



Citizenship & Religious Liberty

SUNDAY

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MARK 12:17, CSB



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Why is Religious Liberty So Important to Baptists?

BY JOSH WESTER

Religious liberty lies at the heart of the Baptist tradition. Beginning in England in the early 17th century, our forebears dissented to the idea of a state church and rejected the legitimacy of any formal ties between matters civil and ecclesial.

Citizens living in the United States today enjoy broad protections when it comes to religion. The First Amendment guarantees that we are able to freely exercise our religious beliefs without fear of punishment or interference at the hands of government. But it has not always been this way. And Baptists, who once were fined, jailed, and beaten here on American soil simply for practicing religion in ways the state deemed unacceptable, played a critical role in establishing that freedom.

Baptists have always recognized that a person's spiritual beliefs and ultimate commitments are sacred, and they've refused to conform to the standards of state-sanctioned religion. The state has no authority to use religion in order to amass power or enforce its will.

Defending religious freedom is not ultimately some mechanism for self-protection or self-preservation; religious liberty is about protecting the rights of others, particularly the weak, vulnerable, and marginalized.

And this conviction stands at the center of the Baptist commitment to religious freedom. The Scriptures declare that each person will one day stand before God to give an account of his or her life (Rom. 14:10-12). No one will answer on behalf of another. And for this reason it is critical for the state, which wields the power of the sword, to preserve the rights of every person to live and worship God according to conscience (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-14). No obedience, whether rendered to the state or any other authority, will excuse us on the day of judgment. Each of us will answer only to God. Convinced of this, Baptists have, for centuries, defended the right of every person to freely live and worship.

Christians living in a hostile culture recognize the necessity of these protections not only for ourselves but for others like us who are unable to countenance the quickly changing moral and sexual mores of our day. So, for the sake of all, we maintain our support of this fundamental doctrine.

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