

Understanding Separation of Church and State

Pastor Jim Altar wrote in his book "Why Baptist":

Because most Baptists don't understand the Baptist (or Biblical) distinctive of Separation of Church and State, neither do most Americans. It is hard for Americans to understand the significance of this distinctive because of the liberty we now enjoy. It is not a political opinion but rather it is a doctrine from the Word of God that is the basis of our freedom. The misinterpretation of this doctrine has iced America's bobsled ride into humanistic paganism and ungodliness.

The real meaning of the Separation of Church and State was a promise made to the Baptists. The Separation of Church and State" is **not found** in the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution of the United States or in the Bill of Rights. **The phrase is found in a letter from Thomas Jefferson written to the Danbury Baptist Association of Virginia.** The reason for the letter is obvious if you know the Baptist history of America. Jefferson assured these baptized believers that no church denomination would become established as the national religion. America would not be as Europe and establish a national church, persecuting those that did not conform. Roger Williams first used the phrase, "wall of separation." The day after President Jefferson wrote his famous letter to the Baptists of Danbury, Connecticut, describing the wall of separation between church and state, Jefferson went to hear his friend John Leland preach the Sunday service that was being held in the treasury building. Our forefathers had no problem with using the Capitol or the treasury building or any other government building for preaching services because they wanted the Bible to influence the government and the people. Separation of church and state is a biblical, Baptist distinctive. It is rooted in Scripture. When separation of church and state is denied in history the consequence is tyranny, bloodshed, spiritual darkness and hatred for soul liberty.

The separation of church and state is the belief that the state should have no dealing with the church in enforcing religious policies, traditions or doctrines. The power of the church is to come from its eternal head Jesus Christ. The power of the church is not supposed to come from temporal and earthly governments. If a church unites or marries a government or earthly power, it becomes a whore church. The basis for Separation of Church and State is found in another of our Baptist distinctives, individual soul liberty. A proper understanding of soul liberty is vital to our explanation of separation of church and state. (*see "Soul Liberty Article for Master's Degree"*)

We have heard over and over again that, "there is no such thing as separation of church and state." Protestant David Barton even wrote a book entitled *The Myth of Separation*. If describing the kind of separation the secularists are promoting in the media, then this is true; separation of church and state from that view is a myth. To the secularist our Constitution calls for freedom from religion, not freedom of religion. But the shining city on a hill dreamed of by the New England Puritans is an Augustinian concept first espoused by him in his book *City of God*. This concept calls for government to enforce the Ten Commandments. This may sound good, but how do you legislate an individual's heart or what he believes?

The Ten Commandments or The Law is divided into two tables. All Christians would agree that the second table of the law must be legislated, i.e. "Thou shalt not kill," etc. But how do you enforce the first table of the law?

1. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

2. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.
3. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

The Puritans, such as Cotton Mather and John Winthrop, wanted to enforce these commandments with laws. The problem is, you can mandate a person's behavior, but you cannot mandate their heart or conscience. "Persecution makes hypocrites of us all," is a quote that we have heard often, but because of God's grace, most of us have never had to experience the kind of persecution that produces hypocrites.

Prior to the New Testament or Christian age, conquering powers generally imposed their religious views on the nations or peoples they conquered. Religion has the power to unite and it also has the power to divide, so the reasons for governmental usurpation of religious power may vary anywhere from devotion, to self-preservation, to self-promotion, or any combination of the above. In God's plan for His people, the Jews, He established a *theocracy*, which is a government with only God as its head. The priests heard from God and communicated to the people. Eli failed to restrain his sons, shaking the confidence of the people of the priesthood. Samuel learned his parenting skills from Eli bringing more reproach on God's plan, the result being a national call for a king. (1 Samuel 2, 8) God gave the people what they wanted, King Saul. This was a disaster for the children of Israel. For every righteous king there are many more unrighteous kings; and this, combined with the sin of the people, eventually lead to the destruction of the Jewish kingdoms and scattering of the Jews.

When Christ came as the Jewish Messiah, the Jews wanted Him to free them from the Roman yoke as a political leader, but they were not willing to accept Him first as the Son of God, and then, as their national deliverer. They rejected Him, ushering in the church or Christian age and bringing an end to the Old Testament *theocracy*. The church was established by Christ during His earthly ministry, empowered at Pentacost, and ordered and structured under the Apostle Paul. Jesus taught that there are two distinct kingdoms of which He is Lord: the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God. The kingdom of heaven is the literal physical kingdom He will establish on this earth, otherwise known as the Millennial Kingdom. This is the kingdom John the Baptist was announcing. This is the kingdom Jesus will rule with a rod of iron. The second kingdom, of which Christ spoke, is the kingdom of God. "*Neither shall they say, Lo here! Or lo there! for behold, the kingdom of God is within you.*" Luke 17:21 Jesus described it as being in the hearts of men. Paul gives us further inspired revelation on the subject, "*For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.*" Romans 14:7

God revealed the mystery of the church to Paul in Ephesians 3. In God's revelation to him, Paul identifies the distinct roles of the state and the church in Romans 13:1-7. God has given the sword to the State (human government), and we are to submit to the government that God ordains over us. Peter and the apostles give us the line which government cannot cross in Acts 5:29; it is the line of God's command, verses the commands of men. The New Testament church refused to disobey the Lord in order to satisfy the state. In the book of Acts, the New Testament church was always the object of persecution by the state. Human law or government was begun of necessity to protect three things.

1. Their person
2. Their property
3. Their freedom

There are different powers. When the Bible says that we are to be subject to the higher powers, It is not suggesting that we be subject to just one of them. It is saying that we are to be subject to all of the higher powers. We are to obey the higher powers in the proper proportion of their power. Our first allegiance is to God. Our second allegiance is to our country, then to our state, our county and our city. They are all higher powers, but they are not all equal powers. Our first allegiance is to be to the highest power. If government requires us to violate the clear teaching of Scripture, we must obey God rather than men.

So, there are two clear institutions, the State and the church, ordained by God, each with its own delineated responsibilities. Broader Christianity lost this clear distinction with the marriage of the church and state that took place under Constantine, the Roman ruler who, after a spurious conversion experience, attempted to marry the church with the state to use the unifying power of religion to save the divided Roman empire. The offspring of this adulterous marriage in 313 A.D. was a monstrosity, the Roman Catholic institution. Satan was her spiritual father, Constantine was her governmental father, and Augustine was her religious or theological father. Augustine appealed to the Roman government for help in eradicating the Donatists, an early Baptist group.

“It is now full time for the emperor to provide for the safety of the Catholic Church, and prevent those rash men from terrifying the people, whom they cannot seduce. We think it is as lawful for us to ask assistance against them, as it was for Paul to employ a military force against the conspiracy of factious men.” (David Benedict, *History of the Donatists*)

Nowhere in Scripture did Paul ask for a military force to do this! Augustine imagined this fairy tale and labeled it Scripture in order to support his nefarious ends. From this point on, the Roman Catholic institution pursued, with demonic zeal, any who dared interpret the Scriptures for themselves.

“We order those who follow this doctrine to receive the title of Catholic Christians, but others we judge to be mad and raving and worthy of incurring the disgrace of heretical teaching, nor are their assemblies to receive the name of churches. They are to be punished not only by Divine retribution but also by our own measures, which we have decided in accordance with Divine inspiration.” (Edict of the Emperors Gratian, Valentinian II and Theodosius I, February 27, 380.)

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The “church”-state monstrosity then persecuted Bible-believing Christians in diabolical way which supposedly scriptural mandate. This persecution continued on for twelve hundred years! Then, beginning with John Wycliffe and continuing with Jan Hus and Girolamo Savonarola, godly men began throwing off the error of the Roman system, culminating with the Reformation of the Catholic “church” by Martin Luther on October 31, 1517.

Historians love to extol the virtues of the Reformers, but this ignores one major problem: the Catholic “church” did not need to be *reformed*, it needed to be *rejected*. (Titus 3:10-11) Because they ignored this and other Scriptural mandates the reformers *remained Catholic* in many areas.

The Catholics taught what is known as *Replacement Theology*. This is the teaching that the church has replaced Israel in God’s plan for the ages. This is why Jews have been persecuted by Catholics through the centuries. During the Crusades, the Catholics killed Moslems in the holy land, but they also killed as many

Jews as they could. What they were trying to do was establish Christ's Kingdom on this earth. The error here is very simple; *we* do not establish Christ's Kingdom, *Christ* will establish His kingdom when He returns!

Luther remained Catholic in his views on replacement theology, personally teaching and writing against the Jews, leading to terrible anti-Semitism and ultimately to the Holocaust. Ideas have consequences, He enabled this vehement anti-Semitism to become entrenched in German society, paving the way for Hitler's *Final Solution*. Luther wrote a book called, *The Jews and Their Lies*. (York, S.C.: Reprinted by Liberty Bell Publications, 2004) In it, he gives his solution to the Jewish problem: burn down their synagogues, burn down their houses and have them live in barns, burn their Talmudic and other writings, forbid their rabbis on pain of death from teaching Judaism, refuse them safe travel, forbid them to loan money, take away their gold and silver, require them to do menial, physical labor for gentiles to put them in their place. This hideous behavior is acknowledged by Protestants but is generally glossed over with silly statements such as, "he was a man of his times." Make no mistake here. Luther's opinions were not written as a foolish young monk. This abominable treatise was one of the last things he wrote before his death at the age of 63.

Luther and the other reformers, Calvin and Zwingli, remained catholic on the subject of the "church"-state marriage. Huldrych Zwingli, the "great" reformer in Switzerland, had many Baptists killed. His position on this is modeled in the famous statue on the Limmat River in Zurich, Switzerland. It depicts him holding a Bible and a sword. His sword represents the control he wielded in human government. With this power he killed many of our Baptist forefathers and their families.

A chilling example of the way Protestant "church" historians feel about church-state issues is found in the opinion of Philip Schaff. Volume eight of his *History of the Christian Church*, describes Zwingli's execution of Baptist preachers and their families. Referring to the execution of Felix Manz, "Manz was the first victim. He was bound, carried to a boat, and thrown into the river Limmat near the lake, January 5, 1527. He praised God that he was about to die for the truth, and prayed with a loud voice, 'Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit!'"

Schaff writes, "It is not known whether Zwingli really consented to the death sentence, but he certainly did not openly oppose it."

"Capito of Strassburg was disturbed by the execution of Manz, who had died so heroically, as reported; but Zwingli assured him that the magistracy condemned him to death reluctantly and from necessity. This is, of course, *unsatisfactory*. *Banishment* in this case as in that of Servetus, *would have been severe enough*.

Unsatisfactory? Banishment would have been *severe enough*? Severe enough for what? This is a tacit endorsement of church-state persecution!

As the Reformation spread to other countries, so did the persecution of Baptists by Catholic and Reformed alike. The II Diet of Speyer (1529) in Germany was legislative assembly, convened for the purpose of repudiating the Reformation gains of the I Diet of Speyer (1526) in that country. In this document (the written decision of the assembly) we find: "Whereas it is ordered and provided in common [i.e., canon] law that no man, having once been baptized according to Christian order, shall let himself be baptized again or for the second time, nor shall he baptize any such and especially is it forbidden in the imperial law to do such on pain of death...Notwithstanding, we find daily that despite the cited common law and also Our mandate...this our sect of Anabaptism, condemned and forbidden many centuries ago, day by day makes greater inroads and is getting the upper hand. In order to prevent such evil and what may proceed from it, to preserve the peace and unity of the Holy Empire, as well as to dispel all dispute and doubt about the punishment for rebaptism..., We

therefore renew the previous imperial law, as well as Our above-named imperial mandate,...that...every Anabaptist and rebaptized man and woman of the age of reason shall be condemned and brought from natural life into death by fire, sword, and the like, according to the person, without proceeding by the inquisition of the spiritual judges; and let the same pseudo-preachers, instigators, vagabonds, and tumultuous inciters of the said vice of Anabaptism, also whoever remains in it, and those who fall a second time, let them all by no means be shown mercy but instead be dealt with on the power of this constitution and edict earnestly with punishment.” (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7, 1882)

This edict was opposed in writing by the Reformers. Those who participated in this opposition to the II Diet of Speyer were called **Protestants**. One small issue is missing from their protestations; they did not protest the killing of the Anabaptists, but agreed with it as evidenced by Zwingli in Switzerland.

The Reformation made its way to England through Henry VIII. Henry had no real problem with the Catholic “church” other than the authority of the Pope; the Pope would not allow him to divorce his wife. Henry took over control of the “church” establishing the Anglican “church” which remained Catholic in its theology. The “church” of England wobbled back and forth between Catholic and Protestant depending on the personal views of the king or queen. Baptists were persecuted by both.

“Henry VIII was already interested in the extermination of the Baptists, and his zeal extended to foreign lands. He extended his help in exterminating the Baptists in Germany (Gardiner, Letters and Papers of Henry VIII, VII. 167).

“The interest of the king was not confined to Germany. In the same year a royal proclamation was issued, in which it is said that many strangers are coming into this realm, who, “though they were baptized in their infancy, yet have, in contempt of the holy sacrament of baptism, rebaptized themselves. They are ordered to depart out of the realm in twelve days, under pain of death.” (John T. Christian, *A History of the Baptists*, vol. I)

Only truly sad result of our failure to study Baptist history is the promotion and endorsement of these Baptist-hating Protestant leaders. We hear often of Latimer and Ridley, Anglican priests who were burned to death by Bloody Mary. But what did Hugh Latimer think of the Baptist, and how did he view their burning? Here is the answer in Latimer’s own words: “The Anabaptists that were burnt here in divers towns in England as I have heard of credible men, I saw them not myself, went to their death, even intrepid, as ye will say, without any fear in the world, cheerfully. **Well, let them go** (Latimer, Sermons, I. 143).

When confronted with this information, fundamentalists sometimes respond, “Well they did a lot of good things too,” and “they were willing to die for their faith.” Let us examine these opinions in the light of Scripture.

1 Corinthians 13:3, “*And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.*”

Bishop Nicholas Ridley presided in the trials of people charged with heresy, condemning many as heretics, knowing the result of this condemnation would be that the condemned would have his body tied to a post and burned as chunks of flesh fell into the flame until the “heretic” finally died. Regardless of what else these men did, they have earned our censure, not our admiration or praise. (Romans 16:17)

The persecution continued in England causing many dissenters to flee the country. Thomas Helwys was such a dissenter. He joined the separatist group led by John Smyth, who took his congregation to the Netherlands. Jack Hoad writes, “...leaving his own wife and family behind. Mrs. Helwys was imprisoned at York by the

ecclesiastical authorities, because Broxtow Hall (their home) had been used as meeting place for “dissenters” and she must have been party to her husband’s escape.”

In the Netherlands, the church eventually became educated in Baptist doctrine. Helwys became pastor of the church and was troubled by the dearth of leadership among the Baptists of England. He bravely led his church back to London in 1612. He wrote a book, *The Mystery of Iniquity*, demonstrating that the king has no right to rule the “church of England.” Hoad quotes his dedication, “Hear O king, and despise not the counsel of the poor and let their complaints come before thee. The king is mortal and not God; therefore hath no power over the immortal souls of his subjects to make laws and ordinances for them and to set spiritual lords over them. If the king hath authority to make spiritual laws and lords, then his is an immortal God and not mortal man. O King, be not seduced by deceivers to sin against God whom thou oughtest to obey, nor against thy poor subjects who ought and will obey thee in all things with body, life and goods, or else let their lives be taken from the earth. God save the King!” (Jack Hoad, *The Baptist*, 88)

His thanks for writing this was to be in the Newgate prison where he died of privation sometime before 1616. His above cited writing is a tremendous discourse on need for the separation of church and state.

Edward Wightman was a Baptist preacher in England who was charged with believing: “The baptism of infants to be an abominable custom; that the Lord’s Supper and baptism should not be celebrated as they are now practiced in the Church of England; and that Christianity is not wholly professed and preached in the Church of England, but only in part.” (William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopaedia*, 1241)

For this heinous crime, Wightman was ordered by King James I to be burned, and so he was. “His body was reduced to ashes on the 11th of April, 1612, at Lichfield. And he died so cheerfully that he gathered a harvest of glory from the blazing fagots that consumed his body, and from the same fierce flames James reaped a harvest of infamy, which stopped all future fiery sacrifices during his reign.” (William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopaedia*, 1241)

Edward Wightman had five grandsons who fled to America. Cathcart adds, “...all of whom were Baptists, - two were preachers, two deacons, and one a private member. Valentine was ordained in Rhode Island; removed to Groton, Connecticut, in 1705, and planted the First Baptist church, - the first in the town and the first in the State; he afterwards assisted Rev. Nicholas Eyres, from 1712 to 1714, in planting the first Baptist church in the city and State of New York...” (William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopaedia*, 1241)

Church-State Relations In America

After Edward Wightman, a Baptist preacher in England, who was burned at the stake by order of King James I, his five grandsons fled to America. One of those was Valentine Wightman.

To twenty-first century minds, Valentine Wightman’s accomplishment in establishing the first Baptist church in Connecticut and helping establish the first Baptist church in New York reads like mildly interesting history. Because of the fact that so many Baptist churches exist in America, this information is often received as mere Baptist nostalgia. This is because we do not know the price that was paid by our Baptist forefathers in Connecticut and New York. Isaac Backus is one of the most important figures in the pursuit of religious liberty in America. His mother, Elizabeth, wrote him the following letter. (Imagine receiving such a letter from *your* mother.)

Dear Son:

I have heard something of the trials among you of late, and I was grieved till I had strength to give up the case to God, and leave my burden there. And now I would tell you something of our trials. Your brother Samuel lay in prison twenty days. October 15 the collector came to our house and took me away to prison about nine o'clock, in a dark rainy night. [Denison adds, "she was sick, and, thickly wrapped in clothes to produce perspiration, sat near the fire by her stand, reading the family Bible. The officer thought that, under the circumstances, she would yield and pay the rates. But Mrs. Backus was not the woman to abandon her religious principles.] Brothers Hill and Sabin were brought there next night. We lay in prison thirteen days, and then were set at liberty, by what means, I know not. Whilst I was there a great many people came to see me; and some said one thing, and some another. O, the innumerable snares and temptations that beset me; more than I ever thought of before! But, O, the condescension of Heaven! Though I was bound when I was cast into the furnace, ye was I loosed, and found Jesus in the midst of the furnace with me. O, then I could give up my name, estate, family, life and breadth, freely to God. Now the prison looked like a palace to me. I could bless God for all the laughs and scoffs made at me. O, the love that flowed out to all mankind! Then I could forgive, as I would desire to be forgiven, and love my neighbor as myself. Deacon Griswold was put in prison the 8th of October, and yesterday old brother Grover; and (officers) are in pursuit of others; all which calls for humiliation. This Church hath appointed the 13 of November to be spent in prayer and fasting on that account. I do remember my love to you and your wife, and the dear children of God with you, begging your prayers for us in such a day of trial.

These from your loving mother.

Elizabeth Backus.

This was Norwich, Connecticut, November 4th, 1752. Mrs. Backus and others had been arrested for refusing to pay a tax that had been levied by the State to fund the State church. Imagine what Wightman had faced. This is America! Dissenters in colonial America had no religious liberty. One other illustration is in order. In 1744 in Saybrook, Connecticut, a Baptist church was formed. Denison records the event: "In February, fourteen persons were arrested in this place for holding a Baptist meeting; the charge brought against them was 'for holding a meeting contrary to law, on God's holy Sabbath day.' They were arraigned, tried, fined, and driven on foot, through deep mud, to New London, a distance of twenty-five miles, and thrust into prison, without fire, food or beds, where they remained, enduring dreadful sufferings for several weeks, and probably would all have perished, had not some Baptist brethren residing in New London, Great Neck, carried them provisions."

The Saybrook congregation was organized as a Baptist church in July following.

The Connecticut charter of 1662 allowed the government to establish laws and penalties: "For the directing, ruling and disposing of all other Matters and things, whereby Our said People Inhabitants there, may be so religiously, peaceably and civilly governed, as their good Life and orderly Conversation may win and invite the Natives of the Country to the Knowledge and Obedience of the only true GOD, and He Saviour of Mankind, and the Christian Faith, which... is the only and principal End of this Plantation." (Charter of Connecticut 1662)

This is exactly what the founders were trying to avoid with the famed establishment clause of the First Amendment which reads, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." The Connecticut Charter was not changed until a new State Constitution was adopted in 1818, *forty-two years* after the declaration of independence and *twenty-nine years* after our national Constitution was ratified! It is no

coincidence that the religious liberty clause of the new Connecticut Constitution of 1818, was written by Asahel Morse, pastor of the Baptist church in Suffield, Connecticut.

The Baptists in colonial America longed for freedom and liberty. Men like Obadiah Holmes, John Clarke, Henry Dunster and John Crandall all suffered at the hand of the State church. Dr. John Clarke established the first Baptist church in America at Portsmouth, Road Island, and then traveled to England to petition the throne for a new charter for the colony. He labored at this for more than twelve years, finally securing the famous Portsmouth Rhode Island Charter of 1663, which granted such religious liberty that parliament questioned whether the King, Charles II, even had the authority to grant such a charter.

This began a new day in the world. At long last, an economy was established where a man could worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience, without fear of government coercion.

This happened in 1663; finally, freedom was born in Rhode Island! But in the rest of the colonies, liberty, the yearning of the free man's heart, was stubbornly out of reach. Remember, ***Elizabeth Backus wrote her letter in 1752.*** There is not enough room here to tell the whole story, but God did intervene! To briefly summarize the hand of God in our freedom we submit the following examples.

Thomas Jefferson was influenced by visiting the business meetings of the Buck Mountain Baptist Church in Albemarle County, Virginia, pastored by Andrew Tribble. During a meal at Jefferson's home, Pastor Tribble asked Mr. Jefferson what he thought of his church's government. Jefferson stated that he thought it would be the perfect form of government for the new nation.

Patrick Henry defended imprisoned Baptist preachers in Virginia.

James Madison was influenced by the great Baptist preacher, John Leland. Leland persuaded Madison that the only way the Baptist of Virginia would support the new Constitution was on the guarantee of a religious freedom amendment, now famously known as the First Amendment.

The day after President Jefferson wrote his famous letter to the Baptists of Danbury, Connecticut, describing the wall of separation between church and state, (they were understandably concerned) Jefferson went to hear his friend John Leland preach the Sunday service that was being held in the treasury building. These men courageously stood for right and valiantly fought for the liberty now codified in our Bill of Rights.

Separation of church and state is a biblical, Baptist distinctive. It is rooted in Scripture. When denied in history the consequence is tyranny, bloodshed, spiritual darkness and hatred for soul liberty. May we as Bible-believing Baptists ever hold to this vital distinctive.