



gospel  
&  
culture

GOSPEL & CULTURE: RELIGIOUS LIBERTY  
WEEK 2 | PASTOR TOMMY JOHNSTON

# Gospel & Culture: Religious Liberty

On Sunday, July 3, Pastor Tommy Johnston guided us through a discussion on religious liberty. His talk helped us to understand the nature of religious liberty, and he argued that Christians should be motivated into action to defend religious liberty out of love for our neighbors.

## 1) What is religious liberty?

Religious liberty is the ability to conduct one's life according to his or her conscience and moral convictions in public. This means that we are able to be "integrated persons," living consistently both in public and private based on sincerely held beliefs. This principle is written into the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, and it has greatly benefited our society over the years.

## 2) Is religious liberty a gospel issue?

Christians don't uniformly see religious liberty as an issue worth pursuing. Some argued that the only thing we are promised as believers is persecution, and we should not waste our energy on such an endeavor. However, if we look carefully at the implications of the whole counsel of God, pursuing religious liberty becomes an essential step in our obedience to Christ. Here are five biblical pillars that lead us to supporting religious liberty:

### *The Image of God*

Genesis 1:27 tells us that God created male and female in his image. Part of what students of the Bible have understood that to mean is that people are capable of making moral choices. Religious liberty is built upon this basic assumption, that men and women will stand accountable to God for their actions because he has made them moral agents.

### *Limited Spheres of Authority*

God has appointed human governments and endowed them with authority to undertake specific and very limited tasks (Romans 13:1-2). They are to restrain human evil through the strength of military and police and promote good in society (Romans 13:3-4). Jesus taught that there is a realm of authority that belongs to Caesar, and one that only belongs to God (Matthew 22:18-21). When governments begin moving out of the spheres of upholding good and restraining evil and into the spheres of conscience, they are overstepping their boundaries. God gave them this limited authority, it is not something inherent to them and they have no right to overstep it. This is the only legitimate form of the "separation of church and state" that the Bible supports.

### *True Conversion*

In Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 Jesus tells a parable commonly referred to as "The Wheat and the Tares." In it, a group of field workers ask their master if they can begin uprooting weeds that have sprouted among the wheat of his field. The master responds that they must not, as they will uproot the wheat as they pull up the weeds. In the interpretation of the parable that follows, Jesus explains that this is a picture of the world relating to followers of Jesus. There will always be unbelievers present in the world, so Christians must not attempt to cleanse the world through force, for it will only prevent true conversions. This means that Christ's followers must not ever resort to governmental coercion in their efforts to fulfill the Great Commission. That tactic will only result in spurious converts, as history has shown. Instead, believers must use the means of persuasion, appealing to the consciences of unbelievers as they proclaim the gospel (Acts 26; Romans 1:16).

### *Peaceful Righteousness*

While it is true that Christians are to pursue godliness no matter the cost to themselves, it is also true that they are told to pursue a peaceful and quiet life (1 Timothy 2:1-4). Wherever possible, it is our responsibility as Christians to be at peace with our unbelieving neighbors. Religious liberty provides us with the space to flourish as God intended by keeping persecution in check. This benefits both us as believers and the society in which we live as salt and light

### ***Love of Neighbor***

Without this final pillar, our efforts toward religious liberty can rightly be called a self-interested power play. Christians are called to love their neighbors (Matthew 22:39), which results in a sincere desire to see them converted (Romans 9:1-5). If we really love our neighbors, then we are going to want them to have as few barriers to meeting Jesus as possible. That means that in every political environment, Christians need to make space for individuals to have their consciences uncoerced by government, in the hope that they might hear and believe the gospel.

### **3) What is eroding religious liberty?**

Religious liberty is facing threats on multiple fronts in our society. The largest of these threats is that which Dr. Al Mohler describes as ***Erotic Liberty***. This is the goal of the secularist movement, which begins with the assumption that human sexual expression is a virtue, and no societal structure of individual should place limits on it.

Another threat is that of ***Privatization***. Increasingly the terms “freedom of religion” or “religious liberty” are being replaced with “freedom of worship.” This move is being made to reduce religion into what happens within the four walls of a church, mosque or synagogue and out of public life.

Finally, we must note that sometimes even Christians are guilty of asking for ***Privileged Protections***. In these cases, there is a push to use governmental authority to suppress religions that are deemed undesirable. A recent example is that of an article in a major Southern Baptist publication arguing that Muslims do not qualify for religious liberty and should not be protected under religious liberty laws.

### **4) How does the Gospel lead us to respond?**

#### ***Keep authority straight even if society doesn't.***

We stand before the king of heaven to whom we answer before any earthly power. If the government changes in such a way to overstep its God-given authority, it does not give us license to do the same. We must continue reminding our culture of who is the true authority and continue honoring him no matter the circumstance.

#### ***Defend religious liberty out of love for your neighbors.***

It's important for us both to have the action and the motivation right here. We need to take steps to defend religious liberty as best we can. This means influencing politicians, using our rights as citizens and not being silent on the issue. Yet we also must remember to do this out of love for our neighbors. Remember, this is how we keep the barriers out of their way to meet Jesus to the best of our ability.

#### ***Use religious liberty for evangelism.***

While we have religious liberty, we need to maximize it to bring the gospel to our neighbors. It does our unsaved neighbors no good to have religious liberty and to stay in spiritual darkness until the final judgment. Let's use what freedom we have for sharing the gospel.

#### ***Be wise as you prepare for the days ahead.***

It might be time to start thinking about how you will set aside money to aid fellow believers who will be on the front lines of these sorts of issues in the days to come. Will you be able to provide a job for someone who gets fired for Jesus? Will you help pay for a lawyer for someone who gets taken to court for Christ? Will you provide a roof for someone who has their property seized for the sake of Jesus? Will you stick with your church if there are picketers outside? These are the types of questions to ask yourself now, should the Lord guide us through those deep waters.

### ***Foster a heart of Christian hope.***

We follow the crucified Messiah, the one who went through death to bring us life. He has already secured the victory and promised us that we will find peace in him even as we go through tribulation (John 20:33). This means that we have every reason to be joyful no matter the state of religious liberty in our country. We need to foster a heart that finds its security in that reality, so that the ups and downs of our society do not shake us.

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection:**

1. What concerns do you have about the topic of religious liberty? What sort of emotions do you experience as you think about it?
2. What steps can you take to be involved in encouraging religious liberty in our society? What are the biggest obstacles for you to do so?
3. What will it look like for you to have Christian hope instead of fear going forward? What practical steps can you take to foster hope no matter the political situation?

### **Additional Resources for Further Reading:**

U.S. Constitution - Amendment I:

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.*

Grudem, Wayne, *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in the Light of Scripture*

Moore, Russell D. *Gospel & Religious Liberty*

Young, Neil J. *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics*

Mohler, Al, *We Must Not Be Silent*

Carson, D.A. *The Gagging of God*

Barber, Bart, *A Biblical Case for Religious Liberty*  
<http://sbcvoices.com/the-biblical-case-for-religious-liberty/>

MacArthur, John, *An Open Letter to TMS Alumni* <http://www.tms.edu/preachersandpreaching/an-open-letter-to-tms-alumni/>

MacArthur, John, *An Important Message about Religious Liberty* <https://www.facebook.com/mastersseminary/videos/10154236312340990/?fallback=1>

The Baptist Faith and Message  
<http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>

