



BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW SERIES




# **BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY:**

EVIDENCE FROM SCRIPTURE  
AND CHURCH HISTORY

*by David Closson*

FAMILY RESEARCH COUNCIL  
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# BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY:

## EVIDENCE FROM SCRIPTURE AND CHURCH HISTORY

by David Closson

Religious liberty is one of the most important yet misunderstood issues in America. The term often appears in conversations surrounding LGBT rights and the push to normalize same-sex marriage. Advocates for strong religious liberty protections are often described as intolerant and labeled “bigots.” For those familiar with the history of religious liberty in the United States, this recent phenomenon is alarming, because religious liberty, until recently, was uncontroversial and embraced by an overwhelming majority of Americans.

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In fact, America’s commitment to religious liberty has transcended traditional political party lines. In 1998, President Bill Clinton explained, “The right to worship according to one’s own conscience is essential to our dignity as human beings.”<sup>1</sup> President George W. Bush said in 2008 that “The freedom to worship according to one’s conscience is one of our nation’s most cherished values.”<sup>2</sup> In 2012, President Barack Obama declared that religious liberty was a “universal human right,”<sup>3</sup> and in 2019, President Donald Trump said, “The right to religious freedom is innate to the dignity of every human person and is foundational to the pursuit of truth.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite this historic bipartisan commitment to religious liberty, calls to restrict it are becoming increasingly common. This is happening as America's religious landscape becomes more secular and as society continues to move away from a biblical understanding of marriage and sexual ethics.



Therefore, because of the admittedly growing perception that religious liberty advocacy is a pretense for codifying prejudice and bigotry into law, Christians need to articulate with greater clarity and persuasiveness why we support religious liberty and why we believe all people are served when everyone's religious beliefs and practices are protected.

While there are legal and philosophical arguments for why religious liberty should be preserved, the goal of this publication is to present biblical and theological arguments for why religious liberty is worth defending and to encourage Christians to engage in the fight to preserve America's first freedom.

**RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IS OF THE UTMOST IMPORTANCE  
BECAUSE IT ALLOWS US TO LIVE OUT OUR DEEPEST  
CONVICTIONS OF FAITH.**

Properly defined, religious liberty is the freedom to hold religious beliefs of one's choice, and to live in accordance with those beliefs. Consequently, religious liberty is not merely a peripheral

“political issue.” Rather, it is a concern of utmost importance because it relates to our deepest convictions about our faith and how we live out our beliefs about God, our world, and ourselves.

In this publication, it will be argued that the Bible supports an expansive view of religious liberty. This is seen in the Bible’s use of persuasion, not coercion, as the means of drawing followers to Christ. Moreover, the Bible presents faith as a spiritual reality that cannot be forced on people if it is to be genuine. This is why the Bible envisions a society where religious liberty is respected and individuals make their own choices when it comes to religion. This does not mean relativism, but it does recognize that no one can force a person to believe against his or her will. Persuasion, not force, is the means by which faith is embraced and internalized.

We hope to unpack these ideas a bit more in two primary areas: (1) key biblical texts that support a broad understanding of religious freedom, and (2) key theological arguments based on those texts—specifically those made by Roger Williams, who founded Rhode Island on the principle of religious liberty during an era when this freedom was denied to religious minorities in the American Colonies.

## **BIBLICAL SUPPORT FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY**

Although there is no one verse in the Bible expressly demanding “religious liberty” (using that terminology) on its face, the concept is implicit on nearly every page of Scripture. As Barrett Duke argues, the Bible contains a “derived doctrine of religious liberty.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Christian teaching implies the interior nature of faith and the futility of coercion in matters of religion. Key passages include the parable of the tares, Jesus’ exchange with the rich young ruler, the support for appeal and persuasion instead of coercion in Acts and elsewhere, and the passages discussing the role of the government versus the role of the

church in Romans 13 and Matthew 22. As will be discussed, all these illustrate the Bible's derived doctrine of religious liberty.

## Parable of the Tares

The most frequently cited passage for establishing a biblical basis for religious liberty is the parable of the wheat and tares (Matt 13:24-30). For two thousand years of church history, conversations on religious liberty have focused on this passage. While not everyone has always agreed on the parable's implications for religious liberty, there is a consensus among modern interpreters that the parable endorses an expansive view of religious liberty.



Historian Roland Bainton argues that the parable of the tares is the “proof passage for religious liberty.”<sup>6</sup> Because persecuted Christians have appealed to the parable over the centuries, a deeper discussion of its meaning and interpretation is merited.

In Jesus' well-known story, an enemy secretly sows tares (weeds) in his neighbor's field. When the scheme is discovered, the farmer instructs his servants to allow both wheat and tares to grow together lest they damage the wheat while trying to remove the weeds. At harvest, the farmer tells his reapers to “Gather the

**THE PARABLE OF THE TARES MAKES IT CLEAR THAT UNBELIEVERS SHOULD NOT BE FORCED INTO BELIEF BECAUSE GOD WILL JUDGE THEM AT THE END OF THE AGE.**

weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned but gather the wheat into my barn” (Matt 13:30b). When asked about the parable’s explanation, Jesus identifies the tares as “the sons of the evil one” and the wheat as “the sons of the kingdom.” The reapers are the angels who the Lord says will “gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers.” Whereas the righteous will “shine like the sun in the kingdom,” the wicked will be “thrown into the fiery furnace” (Matt 13:36-43).

In his thorough study of the parable, Bainton argues that most interpreters have understood that prior to Jesus’ second coming, there will be unsaved people—those represented by the tares—in the church. Although these people do not belong to the community of faith, they should be left alone because God’s judgment is eschatological; at the end of the age, God will root out the tares for their unbelief.

This was the view of Jerome (347-420), who argued that the Lord forbade the servants from removing the tares and reserved to himself the responsibility to separate the chaff from the grain. Consequently, Jerome argued, “No one can take to himself the prerogative of Christ and judge men before the day of judgment. If the church is purified now, what will be left for the Lord?”<sup>8</sup>



*Saint Jerome*<sup>7</sup>

A few centuries later, Wazo of Liège (985-1048) considered the parable and asked, “What does our Lord indicate by these words if not the patience which he desires preachers to show to their erring neighbors, especially since those who are tares today may be wheat tomorrow.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, tolerance should be extended to heretics because they still have a chance to be saved. After all, God is merciful and gives all an opportunity to repent.



*Wazo of Liège*<sup>10</sup>  
(right)

The interpretation of the parable in favor of religious liberty also received clear expression in Martin Luther's early works. In 1525 he wrote, "As to how we should treat heretics and false teachers, we ought not to eradicate and exterminate them. Christ says openly here that they should be left to grow together."<sup>11</sup> Luther noted with characteristic vigor that true religious liberty required tolerance of even the most grievous theological error. This is because persecuting the heterodox usurped authority that belonged within the exclusive purview of God.



*Martin Luther*<sup>12</sup>

Luther cautioned against persecution of heretics in the name of the Lord because God is the only one who can change someone's heart. Moreover, Christians who take up the sword in the name of religion risk following the example of a young, unconverted Saul who mistakenly persecuted God in a misguided quest to enforce orthodoxy (Acts 9:4). Furthermore, setting aside Old Testament Israel who was instructed to enforce such punishments, under the New Covenant, executing heretics preempts the Lord's work. Luther articulates this concern when he writes, "We say that we should burn heretics, the tares with the wheat . . . but what if Christ wished to make a saint of him who would have been saved?"<sup>13</sup> By physically harming (and in some cases killing) those who dissent from the accepted orthodoxy, the heretic is denied an opportunity to correct his errant views.

Although church leaders as influential as Augustine, Aquinas, John Calvin, and even Luther (later in his career) embraced an interpretation of the parable that allowed for the state to prosecute heresy in some situations,<sup>14</sup> many interpreters, including those cited above, understood Christ's admonition to allow the wheat and tares to grow together as an endorsement of religious liberty.<sup>15</sup>



This is the interpretation embraced by the Anabaptists, a group that arose in the 1520s known primarily for their practice of credobaptism (adult baptism after profession of faith). In their advocacy for religious liberty, the Anabaptists anchored their appeal in the parable of the tares. Menno Simons (1496-1561) is a notable example. Simons joined the Anabaptists and pastored a growing congregation that eventually became the Mennonites.<sup>17</sup> Simons used the parable of the tares to plead for tolerance for religious minorities. He argued, “If our persecutors are Christians, as they claim, if they regard the Word of the Lord as true, why then do they not hear and follow Christ’s word and command? Why do they start weeding before the time? Why do they not fear that they will pluck the wheat and not the tares? Why do they assume the office of angels?”<sup>18</sup> Anabaptists, like many who came before them, understood Jesus to clearly oppose coercion in matters of religious belief.



*Menno Simons<sup>16</sup>*

## **The Rich Young Ruler**

Another passage that shows the Bible’s support for religious liberty is the story of the rich young ruler (Matt 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31, Luke 18:18-30). In this account, a man asks Jesus about eternal life. After discussing the stipulations of the Mosaic law, Jesus says to the man, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Matt 19:21). Scripture records the man’s response in the following verse: “When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (Matt 19:22). While the man’s decision to choose his possessions

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over Jesus is tragic, it is worth noting that Jesus does not coerce the man to follow him, nor does he scold him for walking away. Instead, Jesus respects the man's decision and allows him to reject the invitation. By honoring the man's choice, Jesus underscored the personal nature of faith. Because faith is a matter of the heart, it cannot be forced, coerced, or compelled. In other words, external threats are futile because they cannot affect genuine change at the level of the conscience.

The spiritual nature of faith emphasized in this story also governs Jesus' exhortation in Matthew 10 where he says, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt 10:28). While the main point in this passage is that the spiritual state of the soul determines one's eternal destiny, Jesus' teaching implicitly makes a case for religious liberty. Someone can torture, abuse, and persecute one's physical body without being able to affect the person's most inner beliefs. In other words, external pressure may be successful in producing outward conformity, but it can never change inward belief. Try as they might, the state (or any external authority) can never make someone accept theological truths if they are not willingly embraced. This is because faith cannot be coerced.

These are the principles that undergird the Bible's understanding of the personal nature of faith and why Christians believe the civil state should not enforce a religion or theological perspective onto its citizens. In the language of Matthew 19, it is better to let the rich young ruler walk away than attempt to force him to convert. Hopefully he can be persuaded at a later time to reconsider the call to follow Jesus.

## **The Apostle Paul's Use of Appeal and Persuasion**

Further evidence that religious liberty is a principle embraced in the Bible is the constant language of appeal and persuasion

(instead of coercion) found throughout the Old and New Testament. Along this line, Paul's sermons and evangelistic encounters in Acts are noteworthy examples.

For instance, when Paul is in Athens, he preaches to the philosophers at the Areopagus. Rather than using deceptive or coercive rhetoric, he “reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there” (Acts 17:17).



*Paul in the Areopagus*<sup>19</sup>

F.F. Bruce notes Paul's intentionality to share the gospel at every opportunity. First, Paul “visited the synagogue in Athens . . . and held discourse there with Jews and God-fearing Gentiles.”<sup>20</sup> Next, he “debated day by day with those who happened to be around” the Agora, the center of Athenian life and activity.<sup>21</sup> The text says Paul “reasoned” as he shared the gospel. Translated from the Greek

**PAUL'S EVANGELISTIC TECHNIQUE WAS TO  
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word *διελέγετο* (*dielegeto*), the word means to “draw arguments from Scripture.”<sup>22</sup> Clearly, Paul's evangelistic technique was to converse, dialogue, and persuade using the Old Testament. Although the passage says Paul's spirit was “provoked” at the sight of idols, he does not lash out or try to force anyone to embrace his teaching. Rather, he patiently explains the Scriptures and trusts the Holy Spirit to bring conviction of sin which leads to repentance and faith.

Other examples from Paul’s evangelistic ministry highlight the spiritual nature of faith and the need to address the conscience. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul writes, “And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor 2:3-5). Clearly, Paul did not want to force anyone to believe something of which they were unconvinced. In fact, Paul reminded his readers that his initial gospel presentation was marked with trepidation and signs of personal weakness. Their faith in Christ was grounded in the work of the Spirit, not Paul’s ability to sway a crowd. Moreover, based on Paul’s own recollection of his weakness, fear, and trembling, it appears that even if he wanted to, he would have been unable—due to his weakened state—to force the Corinthians to profess anything they did not truly believe.

In Acts 19, Paul travels to Ephesus on his second missionary trip. The language Luke uses to describe Paul’s interaction with the Ephesians provides another glimpse into how the apostle approached the task of evangelism and what he believed was necessary for someone to be saved.



*Library of Celsus, Ephesus*

Acts 19:8 says, “And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.” When opposition arose, Paul relocated to the hall of Tyrannus where he continued “reasoning daily” with the residents for two years (Acts 19:9). The words used in Acts 19:8 are *διαλεγόμενος* (*dialegomēnos*) and *πείθων* (*peithōn*). While *διαλεγόμενος* comes from the same root as *διελέγετο* (*dielegeto*) (discussed above), the second word used in Acts 19:8

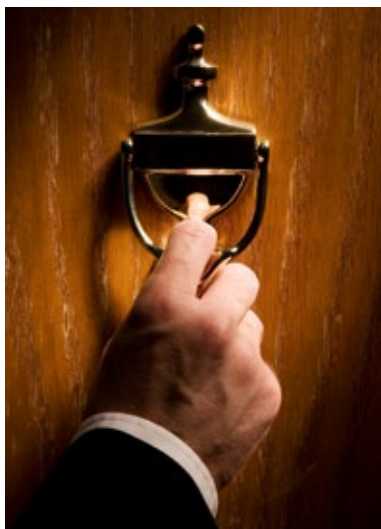
provides further clarity into Paul's understanding of the spiritual nature of faith. According to Thayer's, a respected Greek lexicon, πείθων means "to persuade, i.e. to induce one by words to believe."<sup>23</sup> The same word appears later in the chapter when the silversmiths accuse Paul of having "persuaded and turned away a great many people" from worshipping idols by teaching that "gods made with hands are not gods" (Acts 19:26).

The Ephesian silversmiths recognized that Paul had persuaded many members of their community to follow Christ. Notably, Paul's critics do not accuse him of strong-arming people to trust Christ; coercion and threats of force were not part of Paul's gospel presentation. Instead, he appealed to their hearts and minds by using the words of Scripture and trusting in the Spirit to awaken faith.

Another text where appeal language is used is 2 Corinthians 5:20, where Paul writes, "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." A few specific words once again underline Paul's unshakable belief in the need to persuade people of the Christian faith. He describes himself as an "ambassador." Pastor John MacArthur explains that in the first century, an ambassador was "both a messenger for and a representative of the one who sent him."<sup>24</sup>

As an "ambassador of Christ," Paul sees himself as God's mouthpiece to the people. This is why Paul says that it is through him and his associates that God is "making his appeal." The root of the word "appeal" is παρακαλέω (parakaleo), which means "to address, speak to," and implies exhorting and providing instruction.<sup>25</sup> Although God could easily use other means to communicate the gospel, he chooses to appeal through human means. In this context, it is noticeable that God "appeals" rather than seeking to coerce through Paul. God, through his chosen human instruments, reasons and seeks to persuade. Thus, in the next sentence Paul explains his task as "imploring" on behalf of Christ.

Other passages in the New Testament continue the theme of using persuasion and appeal language to present the gospel. In Acts 20:21, Paul reminds the Ephesian elders that he “testified” of the need for repentance and faith. Peter writes in 1 Peter 3:15 that Christians must be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.” Paul reminds the Thessalonians that he was approved by God to preach the gospel and thus he speaks “not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts” (1 Thess 2:3-5). In Luke 13:34, Jesus weeps over the city of Jerusalem because of their unbelief. He says, “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” In John’s vision in Revelation, Jesus himself says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev 3:20).



In all these passages, the underlying principle is clear: salvation is a spiritual matter and thus must be embraced willingly. Although the lackluster faith evident in the Laodicean church was enough to make Jesus want to spit them out, he does not force them to change (Rev 3:14-22). Instead, symbolized by the image of waiting outside and knocking on the door, he shows patience.

A final text that shows Jesus refused to compel people to believe in him is Luke 9:52-55. In this passage, the disciples are enraged when a Samaritan village rejects Jesus. To exact retribution, they ask Jesus if he wants them to invoke fire to come down from

heaven and consume the village. Jesus refuses the request and reiterates his refusal to coerce people into the kingdom: “But he turned and rebuked them” (Luke 9:55). Observing this exchange, Bible scholar Wayne Grudem says, “Jesus directly refused any attempt to try to force people to believe in him or follow.”<sup>26</sup>

The Bible’s outright rejection of religious coercion and its insistence on persuading people to follow Christ by their own free will is enough reason to claim biblical support for religious liberty. Further reason lies in the fact that it is crucial for the work of the church and the fulfilling of the Great Commission (Matt 28:16-20).

## **The Role of Government Versus the Role of the Church**

Historically, two passages that have helped Christians think through the dynamics of power, authority, and obedience to rulers are Romans 13 and Matthew 22. In addition to grounding the Bible’s teaching on the state, these passages implicitly contribute to the development of a doctrine of religious liberty.

**THE GOVERNMENT’S ROLE IS TO PRESERVE PEACE  
AND RESTORE ORDER, NOT TO ARBITRATE BETWEEN  
COMPETING THEOLOGICAL TRUTH CLAIMS.**

In Romans 13, the apostle Paul discusses the purpose of government. He explains that government is ordained by God to promote good and restrain evil. To this end, the state is authorized to administer justice. But the role of the state is limited, and given the spiritual nature of faith, the state’s responsibilities should be constrained to the outward conduct of its citizens.

Understanding the limited role of the state has implications for religious liberty. As Evan Lenow notes, government must ensure “civil peace, not doctrinal purity.”<sup>27</sup> For a government to function properly—and biblically—it must operate within the scope of authority God has granted it. According to Romans 13:4, the state supports and serves those who do good, but is authorized to punish those who act lawlessly. In other words, the government’s role is to preserve peace and restore order (if that peace is disturbed); arbitrating between competing theological truth claims is outside of its purview.

Although Romans 13 is clear that the state’s role is limited and its authority derivative, many Christians throughout the centuries have believed that the government’s role includes compelling people to embrace the Christian faith (or at least some form of it). This was the nearly unquestioned view until the late seventeenth century.<sup>28</sup>

However, this readiness to cede ecclesial authority to the state represents a misunderstanding of the spiritual nature of faith as well as a failure to attend to Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 22, another key text for understanding what the Bible teaches about the limited role of the state and religious liberty.

In a well-known passage in Matthew’s gospel,<sup>29</sup> the Jewish religious leaders attempt to trap Jesus into adjudicating a volatile political question by asking him if it was lawful to pay the Roman poll tax (Matt 22:17). By inquiring specifically about the poll tax, the religious leaders are being intentionally provocative. If Jesus says the tax should be paid, the Pharisees could accuse him of disloyalty to the Jewish nation; if he says “no” to paying taxes, they can charge him with treason to Rome.

Despite his opponents’ nefarious intentions, Jesus provides a wise and instructive response. After asking for a Roman coin, he replies, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt 22:21). Strategically,



Jesus not only avoids taking sides in the ongoing tax dispute, he reinforces the fact that the authority and jurisdiction of the state is limited. Although Caesar should be respected and obeyed in the areas where he has legitimate authority, Caesar cannot require preeminent allegiance. Jesus is teaching here that there is another sphere that is directly accountable to God—the realm where people must render “to God the things that are God’s.”

Whereas the state is tasked with caring for the common good, God has sole jurisdiction over the soul. An implication of this division of authority is that certain matters, namely those involving religion, are outside the competencies of the state.

Taken together, Romans 13 and Matthew 22 demonstrate that a limited government with clearly defined boundaries is the form of government envisioned by the Bible. Ordained by God, government is God’s servant in the civil sphere where it administers justice. Within this God-given task, government may operate with freedom. However, Jesus makes clear that certain areas of life belong exclusively to God and that government steps beyond its prescribed limits when it demands loyalty in these regards.

## **Salvation is the Work of the Spirit, Not the State**

In summary, the Bible recognizes and respects the inherently spiritual nature of faith. Because of this, the state should never attempt to force people to subscribe to or believe in a specific religion, which is ineffective in any event. (It might be possible to coerce a confession of faith from somebody under torture, but

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it will not be genuine, and as Christians we want to see genuine faith in ourselves and others.) Rather, the civil authorities ought to guarantee religious freedom for followers of all religions. This creates a marketplace for religions to compete with one another for adherents and support. An even playing field allows possible converts to test and evaluate the truth claims of various religious traditions.

For Christians who believe in the truth of their convictions and the power of the Spirit, this open environment represents the ideal context for spreading the gospel. That is why Wayne Grudem in his discussion on civil government argues that “complete freedom of religion should be the first principle advocated and defended by Christians who seek to influence government.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, because the Bible teaches that salvation is the work of the Spirit and not the state, religious liberty is a good that benefits everyone.

## ROGER WILLIAMS AS A MODEL

It is clear that the Bible’s vision for a flourishing society is one in which the government recognizes a broad understanding of religious liberty. When the state acknowledges its limited authority and understands that there are areas in which it is not competent—such as religion—the church is able to freely carry out its mission. While it is true the church will advance with or without religious liberty (Matt 16:18), it is equally true that persecution makes the dissemination of the gospel much more difficult. This is why Christians throughout history who have found themselves persecuted for their faith have sought to persuade the civil authorities to grant them freedom in matters of religion and conscience.



*Roger Williams*<sup>31</sup>

As church leaders have argued for centuries, an environment conducive to the free practice of religion serves both the state and church. Significantly, in contexts where the law requires adherence to a faith tradition, the mandate often results in scores of fake converts. As historian Tom Nettles explains, “The Spirit’s sword, not the magistrate’s sword, makes Christians. A Church constituted by those whose consciences have been either forced or bribed by carnal power is not a New Testament church.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, given the personal nature of faith and the futility of coercion in matters of religion, a free church in a free state is the Christian ideal for the relationship between the state and the church. Such was the position of Roger Williams (1603-1683), who devoted his career to advocating for religious liberty.

Williams was a Separatist minister who broke away from the Anglican Church in 1631. Although he joined the Puritans in Massachusetts, he quickly separated from them too, because he believed their churches were tainted by an unbiblical conflation of civil and ecclesial power. Williams flatly rejected the use of civil authority in a realm he believed was governed by a higher authority.<sup>33</sup> He eventually obtained a charter for a new colony and founded Rhode Island on the principle of religious freedom.

**WILLIAMS SAW THAT THE STATE CHURCH MUST BE  
DISESTABLISHED IN ORDER TO PROTECT THE CHURCH  
FROM THE “WILDERNESS” OF THE WORLD.**

Williams wanted to disestablish the state church because he desired to protect the church from the “wilderness” of the world. For Williams, religious liberty was about rightly interpreting Scripture. Because authentic Christianity requires heartfelt belief in particular doctrines, it can never be coerced. Fundamentally, a relationship with God requires assent to spiritual realities that

must be acknowledged and believed on a personal level. Civil authorities cannot force anyone to believe. While people may pretend to believe to avoid punishment, the state can never affect genuine belief at the level of conscience. Therefore, society should allow the free flow of religious opinions and use persuasion, not the sword, to encourage belief in God.

Significantly, this broad conception of religious liberty represented a serious challenge to the popular understanding of how society should be structured in the seventeenth century. Although it would take over a century to be embraced on a wide scale, Williams' views eventually were accepted. Because of their enduring relevance, Williams' theological arguments for religious liberty will be briefly analyzed, including his interpretation of the parable of the tares, his view on the relationship of the "Two Tables," and the pro-religious liberty implications of his Reformed theology.

## **The Wheat and Tares**

Interpreting the parable of the wheat and tares, Williams argued, "As the civil State keeps it selfe with a civill Guard, in case these Tares shall attempt ought against the peace and welfare of it, let such civil offenses be punished, and yet as Tares opposite Christ's Kingdome, let their Worship and Consciences be tolerated."<sup>34</sup> Representing those who express heterodox beliefs, the "tares," like the rest of society, are liable to the state for transgressing civil laws. However, they should be tolerated in matters of religion. The state may apply civil penalties to civil offenses but should not prosecute those who dissent from the majority's religion. The "tares" should be allowed to worship according to the dictates of their conscience without fear of penalty. While John Cotton, Williams' main antagonist, believed the parable was largely irrelevant to civil restraint of religious deviance, Williams, like many interpreters before him (see previous discussion), believed the parable prohibited persecution of conscience.<sup>35</sup>

Williams' interpretation of the wheat and tares informed his view on religious persecution. He was convinced that persecution based on religious belief was immoral, and that it confused civil authority with church discipline. While the civil authority may use weapons of iron and steel to control civil disturbances, it is wrongheaded to apply them to inward, religious matters.<sup>36</sup> Emphasizing this point, Williams explained, "To batter down idolatry, false worship, heresy, schism, blindness, hardness, out of the soul and spirit, it is vain, improper, and unsuitable to bring those weapons which are used by persecutors- stocks, whips, prisons, swords, gibbets, [and] stakes."<sup>37</sup> Against spiritual strongholds, "spiritual artillery and weapons are proper" but "civil weapons are improper." Moreover, "spiritual weapons in the hand of church officers" is sufficient "for the Lord's work."<sup>38</sup>

## The Two Tables

Another theological argument Williams used to press for religious liberty and explain the differing responsibilities of civil and ecclesial authority relates to enforcement of the "two tables" of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2-17, cf.; Deut 5:6-21). Although the magistrates exercise proper oversight when it comes to enforcing the second table (commandments five through ten), they have no right to enforce the requirements of the first (commandments one through four). This is because the first table regulates the relationship between God and man while the second deals with conduct pertaining to interpersonal relationships. While the latter is a legitimate concern of the state, the former is not, because it lies within the ecclesial realm.

This distinction between the tables emerged in Williams' debates with the New England Puritans. Williams concurred with his opponents that the state was supreme in civil affairs, and endorsed their claim that the church was preeminent in spiritual matters. However, Williams pointed out that John Cotton, John Winthrop, and others denied in practice what they affirmed in theory by making the magistrate the enforcer of the purely spiritual matters of the first table. Williams claimed that

**THE FIRST TABLE OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS REGULATES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND MAN (THE CHURCH'S REALM) WHILE THE SECOND DEALS WITH CONDUCT PERTAINING TO INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS (THE STATE'S REALM).**

so much authority in ecclesial matters had been surrendered to the magistrate as “to make him absolutely the Head of the Church.”<sup>39</sup> Such a conflation of roles was problematic because it divested the church of its duties and responsibility of oversight.

**Theological Convictions: Fallibility, Faith's Interiority, and Consent**

A final aspect of Williams' intellectual cast that influenced his advocacy for religious liberty is his commitment to the tenets of Reformed theology. While advocating for religious liberty does not require someone to agree with the theological system connected with John Calvin (1509-1564), and while there are many religious liberty advocates who hold to a different understanding of election, it is helpful to see how Williams argued for religious liberty from his own theological framework. The concerns he raises in these discussions are shared by those who agree and disagree with his Reformed theology.

Williams was convinced of man's fallibility, as will be further discussed. Moreover, God's overarching sovereignty grounded Williams' theology and influenced his view of the state. In fact, the doctrine of predestination taught Williams that God, rather than human authority, is sovereign over each person's soul. Because God elects and directs his people, civil coercion in religious affairs is powerless and serves only to confuse and distract.<sup>40</sup>

Commenting on the effect of Williams' subscription to Reformed theology and its influence on his political philosophy, historian Perry Miller notes, "The quirk that distinguishes Williams from Winthrop or Cotton was simply that he took these doctrines of Calvinism with such utter consistency that rather than settle for a rough approximation to the kingdom of God on earth, he demanded the real thing or nothing at all."<sup>41</sup> If God is truly sovereign, Williams argued, the Puritan civil authorities should relinquish their grip on man's conscience and trust God to accomplish his saving work.

Grounded by these theological convictions, Williams maintained that God alone opens the hearts of the elect and no amount of intimidation, coercion, or compulsion can affect regeneration. If persuasion is the church's chief spiritual weapon, civil authorities concerned about the morality of its citizens should grant broad religious freedom and withdraw all obstacles that hinder the pursuit of religious truth. As the Spirit of God moves in regenerate congregations, the gospel will advance, and the elect will be drawn. Significantly, broad religious freedom not only allows believers to flourish as they pursue life's ultimate questions, but non-believers are likewise afforded the best conditions for responding in faith and repentance to the gospel. Although this may seem counterintuitive, Williams argued that forcing unregenerate people to attend church against their will is harmful and pushes them further away from God. Even more pernicious, mandating church attendance and participation in religious rites may provide false assurance to unregenerate participants.<sup>42</sup>

**WILLIAMS' EMBRACE OF THE THREE PRINCIPLES OF FALLIBILITY, FAITH'S INTERIORITY, AND CONSENT COMPELLED HIM TOWARD LIBERTY AND AWAY FROM MANDATED CONFORMITY.**

Despite their differences on state established churches, Winthrop and Williams shared a worldview shaped by the teachings of John Calvin, particularly the belief in God's supreme sovereignty. Although both men held similar theological convictions, Williams' embrace, development, and application of three principles in particular—fallibility, faith's interiority, and consent—compelled him toward liberty and away from mandated conformity.<sup>43</sup>

## FALLIBILITY

Rooted in his belief in original sin, the principle of fallibility taught Williams that because of the fall, man is prone to error and bias. As historian Winthrop Hudson explains, “[Fallibility], when taken seriously... tended to undercut any program of enforced religious conformity, for it compelled an acknowledgment that any dominant group might be wrong and that even a lone dissenter might be right.”<sup>44</sup> For Williams, man's fallibility necessitated religious liberty.

Intriguingly, Williams' contemporary, English philosopher John Locke, agreed with the logical implications of original sin and connected this doctrine to religious liberty as well. Recognizing human beings are liable to error and can be wrong even in areas as important as religion, Locke wrote, “St. Paul himself believed he did well, and that he had a call to it, when he persecuted Christians, whom he confidently thought in the wrong; but yet it was he, not they, who were mistaken.”<sup>45</sup> Because we can be misguided in the realm of religion, broad tolerance should be afforded when interfacing with civil authorities.



## FAITH'S INTERIORITY

Even more fundamental to Williams' thought was the belief that faith was an inherently interior reality. According to this idea, there is a sharp distinction between the inner world of belief and the outer realm of civil and social regulation.<sup>46</sup> Whereas Winthrop believed God's kingdom could be realized in part within a national church where every citizen was a member, Williams believed only the elect could rightly worship God. Consequently, a congregation including regenerate and unregenerate members contradicted the very nature of the church, which is a voluntary community of visible saints.<sup>47</sup> Because "forced worship stinks in God's nostrils,"<sup>48</sup> a firm distinction must be made between the private world of belief and the public world where men live and interact with one another. For Williams, the obvious implication of religion's interiority was religious liberty, which protects the inner world of belief, i.e., man's conscience. If true religion is fundamentally about belief, outside force is incapable of affecting genuine conversion. Moreover, coercion and intimidation not only prove ineffective but also violate human dignity.

## CONSENT

The third principle, consent, flows logically from man's fallibility and the spiritual nature of faith. If no one can be coerced into being a Christian, the church must be voluntary. Again, the interior nature of faith makes coercion futile.<sup>49</sup> Persuaded by this logic, Locke, likely influenced by Williams,<sup>50</sup> mocked the notion of coerced faith, writing, "But (will some say) let me at least profess that they believe. A sweet religion, indeed, that obliges men to dissemble and tell lies, both to God and man, for the salvation of their souls!"<sup>51</sup> The spiritual nature of religion requires liberty; an established church mandating doctrinal subscription contradicts the essence and search for religious truth. For Williams, consent required choice in matters of religion.

## Williams' Legacy

For Roger Williams, concern for the purity of the church motivated his advocacy for religious liberty. For Williams, religious liberty was not an abstract concept. Rather, it was a matter of life and death. In a public letter to John Cotton, a New England Puritan who favored state-churches, Williams set forth the stakes of the debate and the implications of a state's refusal to grant religious liberty. In his view, forced worship and state churches "opened a gap in the hedge or wall of Separation between the Garden of the Church and the Wilderness of the world." In other words, the God-ordained boundaries between the state and church had been violated by the coercive practices of the state-sponsored churches of New England. As a result, God had "removed the Candlestick, and made his Garden a Wilderness"<sup>52</sup>

For Williams, the implication was obvious: the existence of established churches breached the hedge between the world and the church and threatened the church's purity. To retrieve communion with God, the true church must withdraw from the compromised and corrupt state churches. Furthermore, individuals must be free to follow the dictates of their conscience in religious matters.

In summary, Roger Williams understood that as an inherently interior matter, religion cannot be forced or coerced. Because God is Lord of the conscience, the state has no business interfering with man's quest for religious truth. In fact, if the state cares about the morality of society and doctrinal orthodoxy, the best course to pursue is one of broad religious freedom which empowers the spiritual weapon of persuasion. In terms of historical influence, Williams' thought was extremely influential in the decades after his death. His views had enormous implications for America's Founders, and his arguments are relevant to present attempts to work out the right relationship between church and state.



## Conclusion

As secular society increasingly misunderstands religious conviction, and even views religious teachings on marriage and human sexuality as outdated and bigoted, a growing number of people are content to restrict religious liberty protections. Thus, there is an increased need to articulate what religious freedom is, and to explain why protecting everyone's ability to believe and live out those beliefs serves all people—religious and non-religious.

Scripture teaches that faith is an inherently spiritual matter and that coercion in matters of religion is not only wicked but futile. Therefore, in a world of competing ideas about life's most enduring questions, advancing religious liberty is a worthy cause. As evidenced by passages such as the parable of the tares, Jesus himself believed in the principle of religious liberty. He understood that God alone, through the Spirit, opens the human heart, and no amount of intimidation or compulsion can affect regeneration. Moreover, the God-ordained authority of the state is limited, and because faith is outside the state's jurisdiction and deals with one's relationship with God, it should be granted wide latitude.

In the seventeenth century, Roger Williams offered bold arguments, drawn from Scripture, that religious liberty is a

human right, and that when the state acknowledges its limited authority in areas such as religion, the church can freely carry out its mission. While the church will advance despite persecution (Matt 16:18), it is nevertheless true that a hostile state makes the spread of the gospel more difficult. This is why oppressed religious minorities, including Christians, have historically sought to persuade the state to grant them religious liberty.

In summary, the Bible provides a strong theological foundation for supporting religious liberty and conscience protection. And in an increasingly secular world, Christians must understand, embrace, and champion religious liberty. As those who desire unhindered dissemination of the gospel, soul freedom for everyone is the ideal toward which we must continually strive.



*DAVID CLOSSON, M.Div., serves as the Director of Christian Ethics and Biblical Worldview at Family Research Council where he researches and writes on issues related to religious liberty, human sexuality, and the development of policy from a biblical worldview. Currently, David is completing a Ph.D. in Christian Ethics (with a focus in public policy) at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.*

## NOTES

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- 1 William J. Clinton, “Proclamation 7036 of January 15, 1998: Religious Freedom Day, 1998,” January 15, 1998, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-112/pdf/STATUTE-112-Pg3716.pdf>.
- 2 George W. Bush, “Religious Freedom Day, 2008,” January 14, 2008, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/01/20080114-5.html>.
- 3 Barack Obama, “Presidential Proclamation -- Religious Freedom Day, 2012,” January 13, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/13/presidential-proclamation-religious-freedom-day-2012>.
- 4 Donald J. Trump, “Presidential Proclamation on Religious Freedom Day, 2019,” The White House, January 15, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-proclamation-religious-freedom-day-2019/>.
- 5 Although there is no one verse in the Bible that says, “Thou shalt have religious liberty,” religious freedom is an implicit truth that pervades Scripture. Duke makes this argument when he notes, “While we cannot find direct references to religious liberty in such a way that we can speak of a theology of religious liberty, sufficient implications are in the major theological doctrines of the Christian faith to argue that God has granted humankind the freedom to choose who or what they want to worship in a way that they please. In other words, there is a derived doctrine of religious liberty.” See Barrett Duke, “*The Christian Doctrine of Religious Liberty*,” in *First Freedom: The Beginning and End of Religious Liberty*, ed. Jason G. Duesing, Thomas White, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 92.

- 6 Roland H. Bainton, "The Parable of the Tares as the Proof Text for Religious Liberty to the End of the Sixteenth Century," *Church History* 1, no. 2 (June 1932): 67.
- 7 *Saint Jerome in His Study* by Domenico Ghirlandaio ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerome#/media/File:Domenico\\_Ghirlandaio\\_-\\_St\\_Jerome\\_in\\_his\\_study.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerome#/media/File:Domenico_Ghirlandaio_-_St_Jerome_in_his_study.jpg))
- 8 Bainton, "The Parable of the Tares as the Proof Text for Religious Liberty to the End of the Sixteenth Century," 69.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 10 19th-century statue of Wazo (right), Palais Provincial, Liège ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wazo\\_of\\_Li%C3%A8ge#/media/File:Li%C3%A8ge,\\_Palais\\_Provincial05,\\_statues\\_des\\_%C3%A9v%C3%AAques\\_Francon,\\_Rath%C3%A8re\\_et\\_Wazon.JPG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wazo_of_Li%C3%A8ge#/media/File:Li%C3%A8ge,_Palais_Provincial05,_statues_des_%C3%A9v%C3%AAques_Francon,_Rath%C3%A8re_et_Wazon.JPG))
- 11 Bainton, "The Parable of the Tares," 80
- 12 *Martin Luther* by Lucas Cranach the Elder ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin\\_Luther#/media/File:Martin\\_Luther\\_by\\_Cranach-restoration.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther#/media/File:Martin_Luther_by_Cranach-restoration.jpg))
- 13 Roland Herbert Bainton, "The Development and Consistency of Luther's Attitude to Religious Liberty," *Harvard Theological Review* 22, no. 2 (April 1929): 122.
- 14 According to Bainton, Augustine's interpretation of the famous parable influenced subsequent generations of church leaders in the direction of religious intolerance. Augustine developed his position amid the Donatist controversy. It was in the context of this debate that he explained the rationale for his willingness to coerce heretics: "Does anyone doubt that it is preferable for people to be drawn to worship God

by teaching rather than forced by fear of punishment or by pain? But because the one type of people are better, it does not mean that the others, who are not of that type, ought to be ignored. Experience has enabled us to prove, and continue to prove, that many people are benefited by being compelled in the first place through fear or pain; so that subsequently they are able to be taught, and then pursue in action what they have learnt in words.” See Augustine, *Letter 185*, in *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 186. In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) rearticulated Augustine’s rationale, which likely influenced future Roman Catholic and Protestant leaders. In summary, Aquinas, drawing on Augustine, argued that because the Lord only cared about the wheat, it was acceptable to root out the tares, provided they are easy to distinguish, and the wheat is well established. See Bainton, “The Parable of the Tares as the Proof Text for Religious Liberty to the End of the Sixteenth Century,” 76.

- 15 In addition to Jerome, Chrysostom, and Wazo, other influential leaders supported religious liberty, drawing from the parable of the tares or other passages. Tertullian (155-220), the early Church Father who coined the term “Trinity,” is another example of someone who favored religious liberty. He argued, “It is not in the nature of religion to coerce religion which must be adopted freely and not by force.” See Bainton, “The Parable of the Tares as the Proof Text for Religious Liberty to the End of the Sixteenth Century,” 70.
- 16 *Menno Simons* by Hugo Bürkner ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Menno\\_Simons#/media/File:Meno\\_simonis.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Menno_Simons#/media/File:Meno_simonis.jpg))
- 17 Robert Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom*: (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 101.

- 18 Bainton, “The Parable of the Tares as the Proof Text for Religious Liberty to the End of the Sixteenth Century,” 87.
- 19 *Paul preaching in the Areopagus* by Sir James Thornhill (<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/work-of-art/paul-preaching-in-the-areopagus>)
- 20 F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 329.
- 21 Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 329.
- 22 Joseph Henry Thayer, trans., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1889), 139.
- 23 The same word is used in 2 Corinthians 5:11 where Paul writes, “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others.” For Thayer’s definition of the root  $\pi\epsilon\iota\theta\omega$  which appears in Acts 19:9 and 2 Corinthians 5:11, see Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 497.
- 24 John MacArthur, *2 Corinthians*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 206.
- 25 Other texts where  $\pi\alpha\rho\alpha\kappa\alpha\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\omega$  is used to communicate the same meaning are Romans 12:8, 2 Timothy 4:2, Hebrews 10:25 and 1 Peter 5:12. See Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 482.
- 26 Wayne Grudem, *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 453.
- 27 Evan Lenow, “Religious Liberty and the Gospel” in *First Freedom: The Beginning and End of Religious Liberty*, ed. Jason G. Duesing, Thomas White, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 115.



- 28 The notorious state-sanctioned execution of Michael Servetus in 1553 is a well-known example. Servetus was condemned by the Geneva city council for teaching anti-trinitarian and anti-pedobaptist (infant baptism) beliefs. Although the Reformer John Calvin did not personally appear at the trial, he advocated behind the scenes for a guilty verdict.

In his justification for combining aspects of civil and ecclesial power, Calvin argued that the duty of the magistrates extended to both tables of the law; if legislators did not consider a law's implications for religion, they failed in fulfilling their true vocation. Unfortunately, many of Calvin's contemporaries, including Huldrych Zwingli and Thomas Cranmer, agreed and believed the state should exercise some level of oversight when it comes to matters of doctrine. See Nick Needham, *2,000 Years of Christ's Power: Renaissance and Reformation* (London, England: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), Vol. 3, 225-26.

- 29 This confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders is also recorded in Mark 12:13-17 and Luke 20:20-26.
- 30 Grudem, *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning*, 454.
- 31 *Roger Williams* (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Roger-Williams-American-religious-leader#/media/1/644376/201529>)
- 32 Thomas Nettles, "BAPTIST FAITH AND MESSAGE: Article 17: Religious Liberty," Baptist Press, September 9, 2002, accessed August 22, 2019, <http://www.bpnews.net/14206/baptist-faith-and-message-article-17-religious-liberty>.
- 33 Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA), 2002, 41.

- 34 Roger Williams, *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, vol. 3 (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), 111.
- 35 Roger Williams, *On Religious Liberty: Selections from the Works of Roger Williams*, ed. James Calvin Davis (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 108.
- 36 David Little, "Roger Williams and the Separation of Church and State" in *Religion and the State: Essays in Honor of Leo Pfeffer*, ed. James E. Wood (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 1985), 9.
- 37 Perry Miller, *Roger Williams* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1953), 131–32.
- 38 Miller, *Roger Williams*, 131, 132.
- 39 Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America*, 81.
- 40 Little, "Roger Williams and the Separation of Church and State," 13.
- 41 Miller, *Roger Williams*, 28.
- 42 On this point, Williams wisely writes, "I affirm that the misapplication of Ordinances to unregenerate and unrepentant persons hardens up their soules in a dreadful sleep and dreame of their owne blessed estate, and sends millions of soules to hell in a secure expectation of false salvation." See Williams, *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, 1963, 3:225.
- 43 Winthrop Hudson, "John Locke: Heir of Puritan Political Theorists" in *Calvinism and the Political Order: Essays*

*Prepared for the Woodrow Wilson Lectureship of The National Presbyterian Center, Washington, D.C.*, ed. George Hunt (The Westminster Press, 1965), 113.

- 44 Hudson, "John Locke: Heir of Puritan Political Theorists," 114.
- 45 Quoted in Little, "Roger Williams and the Separation of Church and State" in *Religion and the State: Essays in Honor of Leo Pfeffer*, 8.
- 46 Little, "Roger Williams and the Separation of Church and State," 9.
- 47 Hudson, "John Locke: Heir of Puritan Political Theorists," 116.
- 48 Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul: Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 4.
- 49 As Gaustad explains, "The sword may make a whole nation of hypocrites, but it cannot bring one single soul in genuine conversion to Christ." See Edwin S. Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999), 79.
- 50 See Little, "Roger Williams and the Separation of Church and State," 7.
- 51 John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. Patrick Romanell (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1950), 45.
- 52 Roger Williams, *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, vol. 1 (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), 392.

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