

ARTICLE

# Why is religious liberty so important to Baptists?

Defending a good doctrine

**BY JOSH WESTER**

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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 (<https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/church-state-and-social-distancing>) elsewhere about the necessity of pastors and churches working in good faith

<https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/churches-and-governments-are-cooperating-lets-keep-it-that-way>) 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](#)

[https://www.amazon.com/First-Freedom-Beginning-Religious-Liberty-ebook/dp/B01M993QMR/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?](https://www.amazon.com/First-Freedom-Beginning-Religious-Liberty-ebook/dp/B01M993QMR/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=first+freedom+duesing&qid=1587391060&sr=8-1)

[dchild=1&keywords=first+freedom+duesing&qid=1587391060&sr=8-1](https://www.amazon.com/First-Freedom-Beginning-Religious-Liberty-ebook/dp/B01M993QMR/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=first+freedom+duesing&qid=1587391060&sr=8-1)). 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.

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."

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.

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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.

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