

Church and State - The Church's Role in Political Process

Historical Perspective

The relationship between Church and State has played out over the course of decades. It was this initial relationship that was a source for the English settlers who first arrived on America's shores in the 17th century. Because the Church of England was a government supported institution, religious exiles sought to develop an separation in church and state as they settled the North American continent.

Baptists were influential in the formation of the first civil government based on the separation of church and state in what is now Rhode Island. While there is a general belief that the state should not decide what the church can believe and should not prohibit the practice of religion, Baptists do disagree among themselves as to the degree to which the church should influence the state and what exactly constitutes state prohibition of religion. These disagreements manifest themselves in issues such as whether the state should restrict gambling, the purchase of alcohol or abortion and whether the prohibition of state-sanctioned public prayer in public schools in the United States constitutes state interference in religion.¹

For the Black Baptist Church, religion and politics have an important relationship, as much the Civil Rights movement was nurtured in the context of its congregations. The Baptist Church in the Black community for many years has served as the center point for spiritual, cultural and political life. From Reconstruction through most of the 20th century, it was the Black preacher who served as chief theologian, community organizer and politician.

What Baptists believe about Civil Government?

Baptist Articles of Faith - We believe the Scriptures teach that civil government is of divine appointment, for the interest and good order of human society; and that magistrates are to be prayed for, conscientiously honored and obeyed; except only in things opposed to the will of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the only Lord of the conscience, and the Prince of the Kings of the earth.

American Baptists Churches USA support religious freedom and respect the expressions of faith of others. As a people whose forbears came together in response to intolerance, American Baptists have cherished freedom and pursued it for millions around the world. Manifestations of that ideal include supporting separation of church and state, advocating

¹<http://www.religionfacts.com/baptists>

for people everywhere to be guaranteed the right to worship free from discrimination, and lifting up respectful dialog as a healthy means to understanding.

The National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. believes that religious liberty is a gift from God. We support the freedom of the individual conscience to choose to worship God according to the dictates of one's heart. And while we celebrate our own liberty to embrace biblical truth without compromise, we also support the first amendment to the Constitution which guarantees freedom of religion for all Americans. In this light, as Americans, we join with other faith communities in supporting the right of Islamic and other religious bodies to worship according to the dictates and mandates of their faith expressions.

What Scripture Teaches about the Church and Government?

Submission to Governing Authorities - Romans 13:1-7

- Governing authorities are subject to God's sovereignty.
- Rebelling against governing authorities is rebelling against God.

Praying for Rulers - 1 Timothy 2:1-2

- We are required to pray for those in authority.
- Prayers for our leaders is apart of God desires for us to live simply

Godly Living in Society - 1 Peter 2:13-17

- We submit to governing power to honor God.
- Doing good by submitting to authorities is a matter of our witness to the world.
- Our freedom in God leads us to stand on the side of what's right.

Responsibilities of Dual Citizenship - Jeremiah 29:4-7

- We should be model citizens.
- Christians are called to seek the peace and prosperity of the land.
- Our prosperity is tied to the prosperity of the country in which we live.

How Can We Express Our Christian Beliefs in Relation to the Political Process?

- Be Informed about Issues and Candidates
- Be Informed about Local, State, and National Politics
- Be Advocates for the Least, Lost, Left Out
- Pray for Our Leaders
- Participate in the Process