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# RELIGIOUS LIBERTY COMMITTEE

## Official Report

The Religious Liberty Committee of the BGAV is charged with “reporting to the General Association annually on the nature and importance of religious liberty and the separation of church and state, citing violations in principle and practice, and suggestions for correcting same.” It is also instructed to “make available information relating to the subject with the view of safeguarding these cherished principles.” This mission has been an essential part of the uniquely Baptist witness of the BGAV from its very beginning, and the need to safeguard our cherished principles of religious freedom and the separation of church and state, as well as helping churches wrestle with what this principle looks like in practice in our current context, is as vital as it has ever been.

For several years, there has been a significant conversation in our society about the role of religion, and specifically of Christianity, in our public life. Decades-long debate over issues such as prayer in schools and the display of religious teachings (such as the Ten Commandments) in public or governmental spaces has reemerged as a major point of contention in many states. New provisions in Texas for government-provided school chaplains and efforts in Oklahoma and Louisiana to incorporate the Bible and the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms also bring religious liberty concerns into the national discourse. Many states continue to struggle with balancing the need for protecting vulnerable communities with the need to protect the religious liberties of faith-based organizations. Finally, the influence of Christian nationalism – which “seeks to merge Christian and American identities” and “demands Christianity be privileged by the State and implies that to be a good American, one must be Christian”<sup>1</sup> – is gaining traction with an increasing number of American Christians.

With such attention given to issues involving religious liberty and the separation of church and state, the Religious Liberty Committee believes it is important to highlight the historic Baptist understanding of these core freedoms for all people – freedoms created not by constitution or legal decree, but by the God who creates us all. The fundamental nature of God is grounded and rooted in love, and such love thrives in being freely chosen. Several texts in Scripture<sup>2</sup> speak to freedom as the result of God’s saving work in and through Jesus Christ, and that freedom includes the liberty to seek God, respond to God, and embrace God, not through coercion, but through the liberty of love that Christ has shown to us. Virginia Baptists have historically carried that understanding of freedom through Christ to the principles of civic life that Baptists have long championed: that each person is free to worship God in whatever manner they understand best, or not worship God at all; that the State provides no favor to any religious group or privilege to any particular faith over another; that no religious expression or practice be required by the State; and that all persons of faith, or no faith at all, are equally treated by the law. This Virginia Baptist perspective parallels that of many other Baptist organizations, including the Southern Baptist Convention as reflected in its 2024 resolution “On Defending Religious Liberty.” That resolution states, “Our Christian witness is better preserved by the separation of church and state,” and resolves “that we oppose any effort to establish a state religion of any nation, including the United States of America; that we refute the idea that God has commanded any state to establish any religion or any denomination; and we reject any government coercion or enforcement of religious belief.”<sup>3</sup>

With these principles in mind, the Religious Liberty Committee of the BGAV has been and continues to be at work to help BGAV churches better understand and safeguard the principles of religious liberty that are part of our Virginia Baptist DNA. Activities of the committee include:

- **Participation in Religious Liberty Day:** Each year, on the anniversary of the enactment of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, the Religious Liberty Committee invites interested Virginia Baptists to join it in visiting the State Capitol in Richmond to meet with legislators and legislative aides, providing information on religious liberty and advocating for religious freedom. While weather made it impossible to participate in 2024, the committee is making plans to visit the Capitol again on January 16, 2025, to share Virginia Baptist perspectives on religious liberty.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christiansagainstchristiannationalism.org/statement>.

<sup>2</sup> A non-exhaustive list: Gal. 5:1, 13; 1 Pet. 2:16; John 8:36; Dan. 3, 6.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.baptistpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2-On-Defending-Religious-Liberty.pdf>.

- **Educational Videos:** Last year, the committee created and published a video on the Religious Liberty Committee Facebook page that told the story of Elder John Weatherford in 1773 and infringements on religious liberty in colonial Virginia; this video is available on several platforms<sup>4</sup> and is useful for congregations and individuals. The committee is working on a second video in what we hope will be a series of educational tools, this time focusing on the historic meeting of John Leland and James Madison in 1788.
- **Curriculum:** In conjunction with the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, the committee continues its work on updating and augmenting the VBHS Heritage Tours: “Freedom Trails, Sites Associated with the Baptists and Religious Liberty.”
- **Breakouts:** At the 2024 BGAV Annual Meeting, the Religious Liberty Committee is offering two breakouts. The first, “Religious Liberty: Our Virginia Baptist Heritage and Future,” introduces the Virginia Baptist principles concerning religious liberty and ponders how those principles might influence our faith and our world today. The second, “What’s at Stake for Young Leaders in Religious Liberty?,” is part of the NextGen track of breakouts and offers space for young leaders to engage with the importance of religious liberty in our churches and our communities.

The Religious Liberty Committee of the BGAV continues the work of resourcing BGAV churches and safeguarding the religious liberty principles that Virginia Baptists have cherished for generations. We look forward to continuing this work in 2025.

Respectfully submitted,

Adam Tyler, Chair  
 Belinda Barnett  
 Warren Johnson  
 Allan F. Livers, Jr.  
 W. Shelton Miles III  
 Nettie Stokes  
 Rebecca J. McKinney (by Virtue of Office – President)  
 Wayne D. Faison (by Virtue of Office – Executive Director)

<sup>4</sup> YouTube, Vimeo, Facebook.