

ARTS

BAPTISTS SUPPORT  
STATE-  
SPONSORED  
PRAYER

Doug Weaver

**From their beginning in America in 1639, Baptists have ardently advocated the separation of church and state.** Historically, they have opposed, not supported, government-sponsored religious practices. Since the 1930s, the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs (BJC) has spoken loud and long in favor of Baptists' historic position supporting the separation of church and state and opposing such practices as government-sponsored prayers. The BJC is the Baptist watchdog for issues of separation of church and state in Washington, D.C., and is sponsored by fourteen supporting Baptist bodies.<sup>1</sup> It, therefore, represents not only the historic Baptist position, but also the mainstream Baptists in this country today.

### Colonial Dissenters

During the colonial period, most influential Baptist voices strongly spoke against state-supported religious practices. Roger Williams, soon to found the first Baptist church in America, was banished from the Massachusetts Bay in 1636 for attacking the union of church and state. The Puritan colony was not the new Israel with a Bible-based government; the magistrate was not competent to play God and judge a person's obedience to the "first tablet" of the Ten Commandments. According to Williams, requiring a religious oath was like requiring a pagan to pray; hypocrisy and persecution were the results.

Other colonial Baptists knew the folly of state-sponsored religion. In Massachusetts, Isaac Backus, the eighteenth-century lobbyist for religious liberty, asserted, "the church and state should never be confounded together." His contemporary, John Leland, the Separate Baptist evangelist in Virginia, was not ambiguous: "the fondness of the magistrate to foster Christianity has done it more harm than all the persecution ever did." Virginia Baptists had spent too much time in colonial prisons to consider state-sponsored religion anything but an oxymoron.

### Disestablishment and Separation

The disestablishment of the Anglican Church during the Revolutionary War era prepared the way for non-sectarian public schools. Despite the victory for religious liberty in the infant nation, a Protestant ethos, with Bible reading and devotions, prevailed in the schools. Secularization developed rapidly around the middle of the nineteenth century. Horace Mann, "father of public education," allowed for Bible reading (without comment) but favored a focus on teaching general moral principles. A renewed focus on religion in the public schools occurred between World Wars I and II. By 1960, half of the nation's school districts had religious exercises.<sup>2</sup>

While many Baptists certainly accepted the Protestant ethos found in the public square, voices opposing religious devotions in public schools gave witness to a vibrant affirmation of the principle of the separation of church and state. In 1888, for example, a motion was made at the annual meeting of the Stone Mountain Baptist Association (Georgia) to urge the daily reading of the Bible "without comment" in the public schools. Judge John T. Pendleton, a prominent member of Second Baptist Church, Atlanta, opposed the resolution, and the association subsequently tabled the motion.<sup>3</sup>

Virginia Baptists of the early twentieth century insisted on the separation of church and state, as had their predecessors. In 1926, the Virginia Senate considered a bill to require public school teachers to read the Bible in their classrooms. George W. McDaniel, pastor of First Baptist Church, Richmond, in 1926, strongly opposed the bill and argued that the United States had made one distinctive contribution to civilization: the separation of church and state. R. H. Pitt, editor of the *Religious Herald*, added that "Virginia Baptists are against any attempt to compel to read the scriptures, to sing hymns, to make prayers, to attend church, or to perform any other act, which is religious."<sup>4</sup>

## Supreme Court Decisions

Beginning in 1940, the Supreme Court ruled that the First Amendment religion clauses (no government establishment of religion; the free exercise of religion) were applicable to state as well as federal governments. Combined with a growing pluralism, the practice of religious devotions in the public schools became contentious. The reverberations of two landmark cases have yet to cease.

In 1962, in *Engel v. Vitale*, the Supreme Court ruled against the required recitation of a prayer that had been written by the regents of the state of New York. According to justices (only one dissented), the government should not be in the business of writing prayers for a government-supported religious program. The ruling was intended to stop government control of religion and prayer.

The following year, the court ruled in *Abington v. Schempp* that school-sponsored Bible reading and recitation of the Lord's Prayer were also unconstitutional because laws must have a secular (neutral) purpose; they must not promote or inhibit religion. The justices distinguished between the practice of religion and the study of religion; the latter should be encouraged.

While much of the public and some Baptists opposed these rulings, many leaders from numerous groups recognized the problems of state-sponsored religion, especially prayer. One of the first Protestant organizations to support the decisions of the Supreme Court was the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs (BJCPA). Most Baptist conventions concurred. *Engel v. Vitale*, according to the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, "made prayer free from political control."<sup>5</sup>

## Constitutional Prayer Amendment

Critics of the 1962-1963 court decisions mounted a sustained effort during the next several decades to pass a constitutional amendment to allow "voluntary" prayer in the public schools. The country's president,

Ronald Reagan, led the most visible effort during the early 1980s and was supported by fundamentalists, including Baptist fundamentalists. In 1982, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution to support a constitutional amendment for "voluntary" prayer in America's public schools. The resolution was a dramatic reversal of the traditional understanding of the separation of church and state among most Baptists.

Two years later, W. A. Criswell, pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, proclaimed a new Baptist way, "I believe this notion of the separation of church and state was the figment of some infidel's imagination."

Most Baptist groups, including some in the SBC, continued to support the historic Baptist position on church/state issues. Commenting on the proposal for a constitutional prayer amendment, Robert C. Campbell, president of American Baptist Churches, said that state-sponsored school prayer, "so called 'group prayer' . . . is a trivialization of prayer." Watchdogs for religious liberty like the BJCPA and Americans United for the Separation of Church and State (with many Baptists in leadership positions) also upheld the traditional distinctiveness of the separation of church and state and attacked the need for a prayer amendment.<sup>6</sup>

The school prayer battle has continued to rage in various ways. Moments of silence are constitutional, but not if prayer is the designed purpose. Efforts to have student-initiated prayers have been controversial. When can a prayer be student-led and not endorsed by the schools? Public prayers at graduation ceremonies and athletic events have been challenged. In June 2000, in *Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe*, the court ruled that officially sanctioned public school prayers could no longer be offered at high school football games.

Edwin Gaustad, the preeminent American Baptist religious historian and expert in church-state

matters, addressed the issues involved. Citing Adlai Stevenson, the popular politician of the 1950s, Gaustad defined democracy as a society in which the rights of the minority were safe and secure. He noted that complaints in the football prayer case came from Catholics and Mormons who lived in a Baptist dominated region, and then opined, “That they did so anonymously suggests the strong, if sometimes subtle, power of majoritarian opinion . . . the power of the majority is such that it requires little or no constitutional protection. In the free exercise school yard or on the open prairie, the buffalo does not need to be protected from the field mouse.”<sup>7</sup>

Brent Walker, executive-director of the BJCPA, similarly warned that without the separation of church and state, the country would have “tepid, attenuated, majoritarian religion, at best, or a theocracy [Christian America] at worst.”<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

James Dunn, the executive-director of the BJCPA for nineteen years (1980-1999), once said that a school prayer amendment was unneeded, unwise, and unfaithful. Some who want voluntary prayer really mean mandatory voluntary prayer—an oxymoron. Dunn knew that peer pressure was inevitable in a classroom setting. Group prayer time was not really voluntary, he contended, but a temptation to exploit the consciences of impressionable children. Even those who want school-sponsored prayer realize the exercise must be “non-sectarian.” “If it is non-sectarian,” however, “it’s secular and not prayer at all.”

Dunn noted majoritarians forget that their Baptist ancestors were a dissenting minority who was persecuted by the state and its established religion. Baptists in the Bible Belt might want school-sponsored prayer, but would they be happy with majoritarian prayer in Buddhist Hawaii, Mormon Utah, or the Black Muslim South Bronx? Authentic prayer is never subject to government

regulations. Besides, as long as there are math tests, students will pray in schools!<sup>9</sup>

The best of the Baptist tradition does not support state-sponsored school prayer. It is majoritarian, coercive, and a trivialization of the sacred. Baptists should follow their historic practice and put the myth to rest.

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1. The groups include: Alliance of Baptists, American Baptist Churches USA, Baptist General Association of Virginia, Baptist General Conference, Baptist General Convention of Texas, Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, National Baptist Convention of America, National Baptist Convention U.S.A., Inc., National Missionary Baptist Convention, North American Baptist Conference, Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc., Religious Liberty Council, and Seventh Day Baptist General Conference.

2. James Wood, Jr., “Religion and Public Education in Historical Perspective,” *Journal of Church and State* (February 1972): 399, 404.

3. Stone Mountain Baptist Association (Georgia), September 4, 1888, minutes.

4. George W. McDaniel, from a collection of McDaniel’s papers held by the Virginia Baptist Historical Society. “R. H. Pitt, “Scotched, If Not Killed,” *Religious Herald* (March 4, 1926): 10. Fred Anderson, “This Week in Our History,” *Religious Herald* (February 2, 1989): 12.

5. Edwin Gaustad, *A Religious History of America*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 319-21. See also Charles Deweese, *Prayer in Baptist Life: A Historical Survey* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1986), 82.

6. Deweese, 83-84.

7. Edwin Gaustad, “Football, Prayer, and Texas,” *The Whitsitt Journal* (Fall 2000), 7.

8. Brent Walker, “Nation’s founders, early Baptists supported principle of separation,” *Report from the Capital* (August 7, 2002): 2.

9. James Dunn, “Should Congress Pass a Prayer School Amendment? No.” *Western Recorder* (March 7, 1995): 6, 14.

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