

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY FOR ALL



R U S S E L L M O O R E
& J O S H W E S T E R

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FOR ALL**

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RELIGIOUS LIBERTY FOR ALL

by Russell Moore

Hanging on the wall in my office is a framed set of letters written by a man named Jeremiah Moore. A relative told me that we are related, but whether we are or not by blood, I certainly think of him as a spiritual forebearer. This man was a pastor and church planter in colonial Virginia, and a tireless advocate for religious freedom. In these letters, he's engaging a public official, pressing him on his commitment to religious freedom, making sure this candidate understands the importance of it to Moore's fellow Baptists. He made it clear that he believed that this candidate for office deserved a vote only if he pledged to articulate a strong defense of religious freedom, and pledged to use the power of his office to promote and strengthen religious freedom.

The candidate answered back, strongly affirming his commitment to religious freedom. This man would go on to be elected to the office he was seeking, the presidency of the United States. This candidate, Thomas Jefferson, would go on to become one of our nation's great champions for religious freedom.

I love looking at these letters because it reminds me that Christians in every generation of this country have prized religious liberty—the way we as Baptists must continue to go about our work today.

Remember, not a faithful pastor among us would permit Thomas Jefferson to teach a Sunday School class in our churches. This was a man who was heretical in his beliefs. But our Baptist ancestors were diligent to work alongside those whom they considered outside the Christian faith in order to secure freedom of conscience for the entire nation.

These believers understood something that often gets lost in our modern debates: Religious liberty cannot be a partisan or parochial issue precisely because it is our “first freedom,” the foundation of all civil liberties. Religious freedom matters for all Americans, and that is why Christians should be the first and strongest advocates for soul freedom, not just for other Christians but for all Americans.

One reason Baptists have historically fought for religious freedom for all, not just some, is that our understanding of humanity and society is anchored in the doctrine of the image of God. We believe that every human being is made in the image of a creative, Triune God, and that this image-bearing quality applies not only to Christians but to everyone. Being created in the image of a God means that human beings have inherent dignity. This dignity expresses itself powerfully in the capacity that we

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all have to form beliefs and live our lives according to those beliefs. This makes religious freedom a basic, and non-negotiable, human right—a right we get from God, not from Uncle Sam.

The Revolutionary-era Baptist preacher John Leland repeatedly included Muslims (“the Turks,” as he called them) in his list of those included in the sorts of religious freedoms he was demanding from the politicians of his time, politicians like Jefferson and James Madison. This was despite the fact that there were virtually no Muslims to speak of in the colonies or in the new republic. Leland included them specifically and intentionally anyway. He wanted to make it clear that his concept of religious freedom was not dependent on a group’s political power. He chose the most despised religious minority of the time, with no political collateral in his context, to make the point that religious freedom is a natural right.

The governing authorities have a responsibility, given by God, to protect the population from violence, and to punish the evildoers who perpetrate such violence (Rom. 13:1-7). But this authority is a limited authority. The government cannot exalt itself as a lord over the conscience or a god over the soul. This is why even “Christian” theocratic projects have inevitably failed throughout history. In dictating to the conscience, the civil authorities seek to fill the role—and assume the power—of God himself.

This is why Baptists have held to the separation of church and state. It’s not hard to understand why that term might cause some nervousness for Bible-believing evangelicals. Over the last several decades, secularizing forces have claimed to be acting in the interest of separating church and state when what they were often trying to do was create what Richard John Neuhaus called

a “naked public square,” a society in which religious belief is an alternative to full citizenship. As Neuhaus rightly pointed out, achieving such an environment is impossible because human beings, made in the divine image, are naturally religious.

People like Thomas Jefferson and John Leland did not believe that the separation of church and state was intended to create a “naked” public square. Instead, they believed that the “wall” between religion and the magistrate existed to clearly define where the rights of government ended and the human rights of citizens began. Jefferson and Leland disagreed strongly in terms of what they believed about God, but they were able to work together for religious freedom because they agreed about one thing: the government wasn’t God.

If we miss why religious liberty matters, we will fundamentally misunderstand how to advocate for it. For a long time, many evangelical Christians have had a narrow vision of religious liberty, due largely to the fact that we have faced so few real challenges to it. This has often caused Christians to see religious liberty as a who-has-the-most-votes issue rather than what it really is: an image-of-God issue. Thus, many critics of Christianity have alleged, not without reason, that “religious liberty” for evangelicals is simply code for Christian privilege. Combine this with the sad spectacle of some evangelicals perpetually claiming to be “persecuted” because the signs at the department store say, “Happy Holidays,” instead of, “Merry Christmas.” The result is an evangelical advocacy of religious liberty that isn’t taken seriously by the broader culture.

When we advocate for religious liberty, we are acknowledging that there are important issues that are not resolved by the state or

by free markets. A state that can pave over the conscience without a compelling interest in doing so, is a state that is unfettered to do virtually anything. We are citizens of the state, yes, but the state isn't ultimate. A government that arbitrarily silences religious convictions or exercise is a government that severs us one from another by silencing proper pluralism and trades pursuit of the truth for bureaucratic enforcement. That is morally wrong and counter-productive, whether attempted by theocrats or neocrats.

As an evangelical Christian, I could not disagree more strongly with Islam. I believe that salvation comes only through union with Jesus Christ, received through faith. As part of the church's mission, we believe we should seek to persuade our Muslim neighbors of the goodness and truth of the gospel. The gospel is big enough to fight for itself and needs no government assistance. The gospel fights not with the invincible sword of Caesar but with the invisible sword of the Spirit.

A government that can shut down mosques simply because they are mosques can shut down Bible studies because they are Bible studies. A government that can close the borders to all Muslims simply on the basis of their religious belief can do the same thing for evangelical Christians. A government that issues ID badges for Muslims simply because they are Muslims can, in the fullness of time, demand the same for Christians because we are Christians.

Jesus commanded his followers to render unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar. Yet the conscience does not bear the image of Caesar, and cannot be swept into the federal treasury by government fiat. Ultimately, religious liberty and freedom of conscience matter for me because I believe all my neighbors—Christian or not, religious or not—are created in the image of God.

Let's stand up for the religious liberty of all Americans. Let's defend the inalienable rights and human dignity of those whom we seek to evangelize. And let's work with others across religious and racial lines to advocate for our first freedom, and the right of everyone made in God's image to be citizens with conscience.

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WHY IS RELIGIOUS LIBERTY SO IMPORTANT TO BAPTISTS?

by Josh Wester

Some have suggested in recent days that a crisis is no time to be concerned about things like religious freedom. As COVID-19 has spread around the globe and continues to wreak havoc here in the United States, many have criticized those who've displayed concern that governments not trample upon the rights of believing citizens during this time. Arguments have been made elsewhere about the necessity of pastors and churches working in good faith with elected leaders and public health officials to mitigate the spread of the virus, but it seems appropriate to say something in defense of religious liberty. After all, for many, including Baptists like myself, religious freedom is not some

ancillary or abstract concept, but a key distinctive of our faith, practice, and history.

Religious liberty lies at the heart of the Baptist tradition. Since the earliest days of the movement, Baptists have found themselves defending the necessity of separation of church and state. 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. English Baptists like John Smyth and Thomas Helwys and the American Baptists Roger Williams and John Clarke after them were pioneers in advancing the cause of religious freedom in their respective countries.

Among the many Baptist forebears who stood in defense of religious freedom, one of my personal heroes is Isaac Backus. A Baptist from New England living during the American Revolution, Backus is best remembered for his tireless advocacy of religious freedom in the fledgling United States as the leader of the Warren Association's Grievance Committee. On behalf of the churches of that association, Backus stood in defense of men and women whose religious convictions were violated by various governments in New England. But my favorite memory of Backus, however, is not actually about him.

Since the earliest days of the movement, Baptists have found themselves defending the necessity of separation of church and state.

Though Backus was already convinced of his Baptist beliefs and had rallied to the cause of religious liberty, the event that galvanized him into action and enabled him to maintain his zeal for the cause actually involved his mother, Elizabeth, a 54-year-old widow. Because Puritan ministers in New England were supported through taxation, Baptists and other dissenters were forced to pay taxes in support of religious views they objected to. When Elizabeth, who was also a Baptist, refused to pay the tax, she was jailed. And she remained so for nearly two weeks. But as a result of his mother's mistreatment, Backus renewed his commitment to the cause of religious freedom. For the rest of his life, he defended the rights of others to worship God according to the dictates of their consciences.

I'm drawn to that story because it illustrates something important about Baptists' commitment to the doctrine of religious liberty. Religious liberty protects not the strong but the weak. It is meant to protect not the powerful but the marginalized. 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. It should be easily understood, therefore, why Baptists and others endeavor to protect these precious freedoms even amid the current crisis.

Indeed, this is familiar territory. Baptists were born dissenters. Because they rejected the idea of a state church, by

default they were at odds from the beginning not only with the religious establishment but with the state itself. And for good reason. 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. As the American Baptist John Leland wrote, "Every man must give an account of himself to God, and therefore every man ought to be at liberty to serve God in that way that he can best reconcile it to his conscience. If government can answer for individuals at the day of judgment, let men be controlled by it in religious matters; otherwise let men be free."

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.

Still, people will sometimes ask why Christians, who literally worship a man who was willfully crucified at the hands of the state, are unwilling to sacrifice their religious freedom. Why not simply suffer as Christ did? Is it not the case that mounting such

a defense about individual rights and liberties is un-Christian? I think the question is understandable. But as the example of Elizabeth Backus demonstrates, 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.

As is often said, the kinds of speech or belief most in need of protection are those that are out of step with the zeitgeist or majority opinion. 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.

Baptists have a long memory. We may be numerous at present, but only a few hundred years ago Baptists were a small and despised minority, suffering violence at the hands of the government. Today we remember that history as we fight to protect religious freedom not merely for our own sake, but for the good of our neighbors. Even now, in the midst of a pandemic, Baptists are justified in their concern about encroachments upon these rights. Historically, Baptists have taken a posture of peaceful cooperation toward the state in times of crisis. And we have rightfully done so once again. But even so, Baptists must recognize how easily the state can, and often has, overstepped its bounds.

This leaves us in a precarious position. Few among us anticipated the magnitude of change the coronavirus pandemic would bring about. As we confront the situation before us, we must do so with sober and measured realism. State and local governments

have taken aggressive action to mitigate the spread of the virus. In certain cases, churches have been unfairly targeted by these measures—actions met with public outrage and legal action that was swift and well deserved. But as we weather the current storm, it is imperative for defenders of religious freedom to recognize the gravity of the moment.

The virus is still an existential threat. And churches remain critical allies in the government's efforts to safeguard public health. So even as we fight to protect these liberties, we must proceed with caution and recognize the volatility of this situation. The incursions upon religious freedom we've seen so far have been local and isolated. There is little evidence suggesting the threat is more widespread. As we navigate this crisis, the last thing our nation needs right now is an insurrection of churches. Fortunately, we are not now being forced to choose between submitting to those in authority or protecting our fundamental rights. But even so, one of the benefits of being reared in the Baptist tradition is a constant awareness of potential threats to the free exercise of religion. For the sake of all, in our religious practice and worship we must remain absolutely free. And just as our forebears did, Baptists and other defenders of liberty will continue to ensure it.

HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE THREE A'S OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AS CHRISTIANS

by Andrew T. Walker

There are different ways to think about religious liberty: From outside the Christian tradition and within it. In a recent article titled "The three A's of religious liberty," I attempted to explain how ideas that undergird religious liberty are ideas that everyone understands and resonates with: Everyone worships something (adoration); everyone wants to live truthfully (authentically); and everyone has an ultimate standard for what they value (authority). These concepts are the building blocks of religious liberty.

That article focused on the commonalities that we all share around religious liberty. In this article, I want to show how

Christians should use the same categories to think about religious liberty as something distinctly Christian.

Adoration: Who or what do we worship?

Adoration means to adore, to worship or venerate, or to give our highest devotion, praise and love to someone or something. Everyone adores. Whether it's a favorite sports team, a hobby like traveling, or God, everyone has something at their core that drives them; that contends for their attention and affections; and that helps anchor their lives and give it meaning.

Christians confess that the Triune God is the Lord of the universe and that the Godhead is to be worshipped. Here are some verses that explain adoration from a Christian perspective:

- Ascribe to the LORD the glory due to His name; worship the LORD in holy array (Ps. 29:2).
- Let all the earth fear the LORD; Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him (Ps. 33:8).
- Come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker (Ps. 95:6).

For Christians, worship is not just a rote practice. Worship is the source of our existence, because Christians believe we are made to worship our Creator.

If someone's liberties to find meaning in life should not be restricted, neither should the liberties that ground the ability for someone to find that same meaning in God. When understood rightly, religious liberty is directly connected to God's glory, because to freely pursue God's glory, it requires an ecosystem of

liberty that allows people to respond to God in ways that honor and esteem Him.

Authenticity: What is true living?

Religious liberty is about authenticity because having the opportunity to act on what drives someone's motivations ensures that someone's deepest convictions aren't restricted and that a person is living truthfully to one's conscience.

In most instances concerning religion, it is through adoration or worship that people obtain a code of ethics and morality necessary for living. Everyone has a code of ethics and morality regardless of whether they consider themselves religious or not. In fact, religious liberty protects the atheist as much as the religious. Each of us has deeply held convictions and moral codes that we prioritize and use to dictate all of our actions, words and decisions. Religious liberty protects the ability of Christians to live out their convictions voluntarily and authentically. Here are some verses that explain authenticity from a Christian perspective:

- So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31).
- Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. . . . Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men (Col. 3:17, 23).
- Therefore I urge you, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the

renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:1-2).

Everything a Christian does is to originate and emanate from our source of meaning: God.

Authority: Who has ultimate judgment?

Even non-religious people believe someone, something or some ideology has ultimate say over life's meaning. The nihilist responds that the highest authority is simply non-existence. The atheist responds that rationality is the highest authority. The hedonist pleads for pleasure's highest authority. The Darwinist says that nature's systems and processes are the highest authority. A North Korean citizen believes that Kim Jong-un is the highest authority.

Not all claims of authority are equal. The fact that Western civilization is in the throes of a crisis of authority indicates that people have very different ideas on what is authoritative. But still, everyone has an authority. And

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because society is imperfect, an era where competing claims of authority challenge one another is normal and to be expected.

The question that is hard to answer in a liberal democratic context is whether someone's view of authority is truly ultimate. Why? Because who has the authority to say what is truly good or bad or to judge between competing understandings of right and wrong is up for debate as people reason about what is true. Here are some verses that explain authority from a Christian perspective:

- For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil (2 Cor. 5:10).
- The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30-31).

From a Christian perspective, ultimate authority is found in God. The state is not ultimate. No ideology is ultimate. Jesus Christ is ultimate. From a Christian perspective, any secondary authority (like the state) that tries to be a primary authority (like God) is mistaken.

Conclusion

The Three A's of Religious Liberty as Christians can be summed up in Deuteronomy 10:12-13:

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require

of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good (Deut. 10:12-13)?

In this verse, we see God possess authority over us by requiring something of us because of his ultimate power to command; God requires our adoration to love and serve him; and God desires us to do this in authentic form with our entire self (our heart and soul).

Christians desire to worship God. Christians desire to bring their worship into every corner of their lives. And Christians give God the highest place of authority. These basic truths form the backbone of why religious liberty ought to matter to Christians.

WHAT DOES “SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE” ACTUALLY MEAN?

by Neal Hardin

“Separation of Church and State” is one of the most misunderstood phrases in modern political discourse. Yet, it is also a phrase with deep roots in Baptist tradition and one that we, as Christians, should have a healthy understanding of as we seek to engage in the public sphere.

Origins of “Separation of Church and State”

The phrase “separation of Church and State” originates in a letter that our third president, Thomas Jefferson, wrote to the Danbury Baptist Association of Connecticut in 1802.

Understanding the background of this letter is key to understanding the meaning of this infamous phrase.

Despite fleeing to the New World to escape religious persecution in Europe and seek religious liberty, many of the settlers of the early colonies did not extend religious freedom to minority religions. During the 17th and 18th centuries, it wasn't uncommon for local governments to levy taxes on citizens to support local clergy. In a society where there were many people of various religious persuasions (mostly Protestant denominations), the question then became, "Whose clergy will be funded through taxation?" In the Congregationalist-dominated Northeast, it was usually a Congregationalist minister. In other parts of the country, the Church of England held sway. Thus, minority denominations such as Baptists and Quakers were left being forced to pay taxes to support religious beliefs that they disagreed with. Many who refused had their property confiscated or were beaten, hanged, or jailed.

Fast-forward to 1801, after the formation of the United States government and the ratification of our Constitution and the First Amendment. Thomas Jefferson had won the election of 1800. The Danbury Baptist Association was worried that the Constitution did not go far enough in protecting religious minorities from the overreaches of government. They wrote a letter to Jefferson, urging that the same mistakes of the past not be made, that "no man ought to suffer in Name, person or effects on account of his religious Opinions—That the legitimate Power of civil Government extends no further than to punish the man who works ill to his neighbour."

Jefferson wrote in response,

“Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & 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 of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church & State.”

Jefferson, quoting the First Amendment to the Constitution, sought to reassure the Danbury Baptists that what was written was sufficient to protect their rights and that he was a friend to their cause.

Thus, it's fair to say that Founders like Jefferson meant for some kind of separation between church and state to be present. The government could not establish a state-sponsored religion, but neither could it prohibit others from freely practicing their own religion. However, it's also fair to say that opponents of religion in the 20th and 21st centuries have misused this phrase to try and separate religion from the public sphere far beyond what was originally intended.

What does the Bible say?

Scripture also supports the principle of separation of church and state (properly understood). It was these principles which informed early Baptist leaders such as John Leland and Isaac Backus and eventually led to the passage of the First Amendment.

First, separation of church and state means that, at an institutional level, church and government are separate entities. Jesus spoke about this in Matthew 22:21 when he said, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's," thus making a clear delineation between the "things that are Caesar's" (the government's) and the "things that are God's." Likewise, Jesus spoke of his Kingdom not being of this world (John 18:36) while simultaneously acknowledging through Paul that earthly government is established by God for our good. (Rom. 13:1-7). Jesus remains sovereign over both institutions (Matt. 28:18) until such time that he returns to rule and reign in the eschaton (Rev. 11:15). In the meantime, he gives both church and government differing tasks.

The key difference we see between the function of the church and the state comes through the use of the power of the sword. God has given government the power of the sword to punish the wrongdoer in civil matters (Rom. 13:4). The church does not have such authority (Matt. 26:51-56). On the other hand, the church can exercise church discipline in judging matters of doctrine and heresy but not the state (1 Cor. 5:1-13). Thus, there exists a healthy separation of church and state, both institutionally and

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functionally. This is crucial to the mission of the church, which is the preaching of the gospel. We cannot bring about conversion through the power of the sword vested in the state. Only through the power of God's Spirit can someone be brought unto saving faith in Jesus Christ. "For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds." (2 Cor. 10:3-4)

Practically, this works out much as it is articulated in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. No religious institution is privileged above another, neither is religion privileged above nonreligion. Similarly, the government does not prohibit the free exercise of someone's faith.

What it doesn't mean

Though we see that separation of church and state is a valid concept, our modern secular society has come to incorrectly understand this phrase to mean either a separation of morality from lawmaking or a separation of religiously informed opinion from the lawmaker. Both of these are mistaken.

"As people of faith, let us seek to engage the public square in a way which is winsome and accords with God's Word, being mindful of the boundaries which God has established between church and state."

First, separation of church and state does not mean a separation of moral reasoning from public policy. Such a goal would

be futile. The process of lawmaking is moral by its very nature. A law is instituted because of an ought. This ought to be done because of such and such, or this ought not to be done. The government's use of coercion would lack any justification without a moral foundation behind the laws which it enforces.

Second, separation of church and state does not mean a separation of religiously informed moral reasoning from public policy. It's often said that religious people who run for office need to check their religion at the door before they make policy. Historically, this would have made no sense to our Founders, most of whom were religious. Philosophically, this also faces issues. Whether secular or religious, everyone brings moral presuppositions to the table. Religious people should not be told to check their beliefs at the door simply because they are religiously based. This smacks of an arrogance which most would not want to be accused of. Everyone, whether religious or secular, should have the freedom to publicly or privately make the case for laws which they believe should be passed.

As Christians, we understand that government ought to be secular in the sense that it does not favor one religion over another. Nor should it favor religion above nonreligion (or vice versa). Yet, a government that seeks to use secular moral reasoning alone will soon find itself adrift amid the sea of ever-changing public opinion. A transcendent moral law is needed which can ground the human and political rights that we cherish today. This is, ultimately, the reason why we allow our political conscience to be properly informed by our faith.

Separation of church and state, properly understood, is a foundational principle which secures the rights and privileges of all

citizens under a government and ensures that both government and church function according to their God-given roles. As people of faith, let us seek to engage the public square in a way which is winsome and accords with God's Word, being mindful of the boundaries which God has established between church and state.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY: ITS TRUE END AND ULTIMATE GOAL

by Jason Duesing

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them (Acts 16:25 ESV).

The visit to Macedonia had gone well. Paul and company had arrived in Philippi days before and on the Sabbath had gone out to a place of prayer and met a gathering of women. Among them was Lydia who listened intently to the good news they shared about Jesus Christ and was converted. Then, as they went along they were met by another woman, an enslaved fortune-teller, who followed and badgered them as she was possessed by an evil spirit.

After a few days, Paul commanded the spirit in the name of Jesus to come out of her, and she was freed, though still not from her physical enslavement. Her owners had profited from her fortune-telling, and, with that at an end, they turned on Paul and Silas and brought them to the rulers, charging them with advocating “customs that are not lawful for us.” A crowd attacked as well, and so the rulers had Paul and Silas stripped, beaten and thrown in jail.

Paul and Silas had merely engaged the Roman culture with the gospel, helping those who would listen and healing those oppressed by spiritual warfare. Since this work overturned an idol of financial profit, they were isolated, misrepresented and made to suffer unjustly. Now they were wounded and in prison, surrounded by prisoners. And at this time when they should be sleeping or weeping, they sang. Why did they sing?

The verse informs us that they were singing to God, and we can infer that the hymns were songs about God and his work. They sang to remind themselves of present and future truths revealed by God to indicate their trust in God regardless of their circumstances. Their hope was in God, not in their might or their friends. They knew that regardless of how this scrape went, their ultimate future was secure and safe in God. Paul and Silas were able to sing in the face of injustice and the loss of their freedoms because they knew that God was faithful (1 Pet. 4:19) and that in the end God would make things right (Rom. 12:19).

Given the current state of religious liberty in this country, and even more around the world, one might be tempted to despair and question whether we are seeing the beginning of the end of religious liberty. Indeed, the future is hard to predict, and the rise of restrictive trends is not encouraging. Yet, lest we lose hope, I

hope, much like Paul and Silas singing, briefly to remind of both religious liberty's true end and religious liberty's end goal.

Religious liberty's true end: Jesus' return

When we talk of religious liberty in the United States, we acknowledge its present fragility with words like “threatened” and with calls to “defend” it.¹ Should believers find their liberties removed or suppressed in the days ahead, we should recognize that we will not really reach the end of religious liberty until Jesus' return. On that day, the time of religious freedom will end. Everyone will bow and acknowledge the one true religion and one true God. Until then, in the most important sense, every day is a day of grace and a day of liberty.

Thus, even if the future practice of religious liberty in this country is virtually unrecognizable to the generations of men and women who died to preserve the first freedom, there exists still grace for a time through a certain future truth. This eternal perspective should provide hope, but it should also serve as a sobering call to action for the grace God shows by granting any form of religious liberty on earth is finite.

Near the end of his life, when Paul was in prison again, he wrote a letter to the Philippian believers. The church that formed after his time in jail with Silas would become his first church in Europe. The church in Philippi was one with whom he would maintain contact and likely would have visited again as they would serve as key supporters of his work (Phil. 4:15). He wrote to encourage them to pursue unity and joy even in suffering and, to that end, at the center of his letter (Phil. 2:5-11) he gave them a hymn. It is as if he knew they would need encouragement in singing.

The hymn in Philippians 2 tells of the humbling, sacrifice and exaltation of Jesus Christ. In the verses describing the exaltation, Paul references a statement from Isaiah and shows why, in the last day, religious liberty will come to an end. He writes, “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Here, Paul is communicating truths that are both already and not yet manifest.

God has already exalted Christ Jesus and given him the name “Lord.” He has already handed all things over to him (Matt. 11:27), put all things under his feet (Eph. 1:22) and given him all authority (Matt. 28:18). Yet Paul reveals that a future day is coming when the name of Jesus will go forth and all creatures will bow and confess him as Lord. At this time, which Paul in 1 Cor. 15:24 calls “the end,” Jesus will finally destroy death and see the complete fulfillment of Psalm 8:6, when all things are put in subjection under his feet (1 Cor. 15:23-28).

Paul’s use of Isaiah 45:23 in Philippians 2 ties his hymn to the larger and weightier biblical story. This reference to God the Father saying “to me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance” is part of a larger passage (Isa. 45:18-25) that, as Bible scholar Moises Silva explains, “constitutes one of the most powerful OT affirmations of the uniqueness of God of Israel in the context of his redeeming work.”² There, Isaiah is crusading against idolatry by vigorously defending the sole uniqueness of the God of Israel. By ascribing this text to Jesus, Paul is making a profound trinitarian statement that shows that the divinity of God the Son is not a challenge to the monotheistic God of the Bible.³

Yet Philippians 2:10-11 is not the only time Paul refers to Isaiah 45:23. In Romans 14:10-11, Paul points to the last day and says, “For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’”

As New Testament scholar Thomas Schreiner notes, here Paul is ascribing to God the Father the day of widespread allegiance, but this only furthers Paul’s point in Philippians 2 of exalting Christ. Schreiner explains, “The fact that Paul can apply the same OT text to God in Romans and to Christ in Philippians reveals the high stature of Christ.”⁴ Yet clearly this exaltation and subjection are both already true and not yet complete. As John Calvin reminds us, “the kingdom of Christ is on such a footing, that it is every day growing and making improvement, while at the same time perfection is not yet attained, nor will it be until the final day of reckoning.”⁵

Thus, we live in the times in between, and we bear the burden and joy of knowing that the end of religious liberty is coming. What else then is there for us to learn from this future end that can help us to know how to live between the times?

1. First, these passages depicting the future day of judgment give readers both a word of warning and a promise of hope. The warning comes in the realization that there is a clock winding down, and one day the triune God will no longer exercise patience with those who do not worship him alone. At that time all will bow and confess that God is supreme, true and Lord. The bowing especially conveys this acknowledgment as the Bible regularly identifies this posture with concession that the one to whom one bows is superior.

Hence Elijah is told to track the faithful by those who have not “bowed the knee to Baal” (1 Kings 19:18). When one bows and confesses, he is submitting, conceding and openly declaring what is true about the One who is superior and exalted.⁶

Further, this day of acknowledgement is universal but not universalism. No one will escape participation, whether they are repentant or not. John Piper explains, “Believers and unbelievers will acknowledge in that day that Jesus has triumphed over every enemy—believers, to their everlasting joy, and unbelievers, to their everlasting shame.” This day will serve as a reversal of sorts of Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image in Daniel 3. Then, the King demanded and coerced that all “fall down and worship,” lest they face judgment by fire (3:5).

Nebuchadnezzar sought a universalism of worship solely for himself. However, three Jews rightly refused, acknowledging that there was One more worthy of their devotion. Whereas Nebuchadnezzar demanded and attempted to coerce a universalistic worship, the true God does not coerce⁷ or universally redeem, but he still will receive, in the end, universal concession and acknowledgment from all creatures. Jesus Christ will reign in triumph over even those who do not worship him but acknowledge their defeat by bowing and confessing.⁸

Yet these passages also provide an ongoing word of hope. One of the lowest points in Charles Spurgeon’s ministry came just as he was preparing

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to preach to over 10,000 people gathered at the new concert hall in Royal Surrey Gardens. After he concluded his prayer, someone in the crowd yelled “Fire!” and that the balcony was collapsing, when nothing of the sort was happening. Panic set in and the crowds pushed to exit, while those assembled outside attempted to enter.

Seven people were trampled to death and many more injured. Spurgeon was devastated by the loss of precious human life, to the extent that he considered leaving the ministry. When he returned to the pulpit weeks later, he preached “The Exaltation of Christ” from Philippians 2:9-11. It was a way to encourage his congregation and his own soul. He said, “This text afforded sweet consolation to every heir of heaven,” and continued,

“In the midst of calamities, whether they be the wreck of nations, the crash of empires, the heaving of revolutions, or the scourge of war, the great question which [a Christian] asks himself, and asks of others too, is this—Is Christ’s kingdom safe? . . . He finds it sufficient consolation, in the midst of all the breaking in pieces which he endures, to think that Christ’s throne stand fast and firm, and that though the earth hath rocked beneath his feet, yet Christ standeth on a rock which never can be moved. . . . Oh! my soul anticipates that blessed day, when this whole earth shall bend its knee before its God willingly! I do believe there is a happy era coming, when there shall not be one knee unbent before my Lord and Master. . . . But even now, while waiting for that era, my soul rejoices in the fact, that every knee does virtually bow, though not willingly, yet really.”

Thus, as those living in an era of religious liberty between the time of Christ's ascension and his certain return, the knowledge of what awaits us on the last day should serve as a warning to all outside of Christ that the freedom to worship other gods without the judgment of the one true God will come to end. For those in Christ, the knowledge of the last day should provide hope that, no matter what trials come or earthly freedoms are diminished, God will make all things new. He will put all things under his feet and declare himself finally triumphant.

2. Second, these passages remind all that, until that day of judgment comes, each day is a day of grace, and thus it is not too late to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. Russell Moore puts it this way: "Christian eschatology maintains that the 'day of salvation' is now (2 Cor. 6:2), during this lifetime's temporary suspension of doom. After this the grace of God is not extended—only his justice, and that with severity."⁹

Indeed, God kindly tolerates a world that worships things created by men and other futile systems or philosophies in order that many may come to repentance (Rom. 2:4). He is patient, "not wishing that any should perish" (2 Pet. 3:9), and reminds that "now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2), since no one knows the day or the hour when he will return (Mark 13:32). Thus, whoever confesses with their tongue and bows in their heart now (Rom. 10:9-10) that Jesus is Lord will not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16). As Spurgeon preached,

"And now, lastly, beloved, if it be true, as it is, that Christ is so exalted that he is to have a name above every name, and every knee is to bow to him, will we not bow our knees

this morning before his Majesty? You must, whether you will or not, one day bow your knee. . . . O that now those that are on earth might willingly bend their knees lest in hell it should be fulfilled, ‘Things under the earth shall bow the knee before him.’”

Whatever happens to the state of religious liberty in the United States and other nations, there will be a final end to religious liberty for all with the return of Christ. At that time, there will be no more hope for the lost. Thus, we pursue religious freedom in the present for the sake of others to be saved before the end.

Religious liberty’s end goal: God’s glory

When thinking of the end of religious liberty, therefore, we should consider not only the warning and hope that comes with the knowledge that one day freedom to worship any god will end, but also the purpose of religious freedom in the here and now. That is, what is the end goal of religious liberty?

In Philippians 2:11, Paul says that the universal submission of humanity to the Lordship of Christ at the end of time takes place “to the glory of God the Father.” Bible scholar James Hamilton explains, “Every knee will bow to him (2:10), every tongue confess him Lord, and this is to the glory of the Father (2:11). The life that Paul calls the Philippians to live is based on the glory of God in salvation through judgment accomplished in Christ’s death on the cross.”¹⁰

The reigning King who made the heavens and the earth should receive honor and glory forever and ever (1 Tim. 1:17). The One

who put forward his Son as a propitiation so that God the Father might be just and justifier of all those who fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:21-26) belongs to glory and dominion forever and ever (1 Pet. 4:11). The One who gave his Spirit as a Helper to teach, convict (John 14:26; 16:8) and send his children as witnesses to the nations (Acts 1:8), to him be glory in the church, throughout all generations forever and ever (Eph. 3:21).

The glory of God in salvation through judgment is the end goal of religious liberty on earth. With that glorious end in mind, we can return to where this conclusion began: with Paul and Silas singing in the Philippian jail.

“Then he brought them out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’”
(Acts 16:30-31 ESV)

In the middle of their singing an earthquake interrupted. Paul and Silas were now released from their chains and confines due to the upheaval. Yet instead of running for safety, they remained for the safety of their captor. Knowing that the jailer would receive the death penalty should they escape, they assured him they had not left and, shaken and afraid, the jailer came to see for himself. Their steadfastness in their punishment even when given the opportunity for freedom, prompted the jailer to ask how he might escape his own spiritual captivity: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

Paul and Silas were misrepresented, imprisoned unjustly and robbed of their freedoms, but they did not despair. Instead, entrusting themselves to their faithful Creator, they looked and

sang to God knowing their captivity was temporary, even if it should lead to death. Why did they sing? They sang to God about God to find strength in God.

But their singing also had another purpose—to help those listening learn of the coming judgment of God. Following the earthquake, more important than their freedom was the life of another. So they stayed because the jailer’s eternal destiny was at risk. After the upheaval, they stayed so at least one who heard the good news could repent and believe.

Hope.

Warning.

Good news that Jesus is Lord shared while there still is time even at the risk of one’s security, safety, and rights—all for the glory of God.

Until the end, this is the true end and end goal of religious liberty.

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¹ Howard M. Friedman, distinguished university professor and professor of law emeritus at the University of Toledo, is the author of “Religion Clause,” cited frequently as one of the 100 top legal blogs in the nation. In December 2015, he assembled his “Top Ten Religious Liberty and Church-State Developments” for the year and they included a wide spectrum of issues ranging U.S. Supreme Court rulings on same-sex marriage, prisoners’ rights issues, Title VII, license plates as government speech, and other topics such as the Affordable Care Act, RFRA laws, anti-Muslim sentiments and terminology, and transgender rights.

² Moises Silva, “Philippians,” in G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Baker Academic, 2007), 837.

³ *Ibid.*, 838. Silva states, “Although not an explicit or precise quotation, this use of Isaiah is especially significant because of its profound implications for

Paul's conception of Christ [I]t patently expresses his own conviction that the worship of Jesus Christ does not compromise Israel's monotheistic faith. On the contrary, Jesus Christ the righteous Savior bears the name of the one Lord, Yahweh, 'to the glory of God the Father.'" See also, Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Baker Academic, 2008), 326-327, "The text in Isaiah engages in a polemic against idolatry, insisting emphatically that the God of Israel is the only true God If we gather together the themes assembled, we see something astonishing. Paul confessed along with Isaiah that there is only one God. Yet, he applies to Jesus what Isaiah attributes to Yahweh—every knee bending and every tongue confessing. Clearly, Paul teaches that Jesus shares in the same divine nature as Yahweh himself, but Paul does this without denying monotheism or the distinctions between the Father and the Son."

⁴ Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 330. See also [4] Mark A. Seifrid, "Romans," in Beale and Carson, *Commentary*, 685.

⁵ John Calvin, "Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians" in *Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. 21* (Baker, 2003), 62. See also, Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, NIGTC (Eerdmans, 2013), 243, "The exaltation of Jesus has already taken place and God has graciously given him his own all-surpassing name of the Lord (vs. 9); yet the bowing of every knee does not occur, at least on earth, until the final day."

⁶ O'Brien, NIGTC, 243, 250, states, "one ought to understand the bowing of the knee as an act of submission to one whose power they cannot resist."

⁷ As the helpful ECT statement puts it, "The New Testament ... never depicts Jesus the Lord as coercing faith. Quite the contrary: Jesus reasoned with his listeners, instructed them parables, called them to repent, and invited them to believe the good news of God's kingdom," in *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*, "In Defense of Religious Freedom (2012)," in George and Guarino, ECT at Twenty, 139-140.

⁸ In the history of Christianity, some have sought to read Phil 2:10-11 as implying universal redemption. Steven R. Harmon in his *Every Knee Should Bow: Biblical Rationales for Universal Salvation in Early Christian Thought* (University Press of America, 2003), presents early patristic interpretations of Philippians 2:10 (and other passages) that draw those conclusions. Harmon, himself does not offer his own assessment other relegating the matter to "a mystery of divine and human freedom," 133n7. However, as I have attempted to show here, the text and context of Philippians 2, Romans 14, and Isaiah 45 clearly do not conclude or portray universalism. See, O'Brien, NIGTC, 239, and Richard R Melick, Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, NAC, (Holman Reference, 1991), 108, and Russell D. Moore, "Personal and Cosmic Eschatology," 702, "Jesus does indeed triumph

over all things, making peace through the blood of his cross (Col. 1:20), but this peace does not mean the redemption of each individual. Instead, Jesus triumphs over his enemies—as they are all consigned to damnation beneath the feet of his sovereign kingship. Yes, every tongue confesses Jesus as Lord eschatologically—even Satan himself (Phil 2:9-11). This does not mean that every tongue calls out to him for salvation. Instead there is universal recognition that Jesus has triumphed over every rival to his throne. The redeemed will love this truth; the impenitent will lament it.”

⁹ Russell D. Moore, “Personal and Cosmic Eschatology,” in Daniel L. Akin, ed., *A Theology for the Church* (B&H Academic, 2014), 702.

¹⁰ James M. Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation Through Judgment* (Crossway, 2010), 486.



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