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Sanford, North Carolina

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**Why Religious Freedom Matters**  
**1 Peter 2:13-17**

Yesterday we marked the 233<sup>rd</sup> birthday of this great land we live in, the United States of America, as we celebrated Independence Day. I hope you took time to give thanks to God for the blessings we have enjoyed as a nation—especially our freedoms—and to pray for his help for it in these difficult days.

There's another celebration going on this year throughout the world. It's the celebration of 400 years of Baptist life. What most church historians consider the first distinguishably Baptist congregation was established by a group of English Christians in Amsterdam, Holland. They were dissenters from the Church of England, and like the Pilgrims who came to America in 1620 on the Mayflower, had fled from persecution in their homeland to Holland, which was something of a haven for dissenters. In fact, these first Baptists had significant connections with the Pilgrims, but when they began to insist on believer's baptism, a division arose between the two groups.<sup>1</sup>

The two leaders of this little band of Baptists were John Smyth and Thomas Helwys. They would later have their own differences, but they launched a Christian movement that would find a variety of expressions all over the world.

Believe it or not, there's something significant that ties these two celebrations together—what we call *religious freedom* or *religious liberty*.

In 1920, the Southern Baptist Convention met in Washington, D.C. Prior to the start of the meeting, George W. Truett, the famous pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, who grew up in the mountains of North Carolina, preached a sermon on religious liberty from the steps of the Capitol Building to a crowd estimated to be between 10,000 and 15,000 people. In the sermon, Truett said:

Baptists have one consistent record concerning liberty throughout all their long and eventful history. They have never been a party to oppression of conscience. They have forever been the champions of liberty, both religious and civil . . . . Our fundamental essential principles have made our Baptist people . . . to be the unyielding protagonists of religious liberty, not only for themselves, but for everybody else as well.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pamela R. Durso and Keith E. Durso, *The Story of Baptists in the United States* (Brentwood, TN: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2006), 14-15.

<sup>2</sup> The full text of Truett's sermon can be found at Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty, George W. Truett, "Baptists and Religious Liberty," [http://www.bjconline.org/resources/pubs/pub\\_truett\\_address.htm](http://www.bjconline.org/resources/pubs/pub_truett_address.htm).

Indeed, this is one of Baptists' greatest contributions to the world—religious liberty. And in the United States, that passionate belief in religious liberty led to Baptists' advocacy for the separation of church and state at a time when most of the original thirteen states still had established churches that were supported by taxes paid to the state governments!

But *why* does religious freedom matter?

### ***A different situation***

Things were very different in colonial America. At that time, Baptists were a relatively small Christian denomination scattered throughout the thirteen colonies. Their minority status often made them religious outsiders. Their somewhat radical views on issues like believer's baptism by immersion (thus rejecting infant baptism), a regenerate church membership (that a church should be composed only of persons who had made a conscious faith commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior), and liberty of conscience (that each individual was responsible directly to God in matters of faith, rather than to a church hierarchy or the state) often led to their persecution.

Roger Williams, who left his Anglican roots and became a Baptist for a brief time on his way to becoming a Seeker, was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony because he had come to believe and teach that government authority could neither dictate nor nurture faith. He thus advocated what he called a “hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

Williams was only one of many persecuted Baptists. John Clarke, pastor of the Baptist church in Newport, Rhode Island, was arrested by the civil authorities in Lynn, Massachusetts along with two members of his congregation, Obadiah Holmes and James Crandall. They were charged with holding an illegal worship service in the home of William Witter. They were given the option of paying a fine or being whipped. Someone anonymously paid the fines for Clarke and Crandall, but Holmes wouldn't allow payment of his fine. He received thirty lashes—one lash for each pound of the fine. In the southern colonies, where the Church of England was the established church in Virginia, Georgia, and in parts of South Carolina, Baptists were regarded as illiterate and ignorant. They were often required to register their meeting places and to help support the Anglican clergy financially. Refusal to baptize infants was a punishable offense. Baptists and other dissenters weren't allowed to preach freely; after the 1689 Act of Toleration, they could obtain a license, but only to preach in certain places, leaving them subject to persecution if they preached elsewhere.<sup>4</sup>

All that happened *here*, not in Russia or China or India or Saudi Arabia or Iran—*here!*

These Baptists in early America were persecuted and oppressed because of their beliefs. The attitudes and actions they were persecuted for grew out of certain fundamental theological convictions based on their understanding of the Bible, particularly the New Testament. Their views led them to the conclusion that there must be religious liberty *for all persons*. Like their British Baptist brothers and sisters in England, they were convinced, as Thomas Helwys had expressed it in his handwritten dedication to King James I, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery*

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Williams, “Mr. Cotton's Letter Lately Printed, Examined and Answered,” in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, vol. 1, ed. Perry Miller (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1963), 108, quoted in J. Brent Walker, *Religious Liberty and Church-State Separation* (Brentwood, TN: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2003), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Durso and Durso, *The Story of Baptists in the United States*, 58-60.

of Iniquity, that “the king is a mortal man and not God, therefore has no power over he immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances for them, and to set spiritual lords over them.”<sup>5</sup>

In Book II of this work, Helwys put it even more bluntly:

For our lord the king is but an earthly king, and he has no authority as a king but in earthly causes. And if the king’s people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all human laws made by the king, our lord the king can require no more. For men’s religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it. Neither may the king be the judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.<sup>6</sup>

Helwys was imprisoned by King James for his views—the same King James that sponsored the beloved Bible translation that bears his name. Helwys later died in Newgate Prison sometime before 1616.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Biblical and Theological Foundations***

Now Baptists didn’t arrive at this understanding of religious freedom willy-nilly. They pointed to some key biblical passages as the basis for this conviction . . .

- Genesis 1:26-27, where the first creation story portrays God as creating humankind (both male and female) in his own image;
- Luke 4:16-21, where in the synagogue service in his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus read the lesson from the prophets (Isaiah 61:1-2a) about being sent “to preach good news to the poor . . . to proclaim freedom for the prisoners . . . to release the oppressed . . . ,”<sup>8</sup> and essentially claimed this passage as his mission statement;
- John 8:36, where Jesus said: “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed”;
- Galatians 5:1, 13, where Paul stated: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery . . . . For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters . . .” (NRSV);
- Romans 13:1-7, where Paul urged appropriate submission to the governing authorities in civil matters, arguing that government is instituted by and entrusted with authority by God to preserve order and administer justice;
- 1 Peter 2:13-17, which we read earlier, where Peter offered a similar understanding as Paul’s, and called on Christians to live responsibly as free people, fearing God and honoring the emperor;
- Acts 4:13-22 and 5:27-29, where Peter and other apostles responded to the Jewish council (the Sanhedrin), which had a degree of civil as well as religious authority, by saying that if the two conflicted, they were bound to obey God rather than human authority; and
- Matthew 22:15-22, where Jesus responded to an attempt to entrap him in his answer to a question about whether to pay taxes to Rome or not by declaring that since the emperor’s

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity (1611/1612)*, ed. Richard Groves (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), xxiv.

<sup>6</sup> Helwys, *Mystery of Iniquity*, 53.

<sup>7</sup> Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, Third Edition (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1975), 37-39. Walker, *Religious Liberty and Church-State Separation*, 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from the *New International Version*.

image and inscription were on the coin used to pay the tax, they should “render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (RSV).

The themes of freedom, responsibility, and ultimate loyalty to Jesus Christ as Lord *permeate* these texts.

In his book *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms*, Walter Shurden argues that Baptists “have anchored their passion for religious liberty to (1) the nature of God, (2) the nature of humanity, and (3) the nature of faith.”<sup>9</sup>

So the historic Baptist argument runs something like this.<sup>10</sup> God is the sovereign and free Lord of the universe, the Creator of all things, and has revealed himself most fully in his Son Jesus Christ, whom God has made both Lord and Messiah. God has created humans as he chose, and has created them with the power of choice. He created human beings in his own image, with the ability to think, reason, relate to him and one another, and make conscious moral choices. Throughout history, God has chosen to act toward people in liberating ways, particularly in delivering the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and in sending Jesus Christ to free people from their sin. Because humans are created in God’s image, each individual has dignity and worth. A key aspect of this dignity is the right to make one’s own decisions in matters of religion. Since God has created individuals with freedom of choice, genuine faith must be voluntary, not coerced. God forces himself on no one. For this to be true, humans must have the freedom to accept or reject God, to have faith or to refuse to have faith.

So from the biblical text and careful theological reflection, Baptists have from our earliest days distilled two fundamental principles that form the twin pillars of the theological foundation for religious freedom: *the Lordship of Jesus Christ* and *the liberty of the conscience*. The affirmation that Jesus is Lord means that the Christian’s first and ultimate loyalty is to him. The principle of liberty of conscience means that no human authority (civil or religious) can force religious opinion, conviction, or faith. Religious *toleration* isn’t enough; only religious *liberty* will do. Toleration implies that only a certain church or churches are legitimate in the eyes of the state; all others are simply tolerated. Toleration is a *concession* by an established church; liberty is a God-given *right*. So as Baptists, we have insisted on liberty, and not just for ourselves, but *for every person*—as John Leland, a Separate Baptist from Massachusetts and one of religious liberty’s strongest advocates put it:

Let every man speak freely without fear, maintain the principles that he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods; and let government protect him in so doing, *i.e.*, see that he meets with no personal abuse, or loss of property, for his religious opinions.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1993), 49.

<sup>10</sup> Similar arguments are presented in: Jim Spivey, “Separation No Myth: Religious Liberty’s Biblical and Theological Bases,” [http://www.bjconline.org/resources/pubs/pub\\_spivey\\_separation.htm](http://www.bjconline.org/resources/pubs/pub_spivey_separation.htm); Walter Shurden, “How We Got That Way: Baptists on Religious Liberty and Separation of Church and State,” <http://www.centerforbaptiststudies.org/shurden/howwegotthatway.htm>; Walker, *Religious Liberty and Church-State Separation*, 7-9; Brooks Hays and John E. Steely, *The Baptist Way of Life*, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1981), 191-192; John Leland, *The Rights of Conscience*, in Robert A. Baker, *A Baptist Source Book with Particular Reference to Southern Baptists* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1966), 40-42; and George W. Truett, “Baptists and Religious Liberty.”

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Hays and Steely, *The Baptist Way of Life*, 195.

That's why Leland and Isaac Backus and a host of other rank and file Baptists worked so hard and partnered with political leaders like Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and others—some of whom were not traditional Christians, if Christians at all—to establish the separation of church and state through the Bill of Rights as a means of *guaranteeing* religious freedom.

***Why it matters***

But why does religious freedom *matter*? It's simple. God has created us in such a way that *faith can never be forced*. A forced faith is no real faith at all. It's not what God wants from us. Dave Ramsey, the Christian financial adviser, likes to quote his grandmother who often said, "He who is persuaded against his will remains unpersuaded still."

You see, God has revealed himself in his Son Jesus Christ, who is Lord. He *demand*s our ultimate loyalty and submission. But he does not *force* it. For those who refuse, there will be eternal consequences, but he forces no one into faith. It must be a *voluntary* personal commitment to Christ.

What about you? You can say no to God. No one has the right to force you into a commitment. But if you want to live truly free, the only way to do it is through bowing to the Lord Jesus Christ, who will set you free indeed!

†MEG