



# The Baptist MESSENGER INSIGHT

## RELIGIOUS LIBERTY ★★ AT RISK! ★★ PERSPECTIVES ON OUR MOST CHERISHED FREEDOM & ITS FUTURE

### Religious freedom & Christian faith



**Timothy George**

Founding Dean, Beeson Divinity School  
Samford University; One of the drafters of  
the Manhattan Declaration

When Chuck Colson, Robert George, and I drafted the Manhattan Declaration back in 2009, some people questioned why we had chosen to include religious freedom, along with the sanctity of life and the integrity of marriage, as one of the three most pressing moral issues of our time. Life is sacred, and matrimony is holy, they said, but isn't religious freedom just another "political" tenet?

It is true that there is a political dimension to religious freedom. Indeed, it is the "first" freedom enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Freedom of religion precedes, and is the basis of other freedoms enumerated there: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right to peaceably assemble, and the right to petition for a governmental redress of grievances. We can give thanks to God that in the charter documents of our country the American founders put in place these precious freedoms. They have served as a bulwark for the flourishing of our Republic across the years. They still constitute a crucial barrier to the totalitarian temptation which may be more present today than at any previous time in our history.

But long before the Constitution was written, or America was discovered, Christians have confessed that "God alone is Lord of the conscience." They have declared that no one should be compelled to embrace any religion against his will, be forbidden to worship God accord-

ing to the dictates of conscience, or be prevented from freely and publicly expressing deeply-held religious convictions. And this applies not only to individuals, but to churches and other religious communities as well.

Religious freedom is not merely political; it is pre-political. As a fundamental, "unalienable" right, it existed before the state. Religious freedom did not begin in modern times. Rooted in the biblical understanding of human dignity and freedom, it is a part of what it means to be created in the image of God.

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A just government is called to recognize and protect the religious freedoms that have been built into human nature by God. Christians know—even if secular theorists deny it—that religious liberty is grounded in the very character of God as revealed in the Bible, and in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, Himself. But we do not claim religious freedom for ourselves only. It applies to all persons everywhere. That is why we affirm, on the authority of the Bible, religious freedom for all, even as we are prepared to defend such freedom

in public life through arguments drawn from reason as well as revelation.

Today, religious freedom is under assault as Christians face harassment and persecution in many countries around the world. According to the World Evangelical Alliance, Christians are "the largest single group in the world . . . being denied human rights on the basis of their faith." But, religious freedom is also being encroached upon and threatened here in the United States. Both the courts and the administrative and regulatory policies are directing the coercive power of the state against Christian believers because of their conscientious adherence to the most sacred principles of their faith.

From the beginning of our history, Baptists have been among the staunchest supporters of religious liberty. Today, as never before, we are called to join with other Christians, and indeed with all persons of goodwill, to seek the renewal of religious freedom in our culture. Just expressing our opinion is not enough. We are called to take a stand. We are called to make a commitment and to

proclaim the "costly grace" we have freely received in Jesus Christ. You can do exactly that by joining hundreds of thousands of believing Christians who have signed the Manhattan Declaration ([www.manhattandeclaration.com](http://www.manhattandeclaration.com)). This declaration of conscience concludes with these words: "We will fully and ungrudgingly render to Caesar what is Caesar's. But under no circumstances will we render to Caesar what is God's."

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# Religious liberty imperiled



**Richard Land**  
President of Southern Evangelical Seminary in Charlotte, N.C.

Historically, Baptists have claimed an almost proprietary credit for the concept of religious liberty or “soul freedom.” Both in 17th Century America and England, it was the Baptists who championed “soul freedom” and who insisted that a man or a woman’s relationship to his or her God was too sacred to allow any coercive interference from king, government, or ecclesiastical authority. Roger Williams rightly called such interference “soul rape.”

Many have, I believe, rightly regarded the concept of “soul freedom,” or religious liberty, to be the unique Baptist gift to the Reformation heritage. It is true that John Land and his fellow Baptists’ insistence on Constitutional guarantees for freedom from government’s persecution of religious belief led to the adoption of the glorious First Amendment guarantee that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

There is great and growing danger that the government is, and will increasingly, suppress religious expression and belief of which it disapproves and thus will violate the Constitution’s “free exercise” clause, which guarantees the right to the free exercise of our faith according to the dictates of our own consciences as an “unalienable” right.

Today, Evangelicals and other conservative Christians face increasing discrimination because of their religious convictions. A vivid recent example of the nature of this discrimination is the case of the Benham brothers. The twin sons of well-known Evangelical leader “Flip” Benham were accused of being “anti-gay” extremists and had their upcoming reality show on the HGTV network cancelled after criticism from gay rights activists who accused the brothers of being anti-gay extremists for stating their biblical, Christian beliefs about homosexual behavior. This followed the earlier attempts (ultimately unsuccessful) to get Duck Dynasty removed from its TV network because of “anti-gay” comments by Phil Robertson.

George Barna’s research reveals that Americans in general “are becoming more hostile and negative toward Christianity” and that even in 2011 it was becoming increasingly difficult “to be the kind of Christian that Jesus longs to have as His ambassadors in this place, at this time” (Futurecast, x, and 125). It is already being suggested in psychiatric and psychological circles that “racism, sexism, and homophobia all be formally classified in one new DSM category as ‘intolerant personality disorder.’” (John S. Dickerson, *The Great Evangelical Recession*, 53).

The homosexual “thought police” are now out in force seeking to intimidate, ostracize, and socially marginalize anyone expressing politically incorrect convictions. People are now being asked, “Are you now, or have you ever been, opposed to same sex marriage?” If the answer is yes, then you are labeled a bigot and a hate monger, even if your convictions about same sex marriage and homosexual behavior are based on deeply-held religious convictions.

Let’s be clear! If the homosexual “thought police” achieve their goals, traditional biblical Christian beliefs about homosexuality would be made the equivalent of KKK-style racism, and such Christians will be socially, economically, and legally ostracized accordingly. It means social, educational, and professional licensure banishment for individual Christians and the loss of tax exempt status and increasing social and legal pressure on churches. The freedom of the pulpit (currently the most sacred “free speech zone” in America) might even be imperiled in the name of stopping “hate speech.”

The best way for Christians to defend themselves, their religious convictions, and their freedom of conscience against the accelerating hostility of an increasingly hostile secular culture is to speak the truth of the Gospel in love, proclaiming the timeless truths of the Christian faith, loving the sinner, while refusing to accept their sin as normal or acceptable to God.

May God give us the spirit of the prophet Jeremiah, that we may speak God’s truth to a sinful nation, but to do so with a tear in our eye and a catch in our voice as we grieve over the tragic consequences of the people’s spiritual and sexual rebellion against the God Who loves them.

Christians must also rally to the defense of their Christian brothers and sisters when they are attacked. The most certain way to lose our freedom is to be silent and not defend it. As the famous Nazi-era German pastor Martin Niemoller famously put it,

**“First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Socialist  
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.  
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Jew.  
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”**

**Speak out!**

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# Reclaiming America’s heritage of religious liberty



**E. Scott Pruitt**  
Oklahoma Attorney General; Deacon, Broken Arrow, First

Do we, too, need to be inspired to reclaim our heritage of freedom and liberty? America, let me remind you, “You are not who ‘they’ say you are; let me remind you who you really are.”

America, you are a nation that proclaims the law is greater than the king and that the president and every elected leader are constrained by it. America, you are a nation that recognizes the individual, not the collective, is empowered to pursue their own happiness. America, you are a nation that recognizes personal liberty. America, you recognize certain unalienable rights emanate as natural law from our Creator, not government, and therefore cannot be managed nor curtailed by government. First among these is the religious liberty, the right to live our faith publicly.

My friend, Russell Moore, noted during a recent visit to Oklahoma the transformative impact religious liberty has had on our country. From the abolition of slavery to the civil rights movement, religious liberty has motivated our nation to achieve and overcome injustice.

The date June 2, 1979, is not one that readily shows up in world history books. But like a lot of days and history itself, that June day, though unremarkable to observers at the time, would prove to be of historical significance nonetheless. On that date, Pope John Paul II embarked on a trip to his native Poland, marking the first time a Roman Catholic pontiff visited a Communist-ruled country. In remarking later about the Solidarity movement and its cause and effect on the collapse of communism, historians would say June 2, 1979 equaled the beginning of the end of Communism in Poland. Because it was on that date, the Pope shared a short statement and would do so repeatedly in 40 sermons thereafter, intended to inspire the Polish people toward courage and resistance to Soviet oppression. The statement ignited the flame of freedom by confronting the evils of Communism and the “culture of lies” it spewed to maintain power.

In his sermons the Pope proposed to the Polish people, “You are not who ‘they’ say you are, let me remind you who you really are.” The Pope’s statement reminded the people of their history of faith, which confronted the Communists’ lies of atheism, and of their history of freedom and liberty, turning back the Communists’ lies that the people existed to serve the state and their ultimate allegiance is to the furtherance of government power. The Pope spoke directly to the people at their core and equipped them with the truth of how they were individuals in a community and a nation that used to walk and live and worship and engage in commerce that was authentically Poland. This notion was contrary to the lies of the ruling Communist elites, and it enabled the people to persevere. It helped spawn the Solidarity movement, which would topple the Communist regime in Poland a mere decade later. Do these words have the same reach and relevance today?

At this moment in our history, political elites are preaching a “culture of lies” that is not authentic at the core and strays far from our founding. In America, we are experiencing a challenge to the truth about our culture. The political class seeks to prioritize the government over the citizen; the communal over the individual; and the collective good over personal liberty. We are told by the political class our faith is merely private. They say when our faith conflicts with claims of the state, our personal convictions must yield. Is it possible we have forgotten our essence as a nation and the special place we occupy in the plotline of history?

**Our religious liberty is under attack from a government seeking to subdue opposition.**

Yet our religious liberty is under attack from a government seeking to subdue opposition. Through millions of dollars in penalties, our government seeks to prohibit David Green and his family from freely exercising their beliefs. I am thankful for the courage of David and his family and humbled to have supported the Green family in rejecting an unjust government mandate. This case reminds the political class in Washington that there are fundamental rights guaranteed by our Constitution, including the foundational freedom to freely exercise our religion. This lawsuit stands up to the “culture of lies” pervading the media, the halls of academia and the Hollywood elites who say our faith is merely private and should not be proclaimed in the public square.

It is time for us to have a reminder of who we are as a nation. If the words of a great man can tear down the oppressive walls of Communism, what can they mean to a country struggling with the threatening overreach to its religious liberty? America, “You are not who they say you are; let me remind you who you really are.”

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# A conversation with Russell Moore about religious liberty

*Jason K. Allen, president of Midwestern Seminary, recently sat down with Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission President Russell Moore to discuss religious liberty and contemporary issues today.*



**ALLEN:** It is a real joy to have in the Spurgeon Room today Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. I know you speak to the topic of religious liberty on a daily basis, and write on it frequently. Tell us, what is religious liberty?



**MOORE:** Religious liberty is simply an application of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s, and render unto God that which is God’s,” which is saying there are some things that belong to God that do not belong to the government; they do not belong to Caesar. One of those things is the simple fact that the Gospel addresses every person personally, saying, “You will stand before the judgment seat

of Christ and give an account.” If the government cannot come in and stand for you, then that means you have an allegiance that is higher than the government when it comes to your soul and your conscience.

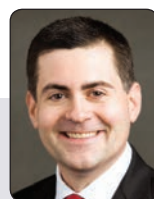
So, when we stand for religious liberty, we don’t just stand for religious liberty for ourselves. It is not as though we say, “Let’s try to get enough votes so conservative evangelicals have liberty or Southern Baptists have liberty, and we take that away from everyone else.” We are saying, “No, if we are Gospel people, then that means you cannot impose your religion on anyone else, because religion is not something you can have issued to you by the state; it has to happen by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

We do not want Muslims pretending to be Christians; we do not want secularists pretending to be Christians; we do not want Hindus pretending to be Christians. We want Muslims, Hindus, everyone else, who are genuinely expressing what they believe, so that we can seek to persuade them, through the power of the Spirit, to come to Christ.

Sometimes people talk about the establishment clause of the American Constitution that says the government cannot set up a church or religion, and the free exercise clause that the government cannot restrict the free exercise of religion. Really, those are not two separate clauses; they are the same thing. Whenever the government comes in and says, “You cannot freely practice and exercise your religion,” the government is setting up a religion of some sort or another. They are saying, “This is the religion we are giving you from the government.” So, we stand for religious liberty for everybody precisely because we do believe the Gospel.



**ALLEN:** As you unpack that a bit more, let’s say you are in your office, the phone rings, and your attention is drawn to a skirmish in South Dakota. You have to process the facts, ask certain questions, and make a pretty quick decision if this should have Russell Moore’s attention, evangelicals’ attention, and the broader community’s concern about religious liberty or not? What type of questions do you ask yourself about “skirmish X” to determine if it is really a legitimate concern or a person looking for a little news media coverage.



**MOORE:** The first thing is, is it true? That is the first question. Sometimes there will be people who claim, “I have a religious liberty violation,” who do not have a religious liberty violation. They are just someone in the military who says, “I am not allowed to express my religious beliefs,” but it is because they are trying to coerce their religious beliefs on a subordinate. I need to find out what the situation is. Is this really a factual rendering of the case?

Second, is this something that has implications for the rest of the community in some way or another, and what are those implications?

Third, is this an opportunity—even if it is a very isolated case—to teach and remind ourselves of why we value religious liberty? That is one of the reasons why I

am not simply involved in religious liberty cases as they apply to Christians. We are, for instance, working on situations in the prison system in Alabama where people who belong to a Native American religion—non-Christian—because of their belief system, have to wear their beards a certain length. We ought to find ways to accommodate that within the prison system as long as it is not a danger to safety and security. Why is that important? It is important because the government always comes in, restricting the rights of unpopular religious minorities, in order to then take over the ground of religion.

That is one of the reasons why sometimes Christians who, when a mosque starts to be built in their community, immediately think, let’s go and try to get

the board of supervisors of the city council to zone that mosque out of existence. There are a bunch of problems with that. One of them is, if you are going to win the Muslims in your community to Christ, the way you start is not by seeking to zone them out of existence.

Also, a government that can say, “This mosque is not coming here because it is Muslim,” is a government that is establishing a religion, and it is the very same government that, in due time, is going to turn around and say, “This evangelical church cannot be here because it is too close to an abortion clinic, and that is going to be bothering people who are going into the abortion clinic.”

The state does not need that power and should not have that power. We have to pay attention to what happens around the world, and stand up for religious minorities, even when we don’t agree with them.

My greater concern as a Gospel communicator—one who is seeking to be faithful to the Great Commission of the Gospel of Christ—is that I do not want, in any way, the proclamation of the Gospel to be stymied. That is my ultimate concern because we have a message that we actually believe people need to hear.

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## What the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message says on Religious Liberty (Article XVII):

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 every 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.

Read the Baptist Faith & Message at [sbc.net](http://sbc.net)

# Why religious liberty unites all Southern Baptists



**Russell Moore**

President, Ethics & Religious Liberty  
Commission of the Southern Baptist  
Convention

Over the years, Southern Baptists have had their differences, particularly when it comes to issues of the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. I think it's important, though, to consider how both the Calvinist and Arminian streams in Christian life bring important emphases together when it comes to one of the most important questions of our time: religious liberty.

Many of our early Baptist forebears were thoroughgoing Arminians, defining the freedom of the human will in libertarian terms. These include such heroes as Thomas Helwys, who fought against the government's mistaken belief that it could overrule the conscience.

Sometimes people caricature Arminians, and those who share some convictions with them. The Arminian tradition doesn't believe that the human will is naturally free in this fallen era. They believe that God graciously empowers human beings with the freedom to choose. Arminians are, above all people, opposed to manipulation.

They believe, after all, that the human will must make a free decision to follow Jesus or to walk away. That means a clear presentation of what the Gospel entails, with all the "cost-counting" that Jesus tells us about. This must be a personal, free decision, and can't be outsourced to or vetoed by some emperor or bishop or bureaucrat.

The Arminian tradition in Baptist life is committed to religious liberty because of their commitment to free de-

cision. Because God has created every conscience free, they say, no church or no state can compel someone to act contrary to conscience. This is an important point that ought to serve as a reminder even for those who don't agree on the theological details.

After all, whatever our theological system, all Christians affirm that all of us will stand in judgment. We will have no government agency, no denominational entity, standing there with us. We will stand with our consciences, and we can stand only with one Advocate, one Mediator. With that being the case, no government has the authority to impede God's purposes in readying us to give an account on that day.

**All Christians, even those who disagree on the theological details, should affirm religious liberty.**

The Calvinist tradition also has much to contribute to religious liberty. While many in the Reformed tradition have had an awful record when it comes to soul freedom, from Geneva to the Puritan colonies of New England, the same is not true in the Calvinist wing of the Baptist tradition. Many, including the English Particular Baptists and American Calvinist Baptists, such as Isaac Backus, were stalwart defenders of religious liberty. Why?

Well, like the Arminians, Calvinists are easy to caricature. Some assume they believe the will is like a computer program operated by God, or that the Gospel isn't freely offered to all people. Evangelical Calvinists believe in the free offer of the Gospel to all people, just as they believe in the universal command of the law of God. They believe that, left to ourselves, we will all run away from the law, and we will all run away from the Gospel. We see the light of Christ, and we hide, because, in our sin we don't want to meet our God.

The Calvinist doctrine of effectual calling means that the Spirit works through preaching to overturn the power of the devil, to liberate our wills so that we can see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. God doesn't overpower our wills; He frees us from occupation by the deceiving demonic powers.

This, too, has religious liberty implications, that again all Christians, even those who disagree on the theological details, should affirm. The Spirit convicts of sin; Caesar doesn't. That means one can't coerce faith into being or out of being with the threat of punishment, regardless of whether one is an Islamic ayatollah or a secularist parliament.

Some of us agree with the Arminians more on the "how" questions of salvation. Some of us agree more with the Calvinists. Many of us are somewhere in the middle. But we all believe that the government is not the ultimate sovereign and should not try to coerce free consciences. We stand united against that, and for another kingdom, the Kingdom of Christ.

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## Back to first principles



**Brian Hobbs**

Editor, Baptist Messenger

Southern Baptists have been described as "a people of the Book" to express our unwavering commitment to the Word of God. We have often said that our mission statement is the Great Commission to describe our commitment to missions.

Yet if there is one defining belief that characterizes Baptists and Baptists alone, it could be religious liberty.

So important has the concept been to our history and belief system that it comprises an entire plank in the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message, which states in part, "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."

Today, we find our cherished freedom increasingly under attack. Whether we are talking about a chaplain in the U.S. military feeling fettered in the way he can share the Gospel and opt out of same-sex "marriage" ceremonies; whether we are talking about a Christian business owner who is being compelled to pay for abortion-inducing drug coverage; or whether we are

talking about increased social pressure that now views religious liberty as pertaining only to "houses of worship," one thing is clear: the future of religious liberty is uncertain.

To be sure, there are many places and times throughout history that have lived without religious liberty. The ancient Egyptians did not even have a word for liberty, and much of the world today lives without liberty of any kind—individual, political or religious.

**We have now sunk to a new depth, a time at which our religious liberty is at risk.**

Yet, much of what has made America great has been built on religious liberty. Of course this concept did not have its beginning with the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America, or even with Baptists. This historical right has even deeper roots, even if it has been a rare "plant" to find throughout history. Perhaps it is because we have such a fine tradition of religious liberty in America that it makes it so tragic to see it eroded today.

Christ's followers have, from the beginning, come under persecution and oppression. In Acts we read: "But Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it's right in the sight of God for us to listen to you rather than to God, you decide; for we are unable to stop speaking about what we have seen and heard'" (Acts 4:19-20).

Peter and John exerted their right to share the Gospel, risking the consequences, as did the generations of Christians who came after them. When churches today follow this path, it could mean we risk losing advantages we are used to, such as our tax-exempt status. For others around the world, a loss of religious liberty could mean imprisonment or death.

In 1939, British novelist George Orwell said, "We have now sunk to a depth at which the restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men." Brothers and sisters, we have now sunk to a new depth, a time at which our religious liberty is at risk.

It is therefore time to restate the obvious: God has made men in His image and desires that all mankind be free to worship Him in spirit and in truth. It is also time for Christians to put aside our differences and unite in one voice, speaking out for this first principle of religious liberty. Together, we can ensure future generations may worship God freely and proclaim His truth, thereby making His will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.

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