

A BIBLICAL VIEW ON  
**Church and State**

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# CHURCH AND STATE



The relationship between church and state has been an important discussion since the founding of this country. What is the history of the First Amendment? What does the phrase “separation of church and state” mean? Here is a brief summary of some key issues and concepts so that you can understand more about the controversial topic of church and state.

## **First Amendment**

The First Amendment in the Bill of Rights deals with more than just the topic of religion, though we will focus merely on the area of religion and religious liberty in this booklet. It says:

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.

The First Amendment begins by preventing Congress from establishing religion or prohibiting the free exercise of religion. Originally, the religion clause of the First Amendment was intended to prevent the federal government from establishing a national church. Some New England states maintained established state-churches

until the 1830s.

In the last two centuries, the Supreme Court has extended the First Amendment to any religious activity by any governmental body. The establishment clause originally prohibited the establishment of a national church by Congress, but now has been broadened to prohibit anything that appears like a government endorsement of religious practice. The free exercise clause supposedly prohibits government from placing any burden on religious practice.

The second part of the First Amendment provides freedom of political participation. This includes freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly with the right to petition the government for a redress of grievances. This quartet of freedoms allows citizens to be actively involved in electing representatives and influencing legislation.

## History of the First Amendment

James Madison (architect of the Constitution) is the one who first proposed the wording of what became the First Amendment. On June 8, 1789, Madison proposed the following:

“The civil rights of none shall be abridged on account of religious belief or worship, nor shall any national religion be established, nor shall the full and equal rights of conscience be in any manner, or on any pretext, infringed.”

The representatives debated this wording and then turned the task over to a committee consisting of Madison and ten other House members. They proposed a new version that read:

“No religion shall be established by law, nor shall the equal rights of conscience be infringed.”

This wording was debated. During the debate, Madison explained,

“he apprehended the meaning of the words to be, that Congress should not establish a religion, and enforce the legal observation of it by law, nor compel men to worship God in any manner contrary to their conscience.”

A week later, the House again altered the wording to this:

“Congress shall make no law establishing religion, or to prevent the free exercise thereof, or to infringe the rights of conscience.”

After further debate, the House and Senate came up with the wording we find today in our Constitution:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

If you follow the details of the debate, you will find that Congress was attempting to prevent the es-

establishment of a national religion or a national church with their drafting of the First Amendment. But they were not trying to outlaw all religious expression in the republic.

**Today, many Americans believe that the First Amendment requires a strict separation of church and state. Therefore, it's worth considering where this idea of church/state separation was created and what it was intended to express.**

### **Wall of Separation**

When Thomas Jefferson first used the phrase "wall of separation," it is certain that he would never have anticipated the controversy that surrounds that term two centuries later. The metaphor has become so powerful that Americans are more familiar with Jefferson's phrase than with the actual language of the Constitution.

In one sense, the idea of separation of church and state is an accurate description of what must

take place between the two institutions. History is full of examples (e.g., the Inquisition) of the dangers that arise when the institutions of church and state become too intertwined.

But the contemporary concept of separation of church and state goes far beyond the recognition that the two institutions must be separate. The current version of this phrase has come to mean that there should be a complete separation between religion and public life.

At the outset, we should state the obvious: the phrase “separation of church and state” is not in the Constitution. Although that should be an obvious statement, it is amazing how many citizens (including lawyers and politicians) do not know that simple fact.

Since the phrase is not in the Constitution and not even significantly discussed by the framers (e.g., The Federalist Papers), it is

open to wide interpretation and misinterpretation. The only clear statement about religion in the Constitution can be found in the First Amendment, and we will look at its legislative history in a moment.

Thomas Jefferson used the phrase “separation of church and state” when he wrote to the Danbury Baptist Association in 1802. Then the phrase slipped into obscurity. In 1947, Justice Hugo Black revived it. Within a few years, the wall of separation metaphor was used to argue that nearly any religious activity (prayer, Bible reading, moment of silence) and any religious symbol (cross, creche, Ten Commandments, etc.) is impermissible outside of church and home. Most of these activities and symbols have been stripped from public arenas.

It’s also worth noting that six of the thirteen original states had official, state-sponsored churches.

Some states (Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and South Carolina) even refused to ratify the new Constitution unless it included a prohibition of federal involvement in the state churches.

### **History of the Phrase**

So what was the meaning of “separation of church and state” and how has it changed? Let’s go back and look at the history of the phrase in more detail.

The presidential campaign of 1800 was one of the most bitterly contested presidential elections in American history. Republican Thomas Jefferson defeated Federalist John Adams (who served as Vice-President under George Washington). During the campaign, the Federalists attacked Jefferson’s religious beliefs, arguing that he was an “atheist” and an “infidel.” Some were so fearful of a Jefferson presidency, they buried their family

Bibles or hid them in wells, fearing that President Jefferson would confiscate them. Timothy Dwight (President of Yale College) even warned a few years before that if Jefferson were elected, "we may see the Bible cast into a bonfire." These concerns were unwarranted since Jefferson had written a great deal in the previous two decades about his support of religious liberty.

In the midst of these concerns, the loyal Republicans of the Danbury Baptist Association wrote to the president congratulating him on his election and his dedication to religious liberty. President Jefferson used the letter as an opportunity to explain why he did not declare days of public prayer and thanksgiving as Washington and Adams had done so before him.

In his letter to them on New Year's Day 1802, Jefferson agreed with their desire for religious freedom, saying that religious faith was

a matter between God and man. Jefferson also affirmed his belief in the First Amendment and went on to say that he believed it denied Congress (or the President) the right to dictate religious beliefs. He argued that the First Amendment denied the Federal government this power:

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinion, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.

It appears that Jefferson's phrase actually came from the 1800 election. Federalist ministers spoke against Jefferson "often from their pulpits, excoriating his infidelity and deism." Republicans, therefore, argued that clergymen should not preach about politics but maintain a separation between the two.

Although the Danbury letter was published in newspapers, the "wall of separation" metaphor never gained much attention and essentially slipped into obscurity. In 1947, Justice Hugo L. Black revived Jefferson's wall metaphor in the case of *Everson v. Board of Education*. He applied this phrase in a different way from Thomas Jefferson. Black said that the First Amendment "was intended to erect a wall of separation between church and State." He added that this wall "must be kept high and impregnable."

Daniel Dreisbach, the author of *Thomas Jefferson and the Wall*

*of Separation Between Church and State*, shows that Black's wall differs from Jefferson's wall. "Although Justice Black credited the third president with building the 'wall of separation,' the barrier raised in *Everson* differs from Jefferson's in function."

There is also a difference in the location of the two walls. Whereas Jefferson's "wall" explicitly separated the institutions of church and state, Black's wall, more expansively, separates religion and all civil government. Moreover, Jefferson's "wall" separated church and the federal government only. By incorporating the First Amendment nonestablishment provision into the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, Black's wall separates religion and civil government at all levels—federal, state, and local.

Jefferson's metaphor was a statement about federalism (the

relationship between the federal government and the states). But Black turned it into a wall between religion and government (which because of the incorporation of the Fourteenth Amendment could also be applied to state and local governments).

As you can probably now see, neither the framers of the Constitution nor the members of Congress nor Thomas Jefferson intended to build a wall of separation between church and state. The phrase has been misused and has often been the justification for an attack on religious liberty. We have the responsibility to assert the rights of Christians and all people of faith. Jesus called for us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). We are to be his ambassadors in the world (2 Corinthians 5:20) and stand for truth and promote righteousness in society.

## **Additional Resources**

Kerby Anderson, *Christians and Government*, Cambridge, OH: Christians Publishing House, 2016.

Daniel Dreisbach, *Thomas Jefferson and the Wall of Separation Between Church and State*, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2002.

Edwin Meese, Matthew Spalding, and David F. Forte, *The Heritage Guide to the Constitution*, Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2004







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