

Celebrating 400 years of Baptist heritage

Remembering our roots and our rights as we continue the fight for freedom

By K. Hollyn Hollman

The year 2009 marked the Baptist movement's 400th anniversary. From our beginning, Baptists have been relentless in the battle to protect religious liberty. As we commemorate four centuries of Baptist life, the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty continues to honor our heritage by promoting the right to be free from government interference in matters of faith. Baptists have always understood that religious freedom for all and the principle of church-state separation must go together, and we continue the campaign that began 400 years ago.

A group of English Christians living in Holland to escape persecution became the first "baptizers" in their search for freedom. These passionate believers studied the New Testament and felt church membership should be based on the confession of belief in Jesus Christ followed by baptism. When they organized the first believer's baptism service in 1609, it was a direct challenge to the state churches in England that demanded infant baptism.

On returning to England and establishing the first Baptist church, the group suffered as a persecuted religious minority. Baptist leader Thomas Helwys called for individual religious freedom, declaring that the King of England was powerless to control religious belief. The monarch in question was King James I, the same person who had the Bible translated into the "King James" version during this time of religious discord and persecution. Helwys also asserted that individuals had the right to read and interpret Scripture. These radical ideas landed Helwys in prison, but the concept of "soul freedom" remained a hallmark of Baptists as they set their sights to the New World.

Baptists in America also faced persecution for their beliefs at the hands of the colonial theocratic governments. As the American colonies began to work for their freedom from England, they continued to banish Baptists and other religious minorities to jails for their dissenting religious views and practices.

When the United States began drafting its constitution, Baptists led by John Leland pressed for a declaration of religious freedom. In 1791, the ratification of the First Amendment embodied the Baptist vision of a nation founded on religious liberty for all and the institutional

separation of church and state. The ideas that the government will not do anything to establish religion or obstruct an individual's religious practice were new and radical, and they continue to face challenges today.

For 73 years, the Baptist Joint Committee has worked to protect these dual pillars supporting robust religious freedom. Our singular mission is "to defend and extend God-given religious liberty for all, furthering the Baptist heritage that champions the principle that religion must be freely exercised, neither advanced nor inhibited by government." We remember how our forbears were persecuted for their faith, and we believe in that "liberty of conscience" that allows us — and other religious groups — to freely worship in the manner we see fit.

Our work in Washington, D.C., and around the country takes us to churches, Congress, and even the Supreme Court. Our staff often leads educational programs in churches, including preaching sermons and teaching Sunday school. We monitor legislation related to church-state matters, joining efforts for or against a bill and leading congressional staff briefings. We file briefs in the U.S. Supreme Court and other courts in cases dealing with religious liberty. The Baptist Joint Committee is working to educate others about

our historical Baptist beliefs while informing individuals and groups about the latest changes and challenges in the law. We also are here to equip individuals and congregations to be ardent promoters and defenders of religious liberty in their own communities.

The historic Baptist commitment to religious liberty is centered on our freedom to worship God and to follow Christ without efforts by the government to advance or restrain religion. We believe it is a gift from God and not the result of any act of toleration or concession on the part of the state. God has made us all free — free to say yes, free to say no, and free to make up our own minds about our spiritual destiny. The fight for religious liberty is an effort to prevent the government from doing what even God will not do: coerce faith. The expression of this Baptist ideal began 400 years ago, and we all have a role and responsibility to make sure others enjoy religious freedom through the next 400 years and beyond.



This stained glass window at First Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., depicts Baptist leader John Leland discussing religious liberty with James Madison, the author of the First Amendment.