

## The Lord Will Come and Not Be Slow

*John Milton (1608–1674)*

The Lord will come and not be slow,  
his footsteps cannot err;  
before him righteousness shall go,  
his royal harbinger.

Truth from the earth, like to a flow'r,  
shall bud and blossom then,  
and justice, from her heav'nly bow'r,  
look down on mortal men.

Rise, God, and judge the earth in might,  
this wicked earth redress;  
for you are he who shall by right  
the nations all possess.

For great you are, and wonders great  
by your strong hand are done:  
you, in your everlasting seat,  
remain the Lord alone.

## ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

### *In the Nick of Time*

#### The Baptist Paradox

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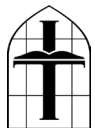
Denominations are like cans of soup. Each can contains a different mix of ingredients, and the label tells you which ingredients to expect. The ingredients of the soup with the *Baptist* label are called the *Baptist distinctives*. Taken together, these distinctives set Baptists apart from all other Christians. Briefly stated, the distinctives are:

1. The absolute authority of the New Testament for all matters of church faith and order.
2. Believer immersion (with emphasis on both words).
3. Pure church membership (including regenerate, baptized church members and the practice of church discipline).
4. Individual Christian responsibility (including both soul liberty and the priesthood of the believer).
5. The right of individual congregations to govern themselves under Christ.
6. The separation of church and state.

Christians who label or denominate themselves differently may disagree with any (or all) of these distinctives. Baptists certainly do not believe that they are the only true Christians. What they do believe is that these distinctives are essential for defining what churches are supposed to look like and how they are supposed to operate.

I am a Baptist by conviction. On my view, all of these distinctives are taught by the New Testament. Simply because they are biblical and true, however, does not mean that they are easy to implement. Some distinctives come with complications and tensions. The unwillingness to live with those tensions is part of the motivation that leads some people to reject them.

One example is the Baptist insistence upon the separation of church and state. This distinctive has become one of the political shibboleths of American government, but it began as a Baptist idea and its acceptance is the result of Baptist influence. What is now a secular political principle originated as a Baptist theological conclusion. Originally the political principle rested upon the theological rationale, and even now it can be rightly understood only in terms of that theology. To remove the theological foundation is to



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ensure that, sooner or later, the political principle will be redefined and misapplied in vicious ways. The necessity for a theological foundation creates a paradox: the only way to keep church and state properly separated is to maintain a theologically informed definition of church-state separation.

The paradox is broader than the mere concept of church-state separation. The social and political institutions of the West have grown out of Christendom. So have the definitions of abstractions such as *liberty* and *justice*. These concepts and institutions are informed by Christian (or Judeo-Christian) categories. Eliminating or altering these Christian categories inevitably distorts the definitions and subverts the institutions. If Christian categories do not regulate the institutions, and if the institutions are captured by those who remold them around anti-Christian categories, then the institutions will be used to obstruct the very Christian categories upon which they were erected, and then eventually to oppress Christians.

T. S. Eliot understood the importance of Christian categories for undergirding Western social and political institutions. This understanding led him overtly to deny the separation of church and state. In his essay, “The Idea of a Christian Society,” he argues for the importance of an established church, even if that establishment is merely nominal. He hoped that Christian categories could be upheld formally by the institutions that rested upon them.

Even if Eliot’s proposal might once have worked, however, we are well past that point. Christendom was dethroned long ago by Enlightenment secularism. The education and amusement industries have spent generations redefining the fundamental principles upon which Western, and especially American, institutions rest. A majority of Americans have been taught to fear Christian categories and definitions as a theocratic attack upon the separation of church and state. New definitions have been imposed and are now being enforced by the remolded institutions.

The Anabaptist response has typically been almost the opposite of Eliot’s: to abandon the public sphere. Even under Christendom the Anabaptists saw the political order as dominated by principalities and powers opposed to God. They shunned military and public service, even refusing to swear oaths. The Anabaptist approach, however, is not shared by Baptists, who have rejected the Anabaptist withdrawal from the public sphere as firmly as they have rejected religious establishment.

The Puritans, especially those in America, were true theonomists. They envisioned a society in which theological concerns would dominate the political order and in which the power of the state would enforce ecclesiastical rectitude. Theirs was the regime that whipped Baptists, hanged Quakers, and drove Roger Williams from his sick bed into the wilderness snows of a New England January. Nevertheless, even the rigid and mutual reinforcement of church and state could not permanently shield the Puritans from the pressures of the Enlightenment, nor did it protect them from the corruption and eventual contempt of their own children.

Baptists argued, not for religious toleration, but for genuine religious freedom. The paradox is that religious freedom can only be maintained in a society that holds definitions and principles congenial to Christianity. No other religion—including the presently-dominant religion of radical secularism—has put itself forward as a vigorous defender of soul liberty. The freedom to believe and practice whatever faith one thinks to be true depends upon the social and political dominance of Christianity.

To appearances, by insisting upon a firm separation of church and state, Baptists are effectively depriving themselves of the opportunity to determine the very definitions and institutions upon which that separation depends. In the face of this paradox, some may feel the allure of Eliot’s establishmentarianism, of the Anabaptists’ isolationism, or of the Puritans’ attempt at theonomy. Before submitting to that pull, however, two considerations are worth noting.

First, none of the non-Baptist alternatives has proven itself particularly effective at resisting the corrosive effects of the Enlightenment. Each has given way to some version of modernity and then postmodernity. Furthermore, none has exhibited the power permanently to preserve Christian categories in its surrounding social and political order, let alone to instill those categories where they have been lost. In short, none appears to be any more successful than the Baptist alternative at maintaining a society in which truly Christian liberty will endure for long.

Second, the separation of church and state does not imply the separation of church saints from the public square. Christian individuals can and should participate in the whole social order, including agriculture, manufacturing, commerce, education, the arts, and even politics and jurisprudence. They should bring their Christian definitions and perspectives into the public square with them. Whenever and wherever they can, they should apply their Christian perspectives to the full-orbed business of life.

Christians in secular civilization should aim to pattern themselves after Daniel and the Hebrew children in the Babylonian court. They should remember the counsel of Jeremiah 29:7, to seek the welfare of the city in which they live as exiles. They can and should participate up to the point at which participation requires disobedience to God. As a result, they may sometimes be promoted or they may sometimes be cast into the furnace. In either event, their circumstances and godly responses will place their faith, values, and priorities on display.



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This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology 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.

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