

BAPTISTS: Separation of Church and State



“Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.”

Matthew 22:21

Speaking from the steps of the United States Capitol in 1920 to 15,000 people in the open air, Texas Baptist pastor George W. Truett declared: **“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s,”** is one of the most revolutionary and history-making utterances that ever fell from those lips divine. That utterance, once and for all, marked the divorcement of church and state.... It was the sunrise gun of a new day, the echoes of which are to go on and on until in every land, whether great or small, the doctrine shall have absolute supremacy everywhere of a free church in a free state.”

The Bases for a Free Church in a Free State

For Baptists, the concept of a free church in a free state rests not on political theory nor on human documents but on the word of God. **The Baptist belief in religious freedom and its corollary, the separation of the institutions of church and state, come from the Baptist commitment to the authority of the Bible.**

“Church and state should be separate.... A free church in a free state is the Christian ideal....”

Baptist Faith and Message

What is meant by the terms “church” and “state”? **The term “state” refers to governments.** The Bible indicates that governments are ordained by God to provide law and order (Romans 13:1-5). Government leaders are to act for the benefit of the citizens (1 Peter 2:13-14). Baptists and other Christians are to honor and pray for government officials (1 Timothy 2:1-3; 1 Peter 2:17), pay taxes (Matthew 22:17-22; Romans 13:6-7) and obey the government except when obedience would be clearly contrary to God’s will (Acts 4:19-20; 5:29). Historically, Baptists have affirmed their loyalty to the state.

The term “church” refers to religious organizations. For Baptists, this includes both local congregations and various entities established for religious purposes, such as associations, conventions, schools and institutions for ministry. Baptists teach that the nature of “church” is to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:8), to teach doctrine and develop believers (Matthew 28:19-20; Ephesians 4:11-13) and to minister in Christ’s name (Matthew 25:31-46). The church is to rely on the sword of the Spirit and not the sword of the government in carrying out its mission.

Ideally, the relation of church and state is mutually beneficial. For example, the state is to provide order and safety; these are useful to the church in carrying out its mission (Acts 13-16). And the church contributes to a positive social order by helping to develop law-abiding, hard-working, honest citizens (Ephesians 4:24-32; 1 Peter 2:11-17).

Baptists contend that this mutual benefit works best when the institutions of church and state are separate and when neither seeks to control the other. The state is not to dictate doctrine, worship style, organization, membership or personnel for leadership to the church. The church is not to seek the power or the financial support of the state for spiritual ends. Such is the model set forth in the New Testament.

The very nature of the gospel and of church calls for such a relationship. The Bible reveals that humans are created by God with a competency to know and follow his will (Genesis 1:27). Following God’s will should be a free choice, not coerced by either church or state. Salvation in Christ is the result of free choice to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:8-10). Thus, neither church nor state should ever interfere with the free proclamation of the gospel or with the freedom of people to accept or reject it.

Likewise, churches ought to be composed of people who have freely chosen to be baptized and to congregate (Acts 2:41-42). People should support the churches by voluntary contributions of tithes and offerings (2 Corinthians 8:1-15). Only Jesus is to be Lord, never any government or ecclesiastical organization (Ephesians 4:11-16; Philippians 2:8-11).

The History of Church-State Relations

The biblical ideal of church-state relations has seldom been realized. In the earliest years of the Christian movement, the church suffered persecution from the Roman government. In the fourth century, the Roman government decreed not only toleration but also a privileged position for the Christian movement.

This led to a union of church and state, that is to a union of the prevailing government with the dominant form of Christianity. The arrangements varied through the centuries but one thing remained constant—all forms of religious expression except the “official” one were persecuted. People who believed in freedom of religion, such as Baptists, were regarded as traitors by governments and as heretics by the government-supported churches.

The use of the power of the state to enforce religion sapped the spiritual vitality of the established state churches and added a host of unsaved people to the churches. Furthermore, efforts by governments to protect the established religion of a country resulted in wars and civil strife that undermined the governments. **Thus, the union of church and state was and is harmful to both.**

Baptists and Church-State Relations

Baptists suffered severely under the union of church and state. They campaigned vigorously for religious freedom, not just for themselves but for all people. Their goal was freedom, not mere toleration.

The record of the Baptist struggle for religious freedom and the separation of church and state is a story of courage and persistence. A host of people with courage stayed with their convictions in the face of stiff resistance from both religious and government authorities. They did so because they believed that they were being true to the teachings of the Bible.

For example, **Thomas Helwys (c. 1556-1616)**, a Baptist pastor in London in the early 1600s, publicly advocated religious freedom. In England, the king was not only head of the government but also of the Church of England. Helwys insisted that the king had no authority over the spiritual dimensions of life. He sent to the king a copy of a book he had written, adding a handwritten statement,

The king is a mortal man, not God

King James placed Helwys in prison, where he died because he would not abandon his convictions.

A few years later in America, **Roger Williams (1603-1683)** was forced to leave Massachusetts Bay Colony because of his views favoring church-state separation. Williams established both the first Baptist church in America and the colony of Rhode Island. The colony afforded religious freedom to all. **He wrote advocating a “hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world.”**

Years elapsed, however, before the “wall of separation” became a national reality. When the Constitution of the United States was placed before the people for ratification, it contained no provision for religious freedom. Baptists joined others in an effort to defeat ratification unless there was a guarantee of religious freedom. Thus, the First Amendment was made to the Constitution, stating,

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

Challenges to a Free Church in a Free State

The struggle for the separation of church and state is far from over. The ideal that Truett expressed on the Capitol steps of “absolute supremacy everywhere of a free church in a free state” has yet to be realized. In some countries, union of religion and government prevails, and there is little or no religious freedom. In others, mere tolerance, not full religious freedom, is the law of the land. A continuing temptation exists to use the tax money and power of the state to carry out the ministries of churches.

To work out what the concept of separation means in an ever-changing world is an abiding challenge. By separation of church and state, Baptists do not mean the separation of God and government. Baptists are not oblivious to the gray areas in the relationship and the various interpretations of what separation means.

However, **Baptists continue to emphasize that neither church nor state should exercise authority over the other, to stress that the church should not depend on the finances or power of the state to carry out its mission, and to point to history’s record that a free church in a free state proves a blessing to both.**

Conclusion

Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom, especially of religious freedom. **Baptists, therefore, ought to resist efforts to commingle church and state and to strive for a friendly separation of the two that results in religious freedom.**

For more information on Baptists and separation of church and state see, www.baptistdistinctives.org.