

HISTORY SPEAKS

To Hard Questions Baptists Ask

The year 2009 is the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Baptist tradition. To help celebrate this big year, the Baptist History and Heritage Society has created a new 24-article series, HISTORY SPEAKS.

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Baptists and Religious Liberty: Where do we stand today?

J. Brent Walker

This year we celebrate the 400th year since John Smyth led that rowdy group of dissenters across the English Channel to Holland to avoid religious persecution and then baptized himself and the others in 1609. Over the next four centuries, those who came to be known as “baptizers” have fought for religious liberty, for others as much as for themselves. This celebration of Baptists’ quadricentennial gives us an opportunity to consider how we are doing.

Three issues should concern us free and faithful Baptists as we embark on our fifth century together.

First, we must be willing to fight for the protection of our religious freedom in the First Amendment. The first 16 words of the Bill of Rights say, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” That freedom of religion is listed first and has two different protections tells you a lot about the importance our founders gave to religious freedom.

Yes, these two clauses—No Establishment (keeping government from helping religion) and Free Exercise (keeping government from hurting religion)—require government to be neutral toward religion. Both ensure religious liberty; both require an institutional separation of church and state as a means to that end.

Unfortunately, many Baptists have lost their way. They want to claim the benefits of the Free Exercise Clause but not the supposed inconvenience of the No Establishment Clause. This is entirely wrong headed. Both clauses are needed to ensure religious liberty. The Establishment Clause keeps government from indirectly hurting your religion by helping somebody else’s religion, and the Free Exercise Clause keeps government from harming your religion directly. They stand as twin pillars in our constitutional architecture upholding the wall of separation between church and state and ensuring religious liberty. We must claim a robust understanding of both of these protections for religious liberty.

Second, we Baptists need to have a balanced understanding of what this freedom—so protected by the First Amendment—is all about. Yes, freedom is fundamental to what it means to be a Baptist Christian. But our freedom is not unlimited. As James Dunn has often said, “No

one is as free as a bird. Only a bird is as free as a bird.” We are to avoid license as well as legalism, and we are to put freedom to good use.

Our freedom in Christ can never be separated from—and must always be limited by—the responsibility that we have to one another. We Baptists are not a bunch of lone-ranger Christians who happen to get together once a week to worship God in the same place. We are a community, responsible not only for ourselves but also for one another.

Religious liberty is not an end in itself to be enjoyed for its own sake. It finds fulfillment in something else. We are free, in the words of the great commandment, to love God and love one another. Buddy Shurden has said that there is a “Statute of Responsibility along side of the Statue of Liberty in the Baptist house.” And he further has observed that “Baptists have never shouted freedom to escape the will of God; they have treasured freedom so they could obey the will of God.”

We Baptists must take seriously our responsibility to the group—to minister to others—and to ensure the religious liberty of everyone. We freedom-loving Baptists need to love others just as much.

The *third* thing I worry about is a call by some Baptists to disengage from public life. They say we should not confront the body politic with our Christian witness. For most Baptists, the separation of church and state never has meant a segregation of religion from politics or relieved Baptist Christians of their duties of citizenship. Antipathy to political engagement historically has been more the hallmark of our Anabaptist cousins than our Baptist grandparents. Baptists from the very beginning have been eager to engage in public life.

We have always been committed to *doing*—rolling up our sleeves, going to work, and speaking out in the public square. And we have done it cooperatively, together—from the General Committee of Virginia, the so-called “political mouth” of Colonial Virginia Baptists, to the political activities of Isaac Backus’ “Warren Association” in Rhode Island, to the Baptist Joint Committee today.

Jesus warned against serving two masters, but he also acknowledged the two kingdoms of which we are citizens—Caesar’s and God’s—with duties and allegiance to both. We must be careful not to be co-opted and compromised by a political party or government officials. But we must speak out in the public square and work with public officials who articulate our message in the Supreme Court, in the halls of Congress and in the White House.

To be sure, there is a tension between withdrawal and engagement, just as there is between rights and responsibilities and between the principles of no establishment and free exercise. But these tensions are part of life and certainly an aspect of public life.

I pray we Baptists will carry forward a proper understanding of these three issues and deal with them responsibly and constructively for the next 400 years.

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