

GALATIANS 5:1, 13
RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

“Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

“You were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”¹

Religious liberty is not simply an ecclesiastical truth debated among churches; religious liberty is headline news. As an example of the veracity of this assertion, note some of the headlines which crossed my desk in a single day.

Indonesian Laws Fuel Violence against Religious Minorities
Religion-related conflicts on the rise in Indonesia
Indonesian Churches Banned from Streets with Islamic Names
Pakistani Christian Attacked for Evangelism
Christian Convert Arrested in Tehran
Somalia Islamists Prevent Starved Christians from Receiving Food Aid
Hindu Radicals Ransack Churches, Beat Up Clergyman in Karnataka
Three years on from pogroms, Christians still living in fear
Catholic church attacked in Pune, India
Christian Worshippers Brutally Beaten by Vietnamese Police²

I maintain files detailing persecution of Christians on my computer. Persecution ranges from oppressive regulatory laws to slavery, forced conversion and execution. Among those files are accounts of Muslims persecuting Christians, accounts of Hindu persecution of Christians, accounts of Jewish persecution of Christians, and perhaps surprisingly, accounts of Christian persecution of Christians. I also have accounts of Communist inspired persecution of Christians and a number of files detailing governmental controlled persecution of Christians—even in North America. It is as though Jesus’ Words were being played out before my eyes. Jesus warned His disciples, “You will be hated by everyone because of My Name” [MATTHEW 10:22 NET BIBLE]. Christians do not seek persecution—we seek peace with all people—but persecution comes because of Him whom we serve.

Of all the foundational truths which have marked Baptists as a distinctive people, the doctrine of religious liberty has had the greatest impact on Christendom as a whole. It seems safe to say that this one issue is most readily threatened in our world by government, most appreciated by Christians, and perhaps least understood by religious leaders. State religions inevitably employ government to coerce compliance with the tenets of that particular religion and to oppress all other forms of worship.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² <http://www.persecution.org/>, accessed 22 August 2011

The concept of the separation of church and state is based more on principle than on proof texts. To be sure, Jesus' words, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" [MATTHEW 22:21], constitute a clear statement of the principle. The record makes clear that the early Christians were good citizens in matters deemed important by the Emperor [ROMANS 13:1-10; 1 PETER 2:12-17]. Even some early Roman writers testify to this fact. Only when Caesar tried to claim for himself the position of God did Christians refuse to obey. The record of Roman persecution of Christians is too well known to require further word here.³

The great ideal for Baptists is a free church in a free state. For Baptists, the verses of our text have become the watchword for our advocacy of religious freedom and liberty of conscience. Listen again to those words of the text. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." "You were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." It is not my intent this day to present an exposition of these verses; but rather I seek to present the argument based upon the Word of God which impels Baptist people to champion the concept of religious liberty.

In the past several weeks, I have presented the case for the form of church which characterises Baptists throughout the world, and especially here in North America. We believe in a regenerate church membership and we believe in congregational church polity. We are convinced that those who unite with a church must be born from above, testifying to this rebirth through baptism. We insist upon believers' baptism. All this is in contradistinction to the model of multitudinist churches as exemplified in the state churches of Europe. This is in contradistinction to the hierarchical models of ecclesiastical polity demonstrated among the mainline denominations of our own nation. This is in contradistinction to the paedobaptists and their rite of infant baptism.

Years ago, at a notable dinner in London, the world-famed statesman, John Bright, asked an American statesman, himself a Baptist, the noble Dr. J. L. M. Curry, "What distinct contribution has your America made to the science of government?" To that question, Dr. Curry replied, "The doctrine of religious liberty." After a moment's reflection, Mr. Bright made the worthy reply, "It was a tremendous contribution."

Indeed, the supreme contribution of the New World to the old is the contribution of religious liberty. Historic justice compels me to say that it was pre-eminently a Baptist contribution. Dr. George Truett, citing the American historian, Mr. Bancroft, says, "Freedom of conscience, unlimited freedom of mind, was from the first the trophy of the Baptists." John Locke stated, "The Baptists were the first propounders of absolute liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty."⁴

Religious liberty is not toleration. Toleration is a concession, while liberty is a right. Toleration is that which man grants; freedom is that which God gives. The sole obligation of human authorities is to protect the individual in the exercise of his God-given right to worship according to the dictates of his own heart.⁵

³ See Herschel H. Hobbs and E. Y. Mullins, **The Axioms of Religion** (Revised Edition), (Nashville, TN, Broadman, 1978) 128

⁴ George W. Truett, "Baptists and Religious Liberty," <http://elbourne.org/baptist/truett/liberty.html>, accessed 30 July 2011

⁵ J. Clyde Turner, **Our Baptist Heritage** (Nashville, The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1945) 49

Some have imagined that the Maryland Toleration Act (1649) was the first great step toward religious liberty among modern states. The parliament of Catholic Maryland merely recognised that the majority of the inhabitants of that colony were non-Catholic and wisely accorded them a measure of toleration to keep them from rebelling. Toleration depends upon the good will of political powers, and that is precisely the reason religious liberty is threatened in this day as our culture increasingly becomes a culture of disbelief.

Likewise, religious liberty is not license. Freedom does not mean that the individual has the right to do as he pleases regardless of the rights and privileges of others. That is not freedom; it is license. Too many confuse the two. Milton said of some of the people of his day:

License they mean when they cry, Liberty!

Religious liberty means the natural and inalienable right of every soul to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience, and to be unmolested in that right, so long, at least, as he does not infringe on the rights of others. Religious freedom does not grant one the right to molest others or to make of himself a public nuisance.

THE IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN SOCIETY — Canada and the United States have enjoyed greatness in no small measure because of religious foundations, including the emphasis upon freedom of religion. Of course, the First Amendment of the United States Constitution establishes religious freedom in American society. That amendment reads:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...

For centuries, most people believed that a government-enforced religion was essential for social order. If individuals were free to choose their religion, it was feared, there would be chaos.⁶ As evidenced from the news articles cited earlier, efforts to enforce religion provoke conflict and hatred and death. Moslems and Hindus, when in the majority of a given culture, kill people who disagree with them. In Europe, we need but remember the Inquisition which ordered the torture and execution of those accused of disagreeing with Catholic doctrines. Remember that the papacy has never relinquished its claim to authority over both church and state.

When Geneva was ruled by theologian John Calvin (1509-1564), people were burned at the stake for missing church services. Michael Servetus was burned alive for disagreeing with the Reformer. In 1567, the Spanish Duke of Alva sentenced thousands of Dutch Protestants to death, and Protestants retaliated by destroying 400 Catholic churches. England's Queen Elizabeth I executed some 800 rebellious Catholics. In 1572, French Catholics seized and slaughtered thousands of French Huguenots, triggering a quarter-century of religious conflicts. In Germany, bloodshed over religion climaxed during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) which wiped out about a third of the population. Most European countries still have state churches and only *tolerate* dissent.

⁶ "Does toleration bring conflict or peace?" <http://www.libertystory.net/LSDEBATETOLER.htm> , accessed 30 July 2011

The first great sanctuary of religious freedom was Rhode Island, established by the Baptist, Roger Williams. Williams explained that in his colony of Rhode Island, “magistrates, as magistrates, have no power of setting up the form of church government, electing church officers, punishing with church censures... And on the other side, the churches, as churches, have no power (though as members of the commonweal they may have power) of erecting or altering forms of civil government, electing of civil officers, inflicting civil punishments...” Such a position was revolutionary!

Later, William Penn, a Quaker, adopted a similar position for Pennsylvania colony. Rhode Island welcomed Catholics, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Mennonites, Quakers, Jews and atheists. Consequently, these societies prospered, even finding peace with the Indians. It became clear that society does quite fine if government leaves people alone to pursue their religious affairs as they see fit.

There are, and will ever be, questions raised concerning the Christian’s place in society. Unfortunately, we live in a day in which society is increasingly hostile to faith, especially if that faith is founded upon the Christian Faith. We have arrived at a time when we are taught—almost compelled—to agree that religion is a private affair. In such a secular environment, it is inevitable that conflicts should arise. I cannot address all the issues which touch on religious freedom in our day, but I must point to several which should give us concern as Christians, and especially as Baptists.

Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States early in the nineteenth century. As result of his visit, he wrote, **Democracy in America**. In that treatise, he wrote that the young nation’s “religious atmosphere was the first thing that struck me on arrival in the United States.” In his view, liberty was tempered by a common morality. “Thus, while the law allows the American people to do everything, there are things which religion prevents them from imagining and forbids them to dare.” Tocqueville “believed that the support given by religious to virtuous standards of behaviour was indispensable for the preserving of liberty.”

“Religions provided Americans with the strong moral character without which democracy cannot function; but, perhaps equally important, they helped to fill the vast space between the people and the government created in their name—a space, Tocqueville recognised, that the government might otherwise fill by itself...”⁷

Translating Tocqueville’s observations to the present day, one sees two chief functions that religions can serve in a democracy. They can serve as “the sources of moral understanding without which any majoritarian system can deteriorate into simple tyranny, and second, they can mediate between the citizen and the apparatus of government, providing an independent moral voice.”⁸

Unfortunately, governments—and even our western democracies—increasingly violate the concept of religious liberty, with the concurrence of far too many churches. Churches have adopted political power as the primary means to influence change of legislated positions they abhor, and the state increasingly seeks to coerce the churches into adopting their moral view. The result is a continual violation of the integrity of religious freedom. Multiple issues such as the death penalty, abortion on demand, prayer in public schools and same sex marriage all serve to destroy the moral authority of the churches through creation of a new moral authority defined by the state.

⁷ Stephen L. Carter, **The Culture of Disbelief** (New York, HarperCollins, 1993) 35-6

⁸ *ibid.*, 36

The concept of a wall of separation between church and state is not found in the American Constitution. Rather, this interpretation was first advanced by Thomas Jefferson in 1802 in a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association. Jefferson wrote:

“Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should ‘make no law respecting an establishment or religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ thus building a wall of separation between church and State.”⁹

Even if we accept as true the concept of a wall of separation between church and state, we must never forget that the principle purpose of the metaphorical wall of separation between church and state was always to prevent governmental interference with a religion’s decisions about what its own theology requires. I insist that the most significant aspect of the separation of church and state is not, as some seem to think, the shielding of the secular world from too strong a religious influence; the principle task of the separation of church and state is to secure religious liberty.¹⁰

Briefly, I must address two particular issues to aid in application of the message. First, the issue of Prayer in school has created great anxiety among many Christians. May I say that the most deadening incentive to worship of God is an unbelieving teacher compelled to recite the Model Prayer. The tone, the reluctance of the individual, the attitude all serve to destroy respect for God in the eyes of the children compelled to witness that act. I question any prayer addressed to a deity which is composed by a committee. I would not consent to read a prayer which was written by officers of this church from this pulpit. How much less can I condone compelling school children to recite a prayer written so as not to offend every imaginable group?

With respect to the concern of churches over moral issues within our nation (same sex marriage, abortion, liquor distribution and availability), the churches have moral authority. Let them use their voice through teaching the Word of God instead of seeking to compel compliance with the dictates of the Faith through political power. It is the responsibility of the churches to use moral suasion to change hearts and minds. Just as worship cannot be compelled, neither can moral issues be resolved through coercion.

Likewise, let the government know that as a minister of Christ I am compelled to stand against every effort to intrude upon my God-appointed responsibility to speak the truth in love. It is not the role of government to compel the churches to adopt the popular positions espoused by contemporary culture, thus superposing culture over Christ.

As I oppose homosexual behaviour because it is immoral, so must I resist all governmental efforts to promote women into ministerial positions and into ecclesiastical oversight. Neither must I temper my condemnation of sin, defining sinful behaviour even while calling all people to repentance and faith. Though I shall not promote a political solution to the evil of abortion upon demand, neither shall I be silent that the holocaust of the unborn is a dreadful evil blighting our land.

⁹ Thomas Jefferson, January 1, 1802, “Letter to the Danbury Baptist Association” (http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/danbury_1802.html), accessed 30 July 2011

¹⁰ See Carter, op. cit. 107

THE IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN THE POLITICAL REALM — Religion must be forever voluntary and uncoerced. It is not the prerogative of any power, whether civil or ecclesiastical, to compel men to conform to any religious creed or form of worship, or to pay taxes for the support of a religious organisation to which they do not believe. God wants free worshippers and no other kind.

Every state religion on earth is a spiritual tyranny. Just as long as there is left upon this earth any state religion, in any land, the task of Baptists will that long remain unfinished. Their cry has been and is and must ever be:

Let Caesar's dues be paid
To Caesar and his throne;
But consciences and souls were made
To be the Lord's alone.

The framers of the American Constitution considered establishment of religion. The colonies had witnessed a number of "state churches" during their histories including, the Congregational Church in Massachusetts, the Dutch Reformed Church in New York, the Catholic Church in Maryland, and the Anglican Church in Virginia. The proposal was made to the Continental Congress that there should be three churches established and taxes directed to those churches in support of their religious aims. The Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church and Baptist were proposed to be state churches.

Though the Presbyterians and Methodists were content to accept the appointment, Baptists were united in rejecting the proposal as a violation of their united position concerning religious liberty. It was primarily the threat of Baptists to battle by every conceivable means if religious freedom was not included in the nascent Constitution that ensured religious liberty was enshrined in the Constitution. The civil liberties guaranteed in the new constitution meant nothing to Baptists, if religious liberty were not guaranteed.

Permit me once again to read that first clause of the first amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...

Take note that there is an Establishment clause, which is frequently emphasised by the American judiciary in this day; that Establishment clause is used as an excuse to exclude religion from the public square. Carefully, note, however, that there is also a Free Exercise clause which is too often ignored by the same judiciary.

Nothing in this amendment demands a secular state. Nothing in this amendment demands the promotion of secularism as a religious philosophy, as is the case in this day. Nothing stated in this amendment prohibits the Christian Faith from influencing government, nor is there anything present in this statement prohibiting government from heeding the Christian Faith. All that is stated is the principle, championed by Baptists throughout the long years of their existence, that the ideal situation is a free church in a free state. In passing, compelled by the brevity of time, I must state that *the power to tax is the power to control*, and the Free Exercise clause excludes taxation of the churches.

THE IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN CHRISTIANITY — Man was created in the image of God. To be in the image of God is to be free. God made man with the right of choice. Man is, therefore, free to choose, but he is always responsible for his choices. As a finite being, man can say “yes” or “no” even to his Creator, the infinite God. Thus, religious liberty leads us to acknowledging man’s free will in matters of faith and practise.

Throughout the years of my service to the churches of our Master, I have emphasised that a Baptist church must be a Free Church. Every paedobaptist church violates the freedom of the individual each time they baptise a baby. The Roman Catholic system, and those systems which derive their practise from that communion—whether Lutheran, Anglican, United Church, Presbyterian or other paedobaptist communion, unite to violate human freedom each time they christen an infant. In those systems, the church and the hierarchy stand between the individual and his direct responsibility to God. In the final analysis this is to treat the individual as a *thing* rather than as a *person* made in the image of God.

Herschel Hobbs relates an incident illustrating this truth. He writes, “One Monday following Easter I heard a mother, a Roman Catholic, describe to another the baptism of her infant the previous day. ‘Oh,’ she said, ‘how he kicked and cried! But the poor little thing did not understand what was happening to him.’”

Hobbs continued, “Had he really known, he would have kicked and cried all the more. This was the first step in depriving him of his greatest dignity—the right of free choice in his relation to God. Through its authoritative priesthood, rites and rituals, and sacraments, including extreme unction, the Church had fastened its iron grip upon that soul, a grip that began with birth and does not end even in death. For through its unscriptural purgatory the soul is dependent upon priestly prayers to pass from there into heaven.

“This is the worst of all tyrannies. And it is made worse by its claim to be in the name of God who made man free!”¹¹

Nowhere does the issue of liberty come to the fore more than in the issue of confessional statements. Baptists have, from earliest days, held that all declarations of faith are imperfect representations of the truths taught in the Bible. Generally, our confessional statements are drafted in reaction to charges made against us as a people. Therefore, we either attempt to demonstrate the reasonableness of our faith or we seek to prove the biblical nature of what we confess.

Coupled with this understanding of the fallible nature of our confessions, we Baptists have enjoyed a lack of ecclesiastical structure capable of enforcing elevation of a confession into a creed. Baptists, as ardent foes of government interference in religion and as fervent advocates of the autonomy of the local “gathered” congregation have precluded by their ecclesiology the erection of any authority which could act as the creed’s coercive agent. Further, the Baptist adherence to the priesthood of the believer and of the individual’s right to worship or not worship, as he pleases, militates strongly against growth of credalism.¹² This concept of liberty lends itself to abuse, as some have discovered in recent years. Our liberty lends itself to doctrinal anarchy and a screen for attack against doctrinal integrity of Baptist churches.

¹¹ Hobbs and Mullins, op. cit., 114-5

¹² Richard D. Land, in Paige Patterson and Luis Pantoja, Jr. (eds.), **We Believe** (Criswell Publications, Dallas, TX 1977) 7, 8

Two respected Baptist scholars have pointed out that the modern definition of liberty has been radically altered from its historic meaning among Baptists.

“Although in our tradition there has been a cherished emphasis upon liberty of conscience, this has not always borne the same meaning which some modern interpreters give to it. Initially resting upon their belief in the sovereignty of God over the conscience, rather than upon human dignity and individual rights, early Baptists advocated a responsible freedom which had certain recognised limits. Today this doctrine of liberty is often taken to mean that each individual is free to adopt whatever views he will, without any restraints at all. Many Baptists thus take pride in their lack of agreement, boastfully asserting that where there are two Baptists there are at least three opinions. Early Baptists, however, would have regarded such a conception of freedom as unwarranted license, a view which can lead only to chaos. Thus, though liberty of conscience has been an important strand of Baptist tradition, the meaning of that concept today has been twisted beyond recognition.”¹³

Soul freedom means that each individual is free to read God’s Word and to interpret the meaning for himself or herself, though it does not imply that every interpretation is correct. Neither church, nor priest, nor parent has a right to tell the individual what he must believe or must not believe. We may teach the individual and attempt to persuade him through appeal to conscience, but no one may invade the sacred realm of a man’s conscience and coerce belief or compel faith. Not even God does that.

Religious liberty preserves the right of every person to worship God as he pleases—or not to worship at all if he so chooses. No person, no institution, has the right to intervene between a soul and God, telling the individual how he must worship. If an individual chooses not to worship, no one has a right to force worship. There must be no coercion in worship. God alone has the right to receive worship.

You will instantly realise the grave danger of attempting to regulate morals by law. Certainly, civil authorities have a duty to protect the welfare of the community from those who would molest it. Beyond that limit, civil authorities have no right to venture. One’s private moral and religious life cannot be regulated by law unless the rights and privileges of others are involved.

Religious freedom is a biblical doctrine. God respects the individual’s right of choice. Without question, God calls each individual to repentance and faith in the Risen Son of God. God calls all who believe on Jesus to obedience to His commands. Nevertheless, it is always left with the individual whether to obey or disobey the call of God. God does not force the individual, and man must not compel him. Jesus says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” [REVELATION 3:20]. The Lord will not force the door open. The individual must open the door and admit the Saviour.

¹³ Norman H. Maring and Winthrop S. Hudson, **A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice** (Judson Press, Valley Forge, PA 1963) 5

Religious liberty means that the individual must give an account of himself to God. No institution, no priest, no parent can give account for the individual. No doubt, we must answer for our attitude toward our spouse, toward our friends, toward our children, but none of us can give account for them. If an individual is to be held personally accountable to God, then it logically follows that the individual must have the right to deal with God for himself.

A church violates this principle when it demands that the individual submit to its decrees. A priest violates this principle when he steps in between a soul and God, insisting that approach to God must be through him. A parent violates this principle when he performs religious rights and duties for a child. A state violates this principle when it exercises control over the religious life of its people.

As a congregation of free men and women we appeal to your conscience. We invite you to believe the Good News of His salvation. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” **[ROMANS 10:9-13]**.

As the Word of God concludes, it does so with a tacit acknowledgement of man’s right of religious liberty. The invitation is extended to all who will receive it freely. “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price” **[REVELATION 22:17]**.

To confess Christ as Lord, to identify openly with Him in baptism as He commands, to place your life in the membership of the Body as He has taught, we invite you to exercise your freedom to honour Him. This freedom is yours to use to do what you ought, and not to do what you will. May God grant you wisdom and grace as you now obey His call. Amen.