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INFO@STATESMAN.ORG • STATESMAN.ORG
504 C STREET NE #3, WASHINGTON, D.C. 20002

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The [First Amendment](#) to the Constitution, though only containing forty-five words, is often cited as a pillar for protecting Americans' most fundamental freedoms. In its own words, "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." It is not an understatement to say that the First Amendment's ratification in 1791 marked a revolutionary departure from the practices of history, especially those that dominated Western civilization before Christianity.

But in the span of America's existence, this amendment's true meaning and significance have been forgotten, replaced with a myth begotten from secular classical liberalism. Modern dogmas like "the Separation of Church and State" and "Free Speech Absolutism" deconstruct the profound moral canvas upon which the First Amendment is written, perverting its original intent and morphing its words to be outright antagonistic to Christianity.

A. Christ gave the Apostles the spiritual authority of "the Keys" to the Kingdom of Heaven. God also gave civil authorities the power to bear the "Sword." When government attempts to claim both authorities, religious freedom is threatened.

According to a [2021 Pew Research Survey](#), at least a majority of Americans support the "separation of Church and State." This phrase never appears in the Constitution, but proponents of the "separationist" doctrine still argue that their principle can be derived from Thomas Jefferson's historical letter to the Danbury Baptist Association. Before reading the text of the letter, it's important to understand the historical context behind the letter, just as a modern person would follow the news of the day before submitting an article for publication in a newspaper. Context is key.

Virginia, Jefferson's home state, was first founded as an English colony in 1607, chartered by the then-reigning Stuart monarch [King James I](#) and operated by the Virginia Company. During this time, the English Kings claimed powers unlike any other King in the Western World, beginning first with [King Henry VIII](#) in the sixteenth century. Because he was unable to produce a male heir with his first wife Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII asked then Pope Clement VII to annul his marriage so he could marry another lover – Anne Boleyn. The Pope [denied](#) the request, but Henry VIII was determined to end his marriage. To that end, Henry defied the Church's authority on the matter, ending England's connection with the Church. Shortly thereafter, the English Parliament passed the "[Act of Supremacy](#)" in 1534, proclaiming Henry VIII "the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England."

Henry VIII's claim was not only unprecedented in the history of Christendom, it was antithetical to the teaching of Jesus Christ. In [Mark 12](#), Christ says, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." In no uncertain terms, Jesus teaches us that the State and the Church are two distinct and different authorities. The apostle Paul later elaborates on this difference in [Romans 13](#), explaining that government is "the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer." To do so, God gives government the power of the "sword." By contrast, Christ gives a profoundly different authority to His apostles while



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addressing Peter: “I will give you the **keys** of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed[d] in heaven.”

By declaring himself the head of the Church of England, King Henry VIII claimed to wear a crown that vested him both the powers of **the sword** and **the keys**. No longer did the Church and the State occupy different roles, according to Henry VIII. He, and his heirs, possessed all temporal and spiritual authority – that is until his family line, the House of Tudor, ended less than sixty years after his death.

In 1603, the English Crown then passed on to King James VI of Scotland, the head of the House of Stuart, giving him the title of [King James I of England](#). Three years after Virginia was founded as an English colony, James I delivered a [speech](#) to Parliament that claimed absolute authority to rule by divine right: “The State of Monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth: For Kings are not only God’s Lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon God’s throne, but even by God himself they are called Gods.”

Over time, James I grew dissatisfied with the Virginia Company’s operation of the colony and eventually decided to [revoke](#) its charter in 1624. The territory became a complete royal colony and [maintained the established Church of England](#), the Episcopal Church, through the lifetime of Thomas Jefferson. The established Church’s authority, and the King’s authority by extension, was threatened during the “[Great Awakening](#),” a period of religious revival in the colonies among many denominations between the 1720s and 1740s. Royal officials [arrested](#) many non-Episcopal pastors in Virginia on charges of preaching without a license.

Jefferson, a scholar who founded the University of Virginia, understood the old English conception of “Church” brought about by Henry VIII and led the [charge to end it](#). His record on religious liberty earned him praise from many, including religious minorities like the Connecticut Danbury Baptist Association. After Jefferson’s victory in the presidential election of 1800, the Danbury Baptists wrote him a letter, asking that he publicly denounce Connecticut’s state constitution for its failure to fully protect their religious practices.

“[W]hat religious privileges we enjoy (as a minor part of the State) we enjoy as favors granted, and not as inalienable rights: and these favors we receive at the expense of such degrading acknowledgements as are inconsistent with the rights of freemen,” they [wrote](#). “Sir, we are sensible that the President of the united States, is not the national Legislator, & also sensible that the national government cannot destroy the Laws of each State; but our hopes are strong that the sentiments of our beloved President, which have had such genial Effect already, like the radiant beams of the Sun, will shine & prevail through all these States and all the world till Hierarchy and tyranny be destroyed from the Earth.”

According to a [report](#) from a Library of Congress exhibition curator, Jefferson “labored” over his response. He sent a proposed draft to two political figures in his Cabinet, a Connecticut Postmaster General, and Massachusetts Attorney General Levi Lincoln. Jefferson attached a cover letter alongside his draft to Lincoln to explain his reasons for responding to the religious group, reasons that included political objectives. The letter was a way for Jefferson to [state](#) “why [he] did not proclaim fastings & thanksgivings, as my predecessors did.”



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Unlike George Washington and John Adams, Jefferson declined to issue any presidential proclamations to declare a day of “Thanksgiving.” In his own [words](#), Jefferson said he “refrained from prescribing even those occasional performances of devotion” because they were “religious exercises” authorized “[by the Executive of another nation as the legal head of its church](#),” an obvious implication to the British crown.

One historian [writes](#) that Jefferson’s draft to the Danbury Baptist Association makes clear his “refus[al] to continue a *British* practice that was an offense to republicanism.” Indeed, Jefferson’s unedited draft uses language to contrast the distinct authorities possessed by the Church and the government, the biblical teaching known throughout Christendom before King Henry VIII. “[C]onfining myself therefore to the duties of my station, which are merely **temporal**, be assured that your religious rights shall never be infringed by any act of mine and that,” Jefferson wrote.

Jefferson ultimately limited the letter’s scope to avoid political controversy, eliminating any discussion of prayer and thanksgiving. Instead, Jefferson settled with the following language:

“Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the *legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions*, 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 & State.”

Read in the proper historical context, Jefferson's view on the Establishment Clause abhors King Henry VIII’s fusion of church and governmental authority in his crown, a position that defied Scripture and the standard of Christendom. **The “keys” belong to the Church, the bride to the Lord Jesus Christ; the “sword” belongs to the government, a servant to God.**

Despite this history, many leading cultural figures insist that the First Amendment simply enshrines a form of modern, secular liberalism. Carl Sagan [summarizes](#) this approach in the following way: “Christianity may be good and Satanism evil. Under the Constitution, however, both are neutral. This is an important, but difficult, concept for many law enforcement officers to accept. They are paid to uphold the penal code, not the Ten Commandments.”

Sagan’s argument is wrong for many reasons. As a historical matter, the penal code of all fifty states criminalize several prohibitions within the Ten Commandments to this day, including murder, theft, and perjury. As late as 2014, over [twenty States](#) in the Union criminalized adultery. The U.S. Supreme Court also affirmed the constitutionality of State Sabbath statutes in [McGowan v. Maryland](#), laws that require businesses to cease all business operations. Although the Court acknowledged the religious roots of these laws, it nonetheless reasoned that their secular benefits and purposes were too great to offend the Establishment Clause. Moreover, many States, including those with no established Church, even [criminally prohibited blasphemy](#).

The secular liberal might be willing to concede all this history and still normatively argue that the First Amendment ought to be construed to promote secular liberalism. In other words, some may



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argue that, as a moral principle, it is better to have American society freed from any religious influence. **In that case, the Church must boldly declare that God’s will as revealed in Scripture to be morally and authoritatively superior to the will of secular liberalism. If the latter conflicts with God’s perfect moral law, then we must echo the words of Christ’s apostles in [Acts 5](#): “We must obey God rather than men.”**

Today, the Church must use its standing in American culture to restore the confidence of all God’s faithful to joyfully proclaim the perfect love of our Father in Heaven. Religious freedom is a means to an end—that end is to building the Kingdom of God. It is not a secular liberal dogma to “equalize” evil with good. It is the means by which God’s faithful have the right to spread the good news of the gospel. It is a vehicle through which we commune together to remember the finished work of the cross. Religious freedom is the mechanism by which the light of God’s Truth conquers darkness.

B. Free Speech is the mechanism by which Americans can realize and discuss the good, true, and beautiful according to God’s perfect will. Governments become tyrannical when they suppress free speech as the means for this biblical end.

The freedom of speech, which includes [protections for the press](#), is one of the most recognizable liberties secured by the First Amendment. According to a [2022 survey](#), approximately 90% of Americans believe that “protecting free speech is an important part of American democracy” and that “people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions.” Beyond that, however, Americans sharply disagree about how the freedom of speech applies to modern cultural issues. How the freedom of speech *should* be understood and applied are ethical issues that the Church must confront.

First, Christians believe that God created human beings with free will. Saint Augustine, a Church Father, [explained that humanity’s “free will” is realized by the nature of God’s moral law](#):

Now wherever it is said, “Do not do this,” and “Do not do that,” and wherever there is any requirement in the divine admonitions for the work of the will to do anything, or to refrain from doing anything, there is at once a sufficient proof of free will. **No man, therefore, when he sins, can in his heart blame God for it, but every man must impute the fault to himself.** Nor does it detract at all from a man's own will when he performs any act in accordance with God. Indeed, a work is then to be pronounced a good one when a person does it willingly; then, too, may the reward of a good work be hoped for from Him concerning whom it is written, He shall reward every man according to his works. ‘Matthew 16:27’

Human beings, possessing a free will, can choose to use their speech for good or for evil. Given this principle, Scripture consistently elevates the moral content of speech over the freedom one has to speak. The apostle Paul explains the distinction in [1 Corinthians](#): “‘I have the right to do anything,’ you say—but not everything is beneficial. ‘I have the right to do anything’—but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.”



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In short, biblical principle does not endorse the freedom of speech as a positive good in and of itself. In fact, even Enlightenment philosophers who believed the freedom of speech to be a good in and of itself imposed significant limitations on this freedom. For instance, the English philosopher John Locke, who historians largely recognize as a [major influential figure](#) on America's founding fathers, [argued](#) that atheists should not possess this freedom. In his "[Letter Concerning Toleration](#)," Locke wrote that, "[p]romises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all; besides also, those that by their atheism undermine and destroy all religion, can have no pretense of religion whereupon to challenge the privilege of a toleration."

Without limitations, freedom breeds chaos. Biblical principles cannot coexist within a culture that, for example, were to adopt the standards of Enlightenment philosopher [Denis Diderot](#), who argued that freedom means the destruction of Church and governmental authority: "If mankind dared but to listen to the voice of his heart ... He would say to us ... I seek neither to rule nor to serve. And his hands would weave the entrails of the priest, for the lack of a cord with which to strangle kings," Diderot wrote. That worldview is strikingly similar to the words of Satan in John Milton's [Paradise Lost](#): "Better to reign in hell than serve in Heaven."

In the proper Christian context, "[free speech](#)" means that "Americans have the freedom to [say] what is good," true, or beautiful. When the government uses its powers of the sword to prevent Americans from speaking in this way, it becomes tyrannical. **Free speech is the means by which Americans can realize the truth of God's Word and moral law through our speech. But in order for someone to fully realize the truth of the Bible, the Church must advocate for mercy – prudential toleration of certain bad ideas so that the heart of our culture more closely aligns to God's will.**

