

# **The Intersection:**

## **Where Religious Liberty and Power Meet**

*A discussion guide for churches and small groups to be used in conjunction with  
“The Intersection” video featuring Bill Moyers and James Dunn (1996)*

### **Background:**

Our Founders wanted to ensure that Americans could practice their religion free from governmental interference. They were especially sensitive to this issue because they were well-acquainted with societies in which the government compelled citizens to join certain churches and profess specific beliefs. In Europe, governments and churches had operated as something of a joint venture for hundreds of years, resulting in religious persecution. In 13<sup>th</sup> century Spain, for example, religious leaders used governmental powers to find heretics and subject them to torture. And, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Queen Elizabeth of England sentenced proselytizing priests to death for high treason because they contradicted the official, established church: the Church of England.

The tradition of church-state alliances came to American shores. All but four of the original Colonies had officially established churches and engaged in varying degrees of persecution or intolerance. In fact, during the early history of our nation, Baptists were targets of this persecution and intolerance.

When Roger Williams arrived in 1631, he found this situation unacceptable. Williams’ support for the complete separation of church and state and his friendships with the Native Americans offended the Colonial leaders. The government of Massachusetts Bay Colony eventually expelled Williams in 1635 for his unorthodox views and practice. When he founded Providence, in what is now the state of Rhode Island, Williams ensured that this new haven for sake of conscience protected religious liberty by separating church and state.

It took more than 100 years for religious freedom to become the norm in America. During that time, many Baptists suffered the indignities and injustices of religious intolerance. In 1651, for example, Obadiah Holmes was arrested and publicly whipped

for preaching against infant baptism, and Henry Dunster, president of Harvard College, was fired from his post in the mid-1600s for the same reason. Anne Dutton was persecuted continually for her free thinking and Baptist ideals. For these pioneers, religious freedom and soul liberty were as much a part of worshipping God as attending church.

Against the backdrop of a century and a half of religious persecution and intolerance in England and in most of the Colonies, the first Congress assembled in New York in 1789 to adopt a Bill of Rights to the new Constitution. Experience taught the Founders that combining religious zeal with the coercive powers of the state resulted in persecution and the violation of consciences.

The first 16 words of the Bill of Rights contain our First Freedom: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The first two provisions of this amendment, commonly known as the “religion clauses,” embody two related principles that give extensive protection to religion. The Establishment Clause prevents the government from advancing, promoting or privileging religion. The Free Exercise Clause is intended to prevent the government from discouraging, inhibiting or denying the exercise of religion.

Both religion clauses ensure religious liberty, and both require “a wall of separation” between church and state as a means to accomplish that aim. The phrase “wall of separation” originated with Roger Williams and was memorialized by Thomas Jefferson in a letter to the Danbury (Connecticut) Baptist Association. Jefferson believed that the First Amendment erected “a wall of separation between church and state.” Subsequently, this phrase was adopted by the Supreme Court as an apt metaphor for expressing the constitutional truth that government and religion should occupy separate spheres of influence.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1) Bill Moyers says the Constitution requires “no state church, no established religion.” What else does the First Amendment prohibit in an effort to ensure religious liberty? [The “wall of separation” ensures no state church. It prohibits the preferring of one

religion over another or preferring religion over non-religion. It also requires that the state have a compelling reason to limit one's free exercise of religion.]

2) Talk about the significance of the phrase "If anyone's religious freedom is denied, everyone's religious freedom is endangered." Does religious freedom include the right not to practice religion?

3) The phrase "soul freedom" is mentioned with considerable respect by both Bill Moyers and James Dunn. What do they mean by this phrase? What biblical references can you cite that form the foundation of this Baptist distinctive?

[Answers may include Genesis 1:26-27; Matthew 22:20-21; John 8:36; 2 Corinthians 3:15-17; Galatians 5:1-6. In the video, Dunn says it means "the recognition that they're made in the image of God, and that any religion that is worth anything has to be intimate and individual and personal." They note that, if you don't have the freedom to say no, the "yes" is meaningless.]

4) Some say that God has been removed from the classroom. Bill Moyers and James Dunn discuss how this is impossible. If school-sponsored classroom prayer is not allowed, does this really mean that there is no prayer?

[Discuss this in light of Matthew 6:6.]

5) James Dunn states that "religiosity and moralism are not necessarily equal to vital, life-changing religion." What do you think he means by this?

[Dr. Dunn wants people to realize that religious actions do not necessarily mean someone has a vital relationship with Jesus.]

6) Is it true that "only vital religion will change the moral tone of the culture"? If so, how do we help Americans discover "vital religion"?

7) One need only open the newspaper or listen to a news broadcast to hear about "the moral decay" or the "erosion of values" within our country. The answer to these

problems lies in individual relationships with Jesus Christ. What do you think about asking the government to help our country embrace Christian values?

8) Read Chapter 58 of Isaiah. What are some contemporary applications of the ancient problems of ritualized religion?

9) We often hear voices encouraging a return to the “true meaning” of some Christian observances. Do Christians really want to encourage the culture to embrace its special days of religious observance? Why or why not?

[Consider the secularization of Christmas and Easter.]

10) Listening to public debate, one might think that a majority of people favor classroom-wide non-denominational, non-proselytizing prayer. Divide your group into small groups of four. Try to write a truly non-denominational, non-proselytizing prayer that would please all persons of faith or no faith. Read these to the plenary group and discuss.

**To view and download “The Intersection” video, visit  
[www.BJConline.org/TheIntersection](http://www.BJConline.org/TheIntersection)**

**For further reading and discussion:**

Visit the website of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty: **BJConline.org**

Church resources: <http://BJConline.org/church-resources/>

Religion and public schools resources: <http://BJConline.org/religion-public-schools-resources/>

Baptist history and heritage: <http://BJConline.org/mission-history-baptist-heritage/>

Video from Brent Walker on Baptist heritage: <https://vimeo.com/98746501>

Church-state separation: <http://BJConline.org/mission-history-church-state-separation/>

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