



# Biblical Ethics

Church & State and  
Religious Liberty

March 24, 2024  
Adult Sunday School  
Lewis Lake Covenant Church

## Religious Liberty

Case study:

*In December 2023, Iowa allowed various religious displays to be set up in the rotunda of the State capital building. The Satanic Temple erected a display, including a goat-headed statue of Baphomet. Navy Veteran Michael Cassidy destroyed the display, beheading the statue. A news article says prosecutors have charged him with “felony third-degree criminal mischief, claiming that Cassidy’s beheading of The Satanic Temple statue was in violation of individual rights under the state’s hate crime laws.” Cassidy said, “None of the founders would have considered government sanction of Satanic altars inside Capitol buildings as protected by the First Amendment. I saw this blasphemous statue and was outraged. My conscience is held captive to the word of God, not to bureaucratic decree. And so I acted.”*

*You are on the jury. How do you find the defendant?*

*Q: Does freedom of religion apply? Why or why not?*

*Q: Does the fact that activists have destroyed, pulled down, or petitioned to remove hundreds of statues with impunity over the past four years matter?*

I. Biblical Considerations:

- A. Non-toleration of false religion in the theocracy (Deut 18:9-14, 20; Judges 6:25-27)
- B. Separation of priestly and royal lines
- C. Divine judgment for blending the two - Saul & Uzziah
- D. Yet there is a category of priest-king: Melchizedek (Gen 14:18)
- E. Jesus: Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and give to God what is God’s.
  - 1. Dilemma: Is it lawful to pay taxes to Rome?
    - a. Occupying, pagan power

2. In some things, we must submit to Caesar's demands: taxes  
Caesar's head is on the coin - the economic system belonged to him, as did the military (Luke 3:14; Matt 8:5-9).
  3. In other things, we must submit to God's demands: Worship, Gospel proclamation (Acts 5:29)
- F. Why obey earthly authority? Because all authority ultimately comes from God (John 19:11)

## II. Historical Notes

### A. Ancient World: King is Divine

1. Egypt: Pharaoh is descended from the gods
2. Rome: "Caesar is Lord" as both a political and religious claim.
3. To rule over the entire man, one must rule over him body and soul.
4. To have a man's complete allegiance, he must look to you for everything.

### B. Medieval era:

1. Militant spread of Islam
2. Power struggle between Emperor & Pope  
"In medieval theory church and state were but two aspects of Christendom... theoretically church and state were in harmonious interplay, each aiming to secure the good of mankind. In fact, however, the pope and emperor were contestants." - Bruce Shelly, *Church History in Plain Language*

### C. Reformation Era

1. Calvin prosecuted Servetus

2. Zwingli died in battle
3. Catholic/Protestant cities & warfare

D. England:

1. Puritans/Separatists
2. Act of Uniformity 1662

E. Colonial America

1. People were coming seeking the freedom to practice their religion according to their convictions, but that didn't mean they were ready to afford other people the same freedoms.
2. The Persecution of the Baptists
  - a. All the colonies except Rhode Island & Pennsylvania had an established, or state church, supported by taxes.
    - i. Rhode Island: Founded by Baptist Roger Williams
    - ii. Pennsylvania: Founded by Quaker William Penn
  - b. Baptists accused of child abuse (because they did not baptize their children as infants), Baptist marriages not recognized  
"John Cotton, the colony's most prominent pastor, told the court that "denying infant baptism would overthrow all," and therefore, Baptists were "soul-murderers" and deserved death."
3. John & Samuel Adams vehemently opposed Religious Liberty: "The solar system would change,

John Adams said, before they gave up their religious establishment.” - Gregory Wills

4. John Leland & Isaac Backus: Baptists who took up the cause of religious liberty and eventually convinced James Madison to fight for the cause
5. The Baptist case for religious liberty hinged on one argument:

No soul can be coerced by any human institution into truly believing anything. True religious affections arise freely from the heart, never from compulsion.

Therefore, all people should be free to pursue religious truth and express their religious convictions.

6. The theological case underlying this was the doctrine of conversion: Salvation comes by a sincere, freely exercised faith in Christ.
  - a. Not by baptism
  - b. Not by communion
  - c. Not by forced behavior - good works, church attendance, etc.
  - d. Not by church membership
  - e. Therefore, any forceful coercion of religious beliefs or practices ultimately hinders or confuses genuine salvation.

*Note:* You can see how this fits rather nicely with the Baptist conviction that baptism comes *after* conversion, and is something a person decides to do because they have trusted in Christ, rather than a decision that's made for them without their input.

Aside: Consequences of Religious Liberty in early America:  
Separatism from the institutionalized church led to a popular kind of Christianity – the version that captures the most minds and heart wins. Fiery but plain-spoken, entertaining, uneducated, unordained preachers, those who claimed a special mission or word from God – these were all free to compete in a marketplace of religious ideas and practices, and the institutional church had no means of ‘controlling’ them – or their parishioners attraction to them. Led to “The Democratization of American Christianity”

### III. Government:

#### A. What it is: *force* (R.C. Sproul)

Gov’t is legalized use of force to create a beneficial society.

Government cannot operate without the use of force

1. Collecting taxes
2. Enforcing laws
3. Raising an army

#### B. What it does:

*“The proper end of any earthly government is to uphold justice and secure the basic rights of all human beings, to promote the common good, and to restrain and punish evil deeds citizens commit against each other.” – Andrew T. Walker*

#### C. Legislating morality

1. You can’t legislate how people think and feel – you can’t pass laws that make them believe something
2. But you can force them to behave in certain ways
  - a. Speed limits

- b. Building codes
  - c. Regulation of the sale of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco
- D. Religious liberty: the Government will restrain from the use of force when it comes to religious matters.
1. It won't force taxation to support one church over another
  2. It won't force people to attend church
  3. It won't tell people what to believe
  4. It won't prescribe or hinder religious practices  
ie. serving wine to children in communion
  5. It won't privilege one religion over another - it won't construct buildings

#### IV. Argument for Religious Liberty

Andrew Walker's three-pronged argument for "religious freedom in a pluralistic age."

*Note:* You'll notice that all three of these stem from a Christian worldview. They wouldn't show up naturally in a Hindu or even an Islamic state. Suggests religious liberty can only flourish in a Christianized society. Certainly the most atheistic and ostensibly least-religious societies have been anything but hospitable to religious freedom.

- A. Eschatology - "the last times": What will be is not what now is
1. What will be: Jesus will reign as king, uniting church & state. End of religious liberty.
  2. What now is:
    - a. Church & state are incapable of creating true faith, even in cooperation with each other.

- “Christians are to use persuasion rather than coercion to engage others. The right understanding of the rule of God thus acts as a buttress against religious and political utopias.”
- b. Both are incapable of rendering final judgment “Christ has not given authority to his church to judge the consciences of unbelievers, nor is that the role of the state... No human government or authority can judge, end, or mete out punishment for false belief. Only Jesus has that power in his coming kingdom.”
  - c. In sum: “By refusing to bring history’s future judgment into the present, Christians can extend an account of religious liberty to their unbelieving neighbors with whom they disagree.”

## B. Anthropology: the nature of man

- 1. Man is created in the image of God
  - Among other things, ‘image’ may refer to man’s:
    - a. Dominion
    - b. Rationality
    - c. Spirituality
    - d. Morality
- 2. As such, he has certain inherent, “unalienable” rights
  - a. Dominion: man can own & rule creation.
    - i. Rights of private property & the right to govern it as he sees fit
    - ii. The church & the state should respect a man’s property and not take it by force



- iii. A man should be free to invest his assets (or not!) in the religious system of his own choosing (2 Cor 9:7)
  - b. Rationality: man can think and come to logical conclusions
    - i. Man has the right to exercise his reason in pursuit of truth
    - ii. Neither church nor state can force a man to believe anything (Orwell's *1984*)
  - c. Spirituality: man has a soul
    - i. Man has the capacity to interact with the spiritual realm
    - ii. A man is responsible for the state of his own soul & his relationship with the Divine
    - iii. A man should be free to pursue that relationship with sincerity
  - d. Morality: man is aware of right and wrong
    - i. A man's conscience makes him aware of his moral responsibility.
    - ii. Man should be free to pursue the dictates of his conscience
- 3. Because these rights are from God, they should be respected by his fellow man
- 4. Because these rights do not come from the State (they're pre-political and thus 'unalienable'), the state acts immorally if it violates them

C. Missiology: the mission of the church

1. True conversion is a matter of the affections & conscience
2. True conversion cannot be forced or coerced
3. The mission of the church is to persuade people to believe the Gospel from their heart
4. This happens best when people are free to choose
  - a. To abandon prior religious beliefs
  - b. To embrace new ones
5. “Halfhearted religion works as a kind of inoculation or prevention against sincere religion. Only religions so adamant about the judgment of God will seek the freedoms to advance that message for the sake of humankind. Heartfelt convictions will always seek the liberty to be proclaimed.”
6. “If the gospel is true, the gospel does not need government preference. Why? Because in the scope of history, truth wins.”

## V. Challenges:

- A. False religion – why should we allow something that will deceive and lead people to hell to exist?
- B. Religious Liberty can lead to religious apathy
- C. Maintaining Religious Liberty
  1. The challenge of our natural human impulses
    - a. To regulate behavior we disagree with or see as immoral
    - b. To favor behavior we see as virtuous
    - c. To refrain from use of force when it is available
  2. The challenges of a social crises

- May the state restrict the right of people to practice their religion if doing so is deemed a threat?
- a. Who defines the threat?
  - b. Who defines when it is ended?
  - c. Who is authorized to determine what forms of worship are acceptable and lawful?
3. The challenges of false religion: How shall we deal with obviously immoral practices of religion?
- a. Sexually abusive cult leaders
  - b. Satanic rituals involving animal sacrifice
  - c. Islamic imposition of Sharia Law and ‘female circumcision.’

“Render to Caesar  
the things that are  
Caesar's, and to  
God the things that  
are God's.”

-Jesus

