith in exchange for a conference call with Karl Rove.

And what have they to show in return? Precious little. The so-called Baptists in the ranks of the Religious Right have sold their birthright for a mess of pottage. If I were a Baptist, I'd be tempted to sue for trademark infringement!

And too many Baptists have stood by as putative Baptists like Roy Moore perpetrated various stunts aimed at compromising the genius of the First

Amendment. I want to know why every Baptist in Alabama didn't storm the Judicial Building in Montgomery and demand, in the name of Baptist principles, that "Roy's Rock" be removed immediately as an affront to the integrity of the faith – which, as Roger Williams taught us long ago, suffers when it is confused with the state. What Roy Moore was peddling was idolatry, pure and simple – a conflation of the gospel with the American political order.

I confess that I'm not up-to-date on current Baptist thinking about perdition, but I have to believe there is a somewhat warmer place awaiting the Baptist leaders in Alabama who stood by idly in the face of this nonsense. Not Gehenna, perhaps, but somewhere a tad warmer than the norm. I was thinking more along the lines of Houston – or Washington.

My time is drawing to a close and, this being a gathering of Baptists, I must segue into the altar call. I'm asking Baptists to reaffirm their heritage. I'm asking them to rededicate themselves to the importance of liberty of conscience. Baptists were once a minority themselves, so they should know better than most the importance of protecting the rights of minorities, religious or otherwise. "Our contention is not for mere toleration, but for absolute liberty," George Washington Truett declared from the steps of the Capitol on May 16, 1920. "There is a wide difference between toleration and liberty. . . . It is the consistent and insistent contention of our Baptist people, always and everywhere, that religion must be forever voluntary and uncoerced, and that it is not the prerogative of any power, whether civil or ecclesiastical, to compel men to conform to any religious creed or form of

worship, or to pay taxes for the support of a religious organization to which they do not believe.”

Most important, I ask that Baptists reclaim their heritage as watchmen on the wall of separation between church and state. That entails a stern and unstinting rebuke of those supposed Baptists who seek to undermine the First Amendment, the best friend that religion has ever had. They are not real Baptists, for no true Baptist would stand for the compromise of such a foundational Baptist principle.

And let’s remember the perils of lusting after political influence. Religion always functions best from the margins of society and not in the councils of power. That is the great lesson of American history – and, arguably, all of church history. Once religion hankers after temporal influence, the faith loses its prophetic edge. The proper place for all believers, Baptist or otherwise, is on the margins, calling the powerful to account, all the while refusing the seductions of power.

Let me be clear about what I am not saying. I am not arguing that people of faith should not participate in the political process. Not at all. I happen to believe that the arena of public discourse would be impoverished without voices of faith.

But let those voices be clear and uncompromised by unsavory political entanglements, unburdened by the empty promises of religious favoritism, and free from the ritualistic piety of patriotism. The marketplace of religion in America, encoded into the First Amendment, is a Baptist idea, and it is

one that has worked remarkably well for more than two centuries now. But the underlying premise is that no religion, no creed, no faith enjoys a preferential legal status. Everyone in America enjoys liberty of conscience to believe – or not to believe – as she sees fit. Every true Baptist understands that. Every true Baptist recognizes that my right in a pluralistic context to believe and worship as I see fit presupposes my willingness to let others do likewise.

Finally, every true Baptist understands that any attempt to “baptize” the faith with the imprimatur of the state – whether it’s the Ten Commandments or faith-based initiatives or public prayer in public schools – ultimately diminishes the integrity of the faith. Roger Williams warned us about that nearly four centuries ago. Those warnings were prescient then.

Today, they’re urgent.

<sup>1</sup> Letter (handwritten), Terry Miller [Dallas, Texas] to Bob Maddox, August 22, 1980, “Office of Public Liaison, Bob Maddox, Religious Liaison,” Box 3, Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>2</sup> W. A. Criswell, “Religious Freedom and the Presidency,” United Evangelical Action 19 (September 1960), 9-10: quoted in Richard V. Pierard, “Religion and the 1984 Election Campaign,” Review of Religious Research 27 (December 1985), 104-105.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *The Separation of Church and State: Writings on a Fundamental Freedom by America's Founders*, ed. Forrest Church (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 127.