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A SUMMARY

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY:

EVIDENCE FROM SCRIPTURE
AND CHURCH HISTORY

by David Closson

Religious liberty is one of the most important and cherished rights in the United States. However, secular society increasingly misunderstands religious conviction, and even views the advocacy for religious liberty as a pretense for codifying prejudice and bigotry into law. If Christians are to counter this perception, we will need to articulate with greater clarity and persuasiveness why religious liberty is worth supporting and protecting.

FRC's publication "Biblical Principles for Religious Liberty" helps Christians understand what religious freedom is, why the Bible supports it, and how it benefits all people—both religious and non-religious. What follows is a summary of this resource.

WHAT IS RELIGIOUS LIBERTY?

Religious liberty is the freedom to hold religious beliefs of one's own choosing and to live in accordance with those beliefs. Because religion relates to our

deepest convictions about faith, God, the world, and ourselves, it is not a peripheral “political issue,” but rather one of utmost importance.

While there are legal and philosophical arguments for why religious liberty should be protected, here we will examine biblical and theological arguments in its favor.

DOES THE BIBLE SUPPORT RELIGIOUS LIBERTY?

Parable of the Wheat and Tares

For two thousand years of church history, the parable of the wheat and tares (Mat. 13:24-30) has been cited in defense of religious liberty. While not everyone has always agreed on the parable’s implications for religious liberty, many interpreters understood Christ’s admonition to allow the wheat and tares to grow together as an acknowledgment that unbelievers cannot be forced into belief.



The Apostle Paul’s Use of Appeal and Persuasion

The Bible employs language of appeal and persuasion, instead of coercion, throughout the Old and New Testaments. The apostle Paul is a noteworthy example, whose evangelistic technique was to converse, dialogue, and persuade. Paul patiently explained the Scriptures and trusted the Holy Spirit to bring conviction of sin, which would lead to repentance and faith.

Although God could have easily used other means to communicate the gospel, He chooses to appeal through human means. Through His chosen human instruments, God reasons and seeks to persuade unbelievers to repent and believe in the gospel.

The Role of Government Versus the Role of the Church

Romans 13 and Matthew 22 have helped centuries of Christians think through the dynamics of power, authority, and obedience to rulers. In Romans 13, the apostle Paul discusses the purpose of government. In Matthew 22, the Jewish religious leaders attempt to trap Jesus into adjudicating a volatile political question by asking Him if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar.

When taken together, these two passages demonstrate that government is ordained by God to be His servant in the civil sphere but that certain areas of life fall outside government’s authority and belong exclusively to God. The areas to which Jesus instructs, render “to God the things that are God’s,” include God’s jurisdiction of the soul, or areas of religion, belief, and conscience.

Salvation is the Work of the Spirit, Not the State

Because faith is inherently spiritual by nature, the state should never attempt to force people to believe in a specific religion. Such forced conversion is ineffective and outside the jurisdiction of civil authorities. Instead, civil authorities should guarantee religious freedom for followers of all religions. This creates an even playing field where religions can compete with one another for adherents and support, allowing possible converts to test and evaluate the truth claims of various religious traditions to choose for themselves which one they will follow.

ROGER WILLIAMS AS A MODEL

Roger Williams (1603-1683), a Puritan minister and the founder of Providence Plantations (present-day Rhode Island), devoted his career to advocating for religious liberty. He flatly rejected the use of civil authority in a realm he believed was governed by a higher authority. Williams' theological arguments for religious liberty continue to be relevant today.



The Wheat and Tares

Like many interpreters before him, Williams believed the parable of the wheat and tares prohibited persecution of conscience. Williams' interpretation of the parable informed his view on religious persecution. He was convinced that persecution based on religious belief was immoral because it confused civil authority with church discipline. While the civil authority may use weapons of iron and steel to control civil disturbances, it is wrong to apply them to inward, religious matters.

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

Williams' advocacy for religious liberty was greatly influenced by his commitment to the tenets of Reformed theology. 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.

Fallibility

Williams believed in the principle of human fallibility. Due to the fall, humans are prone to error and bias. This fallibility even extends to the realm of religion, where humans can be misguided. Thus, Williams believed broad religious tolerance should be afforded when interfacing with civil authorities.

Faith's Interiority

Williams believed in a sharp distinction between the inner world of belief

(conscience) and the outer realm of civil and social regulation. To William, the obvious implication of religion's interiority is religious liberty, which protects the inner world of belief. If true religion is fundamentally about belief, an outside force is incapable of affecting genuine conversion.

Consent

Because Williams believed that the spiritual nature of religion requires liberty, he concluded that an established church mandating doctrinal subscription contradicts the essence and search for religious truth. If no one can be coerced into being a Christian, consent is necessary, and adherence to a particular faith must be voluntary.

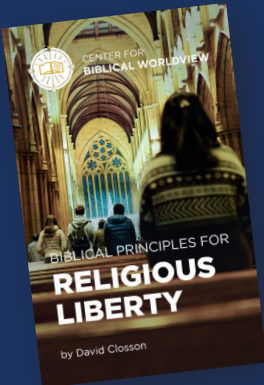
Roger Williams' Legacy

Williams believed that, because God is Lord of the conscience, the state has no business interfering with man's quest for religious truth. 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.

Williams' thoughts had enormous implications for America's founders, and his arguments continue to be relevant to today's discussions about religious liberty.

CONCLUSION

The Bible and the history of Christian thought provide a strong theological foundation for supporting religious liberty and protecting the freedom of conscience. As those who desire unhindered dissemination of the gospel, soul freedom for everyone is the ideal toward which we must continually strive.



For a more in-depth discussion of religious liberty, visit [FRC.org/belief](https://www.frc.org/belief) to read our full publication, "Biblical Principles for Religious Liberty: Evidence from Scripture and Church History."



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