
A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

CHRISTIAN CITIZENSHIP AND POLITICAL ADVOCACY IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Baptists have always stressed the need for liberty of conscience and separation of church and state. In Britain this has been worked out down the years in the context of other churches being 'by law established'. In the USA separation of church and state is embedded in the constitution. The First Amendment to the US Constitution begins 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ... '. The principle is so important to Baptists in the USA that they have set up the Baptist Joint Committee to lobby government on matters which involve religious liberty and church-state issues.

The first ten amendments, often referred to as the Bill of Rights, are the safeguards of Americans' civil liberties. As the Constitution was being debated for ratification in each state, the Bill of Rights was added to gain support of many who believed the Constitution did not go far enough to ensure the rights they had recently fought to obtain. Among these was John Leland, a Baptist pastor in Virginia who was an outspoken proponent of the cause of religious freedom and the necessity of keeping church and state separate. He had strong influence over James Madison, one of the founding fathers and architect of the Constitution. Until this time Virginia had had an established Anglican Church.

The sixteen words containing the two religion clauses of the First Amendment have served the country well for over two hundred years. Interpreting and updating the intentions of the 'no establishment' clause have sometimes been controversial, especially in the past fifty years. Current debates are over prayers in school, at public events, official symbols (like manger scenes on city halls at Christmas), and on any occasion when religion and public life meet. There are those who believe the founders intended the First Amendment to prevent only an official establishment of one faith and nothing more. They argue that the idea of 'separation of church and state' has been used in ways contrary to the founders' intention in order to reduce religion in favour of secular humanism.

The phrase 'separation of church and state' is not in the Constitution. The concept, however, seems to be there. The phrase originates in a letter from Thomas Jefferson to the Danbury Baptists in which he assured them that government would remain neutral in questions of religion. There is much evidence to indicate that that is exactly what the framers of the Constitution intended when writing the amendment: that government should neither endorse nor inhibit religion. This has also been the reasoning of most Supreme Court decisions: that government is prevented from endorsing or appearing to endorse any particular faith. The intention is not, as some would claim, to create a godless state but rather to preserve the independence and integrity of religion.

The other clause, often referred to as the 'free exercise' clause, is self-

explanatory. It guarantees full freeom of religious practice to all citizens. Obviously there must be some limits on the exercise, such as public health and safety, but high protection is given to religion. The legal terminology states that government (which includes criminal and civil laws, as well as building regulations, local ordinances, etc) must accommodate religious practice unless it can show a 'compelling interest' to prohibit it and that it has taken the 'least restrictive means' to do so. Unfortunately, in the past decade the Supreme Court has begun to weaken the degree of protection for religious exercise, calling it a 'luxury we can no longer afford' in such a complex society. In response, a large group of organizations, headed by the Baptist Joint Committee, helped pass the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which restored this heightened protection, although it is now facing an uphill battle with the Supreme Court.

The Baptist Joint Committee watches over these concerns on behalf of various Baptist groupings: the Alliance of Baptists, American Baptist Churches in the USA, Baptist General Conference, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, National Baptist Convention of America, National Baptist Convention USA Inc., National Missionary Baptist Convention, North American Baptist Conference, Progressive National Baptist Convention Inc., Religious Liberty Council, Seventh Day Baptist General Conference, and Southern Baptist state conventions and churches. The Committee has a unique role as a lobbying body, respected for its consistency, accuracy, and insistence that separation of church and state is good for both.

In this paper the Executive Director reflects on the application of these historic Baptist principles in the United States today.

'A person cannot be a good Christian unless he is a good citizen' is the Baptist way in piety and politics. To approach Christian citizenship and political advocacy one travels a well-worn road to Newcastle with a load of hot coals. Yet, out of the specificity of time and place, some general help may burn through. Baptists in the United States are political animals. Seven of the eight top elected officials in the United States today [writing in January 1998] are Baptists: the President, the Vice-President, the Speaker of the House and the Minority Leader, the President Pro-Tem of the Senate and her Majority Leader, and the ranking minority member are all Baptists. These politicians and other Baptists all share some common presuppositions and some approaches to politics but differ drastically in their application to practical problems.

PRESUPPOSITIONS

There is no such thing as presuppositionless thinking. Presuppositions are difficult to define but useful information to have since, without them, one is not sure where the others in question are 'coming from'.

Brook Hays, once president of the Southern Baptist Convention, is in the news because of his attempted reconciliation in the Little Rock school integration crisis

forty years ago. He loved to quote Aristotle: 'Politics is the chief of the sciences, since it alone has the power to allocate the always scant resources of any society to the various elements of that society'.[1] Foy Valentine further explains this basic understanding that allows many Baptists to live more or less comfortably with 'dirty politics': 'Politics is the science of government, the art of the possible, the serious business of deciding who gets what, when and where. In and of itself, it is neither good or bad. It has power as its chief ingredient, compromise as its primary agent for getting things done, and the public good as its main purpose'.[2]

In these days, however, with many political extremists claiming the label 'Baptist', rethinking our presuppositions is timely and necessary. The political activism of right-wing Christians is not the problem. It is not that they are wrongly active but that they are actively wrong.

Not to take a stand in the political context is to support the *status quo*. To accept things as they are is to indicate either that one is satisfied with present policies, that the situation is hopeless, or that one's religion has nothing relevant to say. Julius Nyerere, the quotable African leader, spoke powerfully to the power of a biblical doctrine, with its vertical and horizontal dimensions: 'We say man was created in the image of God. I refuse to imagine a God who is miserable, poor, ignorant, superstitious, fearful, oppressed and wretched - which is the lot of a majority of those created in his own image'.[3] To fail to alarm another morally ensures that one will remain morally asleep oneself. There is no neutral ground in a vital, changing democratic society. To 'stay out of politics', or to assume a smugly superior pose as if independent above it all, is itself an alignment with the forces of evil, a cheap cop-out.

From the broader social viewpoint too, religion has influenced and will continue to influence political choices. The Baptist, Harvey Cox, insists that 'Politics without a vision of the common good ... is reduced to the art of brokerage between power interests'. Cox recognizes the difficulties of involvement by many diverse religious groups in a highly complex government process but does not give up on mixing religion and politics because, as he says, '1. Our politics need it. 2. Our faith requires it. 3. Our people want it.'[4] The late Dean M. Kelley, ardent church-state separationist and astute champion of religious freedom, predicted that 'the churches are going to go on meddling with the social, political, and economic systems that affect the lives of human beings until hunger, war, vice, injustice, poverty, sickness and suffering are eliminated'.[5]

Mixing politics and religion is inevitable. The nature of a society that holds in tension religious pluralism and a democratic process guarantees the mix will be inevitable and inevitably explosive. There are no guarantees that mixing religion and politics will be easy, constructive or peaceful. Indeed, there is no direct route from the Bible to the ballot box. Even the dogmatist, Carl Henry, admits that one cannot leap from 'individual spiritual rebirth to assuredly authentic and predictable public policy consequences ...' but rather that 'equally devout individuals may disagree

over the best program for achieving common goals'.[6] The recipes for mixing these explosive ingredients are many, difficult to understand and more difficult to execute.

The struggle to find the proper mix is to be addressed. The United States Catholic Conference stakes out the church's role in the political order as including 'education regarding the teachings of the church ...; analysis of issues ...; measuring public policy against gospel values; participating ... in debate over public policy; and speaking out with courage, skill and concern on public issues involving human rights and social justice'.[7] Many, of course, are not willing to begin or end with 'the teachings of the church' - any church. The 'livlie [sic] experiment' proposed by Roger Williams has become the American way. Religious freedom is protected by its essential corollary: the separation of church and state.

Even when mixing religion and politics, one must honour the spirit of separation. When Ted Kennedy spoke to the Liberty Baptist College on 3 October 1983 he set out a pragmatic position: mix but do not merge. 'In drawing the line between imposed will and essential witness, we keep Church and State separate - and at the same time, we recognize that the city of God should speak to the civic duties of men and women'.[8] In distinguishing mixing politics and religion from church-state separation, Senator Kennedy set out four tests: 'respect the integrity of religion itself', 'respect the independent judgments of conscience', 'respect the integrity of public debate', and 'respect the motives of those who exercise their right to disagree'.[9]

Church-state separation is an attempt to write into public policy the notion that there is no place for coercion in the choice, exercise or perpetuation of religion. Separation of Church and State means at least that Church and State have different reasons for being, diverse functions, separate sources of funding, and distinctive methods, strategies and identities.

Separation of church and state is not a myth or 'shibboleth of doctrinaire secularism'. It is a primary component of the American way, an unquestioned presupposition of the appropriate style of church-state relations. Baptists have held that the necessary distance between church and state extends to and requires no public support for religious causes and institutions. John Leland, Baptist forebear, declared: 'Experience has informed us that the fondness of magistrates to foster Christianity has done it more harm than all the persecutions ever did'.[10]

Beyond coming to terms with presuppositions and the underpinning philosophy of the baptistified American way, one faces the politics that have shaped and been shaped by those presuppositions.

POLITICS

One of the burdens of Christian citizenship in our modern, complex democracy is the burden of ambivalence. Honesty and awareness leave one stuck with difficult choices. Only the oversimplified positions of extremists, both Left and Right, allow freedom from agony. This pain is what the Preacher had in mind, 'The more you

know, the more you suffer: the more you understand, the more you ache' (Ecclesiastes 1:18, Moffat).

'Where does one draw the line between mixing politics and religion and merging church and state?' The popular question is often asked simply to shut off debate. The challenge works as a cut-off valve because there is no simple short answer. The question implies a neat world view in which everything is black or white, good or bad. This either-or mentality is not the exclusive disease of religious and political fundamentalists. A horizontal line with opposing views, differing ways of looking at things, or balancing considerations at either end is probably a more useful model. In many of the polarities, paradoxes, contradictions, or competing goods that complicate the church-state debate one draws the line and then travels it, or draws the line and then discovers that travelling that line is fraught with tension. Balance, compromise, accommodation are the game: in a democracy they are the only game in town.

Hear the cliché that the state 'cannot legislate morals'. Some draw a line that would rule out any attempt to regulate any personal behaviour. Yet in some senses *all* legislation deals ultimately with morality, good and bad, right and wrong. Once again, the reasonable response must be, to a degree, compared to what?

Conviction and a measure of certainty are necessary for politics. Timid politicians lose. Yet the political world needs humility as well. Believers have reason to help supply both. Don Shriver cites Oliver Cromwell who 'said to two contentious groups of Scotsmen, "I beseech you, by the mercies of Christ, think that you may be wrong!"' Judge Learned Hand is often invoked: 'The Spirit of Liberty is the spirit that is not too sure it is right'.[11]

Face another continuum. On one hand it is held that only individual citizens should be involved in politics, with churches educating, motivating, moralizing, but never becoming involved corporately. On the other hand, churches not only may but *must* act on their stewardship as prophetic witnesses.

Other continua must be taken into account in dealing with the questions of how much mixing is too much and where the line is that sets off Church from State. A few of the more obvious involve motive, biblical warrant, understanding, entanglement with government and the methods used in advancing views. Each of these considerations involves a whole range of questions of degree. For example, is the motive for one's political involvement self-interest or the public good? This test alone is too subjective to be reliable, yet one's own motives must be tested. To what degree do forays into public policy find biblical warrant, spiritual sanction and historical precedent? At what level of understanding and education do those who would mix politics and religion operate? All citizens cannot become technical experts and policy specialists, but we can all do our homework and refuse to follow anyone blindly. To what extent does the policy, practice or proposed legislation under consideration entangle government with religion, merging Church and State? Maintaining a healthy distance, an institutional integrity, is one of the relative factors

to be taken into account.

The tensions, tugs, conflicts and contradictions between polar concepts could be multiplied. Sometimes both poles are useful, proper and essential in determining right and wrong, as with the classic interplay between love and law, freedom and fixity, experience and authority. At other times both extremes are to be rejected.

The deliberate attempts to collapse the distinction between mixing politics and religion and merging Church and State will fail if persons of goodwill who believe in religion and care about democracy will act. Niebuhr's words are relevant: 'Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary'.[12] The same can be said of the precious doctrine of religious liberty which makes church-state separation and political involvement necessary. A proper mix is Christian virtue - but how does that lofty stuff work in Washington?

PRACTICES

Beyond philosophical presuppositions and political premises, it may be disproportionately informative to look at actual lobbying practices.

Any church-related agency dedicated to both faithfulness of public witness and effectiveness should observe some commonsense guidelines. Since 1980 the Baptist Joint Committee, serving over twenty million Baptists and their church-state concerns, has worked with the following 'ground rules':

1 Do a few things well, rather than many things poorly. The focus of the Baptist Joint Committee is on human rights and religious liberty.

2 Thereby develop expertise in a specialized field that will command respect.

3 Respect all public servants. They are people too and do not respond well to implied threats (e.g 'representing fifteen million Baptists', 'speaking for most Baptists').

4 Co-operate with like-minded allies. Single issue coalitions are in order for almost any issue and any method, literature, educational venture, lobby visit, press conference, sign-on letter, testimony before government bodies, etc.

5 Educate journalists about your issues. Most interviews with electronic or print media people are time-consuming and do not result in one's being quoted or appearing on television. In the long haul, however, it is amazing how much good can be done if one does not care who gets the credit.

6 Learn to give short, simple answers. Unless one's answers are listener/reader friendly, why bother? The public dialogue is not a graduate seminar.

7 Remember it is always easier to kill a bill than to pass one and the best way to put one to rest is to 'improve it to death'; postpone, put off, delay, drag out consideration.

8 Deliver real substantive help for legislators. They need background papers, talking points, answers to objections, lists of proponents and opponents to the subject in question.

9 Work with the designated staff people. Face it, the member of Congress does not always need to see you.

10 Take time to do the things asked of you, often on short notice. Washington moves ridiculously fast. Nothing is more useful than writing speeches for members, nor much more appreciated by them. Besides, you get to put your words in their mouths.

11 Stick with what you know when testifying or speaking in a media setting. Nothing is so tragic for Baptists as to have someone purporting to speak for them on environmental ethics, trade policy, medical research and complex human rights situations when it is obvious after his second sentence or the first question asked of him that he is totally in over his head.

12 Keep calm. Folks in Washington have seen panic before and they will see it again, tomorrow. They are not usually moved by it.

13 Educate, do not pontificate. We try to remember that we speak 'to Baptists' not 'for Baptists'. That is a big enough job.

14 Tell the truth. It is so rare in Washington that it is refreshing.

15 Act on issues in a timely manner. Whatever one does in an advocacy role must be at the 'teachable moment' for the Congress, for the public, for the constituency.

CONCLUSION

The particular brand of advocacy for Christian citizenship described and illustrated above is never held up to be the only way or the best way to 'do politics' in Washington. It is the peculiar way that has emerged for fifteen national and regional Baptist bodies, hundreds of churches with line items in their local budgets for the Baptist Joint Committee and thousands of supportive individuals. In addition to the political, economic and denominational landscape that has shaped this specific programme of Baptist public witness, there have been more general historical and theological constraints at work. But with vast variety, Baptists do engage the political process. There is a confidence, shared with William Temple, that 'Since we cannot deny the existence of political power, we must simply be good stewards of it'. Valentine, again, puts it plainly:

> So, Baptists pray for those in authority, pay taxes, obey the law, vote on election day and stand for office. We work at shaping legislation that helps children, strengthens families, defends the poor, feeds the hungry and supports public education. And we actively oppose such socially destructive things as racism, institutionalized gender bias, gambling, smoking, pollution, and environmental abuse. As changed people, we seek to change the world.[13]

Without appropriate respect for a free church in a free state, the people of faith have difficulty addressing all those socially destructive forces in society. Fighting for freedom is not merely a cause, an ideology, a partisan position or even a

doctrine to defend. It is more than that. It is who we are. It is in our genes. Free church folks calls it 'soul freedom'.

That doctrine, soul freedom, as propounded by our forebears, is prior to, deeper than, and goes beyond the Reformation teaching of the priesthood of all believers. Soul competency precedes reformation thought because it is rooted not merely in scripture but in the very nature and being of God. Made in God's image, we are able to respond, responsible (response able - see how we got the word) and, if responsible, free. We are wired up to be free, programmed for freedom. Our software demands it. God made human beings with a faculty no other can control: the 'I' at the centre of our being which even Almighty God will not trample.

NOTES

1 Brook Hays, *Politics is my parish*, Louisiana State University Press, 1981, p.279.
2 Foy Valentine, 'Piety and Politics: A Baptist Perspective', *Transformations: An International Evangelical Dialogue on Mission and Ethics*, Vol.14, No.3, July-September 1997, p.15.
3 Julius K. Nyerere, *Maryknoll* magazine, June 1971, p.37.
4 Harvey Cox, 'Our politics need religion', *Washington Post* 2 September 1984, p.D8.
5 Dean M. Kelley, 'Meddling in politics', *Liberty*, Vol.279, No.4, July 1984, p.13.
6 'Evangelicals out of the closet, but going nowhere?' *Christianity Today*, 4 January 1980, p.21.
7 'Political Responsibility: Choices for the '80s', USCC Administrative Board, 22 March 1984, p.1.
8 Edward M. Kennedy, 'Tolerance and Truth in America', Liberty Baptist College, 3 October 1982.
9 *ibid.*
10 L.F. Greene, ed., *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, New York 1969, p.278.
11 Donald W. Shriver, 'What's wrong with born-again politics?', *Christian Century*, Vol.XCVII, No.32, 22 October 1980, p.1002.
12 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The children of light and the children of darkness*, 1944, foreword.
13 Valentine, *op.cit.*

JAMES M. DUNN *Executive Director, Baptist Joint Committee, USA*

The introductory section, explaining the First Amendment, is provided by Andrew Black, a law graduate who spent some months in London immediately after an internship with the Baptist Joint Committee.

BEYOND MERE TOLERATION
Religious Liberty as a Basic Human Right

Sponsored by Baptists true to their historic commitment to freedom as a gift of God not a human concession. Thursday 8 July - Saturday 10 July 1999, at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London. Arranged by the Baptist Joint Committee, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Bloomsbury Church, and supported by the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Baptist Missionary Society, and the Baptist Historical Society. Details from Karen McGuire at BJC, Washington DC, tel: (202) 544-4226, or from the Bloomsbury church, tel: 0171 240 0544.