

BACKUS TO THE FUTURE: Fighting for Religious Liberty in the Twenty-First Century

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In *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty Against the Oppressions of the Present Day*, a Baptist pastor in colonial Massachusetts penned these now-famous words:

Religious matters are to be separated from the jurisdiction of the state, not because they are beneath the interests of the state but, quite to the contrary, because they are too high and holy and thus are beyond the competence of the state.

God has appointed two kinds of government in the world, which are distinct in their nature, and ought never to be confounded together; one of which is called civil, the other ecclesiastical government.¹

Backus could not have known the new world these words helped bring into existence. Though the idea of religious liberty was not new to Backus and, in some form or another, has been around at least in part since the second century and Tertullian,² Backus and his contemporaries bequeathed to us a world where religious liberty is a reality, even if in imperfect forms. Three hundred years after the birth of this consequential man, Baptists are still wrestling with Backus's words as we contemplate freedom of religion in an increasingly confused age.

Whereas Backus and his contemporaries surveyed the wreckage of a too cozy alliance with the church and the state, the strong arm of government

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¹Isaac Backus, "An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty" (1773; accessed May 14, 2024, <https://classicaliberal.tripod.com/misc/appeal.html>).

²Robert Louis Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God* (Yale University Press, 2019).

often coming down on the side of one Christian tradition or the other, today Baptists wrestle with the wreckage of secularism. The strong arm of the government is often quick to push Christianity into the margins of private devotion.

On offer, as an antidote to a fraying social fabric are two competing visions. One, a small, but loud cohort of would-be magisterial Protestants casting their lonely eyes toward the state church of the medieval era. Another, a strict separationism which flinches at any intersection of Christianity and government. Ironically it is traditional Baptist theology, as confessed by Baptists, that might serve as an alternative to these, in the view of this author, aberrant approaches.³

WHAT BAPTISTS ARE SAYING

Backus's words, quoted above, which separate civil government from ecclesial government, were echoed in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, ratified 16 years later: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

The federal government must not favor one religious tradition over another, nor may it interfere in the inner workings of a religion. Baptists can reasonably draw these beliefs from Scripture, particularly Jesus's words in the gospels (Matt. 22, Mark 12, Luke 20). The Lord declares some goods are appropriate to "render to Caesar," while others, such as the conscience, belong only to God. Paul makes the same distinction between ecclesial and civil government in 1 Timothy 2, urging his young protégé to plead for space between the state and the church.

Historic Baptist confessions have reflected this biblical theme of separation. The Second London Confession reads:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his word, or not contained in it. So that to believe such doctrines, or obey such commands out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of an implicit faith, an absolute and blind

³Jonathan Leeman, "A Baptist Third Way for Political Theology," *Mere Orthodoxy* (2022; accessed November 25, 2024, <https://mereorthodoxy.com/baptist-third-way-politics>).

obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience and reason also.⁴

This sentiment is echoed in the Philadelphia Confession (1742), as well as in the New Hampshire Confession (1883) and subsequent confessions. The 1925 Baptist Faith and Message builds on these with its article on religious liberty:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and he has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are contrary to his Word or not contained in it. Church and state should be separate. The state owes to the church protection and full freedom in the pursuit of its spiritual ends. In providing for such freedom no ecclesiastical group or denomination should be favored by the state more than others. Civil government being ordained of God, it is the duty of Christians to render loyal obedience thereto in all things not contrary to the revealed will of God. The church should not resort to the civil power to carry on its work. The gospel of Christ contemplates spiritual means alone for the pursuit of its ends. The state has no right to impose penalties for religious opinions of any kind. The state has no right to impose taxes for the support of any form of religion. A free church in a free state is the Christian ideal, and this implies the right of free and unhindered access to God on the part of all men, and the right to form and propagate opinions in the sphere of religion without interference by the civil power.

The 1963 and 2000 renditions of the Baptist Faith and Message essentially copy the 1925 confession's article on religious liberty.⁵ This robust language, common in all three versions, both warns the church not to "resort to the civil power to carry out its work," and warns the state not to "impose penalties for religious opinions of any kind." Perhaps the most important phrase in this confession helps Baptists understand what to

⁴"Of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience," in the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689).

⁵The religious liberty article was numbered XVIII in the 1925 version, XVII and in the 1963 and 2000 versions. "Comparison Chart - The Baptist Faith and Message" (accessed November 25, 2024, <https://bfm.sbc.net/comparison-chart/>).

seek in the exercise of their citizenship: “A free church in a free state is the Christian ideal.” This does not prescribe but necessarily implies a society of ordered liberty where the church is not hindered from her mission and where the church refuses to use the state to coerce belief.

WHAT BAPTISTS ARE NOT SAYING

Just as important as what Baptists, both in Backus’s day and in our day, are saying is what we are *not* saying. Baptists are not advocating that Christians withdraw from society, nor are Baptists advocating that Christians should stop influencing their government based on Christian principles. One only needs to read of Isaac Backus’s work with Thomas Jefferson and James Madison to pass the Bill of Rights in 1791 to dispel that myth.⁶

Our Southern Baptist confession contains a robust clause on Christian social involvement. Article 15 of the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message reads this way:

All Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society. Means and methods used for the improvement of society and the establishment of righteousness among men can be truly and permanently helpful only when they are rooted in the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. In the spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, and vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography. We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. We should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death. Every Christian should seek to bring industry, government, and society as a whole under the sway of the principles of righteousness, truth, and brotherly love. In order to promote these ends Christians should be ready to work with all men of good will in any

⁶Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (Basic Books, 2010); Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* (B&H, 2015).

good cause, always being careful to act in the spirit of love without compromising their loyalty to Christ and His truth.

Baptists have eagerly engaged in active citizenship for the duration of the American experiment and have boasted of their members on city councils, in statehouses, and in governor's mansions, as well as in the White House. As of this writing, the current speaker of the United States House of Representatives is Mike Johnson, a lifelong Southern Baptist. He is joined in our nation's Congress by several Southern Baptists, both in the House and in the Senate. Southern Baptists continue to fund a Washington D. C. office to advance Southern Baptist priorities such as religious liberty, human dignity, and international religious freedom. Despite the hysterical media outcries, these are not theocratic moves.

Some confuse Baptist beliefs on religious liberty with a strict separationism, advocating for a secularizing of the public square.⁷ Richard John Neuhaus aptly rendered this project theoretically impossible:

When . . . religious values and the institutions that bear them are excluded, the inescapable need to make public moral judgments will result in an elite construction of a normative morality from sources and principles not democratically recognized by the society. The truly naked public square is at best a transitional phenomenon. It is a vacuum waiting to be filled.⁸

The intent of Backus and his contemporaries was not to strip government of Christianity, force Christians out of government, or create a value-free public square. Their intention was to protect the church from government overreach and to prevent the establishment of a state church. Backus elsewhere advocated a "sweet harmony" between church and state. He also advocated for Christians to bring Christian ideals to bear on public policy.⁹

Backus understood that a thick, though uninhibited, Christianity was necessary for the survival of ordered liberty: "Rulers, ministers and people,

⁷Richard Land, *The Divided States of America? What Liberals and Conservatives Are Missing in the God-and-Country Shouting Match!* (Thomas Nelson, 2010).

⁸Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Eerdmans, 1984), 86.

⁹Isaac Backus, *A Fish Caught in His Own Net. An Examination of Nine Sermons, from Matt. 16. 18. Published Last Year, by Mr Joseph Fish of Stonington* (1768).

ought to improve all their influence, in their several stations, to promote and support true religion by gospel means and methods ... it surely is of infinite importance, that every lover of our dear country, be in earnest to have it saved from such iniquity, and from such ruin."¹⁰

It is good, therefore, and not against Baptist ideals, for America's founding documents to acknowledge that natural rights come from God.

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Three centuries after the birth of Isaac Backus, the country he helped to found faces its own challenges. The United States of America requires a robust Baptist political theology that both draws on our historic inheritance and is applied to new threats against freedom of conscience.

One threat comes from the collision of religious liberty with the sexual revolution, whereby individual Christians and Christian organizations are pressed to violate their consciences. One example includes the forcing of Christian foster care and adoption agencies to abandon their beliefs about marriage to help place children in healthy families. Another example includes Christian institutions of higher education being pushed to modify their beliefs on sexual ethics to receive accreditation or participate in student loan programs. In a sense, these reflect attempts to establish a new religious orthodoxy, one that violates historic Christian beliefs.

Thankfully, the twenty-first century has witnessed successful jurisprudence, at the Supreme Court level, to maintain the social space that the Founders intended for people of faith. Yet Baptists must be vigilant and continue to be active in defending the rights, not only of Christians, but of all faiths, to practice freely.

Another threat comes from the small, but persistent chorus of self-proclaimed Christian nationalists¹¹ and Catholic integralists¹² who, dissatisfied with the fruits of modernity and decaying cultural norms, grow wistful for a new social arrangement with a more robustly Christian form of government. Many of these conversations are confined to the academy and niche online audiences, but they are gaining purchase among a younger

¹⁰Isaac Backus, *Government and Liberty Described; and Ecclesiastical Tyranny Exposed* (1778). Cf. "The local churches that Baptists everywhere cherish find greater security with a government that sees them as fundamental to its organizing principles, not potential threats." Flynn Evans, "Against Strict Separationism: The Viability of a (Civilly) Christian State in Baptist Perspective," *The London Lyceum* (accessed May 13, 2023, <https://thelondonlyceum.com/against-strict-separationism-viability/>).

¹¹Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2022).

¹²Patrick Deneen, *Regime Change: Towards a Postliberal Future* (Swift Press, 2023).

generation of pastors and academics. Baptists should meet this challenge, not with rank hostility to the genuine problems raised by our interlocutors, but with both a vigorous defense of religious liberty and an articulation of what robust citizenship looks like in an increasingly pluralistic age.

The final threat is related. While Baptists are rightly hesitant to claim the American experiment in ordered liberty makes the United States a “Christian nation,”¹³ we should not hesitate to accept that Christian ideals played a major role in shaping America.¹⁴ Furthermore, Baptists must not shy away from encouraging a sober yet active engagement in the culture in order to shape laws that affect the flourishing of our neighbors.¹⁵ Baptists cannot merely stand athwart the culture and yell “Backus.” We must be active in preserving, as “salt” and “light” (Matt. 5:13-16), the democracy bestowed upon us.

Ultimately, however, our culture will not “Christianize” through public policy, however important that is. Instead, we must be committed, through faithful obedience, to fulfill our God-given responsibility in the Great Commission. Evangelism, church planting, and discipleship in the power of the Spirit will prompt the most transformative renewal of American life.

¹³Ian M. Giatti, “Being a Patriotic American Doesn’t Make You a ‘Christian Nationalist’: Dr. Richard Land Weighs in on the Debate,” *Christian Post* (2022; <https://www.christianpost.com/news/being-a-patriotic-american-doesnt-make-you-a-christian-nationalist.html>).

¹⁴Mark David Hall, *Did America Have a Christian Founding? Separating Modern Myth from Historical Truth* (Thomas Nelson, 2020).

¹⁵Daniel Darling and Malcolm B. Yarnell III, “Sufficiency of Scripture and Public Theology,” in David S. Dockery and Yarnell, eds., *The Authority and Sufficiency of Scripture*, revised and expanded ed. (Seminary Hill Press, 2024).