

Trending
Let Freedom Ring
July 5, 2015

PRELUDE – My Lighthouse
Feature – Summertime Blues
Video Announcements
Congregational Song – My Lighthouse
Congregational Song – Called Me Higher

Good morning everyone ... and happy Independence Day (one day late).

As Shannon said, today we're beginning our annual summer series that takes a look at some of the hot topics and provocative issues currently confronting our culture and, this morning, we're going to begin with the matter of religious liberty.

If you've been paying attention to the news lately you know that, with the Supreme Court's recent ruling on gay marriage, the issue of religious freedom has come even more "front

and center” in public debate than it was already. Specifically, the court’s decision raises questions for those who believe that God has ordained marriage to be only between a man and a woman.

- If asked to bake a cake for a gay wedding, can a Christian-owned bakery opt out for reasons of conscience?
- Can courthouse clerks refuse to issue a marriage license to a gay couple if it violates their religious beliefs?
- Must churches host and/or ministers perform gay weddings if it goes against their understanding of the scripture?

Of course, the question of religious liberty has much broader application than just this issue. In recent years it has extended to ...

- Whether or not Christian-owned businesses can be required to provide birth control coverage to its employees under the

healthcare law.

- Whether or not Christian organizations on college campuses can require their leaders to actually be Christians.
- Whether or not faith-based adoption agencies can refuse to place children with same-sex couples or unmarried opposite-sex couples.

Clearly, times have changed in America and many “people of faith” (Christian and non) are understandably concerned as long-standing traditions and morals are being formally and informally challenged.

- So, what should we think about this?
- What rights do we truly have under the Constitution?
- And what difference does it make?

That’s what I want to talk to you about this morning.

As I was preparing for this message, I looked back at all the talks I have given over the past 20 years and realized that this is the first time I have ever devoted an entire message to this topic. I'll confess to you that after spending many hours studying this issue (focusing especially on what our founders had in mind and how they came to embrace such a unique concept as religious liberty in the first place), I felt some regret and even a little bit of shame about that.

I felt regret because I think it would have been very helpful in recent years for Christians like me – *conservative evangelical Christians* (as many of our founders also were) – it would have been very helpful for us to have had a better understanding of the issue; one that goes deeper than the soundbites we hear on Fox News and from some conservative Christian organizations.

That said, I think it would have been very helpful

in recent years for atheists, agnostics and non-Christian spiritualists – as some of our founders were – to have had a better understanding of the issue as well; one that goes deeper than the soundbites you hear on MSNBC and from some liberal activist organizations.

And just a reminder that I plan to make *everyone* mad at some point in this series. One of my goals as a pastor is to be an equal-opportunity offender.

If both sides had had a better understanding of the meaning and purpose of religious liberty (and the right to free speech and freedom of the press which is rooted in it), we might have been able in recent years to avoid at least some of the constant and spiteful minimizing, objectifying and demonizing of those with whom we disagree. We might have been able to have a more civil discourse about the intersection between civil rights (the right of all people to be full participants in our civil society) and rights of

conscience (from which religious liberty derives).

And I say I felt a bit of shame over not speaking about this issue in the past because the very concept of religious liberty in the modern and western world (actually, it hardly exists *anywhere else* in the world) – the very idea of religious liberty was first advanced by men and women who are among the patriarchs and matriarchs of my spiritual lineage as a Christian.

- As most of you know, I became a Christian at the age of 15 in a *Baptist* church in Bowie, MD.
- I experienced God’s call to leave my secular career and enter vocational ministry while serving as a volunteer youth pastor at a *Baptist* church in Aberdeen, NJ.
- I and my family moved to Kansas City so I could go to Midwestern *Baptist* Seminary.
- I was supported and funded in launching this church by Park Hill *Baptist* Church, the

Clay-Platte *Baptist* Association, the Missouri *Baptist* convention and dare I say it – the Southern *Baptist* Convention.

Now, the truth about Baptists (if you happen to know any) is that sometimes they – we – are an obstinate lot. And they – we – have gotten a lot of things wrong over the years which is why we have never made a big deal about our Baptist roots here at NHCC. Plus, we're not interested in making more and better Baptists. We're interested in making more and better Christians – believers and followers of Christ.

But one of the things Baptists have gotten right and have stood for at great personal cost and with great tenacity (at least until recent generations) is the right of every individual to follow his or her conscience in matters of faith ... including the choice not to believe anything when it comes to such matters.

In fact, it's no exaggeration to say that without

the presence and influence of Baptists in early American history, it's very likely that the constitutional right to religious liberty in United States would not exist. It's very likely that the United States would have continued in the European model of a state-appointed, state-supported church ... a model which, at that point in history, had produced centuries – *centuries* – of violence and bloodshed towards those who did not believe and would not go along ...

... a model which is still producing, even today, staggering amounts of violence and bloodshed in vast areas of the world where conformity to a particular religious belief and practice is a demand. (I'm specifically referring to what we've been seeing in the totalitarian regimes associated with radical Islam).

What a profound and unique blessing was bestowed on this nation when our founders had the wisdom to guarantee and protect every person's right to freely choose when it comes to

religious thought and expression!

So, how did that happen? How did that come about? Well, let's do a little bit of history this morning and find out.

A Bit of History

And since I am not a historian, I'm going to enlist the help of those who are. I want to show you several video clips from PBS, C-SPAN's American History TV and also the James Madison Memorial Foundation that tell the story. (Madison, in case you have forgotten your high school history class, was the author of the Constitution).

So, let's begin with the arrival of the Puritans, who came to America by the tens of thousands in the 1630s. They were not the first colonists *chronologically* but they were the first who came for the purpose of escaping religious persecution they were experiencing in England.

Video Clip - 01 “CITY ON A HILL” (3.3 min)

(Begin) Voice: “John Winthrop in 1630 led a group of Puritans ...”

(End) Dr. Bushman: “He felt obligated to quiet her or drive her from the colony.”

Even though they had been persecuted for their beliefs in England, the Puritans turned around and did the same thing to others in the New World. They were interested in *their* freedom but not so much in the freedom of others.

Now, as it turns out, even though Anne Hutchison was banished from the colony, her influence continued to bear fruit. A bright young preacher by the name of Roger Williams, who had attended her Bible studies, not only adopted her views on freedom of conscience and religious tolerance, but took them to the next logical step ... which eventually led to *him* getting kicked out of the colony as well.

What happened next changed the course of

religious and political history in the United States..

Video Clip - 02 ROGER WILLIAMS & THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH (2.7 min)

(Begin) Voice: “Roger Williams believed that the state had no role to play in religion.”

(End) Voice: “What Roger Williams did here still echoes in the larger context of the United States of America.”

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 1>

Now, just to be clear, William’s motivation was *not* political. His motivation was spiritual. He believed that Christianity had been repeatedly and hopelessly perverted throughout history by its alliance with the state, so he wanted to keep government out of religion.

In fact, he – not Thomas Jefferson – was the first to speak of the idea of “a wall of separation” between Church and State. The wall, he said, kept the weeds of the world out of the garden of

the church.

It was the practical application of Jesus' command to ...

“Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Matthew 22:21 (NET)

It was the practical application of Jesus' insistence that ...

“My kingdom is not from this world.” *John 18:3 (NET)*

More specifically, Williams had observed that one of the greatest problems with Christianity in his day was the fact that the government forced people to “profess Christ” without first having had an encounter *with Christ* and a true change of heart.

He said ...

“[This] is the bane of millions of souls in England and all other nations professing to be Christian nations, who are brought by *public authority* to baptism and fellowship with God in ordinances of worship, *before* the saving work of repentance and a true turning to God.”ⁱ

Now, as it turns out, even though Williams was successful in his efforts and Rhode Island remained without an official church, most of colonial America did not. Following the European pattern, every colony officially adopted one church tradition. But Williams’ emphasis on the necessity of the heart and head to *willfully* choose Christ (instead of being forced to do so by the government) emboldened other preachers who began to emphasize the same quality of faith.

And, eventually, because of their efforts, something amazing happened in the American Colonies.

<END SLIDE SET 1>

Video Clip – 03 THE GREAT AWAKENING (3.3 min)

(Begin) Music with shot of Paine’s *Age of Reason* cover page

(End) Professor: “... has its roots in that Great Awakening of the 1740s and 50s.”

Now, that’s a very important observation. The experience of God on a personal level through the preaching of Whitefield, Edwards (and also John and Charles Wesley) is leading multitudes of people all over the country to the conclusion that “authorities in the state are perhaps not any more necessary than they are in the church.”

And now you can see where this is going. The war that’s coming is not going to be only about taxation without representation. That’s part of it but, in reality, there’s a lot more at stake.

Video Clip – 04 FORGED IN FAITH (1.7 min)

(Begin) Voice: “Today’s students of history believe that the root of the American Revolution was ...

(End) Professor: “... life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

That’s a key thought to remember: *the Declaration of Independence was the mission statement of the colonies while the Constitution was the rule book.*

We’ll come back to that in just a minute but the point I want you to see is that there was a great deal of religious sentiment and energy at work. People really did believe that the Creator (whether the God of the Bible or the unnamed God of the Deists) had given them *unalienable* rights that were being usurped by Great Britain. And therefore, rebellion was justified. In fact, in the thinking of some, *not* to rebel was to disobey God.

Of course, many of those same folks had a *huge blind spot* in their thinking in that they didn’t

apply this same logic to the slaves they owned. But that's just part of the human condition. Very rarely do people get it completely right in the first few generations. It takes a long time to work out all the implications of a new revelation and that new revelation often has to live uncomfortably alongside the old for a while.

A fascinating example of that reality is that of the Puritans. They were characteristically unwilling to grant religious freedom to others – even to the point of death (the Salem Witch Trials for example), yet they were among the first to see and condemn the practice of *slavery* as being anti-Christian.

Anyway ... all of this leads up to the Declaration of Independence – the mission statement – and the Revolutionary War, but once the war is over and victory is won, the states have to decide on the form of government. They have to design the rulebook – The Constitution.

And, for many people, the question of the relationship between church and state is at the top of the list. And because there is a great deal of apprehension over the issue, James Madison reluctantly gives in to pressure (primarily from Baptists) to create an additional document which we know as “The Bill of Rights.”

Video Clip – 05 THE BILL OF RIGHTS (2.7 min)

(Begin) Voice: “Critics of the new constitution clamored for changes.”

(End) Professor: “... without being pressured by or buffeted by larger forces.”

Now, because most of us have lived in this culture for a long, long time and we’re used to the way things are, I don’t know that we really appreciate the magnitude of what happened. I don’t know if we appropriately value what it is we have in our Constitution. *For the very first time in world history, a national government - our national government - promised to stay out of religion.*

And don't miss this point: the primary pressure to set it up this way did not come from anti-Christian secularists. It came from Christians (again, primarily *Baptists* and Baptist pastors no less!) who eventually convinced other Christians of the value of the proposition.

And what we have today – what we enjoy in this country that multitudes around the world can only dream of and hope for and pray for – is not simply the freedom to choose whether to be Mormon or Muslim ... it is also the liberty *not* to believe.

Pretty incredible, isn't it? America, God truly did shed His grace on thee!

Major Implications

Now, with all of that said by way of explanation – and, quite frankly, so much more could be said and probably needs to be said (what with so much revisionist history in textbooks, movies

and TV shows designed to scrub the record of any hint of religious influence and paint our founding as being predominantly a secular event) ... let's move on and briefly examine a few implications of our Constitutional right to religious liberty.

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 2>

1. We must confidently (but graciously) challenge attempts to exclude religious thought from the public square.

It has often been said that the United States is not a Christian nation and that is absolutely true. Though Christianity was a great motivation (remember the influence of the black-robed regiment!) and many of the founders were Christians, this country was not set up to support and/or propagate Christianity.

However, it was also not set up to be *hostile* to Christianity – or any other religion. In fact, it was

just the opposite. Even though the founders were not interested in establishing a state religion or church they felt that religion and churches were indispensable to the process of a democratic republic.

In his farewell address, George Washington said that “of all the dispositions and habits, which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports.”ⁱⁱ

John Adams, signer of the Declaration of Independence and second president of our nation wrote: “[W]e have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. . . . Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”ⁱⁱⁱ

James Madison, the writer of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, late in his life wrote that “The belief in God all powerful wise and good, is so

essential to the moral order of the world and to the happiness of man, that arguments which enforce it cannot be drawn from too many sources.”

Madison, along with the rest of the founders, thought that belief in God was vital to a healthy republic.

Therefore, you and I must confidently (and graciously) challenge attempts to exclude religious thought from the public square.

How do we do that? Obviously, speak up. But just as importantly ...

**2. We must elect representatives –
Democrats, Republicans,
Independents, Libertarians – who
believe in freedom of conscience ...**

... who not only believe that it’s OK to think and worship differently (or not at all) but also believe we have the right to *speak* of what we believe ...

even if others *don't like it*.

- We need people in leadership who will protect the rights of churches and pastors to preach what the Bible says about homosexual behavior.
- We need people in leadership who will protect the rights of homosexuals to picket churches and pastors who speak against homosexual behavior.
- We need people in leadership who will protect the rights of the Klan to say hateful things about African Americans.
- We need people in leadership who will protect the right of African Americans to expose the ignorant thinking of the Klan.

Right or wrong, all of these are matters of conscience. And conscience, we as Christians believe, is beholden to no one on earth.

And when we as Christians stand up for religious liberty and vote for representatives who believe

in religious liberty, we are not just protecting ourselves; we are working in the interest of the common good. We are working to keep *everyone* from the evil of a conscience-restricting coercive government.^{iv}

All Americans must stand up for the right of others of different opinions to fully participate in civil society lest the day come when we find ourselves excluded.

That said ...

3. We must also recognize that religious liberty does not trump the civil rights of others.

This is something that the courts have understood for a very long time. This is the way our system works ... which means that even though churches will not be forced to do gay weddings (as that would be the state controlling the church) Christian bakers (for example) are not going to be able to opt out of serving gay

couples any more than they can opt out of serving interracial couples.

In this nation, a decision to refuse to do business with someone — especially for reasons such as race or sexual orientation — denies them the right to participate equally in society. And that’s a violation of their civil rights.^v

And even though we don’t agree, those rights must be protected ... for if they are not – if the Christian baker can choose not to serve the gay couple because they are gay – then our rights as Christians are at risk. The gay baker can choose not to serve a Christian couple simply because they are Christians.

That’s not a prescription for shalom.

“But, wait a minute, Rick. What if we don’t believe that gay marriage (or any other behavior) is right?”

4. We must influence “protected deviance” with love, wisdom and prayer (not condemnation or legal manipulations).

We are human, but we don't wage war as humans do. We use God's mighty weapons, not worldly weapons, to knock down the strongholds of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments.
2 Corinthians 10:3-4 (NLT)

Our goal: discourage participation in a lifestyle that we see as ungodly and therefore self-destructive. Why we are “against” LGBT and gay marriage? Love.

5. Finally, we must remember that religious liberty is not the norm for Christians. Persecution is the norm.

That's why Peter wrote:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on

you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you ... if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. 1

Peter 4:12-14,16 (NIV)

There is very likely a day coming when the persecution that is elsewhere in this world will be here, too. But until that day let us rejoice and be thankful for the incredible thing God has done in this country.

Let's pray to that end.

<prayer>

Feature – Let Freedom Ring

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Next week's message is called ...

“Je Suis Charleston” / racism cartoon

2. Offering at door

Endnotes

ⁱ [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Roger_Williams_\(theologian\)](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Roger_Williams_(theologian))

ⁱⁱ <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel06.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.wallbuilders.com/libissuesarticles.asp?id=63>

^{iv} See <http://www.russellmoore.com/2015/04/20/religious-liberty-is-not-freedom-from-ridicule/>

^v <http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2014/02/26/3333161/religious-liberty-racist-anti-gay/>