

## The legacy of Dawson and Dunn, then and now

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*Reflections*

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Earlier this month, the Baptist Joint Committee co-hosted the annual meeting of the Baptist History & Heritage Society at the First Baptist Church of the City of Washington, D.C. The meeting's theme was "The Contributions of Baptist Public Figures in America." I had the privilege of delivering the keynote address, titled: "BJC=JMD<sup>2</sup>: The Contributions of Joseph M. Dawson and James M. Dunn to the Baptist Joint Committee."

In that speech I outlined the general approach of the BJC's first and fourth executive directors to church-state issues. I then discussed what I thought were their top 10 contributions (five each) to the preservation of religious liberty generally and to the BJC in particular. (You can read the full text of my speech at [www.BJConline.org](http://www.BJConline.org).)

These are summaries of my top 10:

1. Early in Dawson's seven-year tenure, the BJC filed briefs in two seminal Supreme Court cases dealing with public funding of religion (*Everson*) and religion in the public schools (*McCullum*), thus initiating the practice of filing friend-of-the-court briefs, which the BJC has done more than 100 times since then.
  2. He established this publication, *Report from the Capital*, built the BJC coalition of Baptist bodies and helped found Protestants and Other Americans United for Separation of Church and State (now Americans United for Separation of Church and State).
  3. Dawson spoke prolifically and prophetically and wrote three important books on church and state and Baptist distinctives.
  4. He fought attempts to appoint an ambassador to the Vatican, and in the process, sacrificed an otherwise cordial relationship with a Baptist president and fellow worshiper, Harry Truman.
  5. Dawson was instrumental in causing a guarantee for religious liberty to be included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly.
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1. Early in his 19-year tenure, Dunn spoke out against the Reagan school prayer amendment; he also led the fight to convince Congress to pass the Equal Access Act of 1984. These efforts said "no" to state-sponsored religion and "yes" to constitutionally permissible accommodations of student religious exercise.
  2. He worked to restore protections for free exercise of religion through the passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in 1993, and his lawyers defended its constitutionality in the Supreme Court.

3. The BJC led various religious organizations in consulting with the IRS in an effort to maintain churches' tax-exempt status and otherwise to guard their autonomy against intrusive governmental regulation.
4. Dunn fought for human rights internationally on many fronts. Amendments were sought and obtained to the International Religious Freedom Act (1997) to ensure the rights of conscience for all, not just for Christians.
5. In what was perhaps Dunn's most significant legacy, he successfully guided the BJC through the Southern Baptist controversy and caused it to emerge a healthy agency.

James was in the audience. At the end of the speech, he was asked to critique my selection of accomplishments. Although he did not disagree with my picks, he waxed eloquently about another aspect of his leadership of which he was particularly proud—the BJC internship program. He said that his personal relationships with and the encouragement of young people through the internship program was arguably his most significant and enduring contribution.

I cannot disagree. Over the past 25 years, we have hosted more than 150 interns. Most have gone on to achieve success in law, ministry, teaching and other leadership roles in Baptist and American life. One notable example is Bill Underwood, a 1981 BJC intern, who has been tapped as the next president of Mercer University.

The internship program continues full force. This year we will enjoy nine interns.

Our internship program increases the effectiveness of our ministry, gives young people an experience of working and living in Washington, and develops an "alumni association" for the BJC that only colleges and seminaries usually enjoy. Simply put, former interns make wonderful ambassadors for the BJC and the most effective advocates for religious liberty throughout the country and around the world.

Thank you, James and Joe, for showing us the way.