

FOUNDATIONS OF OUR FAITH

THROUGH THE BAPTIST FAITH AND MESSAGE 2000

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Champions for Liberty

(Article 17: Religious Liberty)

Article 17: Religious Liberty¹ - "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."

Genesis 1:27; 2:7; Matthew 6:6-7,24; 16:26; 22:21; John 8:36; Acts 4:19-20; Romans 6:1-2; 13:1-7; Galatians 5:1,13; Philippians 3:20; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; James 4:12; 1 Peter 2:12-17; 3:11-17; 4:12-19.

Historic Polegreen Church (see picture)
6411 Heatherwood Dr, Mechanicsville, VA 23116

For more than a century the Polegreen Church stood as a monument to the Hanover Dissenters and **Samuel Davies** in the struggle for religious liberty. Though Davies died fifteen years before the American Revolution, his influence and revolutionary spirit was embodied in **Patrick Henry**, the orator of the Revolution. When Reverend Samuel Davies arrived to Polegreen in 1747, Patrick Henry was only eleven years old. Patrick' mother, Sarah, and her father, Isaac Winston, were active dissenter members of the congregation. They regularly worshipped on this site for the twelve years of Davies' ministry at Polegreen. Ironically, Patrick was named for his uncle who was the Rector of the Anglican parish known as St. Paul's at Old Church in Hanover County, Virginia.

Though the force that drove Davies was religious, the impact of his life and ministry on the political climate was equally remarkable. Known as the best recruiter of volunteer militiamen during the Seven Years' War of 1754-1759, his patriotic sermons left Davies with no peer as a pulpit orator in Virginia, or perhaps in all the colonies, during his lifetime. This gift of oratory gave him the designation "Apostle of Virginia." His sermons were so powerful that Sarah Henry required her young son to repeat them on their carriage ride home to Patrick Henry's birthplace, Studley Plantation, which is approximately four miles from this site. Documented by his biographer William Wirt, shortly before his death, Henry credited Davies with teaching him what an orator should be.



¹ From the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000>.

Timeline of Religious Freedom (walkway)²

One of the most popular features of the Historic Polegreen Church site is the Timeline of Religious Freedom. The Timeline is a long brick walkway leading to the original church's structure. The walkway is inlaid with markers listing the most important dates over two millennia in the history of the struggle for religious freedom.

Many visitors — especially students — find the Timeline to be a real eye-opener. A common assumption is that “religious freedom” is exclusively an American creation. But the reality is those freedoms represent hard-fought struggles that emerged over centuries of sacrifice and hard work.



Historic Baptist Leaders for Religious Liberty

1. **Roger Williams** (c. 1603–1683) - Advocated for religious liberty and founded the colony of Rhode Island as a haven for religious freedom.
2. **Obadiah Holmes** (c. 1607–1682) - Suffered persecution and public whipping for his refusal to compromise on religious liberty principles.
3. **Thomas Helwys** (c. 1550–c. 1616) - Declared that religious belief is between God and individuals, and no earthly king has the right to dictate matters of conscience.
4. **John Smyth** (c. 1570–1612) - Asserted that magistrates must not meddle in matters of religion or conscience.
5. **E. Y. Mullins** (1860–1928) - Defined the Baptist ideal of “a free church in a free state” and emphasized equal protection for all religious beliefs.

George Truett, in his famous address on religious liberty in 1920, in front of 10,000-15,000 at the steps of the Capitol in Washington DC, said, “We are very happy for all our fellow religionists of every denomination and creed to have this splendid flower of religious liberty, but you will allow us to remind you that **you got the seed in our Baptist garden.** We are very happy for you to have it; now let us all make the best of it and the most of it.”

Key Concepts from the Baptist Faith and Message

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| 1. God is Lord of the Conscience. | 5. The Church Should Not Rely on Civil Power. |
| 2. Church and State Should Be Separate. | 6. The State Cannot Penalize Religious Opinions. |
| 3. No Favoritism by the State. | 7. No Taxes for Religious Support. |
| 4. Civil Government is Ordained by God. | 8. The Christian Ideal: A Free Church in a Free State. |

Key Scriptural Concepts Supporting Religious Liberty

1. **Matthew 22:21** - Jesus teaches that the church and state have distinct roles, and God’s authority is supreme.
2. **Romans 13:1-7** - Christians should respect and obey governing authorities, as long as their commands do not contradict God’s revealed will.
3. **Acts 5:29** - When government laws conflict with God’s commands, Christians must prioritize obedience to God.
4. **1 Timothy 2:1-2** - Christians are called to pray for government leaders so they may govern justly and protect freedom.
5. **Galatians 5:1** - True freedom, including religious liberty, is a gift from God.

Practical Applications

1. Thank God for the freedom to worship and serve Him without interference from the government.
2. Pray for government leaders to uphold religious freedom and for wisdom to balance church-state relations.
3. Vote in elections and engage with organizations and initiatives that defend religious freedom locally and globally.
4. Live as Christ’s Ambassadors by respecting civil laws, loving your neighbors, and sharing the Gospel freely in your community.
5. Bring a biblically informed perspective to discussions about moral and public policy (Matthew 5:13-16).

² <https://www.historicpolegreenchurch.org/resources.php>