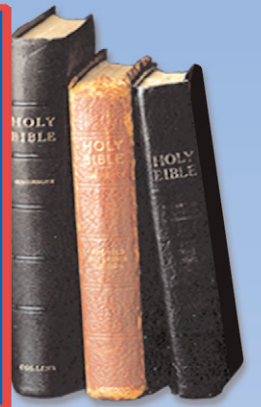




# Baptists Champions of Religious Freedom



The renowned Baptist pastor George W. Truett (1867-1944) in a sermon on Baptists and religious liberty cited the American historian George Bancroft as having said, **“Freedom of conscience, unlimited freedom of mind, was from the first the trophy of the Baptists.”**

Truett also quoted the English philosopher John Locke’s statement, **“The Baptists were the first propounders of absolute liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty.”**

## The Struggle for Religious Freedom

Indeed, Baptists were among the leaders in the struggle for religious freedom, but at great cost over a long period of time. In fact, religious freedom has been, and still is, very rare. In the earliest days of the Christian movement, government officials severely persecuted Christians. Throughout the Middle Ages and the era of the Protestant Reformation, religious freedom was practically non-existent, as both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches enlisted the aid of governments to persecute those who disagreed with their doctrines.

In England, Thomas Helwys (c.1556-1616), credited with being the first Baptist pastor on English soil, dared to challenge the king’s claim to be authoritative in religious matters. Helwys wrote a booklet in 1612 titled *The Mystery of Iniquity* and sent an autographed copy to King James I with a personal inscription in which he declared, “The King is a mortal man and not God, therefore hath no power over immortal souls of his subjects to make laws and ordinances for them and to set spiritual Lords over them.”

For Helwys’ brave declaration of Baptist convictions about religious freedom, King James had him thrown in prison where he died ... for the cause of religious freedom, not just for Baptists but for all people. Many others suffered for the cause. For example, John Bunyan (1628-1688), author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, suffered in an English jail for many years because as a Baptist pastor he would not accept limits on religious freedom.



In America, Roger Williams (1603-1683) was persecuted for his views on religious freedom. In January of 1636, he fled Massachusetts and took refuge with Indian friends. In the spring, he founded the colony of Rhode Island with a guarantee of liberty of conscience for all citizens. He also helped establish

the first Baptist church in the western hemisphere.

However, religious freedom was a scarce commodity throughout the New World. Baptists launched efforts up and down the eastern seaboard to bring about religious liberty. **Baptists were publicly flogged, imprisoned and fined by government officials and beaten and ridiculed by people unsympathetic to their cause.**

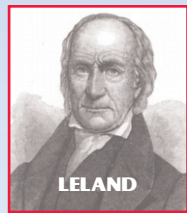
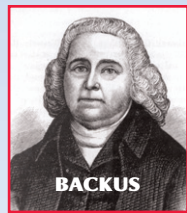
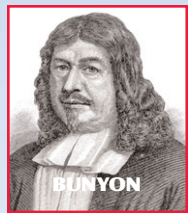
Finally, through efforts by leaders such as Isaac Backus (1724-1806) in New England and John Leland (1754-1841) in Virginia, the Baptist voice, joined by others, was heeded. For example, Leland reportedly met with James Madison under an oak tree in Orange County, VA, and secured Madison’s pledge to work for an amendment to the new Constitution to provide for religious freedom. The Constitution of the United States, at first flawed by its lack of guarantee of religious freedom, was amended

**“... ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.”  
Galatians 5:13**

under Madison’s leadership to provide such a guarantee. **For the first time in history, a nation provided full religious freedom for its citizens.**

## The Bases for Religious Freedom

Why were Baptists willing to pay such a high price for religious freedom? Why did they not settle for mere tolerance but instead campaigned for religious freedom, not just for themselves but for all? The answer is found in basic Baptist convictions about the nature of the Christian faith.



**The Baptist devotion to religious freedom is closely related to other biblical truths that comprise the Baptist mosaic of beliefs and practices. Freedom is an integral part of these.**

★ **Freedom to follow Christ.** The Bible reveals that Jesus as Lord calls for people to follow him (Matthew 7:21-27; 16:24-25). This fellowship, however, is to be voluntary, never coerced. Furthermore, people should be free to follow Christ, not prevented by any church or government. Salvation in Christ is by a faith response to God’s grace gift of his Son (Ephesians 2:8-10). The freedom to proclaim, hear and respond to this good news ought never to be curtailed.

★ **Freedom to read and interpret the Bible.** The Bible is authoritative for faith and practice. Baptists insist that each person who responds by faith in Christ becomes a believer priest with a God-given competency to understand and apply the Bible with guidance from the Holy Spirit. Neither church nor government officials ought to obstruct Bible study nor dictate what the Bible teaches. Each person should be free to do that for herself or himself.

★ **Freedom to be baptized.** Baptists insist that baptism ought to be administered only to someone who voluntarily commits to faith in Christ (Romans 6:3-5; Colossians 2:12). Never should baptism be forced on anyone. Neither should anyone prevent a person from choosing to be baptized.

★ **Freedom to choose and support a church.** The Bible teaches that a church is a voluntary fellowship of baptized believers in Christ who voluntarily support its ministry (Acts 2:47; 2 Corinthians 9:7). Baptists, therefore, strongly oppose the concept of a state-supported church or of the use of tax funds to finance the ministry of a church.

★ **Freedom to govern a church.** In Christ and through the Holy Spirit, believer priests are competent to govern themselves in an autonomous church (Acts 6:1-6; 13:1-3; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13). Therefore, they should be free to do so apart from efforts of control by either church or government authorities as long as public health and safety are not endangered.

★ **Freedom to witness and minister.** Baptists believe that believer priests have responsibility to share the gospel with others and to minister to others in Christ’s name. Thus Baptists insist that people ought to be free to evangelize and minister without interference from any human authorities (Acts 5:29-42).

## The Application of Religious Freedom

Baptists in the past paid a great price to help provide religious freedom for all. What should the Baptists of today do with this precious heritage?

- **Guard religious freedom.** Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom, including religious freedom. It takes only a generation or two to lose by neglect what many generations gained through sacrifice.
- **Continue the efforts for religious freedom.** Many people in the world still do not live where there is religious liberty. Persecution by religious and governmental authorities continues to exist.
- **Act responsibly with religious freedom.** Exercise freedom by careful study of the Bible, by being a supportive member of a church, by sharing the gospel with others, and by living in accord with the teachings of Jesus.
- **Uphold the separation of church and state.** A corollary of religious freedom is the friendly separation of religious organizations and government authority. Baptists have championed this concept and need to continue to do so.
- **Use freedom for the benefit of others.** Paul wrote, “Ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13). Thus we are to use our freedom, not selfishly, but to minister to the needs of people throughout the world.



## Conclusion

**At great peril and huge sacrifice Baptists helped to provide religious freedom for multitudes in this generation. Now it is up to the Baptists of today to help preserve this precious heritage for the generations to follow.**

For further information on Baptists and religious freedom, see [www.baptistdistinctives.org](http://www.baptistdistinctives.org).

**“It is impossible to define Baptists apart from their devotion to the principle of complete religious freedom.”**

William R. Estep  
Why Baptists?



Wanting to share information about Baptist distinctives, Noble Hurley, shortly before his death in 2004, established the Jane and Noble Hurley Baptist Identity Fund for the purpose of publishing this series and asked William M. Pinson Jr. and Doris A. Tinker to prepare the articles, who enlisted H. Leon McBeth, William L. Pitts Jr. and James H. Semple to serve as resource people. ©