

Sermon Notes
“Religious Liberty”

Material for this message was drawn from a series of sermons by Dr. Calvin Wittman (2009)

Focal Scripture Reference: 1 Peter 2:13-17

Southern Baptists have long been champions of Religious Liberty. So much so that **article 17**, of the **Baptist Faith and Message** is devoted to this specific issue. Article 17 says:

"God alone is the Lord of the conscience and He has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are contrary to His word or not contained in it. Church and state should be separate. The state owes to every church protection and full freedom in the pursuit of its spiritual ends. In providing for such freedom no ecclesiastical group or denomination should be favored by the state more than others.

Civil government being ordained of god, it is the duty of Christians to render loyal obedience thereto in all things not contrary to the revealed will of God. The church should not resort to the civil power to carry on its work. The gospel of Christ contemplates spiritual means alone for the pursuit of its ends.

The state has no right to impose penalties for religious opinions of any kind. The state has no right to impose taxes for the support of any form of religion. A free church in a free state is the Christian ideal, and this implies the right of free and unhindered access to God on the part of all men, and the right to form and propagate opinions in the sphere of religion without interference by the civil power."

As we consider this topic, let us examine the biblical foundation we have for supporting the position of Religious Liberty set forth in the article we just read.

First, Jesus tells us that He is the author of freedom when in **John 8:32** He says, "**You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free,**" and in **John 8:36** where He says, "**If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.**"

Jesus clearly separates the Church and the State in **Matthew 22:21**, where He says, "**Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.**"

Paul instructs the Christians at Ephesus in **1 Timothy 2:1-2** to live in harmony with the government, even to pray for their leaders.

He says, "**I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.**"

And the Apostle Peter spells it out even more clearly in **1 Peter 2:13-17** when he says, "¹³**Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, ¹⁴or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.**

¹⁵**For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. ¹⁶Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. ¹⁷Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king."**

These are just some of the passages upon which our statement of Religious Liberty is founded. Next, let's look at several of the statements made in article 17 and expound upon them briefly.

1. We Believe in Religious Liberty

Article 17 begins with the affirmation that "God alone is the Lord of conscience." This conviction is at the very heart of all religious liberty, the idea that God alone is the one Who, through His word, tells us what to believe and practice. Simply stated, Religious Liberty is the right of every person to worship God, or not, as they see fit, without any interference from the government.

In other words, we do not believe people should be forced to worship God nor do we believe they should be, in any way, kept from worshiping God. This conviction that God alone is the Lord of conscience not only applies to religious liberty where our government is concerned.

As Baptists, we have always resisted any kind of hierarchical oversight from a denomination. The depth of our conviction runs so deep here that we strongly believe each local church is autonomous, retaining the right to affirm their own beliefs, doctrinally examine their own pastors and own their own property.

The Baptist Faith and Message is a common confessional statement that each individual church can choose to adopt for itself. As Baptists, we believe strongly in religious liberty.

2. We Believe in the Separation of Church and State

The separation of church and state is cited frequently in this country as justification for the exclusion of any mention of Christianity from the public square. This is not what we mean by the separation of church and state. As we seek an accurate definition of the separation of church and state, we must consider several things. First:

A. The State Should Protect the Church's Freedom to Pursue its Spiritual Ends

We believe that it is our God given right to express our religious and moral views, and to worship free from any government interference. Religious liberty means the state has an obligation to protect our right to believe, preach and teach whatever we like. This includes exerting any political influence we may have as Christians to see candidates elected who hold our beliefs and who best represent our views. Citizens who happen to be Christians should not be silenced as they seek to exercise their freedom of speech simply because they choose to espouse a Christian worldview.

Increasingly, we are seeing the idea that all views are valid, unless of course it is a Christian point of view, accepted as fact. This is contrary to what we believe. And for the record, it is contrary to what the founders of our country envisioned. The government also has no business dictating to pastors what they can and cannot preach from their pulpits. We believe the state has a responsibility, a God given responsibility, to protect us as we seek to live out our faith in public. Our religious freedom is not based on the laws of men, in truth it is an unalienable right granted to all people by God. Good government has the responsibility of protecting that God given right.

B. The State Should not Favor One Religious Group over Another

Many people in our country believe that separation of church and state means that the state must be godless. This was never the intention of the framers of our Constitution. Whether or not its adherents like to admit it, the fact remains that Atheism is a religion unto itself. Since the separation of church from state means that the state will not favor one religious group over another, it makes sense that Atheism, being a religious belief system should not be favored over Christianity.

Thus, we should argue that if the state acts as if there is no God, it is in fact establishing Atheism as the state religion. The true intention of “the separation of Church and state” was to protect the church from the state. It was never intended to establish a godless state.

C. Christians Should Not Look to Government to Carry on the Church's Work

As Baptists, not only do we object to a church that is governed by the state, we also reject the idea of a state that is governed by the church. As Christians, we do not believe in a theocratic government, that is, a government which is ruled by religion. We have but to look to most Islamic countries today to see what happens when people try and use government to carry out the work of the church, or try to enforce the laws of their religion on those who do not believe.

We do not believe in making converts at the edge of the sword or at the end of a gun barrel. We believe that God's work is accomplished by God's people through the power of the Holy Spirit, not by the enforcement of civil authorities.

Jesus did not look to the Roman authorities to further His kingdom, neither did the disciples, nor did the Apostle Paul. In fact, Jesus said that His kingdom was not of this world. One of the dangers inherent in allowing the government to get involved in any way with the work of the church is that they will control the church. As one writer notes, government shekels often lead to government shackles.

D. Christians Do Have a Responsibility to the State

As Christians, scripture clearly tells us that we have a responsibility to submit to the state, to pay our taxes, and to serve when asked to serve. But because we are also salt and light, we have a responsibility to speak the truth in love when our government is wrong on moral issues. While we are to submit to the government's authority, our ultimate allegiance is to Christ and to the truth of His word.

In **Acts chapter 4**, when Peter and John were ordered by the Sanhedrin to stop preaching in the name of Jesus, Peter and John answered them in verses **19-20** by saying,

"Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

And in **Chapter 5**, after having been arrested for continuing to preach Jesus, Peter said, **"We must obey God rather than men!"** When the laws of man violate the laws of God, as citizens of heaven we must obey the laws of God. As Christians we should be model citizens, but we also have a responsibility to be the conscience of our nation as well.

3. A Free Church in a Free State is the Christian Ideal

Dr. Richard Land says that government can take one of three distinct approaches to church-state relations. The first is avoidance - completely removing any recognition of the church and creating a secular society. France falls in this category. The second is acknowledgment - a government affirmation of the majority religion. Iran would be an example of this approach. What we need, Dr. Land suggests, is accommodation, a middle way between the other two.

This approach provides healthy pluralism, in which all views are allowed and respected, and recognition of the value of religion in America's past, present, and future permeates society.

Conclusion

Looking back over the course of history, few people have ever had as much religious freedom as we have as Americans. The religious freedom we currently enjoy affords us the opportunity to worship God as we wish, where we wish and with whom we wish, without fear of punishment or reprisal. But there is a serious problem with this as well. Many Americans have no concept of how truly precious and unique our religious liberty is. And, if we fail to protect it against the encroaching tide of secularism that is swiftly rising in our land, future generations of Christians may know nothing of the religious freedoms we take for granted.

As Christians we must let our voice be heard. As salt and light in our culture, we must be faithful to the responsibility God has given us. One way to do this is to support vote for those who will uphold our freedoms and who best represent our values. However, we should also exercise our religious liberty and seek to win our fellow citizens to Christ, one soul at a time. Nothing we can do or say will have a greater impact on our nation than sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with everyone who will listen.