

How Baptists became champions of religious liberty

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Baptist Press

Throughout the world, many Christians face imprisonment or even death for expressing dissenting religious beliefs. Today, such persecution often comes at the hands of other religions such as Islam and Hindu nationalism. But in early modern Europe, religious conformity was often enforced by state power and by the hands of believers in Christ.

Against this backdrop, Baptists emerged as ardent advocates for religious liberty, a stance that has profoundly influenced the concept of church-state separation and religious freedom in the modern world.

Early beginnings of Baptist thought on religious liberty

Theological and scriptural justifications underpin Baptists' commitment to religious liberty.

Central to Baptist belief is the concept of individual soul liberty – the idea that each person is directly accountable to God and must have the freedom to make their own religious choices without coercion from the state or other religious authorities. This principle naturally led Baptists to advocate for religious liberty for all, believing that genuine faith must be freely chosen rather than imposed.

The Baptist movement originated in the early 17th century, with key figures such as John Smyth and Thomas Helwys. Their theological convictions, particularly the emphasis on believer's baptism and voluntary faith, laid the groundwork for a broader commitment to freedom of religious belief.

Early Baptist confessions and declarations, such as the Second London Baptist Confession of 1689, also consistently emphasized religious liberty. Unlike the state churches of their time, which mandated infant baptism and adherence to the state-supported religious tradition, early Baptists argued that genuine faith could arise only from a personal, voluntary decision to follow Christ.

The first Baptist congregations formed in England and the Netherlands, often facing severe persecution for their beliefs. Thomas Helwys, in his groundbreaking work "*A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*" (1612), boldly argued that "For men's religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it. Neither may the king be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews or whatsoever it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure. This is made evident by our lord the king by the scriptures." Helwys' work was one of the first English-language books to call for complete religious freedom – a radical notion in his time.

As dissenters from the established Church of England, Baptists also faced persecution in various forms in colonial America. Places like Massachusetts viewed Baptist teachings as heretical and dangerous to social order. In Virginia, Baptist preachers were frequently jailed for preaching without a license from the Anglican authorities. These experiences of oppression deeply ingrained in Baptists the importance of religious freedom, not just for themselves but for all people. They came to understand firsthand the injustice and suffering caused by religious intolerance, fueling their passion for liberty of conscience.

Yet despite these challenges, the Baptist commitment to religious liberty found some fertile ground in colonial America. One key ally was Roger Williams, a fervent advocate for the separation of church and state, who founded the Providence Plantation in Rhode Island in 1636 as a refuge for

those persecuted for their religious beliefs. Although Williams did not affiliate himself with any church, he agreed with such positions as believer's baptism and often cooperated with Baptists. Williams even helped to found the First Baptist Church in America in the city of Providence. Williams' writings, particularly *"The Bloody Tenent of Persecution,"* articulated a robust defense of religious liberty and influenced later American thought on the subject.

Baptist religious liberty influence on America and the world

Baptists would go on to play a crucial role in shaping the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which guarantees the free exercise of religion. Prominent Baptist figures like Isaac Backus and John Leland were instrumental in lobbying for religious freedom. Leland, a Baptist minister in Virginia, worked closely with James Madison and played a significant role in ensuring that protection for religious liberty was included in the Bill of Rights. His advocacy was instrumental in shaping the First Amendment's guarantee of religious freedom. Leland helped ensure that the new American republic would not establish a state church and would protect individual religious rights.

The 19th century saw Baptists actively promoting religious liberty, not just in America but also in other parts of the world, as they engaged in missionary work and supported movements for religious freedom globally. In the 20th century, Baptists continued to be at the forefront of religious liberty advocacy. The Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (originally the Southern Baptist Committee on Public Relations), founded in 1936, has played a significant role in defending religious freedom in the U.S. This organization has been influential in landmark court cases and legislative measures that protect the separation of church and state.

In 1997, the SBC's Christian Life Commission absorbed other committees and changed its name to the Ethics & Religious

Liberty Committee, reflecting Southern Baptists commitment to the importance of our first freedom. Since then, the ERLC has been a leader in championing religious freedom and supporting persecuted religious minorities around the globe. As with other Baptist groups, the ERLC's commitment to this cause has extended beyond Baptist circles, reflecting a broader concern for human rights and justice.

Conclusion

Baptists' unwavering commitment to religious liberty has been a defining feature of their history and identity. From the early theological convictions of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys to the modern advocacy of the ERLC, Baptists have consistently championed the principle that faith must be free from state coercion. As the world becomes increasingly pluralistic, the Baptist tradition of advocating for religious liberty remains crucial. By continuing this legacy, Baptists and others committed to religious freedom can ensure that this fundamental right is preserved and protected for future generations.