



Religious Liberty

HOW THE GOSPEL SHAPES
OUR FIRST FREEDOM

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How to Use This Study

Religious Liberty: How the Gospel Shapes Our First Freedom helps immerse individuals and small groups in the current cultural and political conversation to better understand why religious liberty matters to the church.

This Bible study book is divided into two main sections: “Group Study,” and “Personal Study.” A leader guide is also provided to prepare those who are leading groups through this journey.

Group Study

This group lesson is designed to last 60 minutes, with approximately 25 minutes dedicated to video teaching and another 35 minutes to group discussion. Meeting even longer will allow more time for participants to interact with one another.

Each group study uses the following format to facilitate simple yet meaningful interaction among group members, with God’s Word, and with the video teaching.

START

This section includes questions to get the conversation started, a review of the previous week’s study to reinforce the content, and an introduction to the new content for the current week.

WATCH

This page provides space for taking notes as participants watch the video.

DISCUSS

This page includes discussion questions that guide the group to respond to the video teaching and to relevant Bible passages.

ENGAGE

This page will guide your group to consider the truths of the gospel. Use these ideas to spark conversations in your group and home.

Individual Study

Personal studies are provided each week to take individuals deeper into Scripture and to supplement the content introduced in the group study. With biblical teaching and interactive questions, these sections challenge individuals to grow in their understanding of God's Word and to make practical application to their lives.

Journal

Each session gives the group member plenty of opportunity to engage with the content. Another way of doing this is with the journal section. This section gives the group member two questions to flesh out their thoughts on the topic for the week.

Article

Leading experts on the subject of religious liberty have contributed to this study by writing articles for the member to reflect on each week. These articles were written specifically for each week's topic. Use these articles to further engage with the content before you gather again for your next group meeting.

Leader Guide

On pages 106-111, you will find a leader guide that will help you prepare each week. Use this guide to gain a broad understanding of the content for each week and to learn ways you can engage members at different levels of life-changing discussion.

ABOUT THE ERLC

The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission is dedicated to engaging the culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ and speaking to issues in the public square for the protection of religious liberty and human flourishing.

Since its inception, the ERLC has been defined around a holistic vision of the kingdom of God, leading the culture to change within the church itself and then as the church addresses the world.

MISSION

The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission exists to assist the churches by helping them understand the moral demands of the gospel, apply Christian principles to moral and social problems and questions of public policy, and to promote religious liberty in cooperation with the churches and other Southern Baptist entities.

MINISTRIES

The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission exists to assist the churches by helping:

- Apply the moral and ethical teachings of the Bible to the Christian life.
- Through the communication and advocacy of moral and ethical concerns in the public arena.
- In their moral witness in local communities.
- Promote religious liberty.

RELATIONSHIPS

The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission will work within the Southern Baptist Convention agency relationship guidelines approved by the Inter-Agency Council and the Executive Committee and printed in the Organization Manual of the Southern Baptist Convention.

INTRODUCTION

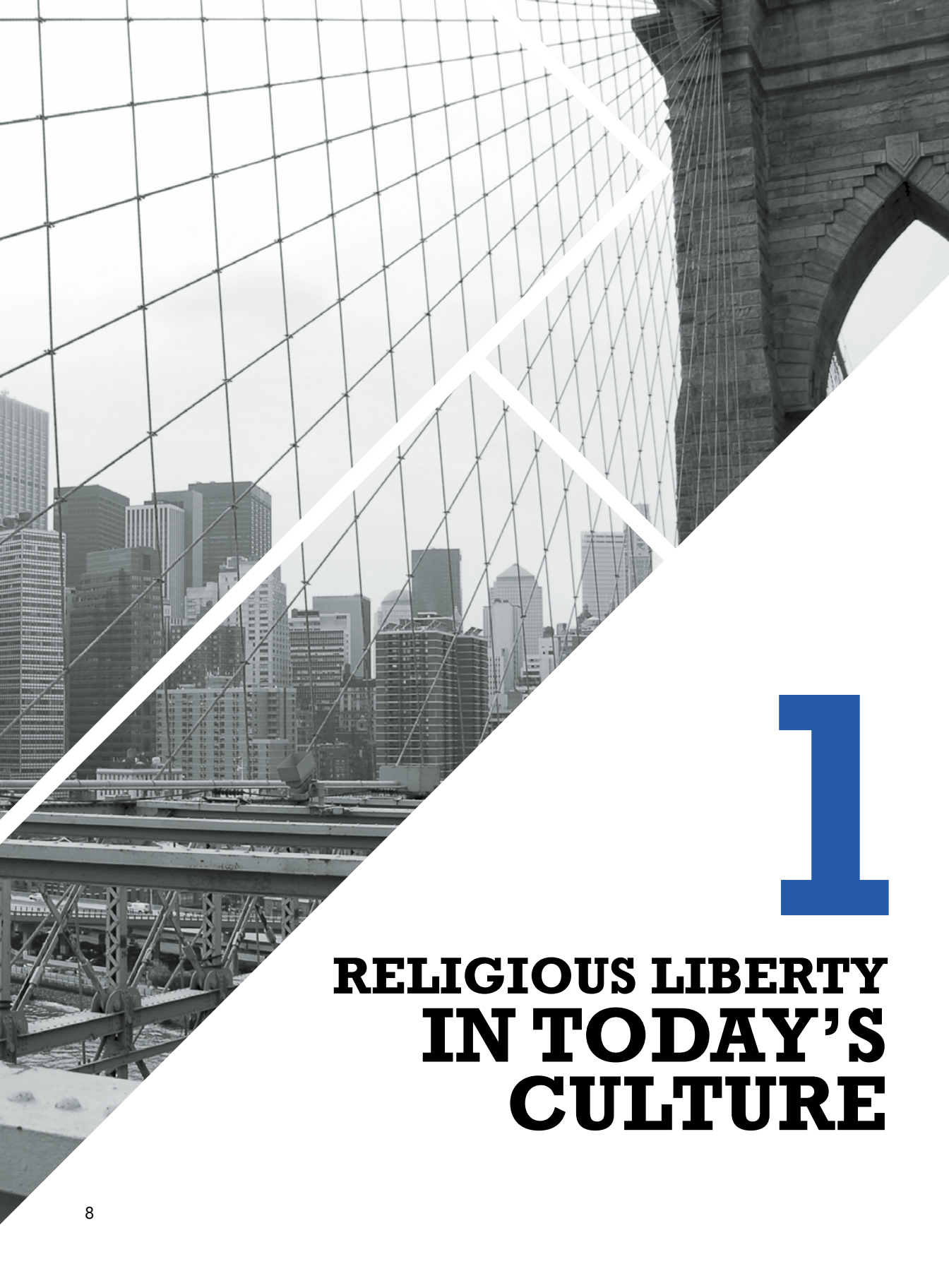
Religious liberty is the freedom for all people to live out their faith according to their deepest convictions.

The principle of religious liberty should be enjoyed by everyone, regardless of their faith. For this reason, religious liberty protects the common good. In a diverse society like our own, solutions must be found that afford people the opportunity to live peacefully together. Religious liberty serves as a necessary component of such solutions in our society by welcoming differences in a respectfully and peacefully manner.

But why study religious liberty? For lots of reasons. First, the Bible teaches that individuals each possess a conscience. Allowing someone to live faithfully to their conscience—even when a person is wrong—protects the integrity of their religious choice. Even more so, being wrong is why we need a Savior. Secondly, religious liberty is often misunderstood, so educating ourselves about this historic principle will benefit you and the society we live in. In an age of confusion and growing opposition to religious liberty, it is necessary that new advocates for the truth about religious liberty emerge.

The goal of this study is for everyone to see why religious liberty matters to the Bible, to God, to our life together in society, and to the mission of God. Going through this study will strengthen both the Christian's understanding of religious liberty while also strengthening our understanding why religious liberty matters to every person and every country. Participants in this study will be able to go from uninformed to informed. And one hope is that in an age of confusion around religious liberty, Christians will help bring clarity.

Religious liberty is not something for a privileged few. It is for everyone.



1

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN TODAY'S CULTURE

START

Open with prayer.

Welcome to Session 1 of *Religious Liberty*. Before you get started, ask participants to introduce themselves and provide some quick answers to the following questions:

What do you hope to gain from this study?

How do you hope this study will help guide and influence your own faith?

What do you think about after hearing the term religious liberty?

If you watch the news, religious liberty is a topic that is getting more and more attention, but not for good reasons. Sadly, this results in a distorted view of religious liberty. There are lots of rumors swirling around religious liberty; rumors, for example, that religious liberty is only about protecting Christian majorities, or that religious liberty is a code word for discrimination. Often times, depending on who is describing it, religious liberty either upholds or violates America's commitment to the "separation of church and state" (a helpful concept that is popularly misinterpreted). Or in an increasingly post-Christian society like our own, critics of religion think religious liberty is about forcing your religion on someone. These are all caricatures of what religious liberty is really all about. The bottom line is that religious liberty is in jeopardy in America.

In this session, we will look at some of those rumors and caricatures. The hope is that you will leave with a clear definition of religious liberty—a topic widely misunderstood in our culture.

Pray as a group and then watch the video for Session 1.

DISCUSS

Discuss the following questions with those participating.

What is the one thing that resonated with you the most from the video?

How did the video challenge you?

What is something new you learned from the video?

Religious liberty has become a controversial topic in our culture. As the video session makes clear, it is important to understand religious liberty. Part of the reason that religious liberty is controversial is because people often misunderstand it.

How would you define religious liberty?

What are common misunderstandings of religious liberty?

How is religious liberty different from freedom of worship?

Religious liberty may seem like an insignificant subject, but it is actually a key issue for Christians. Many Christians do not prioritize a concern for religious freedom because they do not understand why it matters.

Why is religious liberty important for Christians?

How is religious liberty important for society?

What happens when religious liberty declines in a culture?

The cultural landscape is quickly shifting for religious liberty in America. In previous eras, religious liberty enjoyed near universal consensus and was not considered partisan. First Amendment protections of religious freedom used to be prioritized and protected. Now, religious liberty is often seen as a threat to an increasingly secular culture.

What are some examples you have seen of ways that religious liberty is threatened?

How does the decline of religious liberty in our culture impact the way Christians live and churches operate?

If we want to understand what religious liberty is and why it matters, we must first understand its origin. Some people assume it is a new concept that has become a controversial issue in our culture. But there is a long history of Christians defending religious liberty.

What does the video suggest about why Christians throughout history have championed religious freedom?

Where does religious liberty come from as a political idea?

Religious liberty is a biblical idea. The Bible tells the story of the unfolding of the kingdom of God: the way that, in Christ, God defeats the kingdom of darkness and restores His rulership over all creation. Religious liberty is best understood within the framework of the kingdom of God.

How does the Bible describe the kingdom of God?

How does religious liberty intersect with the kingdom of God?

What effect will the decline of religious liberty have on kingdom work?

ENGAGE

Religious liberty is hard for some people to understand. This is especially true for two types of people: 1) those that are not Christians and 2) children.

Use this time to discuss with your group how you would describe religious liberty to both types of people. If you have a large group, you may want to split into smaller groups of 3-4 for this time.

SITUATION 1: Imagine you have developed a good relationship with your neighbor, who is not a Christian. After seeing a controversial religious liberty issue come up in the news, your neighbor asks about it.

How would you explain religious liberty to your non-Christian neighbor?

How should your explanation be different because you are describing it to someone who is not a believer?

SITUATION 2: Imagine your child, or a child in your church, overhears you discussing a controversial religious liberty issue with another adult. The child then asks about religious liberty.

How would you explain religious liberty to a child?

How should your explanation be different because you are describing it to a child?

PRAYER: Close your group time in prayer by asking God to bring clarity to the group on understanding what religious liberty is and why it matters. Pray that God would protect religious liberty in your community.

INDIVIDUAL STUDY

Today, religious liberty is under threat unlike any other point in American history. A principle that is so much tied to Christianity itself, and a principle at the heart of the founding of America, religious liberty has tragically shifted from being an issue of bipartisan agreement to an issue now deeply politically divisive. Religious liberty has become an unwanted combatant in today's culture wars that needlessly escalates tension and divides people.

How so? In the media, it is common to see scare quotes placed around "religious liberty," which is a way to casually dismiss or mock those for whom religious liberty is important. Many in government adopt the phrase "freedom of worship"—a distortion of the broader understanding that not only are we to be free when we worship inside our churches, but we are to be free to exercise our religion in all areas of our life.

WHAT IS RELIGIOUS LIBERTY?

Religious liberty is the freedom for all people to live out their faith according to their deepest convictions. To be free means to be unhindered. A commitment to religious liberty means that someone's religious convictions must be freely chosen. Belief cannot be forced or coerced. It is impossible to make someone believe something that a person does not believe in.

Religious liberty means that individuals are free to live out what their faith teaches in every area of life. It must be said upfront that there are indeed limits to what someone is free to do when exercising his or her religion. No one is saying that it is permissible to lie, steal, or kill under the protection of religious liberty.

Religious liberty is not just about what we do on Sunday morning inside our churches. It is not just about worship services. Religious liberty is much more robust than simply the right to be pious. Religious liberty is about our deepest convictions, in every aspect of our lives, because we believe that God is glorified by living in accordance with what He teaches. Everyone, whether they know it or not, lives out what they believe is true.

Religious liberty also has a government component. In societies with religious liberty, the government has typically taken the position that they do not control every aspect of a person's life. When this happens,

it is good. A government that understands it is not absolute, or does not try to play the role of a sovereign God, is staying true to God's mission for the state. Therefore, religious liberty is a right that government recognizes. It is not a grant that is given to us.

Why is it important that government recognize religious liberty as a right instead of a grant?


What misunderstandings have you had about religious liberty?

WHY DOES RELIGIOUS LIBERTY MATTER?

Religious liberty allows Christians to practice their faith freely and unhindered in the public square. Religious liberty reduces the stigma around religious belief by expressing the idea that deep convictions about the world and morality is a common experience for all persons, and that all persons should be given as much space as possible to live out their convictions. Moreover, religious liberty produces human happiness. Imagine being told you cannot live out your convictions. Or imagine being told that you have to believe or agree with something you believe is immoral, wrong, or even dangerous. A person who is not free to believe or act on those beliefs is not free in any sense of the term.

Religion matters greatly to the common good. No one is living this life totally separate from everyone else. We all live in communities. And some communities are more diverse than others. This means that society, if it wants to be free, has to design a way for people to live together despite having many different, and even conflicting, views about what is true, good, and beautiful. Religious liberty is what makes that life possible. By committing to respect someone else's religious liberty peacefully and to seek understanding, we ensure that others in society respect our religious liberty. Seen in this light, religious liberty is reciprocal—it requires us to give liberty to others and to receive that same right at the same time.

For Christians, religious liberty matters to Christian mission. The ability, for example, of the Southern Baptist Disaster Relief Network



to do their work requires that they be given the opportunity to do what it thinks is a duty or an obligation: Helping people that are in a disaster shows God's love to humanity, and all people deserve compassion as image bearers. In all the countless ways that Christians advance Christian mission, whether through one-on-one evangelism or through missional opportunities, religious liberty ensures that people motivated by faith are welcome in the public square and go about showing Jesus' love. Moreover, the ability to authentically follow Christ is strengthened when a state or government does not see Christianity as a threat.

It is important to see how religious liberty connects to other freedoms. The freedom of speech, the freedom to assemble, the freedom to protest—all of these freedoms spring from the conscience. From our conscience, we perceive what is right or wrong. To limit someone's conscience is to limit someone's religious liberty. And if someone's conscience can be told what to believe or is not permitted to act on their conscience, the freedom of speech must be suppressed as well. Religious liberty and other basic freedoms all come bundled together.

How does religious liberty help us teach respect for religions we disagree with?

Why is it important for someone to be able to live out their convictions?

What is the connection between religious liberty and Christian mission?

WHERE DID RELIGIOUS LIBERTY COME FROM?

Religious liberty is not a new concept. While scholars debate the exact origin, as early as the Church Father Tertullian, there is evidence of Christianity's involvement in promoting religious liberty. Around 200 A.D., Tertullian remarked: "It is a fundamental human right, a privilege of nature, that every man should worship according to his own convictions.

One man's religion neither harms nor helps another man. It is assuredly no part of religion to compel religion, to which free will and not force should lead us."¹

Christian doctrine also promotes a concept like religious freedom (though that exact phrase is missing from the Bible). At the beginning of Genesis, God is the Creator, and we are His creations (see Gen. 1). This means that there ought to be no barrier between the Creator and His creation. No government can play the role of God since government is an institution designed to serve God (see Rom. 13). Moreover, the God of the Bible wants us to voluntarily worship in spirit and truth, not under compulsion (see Ps. 138:1; John 4:23-24). And lastly, when Jesus gives the Great Commission and throughout the early church, the implication is clear: Get the gospel to as many people as possible with as few hindrances as possible (see Matt. 28:16-20; Acts 4:18-20).

In a period called the Enlightenment, political philosophers began to focus heavily on individual rights. According to this thinking, each individual possesses inalienable rights that come with being a person. Every person possesses these rights regardless of abilities or intelligence. One of those rights was the right of conscience. To this way of thinking, every individual possesses a conscience, which should be protected at all cost possible. To be free to exercise one's conscience was one of the fundamental principles at the heart of liberty. This viewpoint was the foundation for why religious liberty was protected in the Constitution: The American Founders knew that to protect the whole person, the right to believe and live out those beliefs is fundamental.

In the Baptist tradition, religious liberty stands out as one of our most distinguishing legacies. From English Baptists to Colonial Baptists like John Leland and Isaac Backus, our Baptist ancestors believed that it was wrong for the state to interfere with the mission of the church, and for the church to become subservient to the state's demands. Baptist played a very influential role at the founding of the United States, ensuring that religious liberty would be a hallmark of the U.S. constitution.

Why do you think God desires to be worshipped freely?



Why is it important to talk about religious liberty as a “right”?

HOW DOES RELIGIOUS LIBERTY CONNECT TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

The “kingdom of God” is a crucial concept to understand. The kingdom of God is God’s reign where Jesus sits as a sovereign King with all power, rule, and authority. The kingdom is present where Jesus reigns. According to George Eldon Ladd, it is a present reality (see Matt. 12:28) and also a future blessing (see 1 Cor. 15:50). The kingdom of God deals with the inner renewal that follows from experiencing salvation through Christ alone (see Rom. 14:17), but it also promises to impact the nations of the world (see Eph. 1:10; Rev. 11:15). The kingdom of God also refers to a people who belong to that realm. Today, that is the church—the redeemed of the ages from every tribe, tongue, and nation. So Jesus is ruling and reigning through His church (see Eph. 1:20-23).²

How does Jesus’ reign as a King concern religious liberty? Because the kingdom of God ultimately shapes where our ultimate allegiance is owed and what power the state has over the conscience. As Christians, Jesus is owed our ultimate allegiance (see Acts 5:29). The state is set up not as a broker of the conscience, but for the stability of the social order and to make sure laws are followed (see Rom. 13). When the state embarks on territory that does not belong to it, the state is outside of God’s plan for its role. The state is not a theological umpire calling balls and strikes on what is or is not true religion. The judgment seat belongs to Christ, not the state (see 2 Cor. 5:10); so the state cannot stand in our place and be accountable on our behalf. This means that the state has no part in dictating what is or is not appropriate for persons to worship.

Christians are committed to the common good. But we are not committed to the common good out of generic principles. No, as Christians, we have to view our deepest commitments about our advocacy for religious liberty and our love for our fellow neighbor from one essential angle: Because Jesus is King, there can be true freedom of conscience and religious liberty. The Bible gives people the right to be wrong. But the Scriptures do not allow these wrongs to go unaccounted for. God holds people ultimately accountable—not us, or governments. As John Piper has written,

Jesus Christ, the source and ground of all truth, will himself one day bring an end to all tolerance, and he alone will be exalted as the one and only Lord and Savior and Judge of the universe. Therefore, since Jesus Christ alone, the Creator and Lord of history, has the right to wield the tolerance-ending sword, we dare not.³

It is precisely because of an ultimate Judge that we cannot be the judge of anyone else (see Heb. 9:27).

Lastly, religious liberty matters to the kingdom of God because it is religious liberty that fosters the right conditions that allows kingdom work to be unhindered. While the church's mission is to go forward no matter what obstacles are in its way, religious liberty functions like smooth pavement, allowing the church's mission to go forward.

Why is a concept like “kingdom” and “sovereignty” important for discussions related to religious liberty?

If the state is not absolutely sovereign, what does that say about our obligation to always follow it?

Religious liberty is one of the most important aspects of a Christian's calling in the world. Too often, it is ignored. And sadly, in our own day, religious liberty is caricatured, mocked, and dismissed. If the broader society will not champion a principle so important and necessary for our social order, who will?

1. Tertullian, *Ad Scapulam*, c. 212.

2. George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959).

3. <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/jesus-christ-the-end-and-ground-of-tolerance>.



THE CULTURE AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

By Hunter Baker, J.D., Ph.D.

If you look at “culture,” you will see the root word “cult” contained within it. That should not cause you to think about bizarre religious groups on the fringes of society, but rather should help you to see that religion is at the core of communities and nations. Our beliefs make up a large part of who we are.

Unsurprisingly, there tends to be a dominant faith in almost any culture. The adherents of that faith do not like to be reminded that there are others who may not share their views. Peter Berger, a sociologist, noted that societies try to create a sacred canopy that reinforces fundamental beliefs shared by the group. One of the most difficult problems to deal with in any culture is to figure out how much freedom we give others not to share a vision of the good (or of God, for that matter). It can be physically unpleasant to be confronted by dissent. For that reason, we sometimes react negatively (and even coercively) toward dissenters.¹

The United States (and Baptists) emerged as leaders in solving that fundamental problem. Thanks to increasing pluralism, distance from the established churches of Europe, Baptist theology, and new ideological ideas about liberty, the United States developed a strong concept of religious liberty. This freedom to believe, to choose one’s church, and to live out a life of integrity based on one’s beliefs proved to be immensely attractive. Many of the immigrants who flooded into the young American nation during the past two centuries came so that they might experience religious liberty.

But the story is not nearly as smooth as it sounds in a brief summary. Even in the United States, the issue of religious liberty has been a herky-jerky one. When all have liberty to believe, others will be disturbed by the lack of conformity to dominant modes of worship, membership, thought, and living. For that reason, we have sometimes treated members of different religious groups badly. Baptists were persecuted at one point. Jews have been ostracized and marginalized. Catholics found tremendous resistance from Protestants at various points in history. But

over time, religious liberty has developed into a durable and treasured American value. At our best, Christians have learned that we can accommodate the beliefs of those who disagree, such as the Amish families who wanted to remove their children from formal schooling at an earlier age than most state laws require. The United States Supreme Court protected them.²

Today, American society has changed in ways that put the beliefs of many Christians at odds with the policies of national, state, and local governments. Gay marriage is a prime example. Christians often find that they cannot compromise on a fundamental Christian belief when law requires some affirmative act on their part. And thus we have the cases of florists, bakers, photographers and others who have been subject to real coercion from American governments who do not respect their wish not to participate in a ceremony or ritual with which they strongly disagree.

Religious liberty should protect these individuals in the same way our Supreme Court protected the Amish in the past. In the current cultural moment, large numbers of Americans seem to think that Christians must be made to bow to the majority (if indeed that is the majority's will). The idea is that accommodating religious liberty will create chaos. But various American Founders understood the reality is not so stark. If a person's religious practice (or "free exercise") does not threaten the peace or safety of the community, then we should respect it.

What needs to be understood is that those who would stake a claim based on religious liberty typically are asking for some kind of fairly narrow exemption. One of the major misconceptions in the debate over non-discrimination laws related to sexual orientation is the belief that Christians are trying to create a gay/straight apartheid or recreation of Jim Crow Southern segregation. Such an interpretation is deeply misguided.

The simple reality is that respecting religious liberty is a way for us to live together without crushing faith and conscience. Religious liberty helps us to live in peace.

1. Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).

2. *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205 (1972).