

Article 17 Religious Liberty

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You're a lot closer than you were last night.

Article 17, entitled Religious Liberty, says, 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, and providing for such freedom, no ecclesiastical group or denomination should be favored by the state more than others.

Civil government being ordained by 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.

In the Baptist Faith and Message, that article is followed by a list of 18 scriptures that purportedly speak to the issue of religious liberty. I've looked at all those scriptures. I have to be a bit honest with you this morning. Some of them would require some artful exposition to get religious liberty out of them, but I commend the writers for doing a good job.

As far back as the 17th and 18th centuries, Baptists have been champions of religious liberty. We understand that the Bible teaches us to pray for the governing authorities and to submit to them as they minister for good.

Jesus told us to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, but we also understand, based on the doctrines of soul competency and priesthood of the

believer among others, that there should be limitations on government's intrusion into the things of faith.

Quickly, I want to highlight just three points out of Article 17 for this morning.

First point, church and state should be separate.

No ecclesiastical group or denomination should be favored by the state more than others. This idea was solidified in the Constitution of the United States on December 15th, 1791, when the Bill of Rights, written by James Madison, who, incidentally, was highly influenced by the Baptists of Virginia, was ratified.

The very First Amendment says, Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

Now, I would suggest that we are really not in much danger of Congress making any laws establishing religion, but it's the free exercise thereof where things get a bit dicey.

We don't want the government telling us whom to worship, and we don't want the government telling us how to worship, and we don't want the government penalizing us for the way we live our lives under the lordship of Jesus Christ, whether it's the preacher in the pulpit, the coach on the football field, or the baker in the bakery shop.

As Article 17 begins, God alone is Lord of the conscience.

Point number two, the gospel of Christ contemplates spiritual means alone for the pursuit of its ends.

Oh, six minutes, okay.

As Baptists, we believe strongly that all religions should be free of government influence, not because we believe all religions to be equal or because we have some watered-down, syncretistic view of truth, but rather because we believe that the gospel is the only way of salvation, and we know that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

We don't need the government's endorsement or the government's power to accomplish the task that God has given us. The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is sufficient to save.

Point number three, quoting again from Article 17, the state has no right to impose penalties for religious opinions of any kind.

We have the right to form and propagate opinions in the sphere of religion without interference by the civil power.

What constitutes a religious opinion is increasingly under debate and attack. Some have called our opinions hate speech. Others are attempting to tell us that our sphere of religion should be very narrowly defined.

As some former leaders in our country held, the law means freedom of worship rather than freedom of religion.

In other words, you are only free inside the four walls of your church.

That kind of interpretation is in effect a gag order on those who want to speak to the countless biblical concerns Christians have about the issues in our nation today.

This kind of thinking is on the increased, and we should not be intimidated. I have a deep, deep concern for some of you younger pastors who will face the threat of imprisonment for your faith if you stay true to your biblical convictions.

Some of our neighbors to the north have already experienced this. I pray for you that you will *be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.*

Should this happen, I leave you with the words of Peter. *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you as though something strange were happening to you, but rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed.*