

When Any Turn From Zion's Way

John Newton (1725–1807)

When any turn from Zion's way,
(Alas! what numbers do!)
Methinks I hear my Savior say,
"Wilt thou forsake Me too?"

Ah Lord! with such a heart as mine,
Unless Thou hold me fast;
I feel I must, I shall decline,
And prove like them at last.

Yet Thou alone hast power, I know,
To save a wretch like me;
To whom, or whither, could I go,
If I should turn from Thee?

Beyond a doubt I rest assured
Thou art the Christ of God;
Who hast eternal life secured
By promise and by blood.

The help of men and angels joined,
Could never reach my case;
Nor can I hope relief to find,
But in Thy boundless grace.

No voice but Thine can give me rest,
And bid my fears depart;
No love but Thine can make me blest,
And satisfy my heart.

What anguish has that question stirred,
If I will also go?
Yet, Lord, relying on Thy Word,
I humbly answer, "No!"

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

439 and Beyond: An Illustration of the Separation of Church and State

Jon Pratt

In our most recent edition of *Nick of Time*, I provided a copy of the letter Chinese house church pastors first issued on August 30, 2018. The initial letter contained 29 signatories; two days later 87 more signed their names. That number had grown to 279 by September 6; this was the number reported in last week's issue. According to the St. Charles Institute there are now 439 names on the list. This number is likely to grow as news of this declaration spreads. Plug in "letter from Chinese pastors" into any internet search engine and you will find dozens of stories about it.

So how can Gospel-preaching American churches profit from considering these brave words penned by our Chinese counterparts? We could consider several themes raised in the letter, including the content of the Gospel message, the final authority of Scripture, the nature of acceptable civil disobedience, the demonstration of Spirit-motivated courage, the mission of the church, and the biblical role of civil authority. But space constraints permit me to concentrate only on the subject covered in declaration #4 which actually intersects with the last two themes regarding the mission of the church and the role of government: the principle of the separation of church and state.

Here are two sentences from the declaration that concisely explain this principle: "We declare that in matters of external conduct, churches are willing to accept lawful oversight by civil administration or other government departments as other social organizations do. But under no circumstances will we lead our churches to join a religious organization controlled by the government, to register with the religious administration department, or to accept any kind of affiliation." The key phrase here is "lawful oversight by civil administration" which, the church leaders state, should be the same as that exercised over any social organization in a country. Conversely, unlawful governmental coercion in the Chinese context would include forced membership in government-controlled organizations, required registration with the religious administration department, and any kind of church-state affiliation.



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Earlier in the declaration we receive several examples of unlawful government oversight, such as demolishing crosses on church buildings, forcing churches to hang the Chinese flag or to sing songs praising the state, banning children from receiving religious education, and depriving believers of the right to gather freely. We Americans, and particularly Baptists, find such governmental practices repulsive and alarming just as our Chinese brethren. And we rightly approve of such declarations in countries like China which do not have constitutional guarantees of religious freedom such as we enjoy in the United States.

On a short historical note, one of the main reasons we have the First Amendment to the Constitution here in America is because of the diligent efforts of Baptist pastor John Leland. Because of a letter to George Washington and a meeting with James Madison, Leland helped influence the Constitutional Convention so that religious liberty of the sort Baptists had always affirmed could be included in the Bill of Rights. Indeed, the guarantee that the state cannot establish any religion nor prohibit its free exercise provides the impetus for many prayers of thanksgiving on the part of American Christians and of American Baptists in particular.

Since we Americans have enjoyed religious liberty for so many years, we often forget how valuable this freedom is, and we also find it puzzling and even outrageous to hear of the oppression of worship in countries like China. Lest we forget about the meaning of the separation of church and state, I remind the reader that this concept has been a major distinctive of Baptist theology for centuries.

One of my colleagues here at Central Seminary, Kevin Bauder, has provided us with a valuable gift in this regard. In Chapter 6 of his book, *Baptist Distinctives and New Testament Church Order* (Regular Baptist Press, 2012), Kevin succinctly and clearly lays out the history, meaning, and points of application regarding the significant Baptist distinctive of separation of church and state. I can only provide the main points of his discussion here, but I strongly recommend further study of this chapter for every Baptist—American or otherwise.

First, Baptists believe that the state cannot coerce worship because true devotion must come from the heart. Second, the New Testament teaches that churches neither expected nor received material support from the government. Third, with regard to civil authority, Baptists have been willing to serve in the military and to hold public office; they have been willing to practice civil disobedience when the country's laws require them to do evil or forbid them from doing good and when a particular law violates the higher laws of the land. Fourth, in regard to the church and politics, the church has no political responsibility but bears a moral responsibility to expose the works of darkness in the land (Eph 5:3–14); individual Christians should refuse to support unjust policies, should vote, and should get

involved in the political process and in some cases run for public office; and Christians can be involved in civic events and military chaplaincy. Finally, because the boundary between religious freedom and state authority has blurred, wisdom is required in regard to governmental regulations (e.g. building codes), religious sedition, and immoral religion.

We see many points of connection between the issues facing Chinese house churches and these principles of church-state separation. What Baptists have traditionally supported in this regard is clearly asserted by the Chinese declaration. And we in the American church must continue to hope and pray that our Chinese brothers and sisters will be able to enjoy the same freedom from government oppression that we experience here so that the Word of God can have free course.

Finally, I offer an observation about some Baptist churches and their inconsistent application of the separation of church and state. The observant reader will have noticed that the Chinese churches view the hanging of the national flag and singing of patriotic songs as antithetical to their view of religious freedom and as an unlawful intrusion by the government into their worship. Indeed, the mission of the church knows no national boundary and must not include worship of any but Christ. Having worshipped with believers in England, Romania, India, and China, I can attest that the hanging of the national flag and singing of patriotic songs appears to be a mostly American phenomenon (or in some cases an American practice transported via missionaries to other countries). Our Chinese brethren are willing to be imprisoned for not doing these things. We Americans, and Baptists in particular, would be wise and consistent in applying the principle of separation of church and state similarly.



This essay is by Jon Pratt, Vice President of Academics and Professor of New Testament at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
