

Baptists and

Religious Freedoms

Theological Foundations

**Resolutions on Religious Liberty from the General Council
of the Baptist World Alliance, meeting in Santiago, Chile
July 2-7, 2012**

(extracts)

WHEREAS, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion";

WHEREAS, Religious Liberty for all persons has been a foundational Baptist principle for 400 years;

THEREFORE CALLS on Baptist church leaders around the world to renew urgently the teaching on Religious Liberty for all persons and to serve as advocates in their congregations and communities for the protection of all who wish to worship as their consciences dictate.

Three Foundations for Baptist defence of freedom of religion:

1. The divine rule (the rule of Christ/ the sovereignty of God)
2. God's gift of natural rights
3. Respect for the conscience

The relation between the three aspects sets up:

- an overlap between Baptist thinking and a secular 'rights-culture'
- a valuable dialogue with other religions, especially with Islam

1. The Divine Rule

Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (1612).

"For mens religion to God, is betwixt God and themselves; the King shall not answer for it, neither may the King be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks [i.e. Muslims], Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure. This is made evident to our lord the King by the scriptures." (p. 69)

"God hath given unto the king an earthly kingdom with all earthly power against the which none may resist [but] Christ alone is king of Israel and sits upon David's throne and the king ought to be a subject of his kingdom The king must needs grant that as he is an earthly king he can have no power to rule in this spiritual kingdom of Christ, nor can compel any to be subjects thereof."

(Principal matters, recto; p. 49)

2. Natural Rights

‘These Accusations would soon cease, if the Law of Toleration were once so settled, that all Churches were obliged to lay down Toleration as the Foundation of their own Liberty; and teach that Liberty of Conscience is every mans natural Right, equally belonging to Dissenters as to themselves; and that no body ought to be compelled in matters of Religion, either by Law or Force.’

John Locke, *A letter concerning toleration humbly submitted* (London: 1689), p. 48

Robert Hall, Baptist minister in Cambridge, 1793:

‘That there are natural rights, or, in other words, a certain liberty which men may exercise, independent of permission from society, can scarcely be doubted by those who comprehend the meaning of the terms. Every man must have a right to worship God after the mode he thinks acceptable; or, in other words, he ought not to be compelled to consult any thing but his own conscience’

The Works of Robert Hall, ed. Olinthus Gregory. 6 Volumes (London: 1832), vol. 3, p. 122.

‘Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.’

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 18

The American Baptist Bill of Rights

unanimously approved at the 1939 annual sessions of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Northern Baptist Convention and the National Baptist Convention.

Extract:

“Believing religious liberty to be **not only an inalienable human right, but indispensable to human welfare**, a Baptist must exercise himself to the utmost maintenance of absolute religious liberty **for his Jewish neighbor, his Catholic neighbor, his Protestant neighbor, and for everybody else**. Profoundly convinced that any deprivation of this right is a wrong to be challenged, Baptists condemn every form of compulsion in religion or restraint of the free consideration of the claims of religion.
We stand for a civil state, “with full liberty in religious concerns.”

13th Baptist world Congress Stockholm (1975):

"We believe that God has made humankind in his own image and that he endows us with certain human rights which Christians are obliged to affirm, defend, and extend: the right to necessities of life includes the rights of all persons to have access to life, liberty, food, clothing, shelter, health, education, the right to work, and the pursuit of happiness including a quality of life that allows adequate development of human potentialities."

14th Baptist world Congress Toronto (1980):

"Human rights are derived from God -- from his nature, his creation, and his commands. Concern for human rights is at the heart of the Christian faith. Every major doctrine is related to human rights, beginning with the biblical revelation of God."

3. Respect for Conscience

-- Conscience and the Rule of God

"that the magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force or compel men to this or that form of religion, or doctrine; but to leave Christian religion free, to every man's conscience ... for Christ only is the King, and lawgiver of the church and conscience (James 4.12)" (Confession of Faith of the English Congregation, Amsterdam 1612).

Neither has our Lord and King by that sword of justice power over his subject's consciences (Thomas Helwys, *Mystery of Iniquity*, 1612, p. 43)

"It is a cruel tyranny to force men's consciences in their religion to God ... seeing that they onely must stand themselves before the iudgement seat of God to answer for themselves, when it shall be no excuse for them to say, we were commanded or compelled to be of this religion by the King, or by them that had authority from him." (Thomas Helwys, *Mystery of Iniquity*, 1612, p. 46)

-- Conscience and Rights

“The religious opinions of Dissenters are so various, that there is perhaps no point in which they are agreed, except in asserting the rights of conscience against all human control and authority. From the time of Queen Elizabeth ... their views of religious liberty have gradually extended”. (Robert Hall, 1823)

“ in our postulate of soul liberty we affirm the right of every human being to exemption in matters of faith and conscience from from all coercion or intimidation by an earthly power whatsoever. (1905. JD Freeman, Platform address, First Baptist world Congress London).

“We reaffirm ... the Baptist concepts of freedom of individual conscience and of the worth and inherent rights of each human being.” (12th Baptist world Congress Tokyo, 1970).

4. Losing the Balance

(a) Over-emphasis on divine rule

‘Polutheisme [polytheism] and Atheistical doctrine ought to be restrained, exploded by the Christian Magistrate’

(John Tombes, *The Ancient Bounds: Or Liberty of Conscience Tenderly Stated, Modestly Asserted, and Mildly Vindicated* (London: 1645), Preface, p. 7.)

(b) Over-emphasis on natural rights

‘Accommodationism’ and ‘exceptionalism’

(c) Over-emphasis on conscience

“Competency of the soul in religion and under God -- may be regarded as the platform of human rights in religion.”

(E.Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Philadelphia, 1908), p. 77.

5. Defence of the Universal Liberty of Religion

-- based on Divine Rule

“For mens religion to God, is betwixt God and themselves; the King shall not answer for it, neither may the King be judge between God and man.”

(Helwys, *Short Declaration*, p. 69)

“the Kingdom of heaven or Christ’s Government over the whole world doth strictly charge his servants, the Kings and Rulers of the Earth to suffer tares; Turks, Jews, Pagans, and Infidels, as well as Christians to grow or live together in the Field of the World, their Dominions until the Day of harvest, or dissolution of all things, and not pluck them up.”

(Richard Overton, *Araignment of Mr Persecution*, 1645, p. 22)

“Our demand has not been simply for religious toleration, but religious liberty ... and that not for ourselves alone, but for all men. We did not stumble upon the doctrine. It inheres in the very essence of our belief. Christ is Lord of all.” (1905. JD Freeman, First Baptist world Congress, London)

-- based on rights and conscience

Jews in Russia should be ‘left to the quiet exercise of their heaven-born right to worship God according to their own consciences’.

(1905, General Baptist Convention of Texas)

"Believing religious liberty to be not only an inalienable human right, but indispensable to human welfare, a Baptist must exercise himself to the utmost in the maintenance of absolute religious liberty for his Jewish neighbour, his catholic neighbour, his Protestant neighbour, and for everybody else.”

(Mandate of the Baptist Joint Committee for Public Affairs, 1939).

‘To support the BWA and its member bodies in their advocacy for the protection of fundamental human rights for people of all faiths, especially for Baptists and other Christians who experience or face the threat of persecution.’ (Present mandate of Baptist World Alliance Commission on Religious Freedom)

-- return to a basis on Divine Rule

“Religion can be deeply rooted in the identity of a person and one's relation to the transcendental world expressed in acts of worship and the sharing of one's faith.”

(BWA Resolution, Santiago, 2012).

“Christians are not to be partisan in their concern for religious freedom, but to be active campaigners for religious freedom for all Helwys’ stance implies an acceptance of a multi-faith plural society in which he encourages active engagement rather than a withdrawal to the margins, or indeed any attempt to re-establish Christendom.”

(Paper given to BWA Commission on Religious Freedom, Santiago, 2012)

Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) article 18:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, worship and observance.

Article 29.2: In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.

The European Convention on Human Rights (1950/1953), article 9:

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

2. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

BWA Congress in Stockholm 1975: resolved that Baptists should refrain from “seeking privileges that might infringe on full religious freedom of others.”

6. Common Ground with Others for Religious Freedom

“O People of the Scripture! Come to a Common *Word* between us and you. That we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none shall take others for Lords beside God.”

A Common Word (2008), citing the Qur'an Aal 'Imran 3:64.

Clearly, the blessed words: ***'we shall ascribe no partner unto Him'*** relate to the Unity of God. Clearly also, ***worshipping none but God*** relates to being totally devoted to God and hence to the First and Greatest Commandment. According to one of the oldest and most authoritative commentaries (tafsir) on the Holy Qur'an ***'that none of us shall take others for lords beside God'*** means 'that none of us should obey in disobedience to what God has commanded, nor glorify them by prostrating to them in the same way as they prostrate to God'. In other words, that Muslims, Christians and Jews should be free to each follow what God commanded them, and not have 'to prostrate before kings and the like', for God says elsewhere in the Holy Qur'an: Let there be no compulsion in religion.... (Al-Baqarah, 2:256). This clearly relates to the Second Commandment and to love of the neighbour of which justice and freedom of religion are a crucial part

A Common Word (2008), citing the Qur'an Aal 'Imran 3:64.

Baptist-Muslim Dialogue about Religious Freedom

Extract from the BWA response to *A Common Word*:

“It is not altogether clear to us whether you think that this principle [‘to follow what God has commanded them’] can also cover the freedom of people to change their religion, or to move from a community of one faith to another of a different faith. As Baptist Christians, we believe that the same principle of accountability to the sovereign God gives freedom to make such a change, from Christianity to Islam or from Islam to Christianity. Of course, we are concerned here with a person’s *own* conviction that God is calling them into a different community of faith (‘to follow what God has commanded them’), not with unjust human means of persuasion, inducement or compulsion.”