

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro  
4 July 2021

10:30 a.m. & 6:30 p.m. MT Worship  
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church  
Denver, Colorado

***“Free to Be: A People Who Stand for Freedom OF Religion,  
Freedom FOR Religion, and Freedom FROM Religion***

Second of Four Baptist Freedoms: Religious Freedom  
Fifth Sermon in the 14-week summer series: Free to Be

*Ephesians 2:8-9, Matthew 22:15-22, John 8:31-32, 36*

New Revised Standard Version

Show “Baptist Freedom Fighters”  
Video from the Baptist Joint  
Committee for Religious Liberty<sup>1</sup>

In his 1984 hit song *God Bless the USA*, Lee Greenwood patriotically sings:

*And I'm proud to be an  
American /  
Where at least I know I'm free /  
And I won't forget the ones who  
died who gave that right to me /  
And I'll gladly stand up next to  
you and defend her still today /  
Cause there ain't no doubt I love  
this land, / God Bless the USA.<sup>2</sup>*

July 4<sup>th</sup> is a day of celebrating our country's original 13 colonies' independence from the rule of Great Britain. Though the *Declaration of Independence* proclaimed that “all men were created equal” and there are “certain inalienable rights given to all: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of

*Happiness*,” history teaches us that it was a day of freedom for some, but not for all; and we know that the ones who experienced freedom did so on a land that was stolen from indigenous peoples, in an economy that was prospering because of the slave labor of black skinned people from Africa, and as ones with wives and daughters and sisters who could not vote.

It is a “self-evident truth” perhaps that freedom is a relative term, and yet, a beautiful ideal and aspiration. Even if July 4<sup>th</sup> only unlocked actual freedom for some, it instilled within the soul of our nation a desire to have and preserve freedom even as we all interpret what that means in different ways. Freedom, if nothing else, gives us the

<sup>1</sup> Video accessed on bjconline.org or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCGkkt6rQE8>  
On July 4, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Lee Greenwood, “God Bless the USA” *You've Got a Good Love Comin'* (MCA Nashville: 1984), lyrics accessed on

July 4, 2021 at <https://www.songfacts.com/lyrics/lee-greenwood/god-bless-the-usa>.

freedom to disagree about what it even means to be “free.”

Now, we usually do not talk much about July 4<sup>th</sup> in church because God’s *kin*-dom is not about one country or earthly kingdom but rather encompasses all the countries and creatures of the globe – indeed the entire created cosmos and universe. That said, as we see in today’s gospel passage from Matthew, Jesus lived in a certain time and place with political rule and government. And so do we.

God sent Jesus into the world as an embodied person and that means living under the rule of the governments we have chosen and created or that have been imposed upon us (depending on where you live in the world). God’s *kin*-dom is NOT one and the same with human governments; God’s *kin*-dom is both beyond human governments and yet still at work *within* them and *through* them – thanks be to God.

So today while our country is celebrating its Independence Day from being under another country’s rule, we as a church and as a people of faith are

celebrating our independence from being under any government’s rule when it comes to what we do or do not believe. This is called Religious Freedom, or Religious Liberty. It’s one of the Four Fragile Freedoms of Baptist Identity, as Baptist scholar Walter Shurden called them: Bible Freedom, Religious Freedom, Soul Freedom, Church Freedom.

And if you didn’t already know it, I hope you learned through that wonderful educational video from the Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty, that our Baptist ancestors were *pivotal* in ensuring that religious freedom was woven into the fabric of our nation.

“Baptist Minister John Leland spent most of his ministry preaching in Virginia, where he became an ally to Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Leland’s leadership helped galvanize Baptist petitions in support of Jefferson’s Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom.<sup>3</sup> Tensions arose between Madison and Leland over the introduction of similar protections in the federal constitution. Madison did not

<sup>3</sup> John E. Ferguson Jr., “John Leland,” *The First Amendment Encyclopedia* (2009), accessed on July 4, 2021 at

<https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1219/john-leland>.

initially think that additional amendments were needed to protect religious liberty, while Leland and his Baptist followers sharply disagreed.”<sup>4</sup>

“In the midst [of this argument,] Leland, who was then living in Virginia, had more votes than Madison for the Orange County seat at the Virginia Convention on ratifying the Constitution, (despite the fact that Madison had drafted much of the Constitution). But Leland agreed to drop out of the contest for the seat IF Madison would work to include a religious liberty provision as an amendment to the Constitution.”<sup>5</sup> The deal worked! Leland’s lobbying convinced Madison to include the guarantee of religious liberty in the Bill of Rights, the 10 amendments that were added to the U.S. Constitution in 1791.”<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, we Baptists have a LOT to be proud of when it comes to Religious Freedom in our country, *and* we have a lot to keep working for in this regard.

Religious freedom was written into the U.S. Constitution,

spelled out in the first 16 words of the First Amendment:

*“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”*<sup>7</sup> What does this mean? Well, put simply: Religious freedom is Freedom **OF** Religion, Freedom **FOR** Religion, and Freedom **FROM** Religion.

**Freedom OF Religion** means we are free to choose what faith we practice, and what flavor of that faith we are. Catholic or Church of God in Christ, Hindu or Sikh, Buddhist, Bahai, or Baptist, Jewish or Jain, Muslim, Mormon, or Mainline Protestant, Pentecostal or Pagan, Zen or Zoroastrian, Humanist or Orthodox – take your pick. Freedom OF Religion means we get to pick what faith community we’re a part of and who or what we worship.

**Freedom FOR Religion** means that we can openly express ourselves as people of faith in the public square and be free from the intervention of the state in matters of religion or faith. The government cannot interfere with or tell the

<sup>4</sup> Ferguson, *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Ferguson, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> From “Who We Are – Baptist Freedom Fighters” on [bjconline.org](https://bjconline.org) accessed on 4 July 2021 at <https://bjconline.org/mission-history-baptist-heritage/>.

<sup>7</sup> From “Who We Are - About BJC” on [bjconline.org](https://bjconline.org), accessed on 3 July 2021 at <https://bjconline.org/mission-history/>.

“church” (or temple, or mosque, etc.) what to do or how, when or where to worship. Our laws protect our ability to worship and gather and live as people of faith in the public square as much as possible, as long as our personal religious beliefs are not harming other people or society.

There can be lots of muddy waters here...and that’s where the legislature and the courts and judicial system come in, and where groups like BJC spend their time advocating on behalf of religious freedom for all – regardless of partisan lines or political persuasion.

### **Freedom FROM Religion**

means that all people are be free from any coercion (from the government or anyone else!) to worship or practice a faith. In other words, you don’t have to believe anything or be a part of any religious organization; our government protects your right to not be forced into any religious ceremony or prayer or religious practice in the public square or to be unduly harmed by someone else’s religious practice or belief. Again – there are muddy waters here at times, but essentially, the first sixteen

words of the First Amendment: “require government to be neutral towards religion—neither helping nor hurting religion, but turning it loose to allow people of faith to practice their religion as they see fit, not as government sees fit. It’s tricky but the government must accommodate religion without advancing it; protect religion without privileging it.”<sup>8</sup>

Essentially what our Baptist forebearers fought for and what the First Amendment states is that: “government and religion are both better off when neither tries to do the job of the other... An institutional and functional separation of church and state promotes a free state and a healthy church.”<sup>9</sup>

Now just because the institutions are separate, doesn’t mean one cannot influence another; indeed, we, as people of faith can’t help but bring our ethics and our prioritizing of “the least of these” to bear in our political votes and policies, but the fact that our faith influences our politics is very different than having our politicians dictate our faith – or vice versa.

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<sup>8</sup> J. Brent Walker, “Two Sides of the Same Coin,” *A sermon on Matthew 22:15-22; Gal. 5:1, 13-14 on BJCOline*,

*accessed on July 4, 2021 at <https://bjconline.org/two-sides-of-the-same-coin/>.*

<sup>9</sup> Walker, *ibid*.

So, that's what Religious Freedom IS, but what is it based on? Three things.

1. ***The nature of God:*** God is the ultimate liberator of humanity. Time and time again in the Old Testament – from exodus to exile, from the priests to the prophets – God speaks out against rulers and power structures that limit the freedom of people. And in the New Testament, we see that Jesus is our ultimate model of one who frees us from sin and from all that keeps us from fulfilling our potential. God (*not* the government or the courts, or our laws) is the ultimate source of our religious liberty.

From the words of Moses, “Let my people go!” to the words of Jesus in John’s gospel today, “*if you are my disciples then you know the truth and the truth will set you free*” (John 8:31-32) – the arc of the biblical narrative bends toward freedom!

2. ***The nature of human beings:*** People, created in God’s image, the *imago dei*,

(Genesis 1. We were created with free will and freedom of conscience. To deny any person religious freedom is to deny them their full humanity. (We’re not robots after all.)

3. ***The nature of faith:*** To be authentic, faith must be free. Genuine faith cannot be forced upon anyone or denied to anyone by the government or a by controlling religious organization.”<sup>10</sup> In short, “*God has made us all free — free to say yes, free to say no, and free to make up our own minds about our spiritual destiny.*”<sup>11</sup> As Isaac Backus (1724–1806), an influential Baptist, who led the fight for religious freedom in colonial Massachusetts said, “*True Religion is a voluntary obedience to God.*” And Baptists have conveyed this sentiment in other ways through the years:

“*Where there is no autonomy, there is no authenticity.*”

“*If faith is to be valid, it must be voluntary.*”

“*The only conversion that counts is conversion by conviction.*”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Accessed on July 4, 2021 from the summary of our Baptist identity and freedoms found on: <http://www.firstbaptist-cs.org/four-freedoms.html>.

<sup>11</sup> K. Hollyn Hollman, “Celebrating 400 years of Baptist heritage: Remembering our roots and our rights as we continue the fight for freedom,” Baptist Joint Committee’s *Report from the Capitol* (November/December 2009),

accessed on July 4, 2021 at <https://bjconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Celebrating-400-years-of-Baptist-heritage-by-Hollman-NovDec2009.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Walter B. Shurden, “How We Got That Way: Baptists on Religious Liberty and the Separation of Church and State,” *Presented at the Baptist Joint Committee’s 1996 Religious*

We are free to follow or free to not follow. Free to have faith or free to not have faith. And everything we see in Jesus' ministry on earth is invitational; it is never coerced. Even Judas, one of the beloved twelve, is welcomed at the Table of Jesus in the Upper Room even as he is free to later betray Jesus that same evening.

We're gonna come back to Jesus and our main gospel text in a minute, but before we do so, a quick history lesson: There are really four models of church-state relations that we've seen throughout history. 1) In medieval times, we saw the model of the church *above* the state. In this model, the church held the ultimate authority and the government served the church. 2) The second model, the church *under* the state, is what we see in communist countries; the state seeks to limit or extinguish the church altogether. 3) In the third model, the church *with* the state, all have religious freedom, but preference is given to one group. The Anglican Church in England is an example of this

model. 4) The fourth model is the complete *separation* of church and state, or a free church in a free state. In America, the church and state exist side-by-side, neither has power over the other. Baptists have always advocated for this model.”<sup>13</sup>

And you can see its roots for the separation of church and state in Matthew chapter 22. “It started out as a clever plot to trap Jesus – hatched by the most unlikely of allies: Pharisees and Herodians. The Pharisees were religious purists, Jewish patriots who despised Roman rule. The Herodians supported the descendants of Herod and were in league with the Romans’ [Rule].”<sup>14</sup> But they both disliked Jesus more than they hated each other. So they teamed up and asked Jesus a question that was bound to get him in trouble: ‘Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God, and don’t care what people think, so tell us what you think on this – is it lawful to pay a poll tax to Caesar?’ (Must have happened around April 15!) “This was their “gotcha” moment for Jesus

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*Liberty Conference*, accessed on July 4, 2021 at <https://bjconline.org/how-we-got-that-way-2-2/>.

<sup>13</sup> Accessed on July 4, 2021 from the summary of our Baptist identity and freedoms found on: <http://www.firstbaptist-cs.org/four-freedoms.html>.

<sup>14</sup> J. Brent Walker, “Two Sides of the Same Coin,” *A sermon on Matthew 22:15-22; Gal. 5:1, 13-14 on BJConline*, accessed on July 4, 2021 at <https://bjconline.org/two-sides-of-the-same-coin/>.

– trying to trap him. The tax was despised by the Jewish people. If Jesus said yes, his credibility [with his own people] would be ruined. But, if he said no, the Romans would charge him with treason. Either way, Jesus loses.”<sup>15</sup>

Well, Jesus saw through their scheme, and addressed it head on. Catching them by surprise – he pulls a “*Yes, And...*” on them. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘you do have an obligation to support the government. *And*, you have a duty to God’s kingdom — which claims a higher citizenship. So, pay your tax to Caesar – it belongs to him. See, his picture is on the coin. *AND*, give to God the things that are God’s—obedience, service, praise, honor, loving God with your whole heart, mind, body, and soul.’ Now, you and I struggle with this text because, like in many areas, Jesus wasn’t very specific (*What exactly do we give to Caesar and what to Christ??*)<sup>16</sup>

Apparently, there’s an old song titled, “*If 10% is good enough for Jesus, it ought to be enough for Uncle Sam?*”<sup>17</sup> But – whoever wrote it needs a fact

checker because Jesus did not say give 10% to him (that’s an Old Testament standard). Jesus said give all that we have to the poor, and Acts 2 says to share everything we have in in common; so things get dicey when you start trying to equate tithing to taxes! Again – separation of church and state is practically helpful not just spiritually helpful!

In truth, we have no idea what Jesus would say about our taxes today, but the point is clear – we are citizens of two realms: the country in which we live and the *kin*-dom of God.<sup>18</sup> And sometimes those two realms clash and we have to make difficult decisions but when those conflicts happen, our citizenship in God’s *kin*-dom is the one that should always be put first. Patriotism must never be equated with piety.

So there seems to be, even for Jesus, a separation between church and state that is healthy and needed, for both faith and government to be at their best, and really, for one to not corrupt the other.

But EVEN MORE, as Paul writes in the letter to Ephesians

<sup>15</sup> Walker, *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Walker, *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Walker, *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Walker, *ibid.*

that we read today, we must acknowledge that *any* faith we have is by the grace of God, and not from our own works or our own doing. We cannot boast about our faith for God's grace is a gift to us, and to all people, it's not something we have created or developed or even deserved. It is freely given.

Which means that part of what it means to be a citizen of God's kingdom, "part of what it means to love one's neighbor and to be accountable to one another, is to take responsibility for each other's rights and to respect differing opinions—even those with whom we disagree [or think we have nothing in common]."¹⁹

"Martin Niemoeller, a German Evangelical Lutheran pastor, was imprisoned for eight years by the Nazi regime. He spoke of the days in the 1930's when Hitler was coming to power: *'First they came for the Communists, but we were not communists, so we said nothing. Then they came for the trade unionists, but we were not trade unionists, so we said nothing. They then came for the Jews, but we were not Jews, so we said nothing.*

*They then came for the mentally deficient, but we were not mentally deficient, so we said nothing. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to say anything.'*²⁰

As Religious Liberty Advocate Brent Walker says, "Pastor Niemoeller's haunting words remind us that liberal protestants, conservative evangelicals, moderate and fundamentalist Baptist and Catholics of every stripe must be as concerned about the religious liberty of the Muslim, or Mormon, Jew or Buddhist, Christian Scientist or Scientologist, as they are for their own."²¹

Religious liberty is threatened anytime one group gets special privileges and protections OR anytime one group of community of faith is targeted with acts of hate. It's why we must be vigilant about things like travel bans based on the faith of one's country of origin or acts of Anti-Semitism or Islamophobia or even advocating for things like prayer in public schools or monuments of the 10 Commandments on government land.

¹⁹ Walker, *ibid.*

²⁰ Walker, *ibid.*

²¹ Walker, *ibid.*



It's a myth that the separation of church and state has resulted in God being "kicked out of the public schools and banished from the public square." As contemporary Baptist Freedom Fighter, the late James Dunn said: *"What a thing to say — to presume that God can be kicked out of anywhere. No 'God Almighty has a perfect attendance record [in public schools and in the public square.]' "*<sup>22</sup> It's state-sponsored religion that has been banned from these spaces, not the Spirit of God.

Today, I invite you to think about the freedom you are experiencing right now in this moment wherever you are. No one is telling you to be in church or not be in church. No one is telling you how to worship or what to believe or whether you even have to believe anything at all. Religious Freedom is essential in being FREE TO BE...even HERE...today/tonight!

Do your best not to take for granted that you are FREE TO BE here with us in the sanctuary or chapel, OR free to NOT be here — maybe you're traveling

or up in the mountains or visiting family or just playing hooky — OR think about how you can worship online without people censoring your computer or monitoring your online activity. *(Except for Google and Amazon, but at least they're not telling you WHAT to believe, just what to buy...)*

In so many ways religious freedom is foundational to our ability to practice the other three freedoms — soul freedom (personal faith in Jesus), biblical freedom (interpreting for ourselves how to read the Bible), and church freedom (how we as Calvary gather together), and it's essential to our ability to baptize people at their free will and for people to freely come forward and partake of the Lord's Supper. None of that is possible without Religious Freedom first!

So if you're looking for a way to celebrate freedom today and put your faith into action — then I suggested supporting the Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty. Learn about them online ([bjconline.org](https://bjconline.org)) or on the Missions bulletin board outside of the office, pick up a

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<sup>22</sup> Information accessed on July 4, 2021 at <https://bjconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Top-5-myths-of-separation-of-church-and-state-1.pdf>.

flyer about their work from the Kiosk, read about our Baptist heroes and sheroes and what challenges our religious liberty faces today. Sign the petition against Christian Nationalism on their website or see what other advocacy efforts you can be involved in.

Because as the BJC points out, just like any freedom, religious liberty is not without limits. As the old saying goes, *“My right to swing my fist ends where your nose begins.”*<sup>23</sup> Because of this, BJC advocates a “golden rule” of religious liberty: *“Do not ask government to promote your religion if you don’t want government to promote somebody else’s religion; and do not permit government to hinder somebody else’s religion if you don’t want government to hinder your own religion.”*<sup>24</sup>

Today, if you are proud to be an American, perhaps also consider whether or not you are proud to be a Christian – and if you are – know that your ability to worship freely as a Christian has a whole heck of a lot to do with the fact that **Baptists**, who were imprisoned and killed for their efforts, fought hard to give you

the right to worship as you please. Sadly, millions around the globe wish they could say the same...but cannot. Religious Freedom is *not* guaranteed; we must always preserve it and protect it and recognize any violation of it – big or small when we see it.

And so in the spirit of our Religious Freedom, and with my deepest apologies to Lee Greenwood, I took the liberty to rewrite the chorus to *God Bless the USA* with some words that might just help us celebrate our history and heritage as Baptists today:

*(singing)*

*And I’m proud to be a Baptist  
Who can worship as I please,*

*And I won’t forget the ones who  
thought to pen that right for me*

*And I’ll gladly speak up and  
defend it for people of all faiths  
or none*

*Cause there ain’t no doubt  
we’re FREE TO BE /  
people of religious liberty!*

Amen.

<sup>23</sup> Information accessed from BJConline on July 4, 2021 at <https://bjconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Religious-Liberty-Primer.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Information accessed from BJConline on July 4, 2021 at <https://bjconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Religious-Liberty-Primer.pdf>.