



A Reflection on Religious Freedom

Religious freedom is the bedrock of all liberty

"The early settlers and founders of our nation had an understanding that what we had as a nation came from God, came from Biblical principles, so the first and foundational freedom in our nation is the right to worship God; the right of conscience," notes David Barton, founder and president of Wall Builders.

He adds that the idea of a free market system of religion, one where no one is coerced to hold any particular view and each faith is free to express itself in the public arena, was a new and radical idea in the early days of our nation.

"That literally is what made America so distinctive," Barton adds. "While those who came to America came from very religious nations, they did not have freedom of conscience there. That is why from the very first we invited other religions to our nation. We had Muslims in America from 1690 and Jews were invited to our nation early on and were welcomed to practice their faith."

God, not government, is the source of all liberties

"We have forgotten that so many of our rights are God-given, and so, if they are given by the government, then the government is free to regulate them, tax them, or simply take them away," Barton says.

Among the freedoms we have mislaid over time is the right of private property. The Pilgrims bargained with the Indians when they landed and bought the land they needed from them at a price set by the natives. They realized that the land belonged to those tribes and not the King of England.

"Today we have the Kelo decision from the U.S. Supreme Court, where the court said that if you are not productive enough with your property, the government can take it away and give it someone who is more productive. That would have never happened in the early years of our nation because we recognized that property is a God-given right," Barton added.

And so is income. "Our nation's early settlers also saw the work of a person's hands and the income it creates as property, and so for a long time our government refrained from taxing income because it was taking the property of others," he adds. "But today we think nothing of it because it has been done for 60 years."

Biblical principles underscore many of the freedoms we take for granted today. Along with private property rights, the pilgrims created the free market enterprise system from 1 Timothy 5:8. They even started the civil rights movement.

"When slave ships landed in New England, the settlers promptly freed the slaves and imprisoned the slave traders based on Acts 17 and Revelation 7:9," Barton says.

What impact does our first freedom - the right of conscience and to worship God that we celebrate each Thanksgiving?

"We have not only given away that first freedom, but we have allowed it to be redefined to where it now means the absence of the free exercise of religion," Barton says. He adds that a scant minority of secularists (who do not see the folly of their actions) are driving the recent cultural attempts to cleanse all mention of Christ - and even the word "Christmas" itself - from Christmas and public life. Because they don't recognize that our rights are God-given - the foundation to our right of conscience - they see neither the value it holds nor the protection it provides to even their viewpoint.

Preserving our national and cultural heritage

Our nation's early settlers came for various reasons. There were the motives of profit and ambition, but there was also the strong motive to spread the Gospel. In 1584, minister and geographer Richard Hakluyt, wrote *A Discourse Concerning Western Planting*, in which he put forth many reasons for investing in the New World.

"One startling reason Hakluyt offered resonates down through the centuries;" says Concerned Women for America Founder Beverly LaHaye. "He wrote, 'We shall by planting there enlarge the glory of the gospel, and from England plant sincere religion, and provide a safe and a sure place to receive people from all parts of the world that are forced to flee for the truth of God's word.' This vision of a refuge for the persecuted was first realized when the Pilgrims settled in Plymouth, Massachusetts."

"Despite the mistakes of sinful men in that process, all Americans can celebrate this story and the great work of God in preserving and maturing freedom in our land. Our own response to God's blessings on this nation should be focused on preserving this gift and ensuring that it will be passed on to the next generation," LaHaye says.

As we approach Thanksgiving, Barton notes that we should be thankful to God for the courage and fortitude of the families, men, women and children who came to our nation not simply to practice their faith but to create a society built on scriptural values.

During the first winter, half of the Pilgrims died, and during the second winter, half of the remaining settlers also died. Those are sacrifices we cannot afford to take lightly, says Barton.

"Here we are today enjoying the fruits of their labor, a goal they were willing to give their lives for," Barton notes.

Let us remember the vision and sacrifice of our nation's early founders, for it is because of their God-inspired effort - which we celebrate each Thanksgiving - that we have the freedom to freely and publicly worship the true and living Savior.

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