

Religious liberty is a gift from God.

Religious liberty is a gift from God, not the result of any act of toleration or concession on the part of the state. It has to do with what we Baptists call “soul freedom” – the liberty of conscience that we all receive simply by virtue of how God created us and chose to relate to us.

God has made all of us free – free to say yes, free to say no, and free to make up our own minds about our spiritual destiny. Religious freedom goes to the heart of who God is and who we are. So, the fight for religious liberty for all is to ensure against government doing what even God will not do: to violate consciences or to coerce faith.

Baptists became champions of religious liberty and church-state separation in large measure because we are a people of the Book. For many Baptists, religious liberty is well-grounded in Scripture. Its taproot runs deep into the creation accounts in Genesis. The creation of human beings in God’s own image necessarily implies a freedom on our part to choose for or against a relationship with God, voluntarily and without coercion.

In the New Testament, Jesus speaks forcefully about freedom. Many would assert it was at the very foundation of his ministry. Reading from Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus announces that he had been anointed “to proclaim release to the captives and ... to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (**Luke 4:18**). Jesus liberated all who would choose to follow him from the slavery of their sins: “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (**John 8:36**). The apostle Paul preached freedom, as well. To the Galatians he railed against the slavery of legalism. He boldly declared that, “[f]or freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (**Galatians 5:1**). The Bible does not articulate a full-blown doctrine of the separation of church and state. Yet, its seeds are clearly present. Jesus at least foreshadowed the concept when he said “[g]ive therefore to the emperor things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (**Matthew 22:21**). Jesus’ behavior was consistent with his words. He never took a coin from Caesar or sought the help of Herod in his ministry and mission.

In many places, the New Testament outlines the contours of the separate realms of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar. The church is given the tasks of spreading the gospel (**Acts 1:8**), teaching doctrine (**Matthew 28:20**), and discipling believers (**Ephesians 4:11-13**). The state is divinely ordained to resist evil (**Romans 13:3**) and keep order (**I Peter 2:13-15**). Although these realms sometimes overlap and do not necessarily clash, the New Testament bears witness to a two-kingdom world – each with separate duties and each engendering different loyalties.



What is the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty?

Serving 15 Baptist bodies, the BJC is a nonpartisan, nonprofit 501(c)(3) education and advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C., that defends religious freedom and upholds the principle of church-state separation. While primarily supported by Baptists (denominations, churches, and individuals), the BJC works for religious liberty for all, including Jewish, Muslim and a host of Christian and minority

religious groups who count on the organization for leadership. The BJC is the only religious agency devoted solely to the principles of religious liberty outlined in the First Amendment, and it leads key coalitions of religious and civil liberties groups striving to protect both the free exercise of religion and to defend against its establishment by government.

What does the BJC do?

The BJC promotes religious freedom through three major activities: legislation, litigation and education. Its legislative work includes monitoring legislation relating to church-state matters, joining coalition efforts for or against a bill, and leading congressional staff briefings on the need for or implications of a bill. The organization also monitors church-state litigation, providing analysis and filing briefs in Supreme Court cases dealing with religious liberty. In addition, the BJC is involved in ongoing education efforts, developing resources for use on college campuses, in churches and in civic gatherings.

How does the BJC help churches?

In addition to serving churches as a religious liberty watchdog agency in the nation’s capital, the BJC staff often leads educational programs in churches, including preaching sermons and teaching Sunday school, and publishes resources on religious liberty issues for congregational use. The organization also can be counted on if church leaders have particular church-state questions about which they would like to consult.

Why does the BJC support church-state separation?

The separation of church and state, or the “wall of separation” talked about by early Baptist Roger Williams, framer Thomas Jefferson, and the U.S. Supreme Court, is simply a shorthand metaphor for expressing a deeper truth. Religious liberty is best protected when church and state are institutionally separated and neither tries to perform or interfere with the essential mission and work of the other.

Government promotion of religion harms religion, encouraging watered-down religious messages. The BJC believes religion is best left to the voluntary efforts of individuals and churches. Church-state separation also ensures our vibrant religious landscape, including a public square open for discussion about religion and matters of faith.