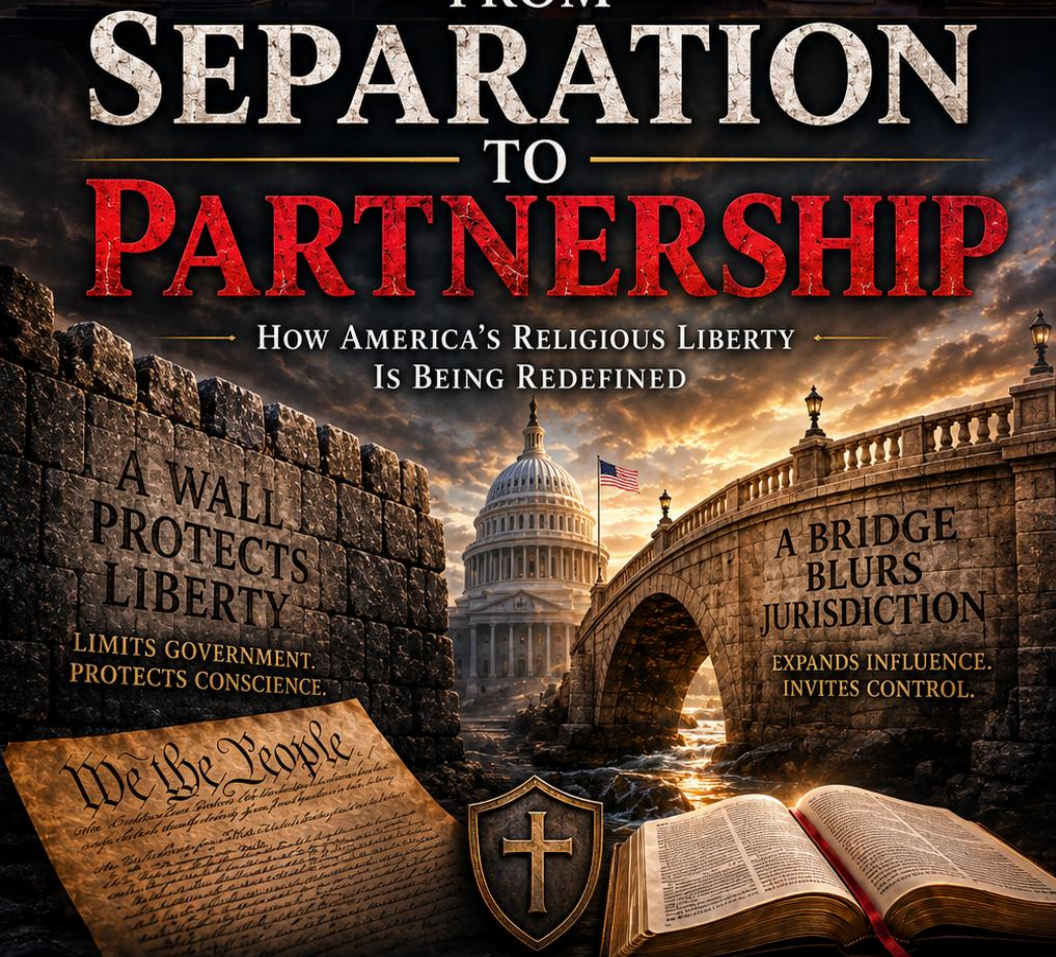
FROM SEPARATION TO PARTNERSHIP

How America's Religious Liberty Is Being Redefined



"Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's."

MATTHEW 22:21

BY DAVID BARRON

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The Question Before America- Introduction

For more than two centuries, the United States has understood religious liberty to rest upon a simple but profound principle. Thomas Jefferson expressed it in his famous letter to the Danbury Baptist Association:

*"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**."*

President Donald Trump receives the report of the Presidential Religious Liberty Commission at the White House. This booklet examines the Commission's recommendations in eradicating the term "separation of church and state".

Those words captured the historic American understanding of liberty of conscience. Civil government was ordained by God, but its authority was deliberately limited. It was entrusted with the responsibility of preserving justice, protecting life, and maintaining civil order. It was **not** entrusted with authority over faith, worship, or the conscience.

The issue has never been whether government is ordained by God. Scripture plainly teaches that it is. The issue has always been where God said government must stop.

The Presidential Religious Liberty Commission affirms the importance of religion and rightly recognizes the vital role faith has played in the history of the United States. Yet its recommendations represent a significant shift in emphasis. Rather than defining religious liberty primarily by the constitutional limits placed upon civil government, the Commission encourages a closer institutional relationship between

government and religion. It proposes replacing the familiar "wall of separation" with a "bridge" between church and state.

This booklet argues that the question before America is not whether religion should influence society. It should. Nor is the question whether government should protect the free exercise of religion. It must.

The question is whether civil government should move beyond protecting religious liberty and begin fostering an institutional partnership with religion.

That question reaches far beyond constitutional interpretation. It touches the biblical distinction Christ established between His kingdom and the kingdoms of this world. It shaped the convictions of America's founders, influenced the framing of the First Amendment, and ultimately points forward to the final conflict over worship described in Bible prophecy.

The pages that follow examine that question from three perspectives—Scripture, history, and the Constitution, to determine whether America's historic understanding of liberty of conscience is being preserved or redefined.

The conscience is not outside God's government—it is outside Caesar's.

Chapter One - Liberty of Conscience Begins with God

Religious liberty is not first a constitutional principle. **It is a biblical principle.**

Long before legislatures enacted laws, before nations drafted constitutions, and before courts interpreted rights, God established the proper relationship between His kingdom and the kingdoms of this world. The distinction between civil authority and the conscience did not originate with Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Roger Williams, or any other statesman. It originated with Jesus Christ.

One of the clearest statements ever made concerning that distinction occurred while Jesus stood before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Accused of claiming to be a king, Jesus answered:

"My kingdom is not of this world: if My kingdom were of this world, then would My servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is My kingdom not from hence." (John 18:36)

This declaration establishes the foundation upon which every discussion of religious liberty must rest. Christ was not denying the legitimacy of civil government. He was defining its jurisdiction.

In fact, only a few verses later Jesus acknowledged that Pilate's authority had been given "from above" (John 19:11). Civil government has a legitimate place within God's order. Yet Christ made it unmistakably clear that His kingdom operates upon entirely different principles.

Earthly governments preserve civil order. They enact laws, punish crime, defend innocent life, and bear the sword against evildoers. Christ's kingdom advances in another way. It governs not by civil force, but by truth, conviction, love, and the work of the Holy Spirit upon the conscience. It never compels genuine faith by civil power.

Jesus explained the difference in a single sentence:

"If My kingdom were of this world, then would My servants fight."

Earthly kingdoms ultimately rely upon force to maintain their authority. Christ's kingdom does not. Faith produced by coercion is not faith at all. A government may compel outward actions, but it cannot produce love for God. It may punish crime, but it cannot create holiness. It may command attendance, but it cannot command worship. Worship belongs to another kingdom.

Christ's words establish the biblical foundation of liberty of conscience. His kingdom does not spread by the sword of Caesar but by the power of truth working upon willing hearts.

The Two Jurisdictions
Jesus reinforced this principle when asked whether taxes should be paid to Caesar. Holding up a coin, He answered:

"Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21)

With these few words, Christ established two distinct jurisdictions. Caesar possesses legitimate authority. God possesses supreme authority. The question is not whether government has authority. Scripture plainly teaches that it does. The question is **what authority God has entrusted to it.**

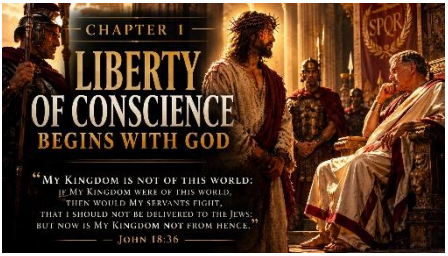
Worship belongs to God. Faith belongs to God. Conscience belongs to God. No earthly ruler may rightfully claim what belongs exclusively to the Creator. Whenever civil government attempts to prescribe doctrine, direct worship, or compel religious belief, it reaches beyond the authority God has granted it. Those things belong to **God's jurisdiction** alone.

God Ordained Civil Government
The Bible does not teach anarchy. The Apostle Paul wrote:

"For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God." (Romans 13:1)

Civil government is God's servant for the preservation of society. Paul explains that rulers are appointed to reward those who do good and punish those who do evil. They "bear not the sword in vain," for they are "the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil" (Romans 13:4).

The sword is a civil instrument. It exists to restrain violence, protect innocent life, punish crime, and preserve public order. It was never given to enforce faith, determine doctrine, compel worship, or govern the conscience. God entrusted civil rulers with authority over civil matters—not over the conscience.



Romans 13 establishes both the authority and the limits of civil government. The magistrate bears the sword to preserve civil order and punish those who commit outward acts of evil. Yet nowhere does Scripture authorize civil government to compel worship, prescribe doctrine, or govern the heart. Those belong to God's jurisdiction alone. Civil rulers judge outward conduct; God alone judges the heart.

This distinction is essential. Not every sin falls within the jurisdiction of civil government. God condemns pride, covetousness, lust, hatred, envy, unbelief, idolatry, and every sinful thought of the heart. These are violations of God's moral law, yet they are not crimes that the civil magistrate is authorized to punish. No government can imprison a man for coveting his neighbor's house, fine him for pride, or sentence him for hatred in his heart. These sins are real, and God will judge them, but He has reserved that judgment to Himself.

Civil government is ordained to punish outward acts that violate the rights and safety of others—murder, theft, fraud, violence, and similar

offenses. It was never commissioned to enforce the whole of God's moral law. If it were, the magistrate would be required to punish every violation of the Ten Commandments, including idolatry, unbelief, covetousness, and every sinful desire of the heart. Furthermore, with the punishment of death. We would all be guilty. (Romans 3:19) Scripture gives no such authority.

This is the distinction of jurisdiction. God ordained civil government to restrain outward acts that disturb the peace and safety of society. He never entrusted it with authority over worship, faith, repentance, doctrine, or the conscience. Those remain under His government alone.

The Limits of Civil Authority

The apostles themselves recognized this distinction. When commanded by the Jewish authorities to stop preaching Christ, Peter answered:

"We ought to obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29)

Peter did not deny the legitimacy of civil government, nor did he call for rebellion. He simply recognized that civil authority has limits. Whenever earthly rulers command what God forbids, or forbid what God commands, the jurisdiction of Caesar has ended and the jurisdiction of God remains supreme.

This is the very essence of liberty of conscience. No government possesses the authority to stand between God and the individual soul.

Faith Cannot Be Forced

Throughout Scripture, God appeals to mankind through persuasion rather than coercion.

Moses pleaded: *"I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life."* (Deuteronomy 30:19)

Joshua challenged Israel: *"Choose you this day whom ye will serve."* (Joshua 24:15)

Paul wrote: *"Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."* (Romans 10:17)

Again he declared: *"Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men."* (2 Corinthians 5:11)

The biblical pattern is unmistakable. God reveals truth. He invites. He warns. He pleads. He persuades. He never produces genuine worship through civil compulsion. If the Almighty Himself does not force the conscience, no earthly government has the right to do so.

Conclusion

The Scriptures establish two governments, each ordained by God for a distinct purpose. Civil government exists to preserve justice, punish wrongdoing, and protect society. It governs outward conduct. Christ's kingdom governs the heart, transforming the conscience through truth, love, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Confusing these two jurisdictions has produced some of the darkest chapters in human history. Whenever the church has sought the sword of the state, or the state has assumed authority over the conscience, liberty has suffered and religion has been corrupted. The chapters that follow will demonstrate how this biblical principle profoundly influenced the development of religious liberty in America, shaped the thinking of the nation's founders, and remains the defining issue in the ongoing debate over the proper relationship between church and state.

Biblical religious liberty is therefore far more than a constitutional principle. It is a divine principle established by Christ Himself.

Civil government is ordained by God, but it was never ordained to govern the conscience. The conscience belongs to God. Caesar has no rightful claim upon it.

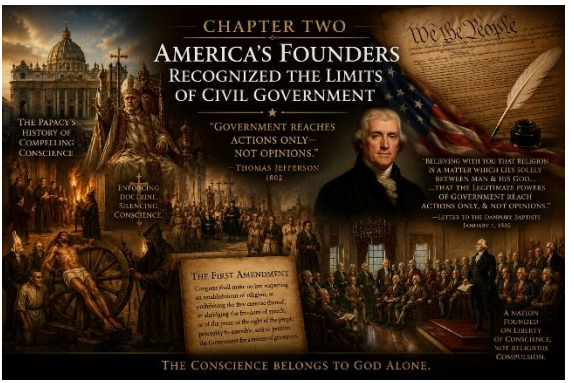
Chapter 2 - America's Founders Recognized the Limits of Civil Government

The principle of liberty of conscience did not begin with America's founders. As we saw in the previous chapter, it began with Jesus Christ Himself, who distinguished His kingdom from the kingdoms of this world and taught that what belongs to God must never be claimed by Caesar.

The founders of the United States did not invent this principle. Rather, they recognized it after centuries of painful experience and sought to preserve it in the constitutional system they established.

The American experiment in religious liberty was born from HISTORY For centuries, Europe witnessed repeated attempts to enforce religious conformity through civil power. Kings legislated doctrine. Magistrates enforced religious decrees. Churches relied upon the sword of the state to preserve orthodoxy, while governments relied upon religious institutions to strengthen political authority.

The result was not religious unity. It was persecution, imprisonment, confiscation of property, exile, torture, and death. America's founders knew this history well, and they were determined not to repeat it.



Roger Williams

Long before the American Revolution, Roger Williams recognized the danger of uniting church and state. A Puritan minister in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Williams believed that civil government had no authority over matters of faith and conscience. His convictions brought him into direct conflict with the colony's leaders, who believed the civil magistrate should help

preserve religious uniformity. In 1635, Williams was banished from Massachusetts because of these convictions.

After establishing the colony of Rhode Island, he sought to build a society where liberty of conscience would be protected and civil government would exercise no authority over worship.

Describing the proper relationship between church and state, Williams wrote of: *"...the hedge or wall of Separation between the Garden of the Church and the Wilderness of the world."*

Williams' concern was not to protect the government from religion. It was to protect the church from the corrupting influence of civil power. He understood that once the civil magistrate entered the affairs of religion, both institutions would suffer. The church would gradually lose its spiritual independence, while the state would become entangled in matters that belonged to God alone.

Isaac Backus

A century later, Baptist minister Isaac Backus continued the same argument. Opposing the establishment of religion by civil government, he wrote:

"God has appointed two kinds of government in the world, which are in their nature and ought never to be confounded together."

Backus understood what Christ had taught centuries earlier. God ordained civil government to preserve justice and order, but He never gave it authority over faith or worship. To confuse those two governments was to violate the jurisdiction God Himself had established.

The language differs from Christ's teaching about rendering unto Caesar and unto God, but the principle is identical. There are two governments, two jurisdictions, and each must remain within the sphere God has assigned it.

John Leland
John Leland, who greatly influenced James Madison regarding the first amendment carried this principle even further. A close friend of James Madison and an influential Baptist minister during the debates surrounding the Constitution, Leland insisted that liberty of conscience was more than mere toleration.

He wrote: *"The liberty I contend for is more than toleration. The very idea of toleration is despicable."*

Leland understood that toleration assumes government possesses authority over religion and merely chooses not to exercise it. Liberty of conscience rests upon an entirely different foundation. Government has no rightful jurisdiction over the conscience in the first place.

Leland also warned: *"The notion of a Christian commonwealth should be exploded forever."*

He was not arguing against Christianity influencing society. Rather, he rejected the idea that civil government should assume responsibility for enforcing Christianity.

Thomas Jefferson
Perhaps no founder expressed this principle more clearly than Thomas Jefferson. Writing to the Danbury Baptist Association on January 1, 1802, Jefferson declared:

"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."

Jefferson did not merely defend religious tolerance. He identified the proper jurisdiction of civil government. Government may regulate actions affecting civil society, but it has no jurisdiction over faith, worship, or conscience. That authority belongs to God alone.

Years earlier, Jefferson reflected upon Europe's history with these sobering words:
"Millions of innocent men, women, and children... have been burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned; yet we have not advanced one inch toward uniformity."

His conclusion was unmistakable. Civil force had failed to produce genuine faith. Instead, it had produced centuries of suffering.

James Madison
James Madison shared the same conviction. Often called the "Father of the Constitution," he became one of America's strongest defenders of liberty of conscience. Reflecting upon Europe's long history of religious persecution, Madison wrote:
"The purpose of separation of church and state is to keep forever from these shores the ceaseless strife that has soaked the soil of Europe in blood for centuries."

Madison was not speaking in the abstract. He was looking back upon centuries in which civil governments enforced religious conformity through the power of the state. Throughout much of the Middle Ages and beyond, church and civil authorities worked together to suppress what they regarded as heresy. The result was imprisonment, torture, confiscation of property, exile, and death.

Both Madison and Jefferson reached the same conclusion. Civil force cannot produce genuine faith. Instead of preserving religion, it corrupts both the church and the state. Whether expressed as "separation," "liberty of conscience," or the "free exercise" of religion, the principle remained the same. Civil government was never intended to govern religion. Its duty is to protect every person's liberty to worship God—or to decline worship—according to the dictates of conscience, without coercion from the state.

George Washington
America's first president expressed the practical result of these principles in his famous letter to the Hebrew Congregation at Newport

in 1790:
"The Government of the United States... gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."

Washington did not speak merely of toleration. He envisioned a nation in which citizens of every faith could worship freely because government neither established religion nor persecuted those who differed.

The Constitution would not create religious liberty. Rather, it would protect the liberty of conscience that belongs to every person as a gift from God.

The First Amendment
These principles found expression in the First Amendment to the Constitution:
"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

Notice that the Amendment accomplishes two complementary purposes. First, it prevents the civil government from establishing religion. Second, it protects the free exercise of religion. These are not competing ideas, they are inseparable. Government refrains from exercising authority over religion precisely so that religion may remain free.

The freedom of the church depends upon the restraint of the state.

Is "Separation of Church and State" in the Constitution?
One objection frequently raised today is that the phrase "separation of church and state" never appears in the Constitution. That observation is correct. The exact phrase is not found in the Constitution. But the question is not whether Jefferson's particular wording appears. The question is whether the principle appears.

The First Amendment declares:

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

Those words establish two complementary principles. Civil government may not establish religion, and it may not interfere with the free exercise of religion. Thomas Jefferson later described this constitutional arrangement as building **"a wall of separation between Church & State."** He was not inventing a new constitutional doctrine. He was describing the practical effect of the First Amendment.

Jefferson was not alone. James Madison defended the same principle. Roger Williams described a hedge or wall separating the church from the wilderness of the world. Isaac Backus spoke of two governments that "ought never to be confounded together." John Leland insisted that government possesses no rightful authority over the conscience. Though they expressed the idea differently, they defended the same constitutional principle: **civil government possesses no jurisdiction over religion because the conscience belongs to God.**

The issue, therefore, is not whether Jefferson's particular phrase appears in the Constitution. The issue is whether the Constitution limits civil government in matters of religion.

It plainly does.

Protecting Both Church and State

One of the greatest misunderstandings surrounding the phrase *"separation of church and state"* is the assumption that it was designed either to exclude religion from public life or merely to protect government from religious influence. The founders understood the issue differently. They believed that God had ordained both civil government and the church, but had entrusted each with a different jurisdiction.

History had repeatedly demonstrated the danger of confusing those jurisdictions. Whenever the church sought the power of the state, it gained political influence but lost its spiritual independence. Whenever

the state assumed authority over religion, it became entangled in matters of faith and conscience that God had never entrusted to it. The result was not liberty, but persecution.

Roger Williams sought to preserve the church from the corrupting influence of civil power. Isaac Backus distinguished the two governments that God had ordained and insisted they must never be confounded. John Leland rejected mere toleration because he believed government possessed no rightful authority over the conscience. Thomas Jefferson limited the legitimate powers of government to "actions only, and not opinions." James Madison sought to spare America the religious bloodshed that had soaked the soil of Europe for centuries. George Washington envisioned a nation that would "give to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."

Though each expressed the principle in different language, they defended the same fundamental truth: civil government possesses no jurisdiction over the conscience. By keeping church and state within their God-given spheres, they sought to preserve the independence of both institutions. The church would remain free to proclaim truth without relying upon civil power, and the government would remain free from assuming authority over worship, doctrine, or faith. In protecting liberty of conscience, they protected both the church and the state from exercising authority that belonged only to God.

Conclusion

America's founders did not establish liberty of conscience because they distrusted religion. They established it because they understood both Scripture and history. They recognized that Christ's kingdom advances through truth rather than force, and they deliberately limited the jurisdiction of civil government to preserve that principle.

For nearly 250 years, this understanding of liberty of conscience has distinguished the United States from the systems that preceded it. The question now before the nation is whether that historic understanding will be preserved, or fundamentally redefined.

Chapter 3 -Religious Liberty Redefined

"The price of liberty is eternal vigilance." — Thomas Jefferson

A New Direction
The Presidential Religious Liberty Commission was established to examine the state of religious liberty in America and recommend ways to strengthen it. At first glance, many of its recommendations appear commendable. The report affirms the importance of religion, recognizes the indispensable role faith has played throughout American history, and calls for protecting the free exercise of religion. Every Christian should welcome sincere efforts to preserve the freedom to worship God according to the dictates of conscience.

The question before us, however, is not whether religious liberty should be protected. The question is **how the Commission defines religious liberty.** Throughout history, liberty has seldom disappeared by being openly abolished. More often it has been redefined until the original principle is scarcely recognized.

For nearly 250 years, the American understanding of religious liberty rested upon a simple constitutional principle: **civil government possesses no jurisdiction over the conscience.** Government protected religious liberty precisely because it limited its own authority. The Commission proposes a different emphasis.

Rather than focusing primarily upon the constitutional limits of civil authority, the report repeatedly encourages a closer relationship between government and religious institutions. That shift becomes especially clear in its discussion of the historic concept of the separation of church and state.

The report states:
"The concept of a 'wall of separation between church and state' can wrongly imply that church and state are opposed to one another... Perhaps a better analogy is that religious liberty acts as a bridge between church and state."

This statement deserves careful consideration because metaphors reveal assumptions. A wall establishes a boundary. A bridge establishes a connection. A wall limits jurisdiction. A bridge facilitates cooperation. Whether one prefers Jefferson's terminology or another expression, the historic American principle remained the same: civil government protects religious liberty by recognizing the limits of its own authority. The Commission's proposed metaphor points in a different direction.

From Protection to Partnership

That change in emphasis is reflected throughout the Commission's report. It recommends expanded cooperation with faith-based organizations, broader opportunities for religious organizations to receive government funding, repeal of the Johnson Amendment, additional executive guidance concerning religion in public life, the creation of a Presidential Medal of Religious Liberty, and even points to historical examples of governmental encouragement of Sabbath observance as positive precedents.

Each recommendation may be evaluated on its own merits. Taken together, however, they reveal a consistent shift in emphasis. For nearly two and a half centuries, America's understanding of religious liberty sought to preserve liberty of conscience by carefully limiting the jurisdiction of civil government in matters of religion. The Commission increasingly presents religious liberty not simply as protection from governmental interference, but as a framework for closer institutional cooperation between government and religion.

That distinction is more significant than it first appears. The historic American question was, "Where has God placed the limits of civil authority?" The Commission increasingly asks, "How can government and religion work together to strengthen society?" Those are fundamentally different questions. One preserves liberty by recognizing constitutional limits. The other encourages a closer institutional relationship between government and religion.

History demonstrates why that distinction matters. Once government becomes a partner with religion, it cannot avoid making religious

judgments. It must determine which organizations qualify for public support, which religious practices deserve official recognition, and where the limits are to be drawn. The Commission's favorable reference to Abraham Lincoln's order encouraging Sabbath observance illustrates how quickly these questions move from protecting religious liberty to government encouraging religious practice. Whether future generations apply that principle more broadly, including questions surrounding Sunday observance, is a question Americans should not dismiss lightly.

Whether that shift ultimately strengthens religious liberty or gradually expands the role of civil government in religious affairs is the central question examined throughout this booklet.

Public Religion Is Not the Issue

At this point an important clarification is necessary. Nothing in this discussion suggests that religion should be confined to private life. Scripture teaches the opposite. Jesus preached publicly. The apostles preached publicly. The prophets addressed kings. Christians are called to proclaim the gospel, defend truth, care for the poor, pursue justice, and bear witness before rulers and nations.

The issue has never been whether religion should influence society. The issue is whether civil government should become institutionally involved in religion. Those are fundamentally different questions. A free church should influence the nation through persuasion, preaching, and faithful witness. A constitutional government should protect that freedom without assuming authority over religion itself.

The Question of Jurisdiction

Ultimately, every discussion concerning religious liberty returns to a single question:

What authority has God entrusted to civil government?

Scripture answers that question clearly. Civil government exists to preserve order, protect life, restrain violence, and punish crime. Worship, doctrine, faith, and conscience belong to another jurisdiction, and it is the duty of the civil government to protect the freedom of it.

History repeatedly demonstrates what happens when that distinction is forgotten. Governments that begin by supporting religion eventually find themselves deciding religious questions. Which beliefs qualify for protection? Which religious organizations deserve public support? Which doctrines fall outside acceptable limits? Who determines what constitutes heresy? These questions are unavoidable whenever civil authority crosses into matters of conscience.

That is precisely the danger America's founders sought to prevent.

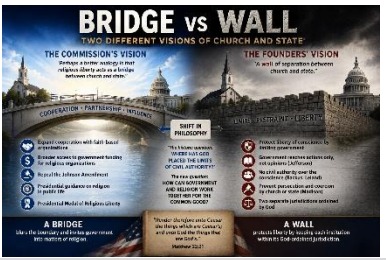
Why This Matters

The issue before America is therefore much larger than a disagreement over a metaphor. The question is whether the constitutional principle that protected liberty of conscience is being quietly redefined.

Replacing a wall with a bridge may sound harmless, but history teaches that liberty is rarely lost in a single dramatic moment. More often it is surrendered gradually, one definition at a time, one principle at a time, until the original safeguards are scarcely recognized.

If America's understanding of religious liberty shifts from protecting the conscience by limiting civil jurisdiction to encouraging institutional alliance between government and religion, then America has begun moving away from the constitutional principles that distinguished it from the Old World.

Before determining whether that shift represents progress or departure, we must first recognize that history itself presents two very different understandings of religious liberty. One sought to preserve liberty by limiting the authority of civil government in matters of religion. The other envisioned a closer relationship between civil authority and religious truth. Understanding those two models is essential before evaluating the direction America is now taking.



Chapter 4 -Two Competing Historical Understandings of Religious Liberty

By the close of the eighteenth century, the United States had embraced a principle that distinguished it from nearly every nation in the world. Civil government would possess no jurisdiction over the conscience. Religion would neither be established by Congress nor prohibited by Congress, and the free exercise of religion would be protected because the conscience belonged to God alone.

This understanding did not arise in a vacuum. It emerged after centuries of conflict over the relationship between civil government and religion. To appreciate the significance of America's constitutional system, it is necessary to compare it with another historical understanding of religious liberty that prevailed throughout much of Europe for centuries. This comparison is not intended to criticize individuals or denominations. It is simply an examination of two different historical models.

The American Model

The American understanding of religious liberty rested upon one fundamental principle: **civil government possesses no jurisdiction over the conscience.** As we have seen, this conviction was championed by Roger Williams, Isaac Backus, John Leland, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and ultimately embodied in the First Amendment. Though each expressed the principle differently, they agreed that the authority of civil government reached only its proper sphere.

Thomas Jefferson summarized that principle with remarkable clarity when he wrote:

"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."

Jefferson's distinction is both simple and profound. Government reaches actions, not opinions, worship, or conscience. Those belong to God alone.

James Madison expressed the same concern when reflecting upon the religious wars that had devastated Europe:
"The purpose of separation of church and state is to keep forever from these shores the ceaseless strife that has soaked the soil of Europe in blood for centuries."

These convictions found constitutional expression in the First Amendment, which prohibited Congress from establishing religion while protecting its free exercise. Under this model, religion remained free because civil government remained limited. The state's responsibility was not to determine religious truth but to protect every citizen's liberty of conscience.

The Historical Papal Model
For many centuries, the relationship between church and civil government developed differently throughout much of Catholic Europe. Rather than treating religion solely as a matter beyond civil jurisdiction, influential papal documents taught that civil society owed duties toward the true religion.

Pope Gregory XVI, writing in *Mirari Vos* (1832), rejected unrestricted liberty of conscience in some of the strongest language of the nineteenth century. Referring to what he viewed as religious indifferentism, he wrote:

"From this poisoned source of indifferentism flows that absurd and erroneous proposition, or rather delirium, that liberty of conscience must be asserted and vindicated for everyone."

Pope Pius IX reaffirmed the same position in *Quanta Cura* (1864), describing liberty of conscience as **"a most pestilential error."**

Pope Leo XIII continued this line of thought in *Libertas* (1888), writing:

"Let us examine that liberty in individuals which is so opposed to the virtue of religion... A liberty such as we have described... is no liberty, but is degradation."

These statements did not deny the importance of religion. Rather, they reflected a different understanding of the relationship between civil authority and religious truth. Whereas Jefferson argued that religion lies solely between man and God, these papal documents maintained that civil society possesses obligations toward what it understands to be the true religion.

Civil Government and Religious Truth

The difference between these two systems extended beyond abstract principles. Throughout much of European history, civil rulers frequently assisted ecclesiastical authorities in suppressing heresy, enforcing religious conformity, and protecting what was regarded as the true faith. Likewise, church authorities often appealed to civil rulers to carry out judgments that the Church itself could not enforce through spiritual authority alone.

These arrangements varied considerably across countries and centuries, and their legal details changed over time. Nevertheless, they reflected a broader understanding that civil government and ecclesiastical authority could cooperate in matters concerning religion.

By contrast, the American constitutional model deliberately denied civil government jurisdiction over religious doctrine while protecting the liberty of every individual's conscience. The distinction was not merely practical. It represented two fundamentally different understandings of the relationship between church and state.

Two Different Starting Points

Although both systems acknowledged the importance of religion, they began from fundamentally different assumptions.

The American system asked, **What authority has God withheld from civil government?** Its answer was straightforward: **the conscience.** Civil

government possesses legitimate authority over civil society, but worship, faith, and doctrine remain under God's jurisdiction alone.

The historical European model more often asked, **What duties does civil government owe toward the true religion?** Its answer generally included some form of cooperation between civil authority and religious truth as understood by the Church. Those different starting points produced two distinct understandings of religious liberty.

Why This Comparison Matters

The purpose of this chapter has not been to determine which historical model was correct. It has simply been to establish that two very different understandings of religious liberty existed. One limited civil government to its God-ordained jurisdiction and sought to protect liberty of conscience by restricting governmental authority.

Recognizing that distinction is essential before examining more recent developments. If America's understanding of religious liberty has remained unchanged, then contemporary discussions should reflect the same constitutional limits recognized by the founders. If, however, that understanding has changed, Americans should carefully examine how, why, and with what consequences.

If these two historical models differed so fundamentally, an obvious question arises: Has that difference disappeared, or has it simply been redefined?

To answer that question, we must examine the modern understanding of religious liberty and ask whether it represents a continuation of America's constitutional tradition, a development within Catholic thought, or the emergence of an entirely new relationship between church and state.

Chapter 5- Vatican II and the Modern Understanding of Religious Liberty

The previous chapter demonstrated that two distinct historical understandings of religious liberty existed for centuries. America's founders understood liberty of conscience to mean that civil government possessed no jurisdiction over matters of faith and worship. Religion belonged to God, while government exercised authority only over civil affairs.

Historical Roman Catholic teaching approached the question differently. As we have seen, Popes Gregory XVI, Pius IX, and Leo XIII each criticized principles associated with unrestricted liberty of conscience and liberty of worship as they were understood in nineteenth-century liberal thought. That historical distinction raises an obvious question: **Did the Roman Catholic Church change its teaching on religious liberty?**

Most Catholics today answer that question by pointing to the Second Vatican Council.

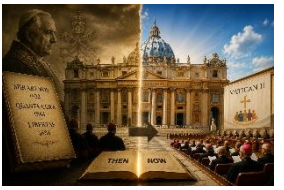
Vatican II and *Dignitatis Humanae*
Between 1962 and 1965, the Roman Catholic Church convened the Second Vatican Council. Among its sixteen major documents was *Dignitatis Humanae* ("Declaration on Religious Freedom"), a document devoted entirely to the subject of religious liberty.

Its opening declaration states:
"The human person has a right to religious freedom."

The document goes on to explain that religious freedom consists in immunity from coercion by individuals, social groups, or civil authority in matters of religion.

To many readers, these statements sound remarkably similar to principles long embraced within the American constitutional tradition. At first glance, one might naturally conclude that the historical debate has been resolved. Yet the matter is more complex than it first appears.

Development Rather Than Contradiction?
The principal debate is not primarily between Protestants and Catholics. It exists within Catholic theology itself.



Catholic theologians generally reject the suggestion that Vatican II contradicted earlier papal teaching. Instead, they argue that doctrine developed. According to Catholic theology, divine truth does not change, but the Church's understanding and application of revealed truth may develop over time. *Dignitatis Humanae* is therefore understood by Catholic scholars not as a rejection of Gregory XVI, Pius IX, or Leo XIII, but as a legitimate development of earlier teaching.

Whether one agrees with that explanation or not, the purpose of this booklet is not to resolve an internal theological debate. It is simply to recognize that the discussion exists.

Public Religion and the Authority to Define Truth
That question becomes especially relevant because Bishop Robert Barron, a member of the Presidential Religious Liberty Commission, frequently presents Vatican II as one of the great achievements of modern Catholicism. Barron has also argued that religion must not be reduced to merely private belief, stating:
"If you marginalized and privatized religion, democracy is in danger... That's deadly to our democracy."

In the historic Roman Catholic understanding, religion is not merely a matter of private judgment. Religious truth is authoritatively defined by the teaching office of the Church, and the individual conscience is expected to be formed by and submit to that established doctrine rather than independently determining matters of faith. Barron's concern should be understood within that theological tradition.

The American understanding of liberty of conscience begins from a different premise. The individual stands accountable to God. Thomas Jefferson wrote that religion "lies solely between Man & his God," and that the legitimate powers of government reach "actions only, and not

opinions." Liberty of conscience therefore protects every individual from civil coercion because the conscience answers ultimately to God rather than to the civil magistrate.

If, however, religious truth is authoritatively defined by the Church, then liberty of conscience cannot simply mean that every individual is free to determine truth for himself. *The disagreement is therefore not over the importance of religion, but over the source of religious authority.*

That difference explains why Popes Gregory XVI, Pius IX, and Leo XIII rejected unrestricted liberty of conscience and liberty of worship. Their concern was not merely that religion remain public, but that religious truth not be reduced to private or individual opinion.

The question before America, therefore, is not whether religion should influence society. It always has. The question is whether liberty of conscience belongs to the individual before God, or whether civil society should increasingly recognize and support an established understanding of religious truth.

Looking Ahead

If these two understandings of religious liberty begin from different assumptions about authority, then an important constitutional question follows.

When the Presidential Religious Liberty Commission speaks of strengthening religious liberty, which understanding is it preserving?

Is it preserving the founders' conviction that civil government possesses no jurisdiction over the conscience?

Or is it moving toward a closer relationship between civil government and an established understanding of religious truth?

That is the question we now examine.

Chapter 6 - Does the Presidential Religious Liberty Commission Preserve America's Understanding of Religious Liberty?

The previous chapters have established four important principles. First, Scripture teaches that civil government possesses no jurisdiction over the conscience. Second, America's founders deliberately incorporated that principle into the Constitution after witnessing centuries of persecution produced by the union of church and state. Third, history has revealed two distinct understandings of religious liberty—one beginning with the liberty of the individual conscience before God, the other beginning with an established understanding of religious truth. Finally, we have seen that the modern discussion of religious liberty cannot be understood apart from this deeper question:

Who possesses authority to define religious truth?
The question before us is therefore straightforward. Does the Presidential Religious Liberty Commission preserve the historic American understanding of liberty of conscience, or does it redefine it? That question cannot be answered by examining motives. It must be answered by examining the Commission's own language, recommendations, and underlying assumptions.

The Commission's Central Claim
The Commission's understanding of religious liberty was expressed not only in its written report but also in the public remarks of its chairman, Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, when the report was presented to President Trump.

Referring to the phrase "separation of church and state," Patrick stated: "...the separation of church and state is not in the Constitution... From this day forward, that phrase should have no power over people of all faiths ever again in America."

This statement deserves careful consideration. Patrick is correct in one respect. The exact phrase "separation of church and state" does not appear in the Constitution. But that has never been the central question. The real question is whether the Constitution establishes the principle that civil government possesses limited jurisdiction in matters of religion.

As we saw in the previous chapter, America's founders answered that question with remarkable consistency. Roger Williams described a hedge separating the church from the civil power. Isaac Backus distinguished two governments that "ought never to be confounded together." John Leland insisted that government possesses no rightful authority over the conscience. Thomas Jefferson explained that the legitimate powers of government reach "actions only, and not opinions." James Madison defended the same principle, and the First Amendment embodied it in constitutional law. And they defined it as the separation of church and state.

The founders used different language, but they defended the same constitutional limitation. This booklet is not an argument for preserving Jefferson's phrase. It is an argument for preserving the constitutional principle that Jefferson's phrase describes.

With that distinction in mind, we may now examine the Commission's report itself. Perhaps no statement better illustrates the Commission's direction than its discussion of the separation of church and state. The report states:

"The concept of a 'wall of separation between church and state' can wrongly imply that church and state are opposed to one another... Perhaps a better analogy is that religious liberty acts as a bridge between church and state." (Page 22)

At first glance this may appear to be merely a change in terminology. In reality, it represents a different constitutional philosophy. A wall establishes a jurisdictional boundary, while a bridge establishes an institutional connection. Jefferson described the legitimate powers of

government as reaching "actions only, and not opinions." The Commission instead speaks of building a bridge between church and state. One emphasizes constitutional restraint; the other emphasizes institutional cooperation. The difference is not merely rhetorical. It reflects two different understandings of the relationship between civil government and religion.

That distinction becomes even clearer when the report's recommendations are viewed together. The Commission encourages expanded partnerships between government and faith-based organizations, broader opportunities for religious institutions to receive government funding, repeal of the Johnson Amendment, additional executive guidance concerning religion in public life, and the creation of a Presidential Medal of Religious Liberty. Each proposal may certainly be debated on its own merits. Taken together, however, they reveal a consistent direction. Religious liberty is increasingly presented not merely as protection from governmental interference, but as a framework for closer institutional cooperation between government and religion.

One important question naturally follows.

What happens when partnership requires government to make religious decisions?

Every institutional partnership requires standards. Government must determine which organizations qualify for funding, what activities deserve public support, what groups receive official recognition, and where the limits are drawn. Questions that once belonged entirely to the church gradually become questions of public administration.

History demonstrates that this is how jurisdiction slowly expands. The issue is not whether today's officials intend persecution. The issue is whether civil government gradually assumes responsibilities that previous generations believed belonged to the conscience alone. America's founders sought to prevent that progression by limiting governmental jurisdiction from the very beginning.

At this point an important clarification is necessary. The issue is not whether religion should influence society. It should. Jesus preached publicly. The apostles preached publicly. The prophets addressed kings. Christians should proclaim the gospel, defend truth, strengthen families, care for the poor, and seek justice within their communities. America's founders never intended religion to be confined to private life.

Beyond the Commission

The Commission's recommendations do not exist in isolation. They reflect ideas that have gained increasing influence within broader religious and political circles concerning the proper relationship between Christianity and civil government.

For example, Vice President J. D. Vance has stated that his views on public policy are "pretty aligned with Catholic social teaching." He has also appeared at conferences where influential speakers argued that civil government should be shaped by biblical laws and Christian political principles rather than maintaining the historic constitutional distinction between church and state.

This is significant because Catholic social teaching has long addressed the relationship between the Church and the civil order. Pope Leo XIII, whose social encyclicals laid the foundation for modern Catholic social teaching, urged Catholics:

"All Catholics should do all in their power to cause the constitutions of states, and legislation, to be modeled on the principles of the true Church."

Whether one agrees with Pope Leo XIII or not is not the issue. The issue is that his understanding of civil government differs fundamentally from the understanding articulated by Jefferson, Madison, Backus, Leland, and the First Amendment. One envisions legislation being modeled upon the principles of the Church. The other limits civil government to its God-given jurisdiction while leaving worship and conscience entirely to God.

The Commission's report likewise presents historical examples of government encouraging religious observance as positive precedents. In its discussion of religious liberty within the military, it approvingly cites President Abraham Lincoln's General Order calling for the orderly observance of the Sabbath within the Army and Navy. Because Lincoln's order referred to Sunday observance, the report treats governmental encouragement of religious observance as part of America's constitutional tradition rather than asking whether such measures fall within the proper jurisdiction of civil government.

Yet this is precisely the constitutional question. Is encouraging religious observance one of the civil magistrate's God-given responsibilities, or does it move civil government beyond the jurisdiction God assigned it?

None of these examples—considered individually—proves that America has abandoned its historic understanding of liberty of conscience. Viewed together, however, they point in the same direction.

Dan Patrick argues that the principle of separation should lose its influence. The Commission proposes replacing a wall with a bridge. Bishop Barron argues against reducing religion to private judgment. J. D. Vance openly embraces Catholic social teaching as a model for public policy. The Commission cites governmental encouragement of Sunday observance as part of America's constitutional tradition.

The significance of these examples is not that they are identical. It is that they all move in the same direction—away from asking where government must stop and toward asking how government can promote religion.

That represents a significant shift from the constitutional philosophy of the founders, who believed religion was strongest when civil government remained within the limits God had assigned it.

The issue is not whether religion should be public.
The issue is whether civil government should become institutionally responsible for religion.

A free church influencing society through preaching, persuasion, education, charity, and moral example is entirely consistent with liberty of conscience. Government becoming institutionally responsible for religion is something altogether different.

Ultimately, every discussion concerning religious liberty returns to a single question:

Who possesses jurisdiction over the conscience?
Scripture answers that question by placing the conscience under God's authority alone. Jefferson answered by insisting that government reaches actions only, not opinions. The First Amendment answered by prohibiting Congress from establishing religion while protecting its free exercise. The founders consistently protected liberty by limiting governmental authority.

The Commission, however, repeatedly shifts the emphasis from constitutional restraint toward institutional cooperation between government and religion. That is why replacing the wall with a bridge is so significant. The metaphor reflects an entirely different constitutional philosophy.

History repeatedly demonstrates a remarkably consistent pattern. Churches seek governmental assistance. Government provides support. Support gradually becomes oversight. Oversight becomes regulation. Regulation becomes influence. Influence eventually reaches the conscience. This progression seldom begins with persecution. More often it begins with cooperation, mutual benefit, and the best of intentions. America's founders understood that danger. They did not establish constitutional restraints because they distrusted Christianity. They established them because they understood human nature and recognized that concentrated power, whether exercised by church or state, has a tendency to exceed its proper limits.

The Commission repeatedly asks how religion can strengthen America. That is a worthy question. A more fundamental question is this:

How can America preserve liberty of conscience while religion continues to strengthen society?
For nearly two and a half centuries the American answer has been remarkably consistent. Religion remains entirely free. Government remains constitutionally limited. The church influences society through preaching, education, charity, and moral persuasion, while government protects that freedom without becoming religion's institutional partner.

The purpose of this booklet has never been to argue that religion should retreat from public life. Christianity should continue to influence society through faithful preaching, compassionate ministry, education, charity, and moral leadership.

The question has always been one of jurisdiction.

Who governs the conscience?

Christ answered that question before Pilate.
America's founders answered it in the Constitution.
History answered it through centuries of persecution.

The Presidential Religious Liberty Commission now asks America to reconsider it.

Every generation must decide whether civil government will remain within the limits God assigned it, or whether it will gradually assume authority over matters that belong to God alone.

The conscience belongs to God. Caesar has no rightful claim upon it.

Chapter 7 -The Final Test of Liberty of Conscience

Throughout this study we have examined religious liberty from three perspectives. We began with Scripture, where Christ distinguished His kingdom from the kingdoms of this world and declared that His servants do not advance His cause through civil force. We then examined the constitutional principles embraced by America's founders, who recognized that civil government possesses no jurisdiction over the conscience. Finally, we considered the recommendations of the Presidential Religious Liberty Commission and asked whether they preserve that historic understanding or move in a different direction.

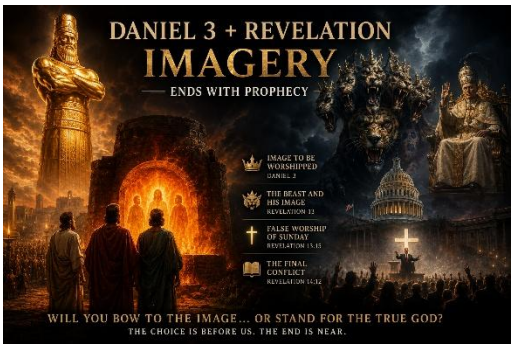
These questions are important not merely because they concern constitutional history. According to Bible prophecy, they become central in the closing conflict between Christ and Satan.

From Genesis to Revelation, the great controversy has never centered merely upon politics, economics, or civil government. At its heart lies the question of worship. Who is worthy of worship? Who possesses authority over the conscience? Who determines religious truth? These questions reach their climax in Revelation 13, where worship is enforced by civil authority under the threat of economic sanctions and ultimately death. The final conflict is therefore not fundamentally political. It is a conflict over jurisdiction. Who has authority over worship? God or the state?

Jesus answered that question before Pilate:
"My kingdom is not of this world: if My kingdom were of this world, then would My servants fight." (John 18:36)

Throughout this booklet we have returned repeatedly to these words because they establish the biblical boundary between Christ's kingdom and the kingdoms of this world. Civil government bears the sword to preserve public order. Christ governs the conscience through truth, love, and the work of the Holy Spirit. Genuine worship cannot be compelled because it must arise from a willing heart.

The book of Daniel illustrates this same principle. In Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar erected a golden image and commanded every nation to worship it under penalty of death. In Daniel 6, another decree prohibited prayer to anyone except the king. In both instances, the issue was not whether civil government existed. God Himself had ordained civil government. The issue was whether civil rulers possessed authority over worship. The faithful obeyed the king in every lawful matter, but when civil authority claimed jurisdiction over the conscience, they obeyed God rather than men.



Revelation presents the same issue on a worldwide scale. The beast receives worship. An image to the beast is formed. The second beast causes the inhabitants of the earth to worship the first beast. The prophecy is not merely predicting persecution. It is predicting the reappearance of the same governing principle that has appeared throughout history: civil authority assuming jurisdiction over worship.

An image reflects the character of the original. The medieval system united ecclesiastical authority with civil power to enforce religious conformity. Revelation predicts not merely another persecution, but the reappearance of that governing principle. Whenever civil government assumes authority over worship, the image begins to form because the same relationship between church and state has returned.

America's Providential Beginning

Ellen White understood that the rise of the United States occupied a unique place in prophecy. Before describing America's future role in Revelation 13, she first explained why the nation became such a powerful defender of liberty of conscience.

She wrote:

"Among the Christian exiles who first fled to America and sought an asylum from royal oppression and priestly intolerance were many who

determined **to establish a government upon the broad foundation of civil and religious liberty**.... Freedom of religious faith was also granted, every man being permitted to worship God according to the dictates of **his conscience**.... **Republicanism and Protestantism became the fundamental principles of the nation**. These principles are the secret of its power and prosperity." *(The Great Controversy, p. 441.)*

This statement deserves careful attention. Ellen White identifies two principles that distinguished America from the nations of Europe.

Republicanism recognized that civil authority derives its just powers from the consent of the governed rather than from ecclesiastical control or hereditary monarchy.

Protestantism, in its historic sense, represented more than a collection of denominations. It embodied the great protest against the union of church and state that had dominated much of medieval Europe through the Papal church. It affirmed the supremacy of Scripture, the direct accountability of every individual to God, and the liberty of every person to worship according to the dictates of conscience without civil coercion.

Together these principles established constitutional restraints that protected liberty of conscience unlike any nation before it.

Liberty Must Be Extended to Everyone

Yet Ellen White was equally careful not to idealize America's beginnings. Although many of the early colonists came seeking freedom from religious persecution, they did not always extend that same freedom to others.

She observed:

"Yet honest and God-fearing as they were, the Pilgrims did not yet comprehend the great principle of religious toleration. The freedom which they sacrificed so much to secure for themselves, they were not equally ready to grant to others." *(The Great Controversy, p. 292.)*

She then describes what happened when church and civil authority became united in the Massachusetts Bay Colony:

"The regulation was adopted by the colonists, that only church-members should have a voice in the civil government.... A kind of State church was formed... the magistrates being authorized to suppress heresy. Thus the secular power was in the hands of the church. It was not long before these measures led to the inevitable result—persecution." *(The Great Controversy, p. 293.)*

The lesson is unmistakable. Even sincere and devoted Christians can repeat the mistakes of history whenever civil government assumes authority over religion. The problem was never Christianity itself. The problem was the union of ecclesiastical authority with the coercive power of the state.

The Prophetic Warning
Having explained both America's strengths and its early failures, Ellen White then looked forward to the final crisis.

She summarized the biblical principle in these words:
"To protect liberty of conscience is the duty of the state, and this is the limit of its authority in matters of religion." *(The Great Controversy, p. 201.)*

This statement perfectly harmonizes with the teachings of Christ, the apostles, and the principles embraced by America's founders. Civil government is ordained by God, but its authority has divinely established limits. It exists to preserve justice and civil order, not to govern worship or the conscience.

Because of this principle, Ellen White repeatedly warned against every movement that would weaken the constitutional restraints protecting liberty of conscience. Writing in 1900, she declared:

"An amendment to the Constitution restricting liberty of conscience, has long been urged upon the legislators of the nation; and the question of

enforcing Sunday observance has become one of national importance. Are we ready for the issue involved in the Sunday movement?" *(Signs of the Times, November 28, 1900.)*

It is significant that she begins, not with Sunday, but with **"an amendment to the Constitution restricting liberty of conscience."** The prophetic issue is constitutional before it is ceremonial. Sunday legislation becomes significant because it represents civil government exercising authority over worship.

Her warning becomes even more direct in *The Great Controversy*:

"Let the restraints now imposed by secular governments be removed and Rome be reinstated in her former power, and there would speedily be a revival of her tyranny and persecution." *(The Great Controversy, p. 564.)*

Throughout this booklet we have identified those restraints. They are the constitutional principles that deny civil government jurisdiction over the conscience and protect every individual's right to worship according to the dictates of conscience. Remove those restraints, and history demonstrates what follows. The issue is not merely one religious observance or another. The issue is whether civil government possesses authority to command worship.

Conclusion
This brings us back to the question that has guided this entire study.

Who possesses jurisdiction over the conscience?

Scripture answers: God.
Christ answered: God.

America's founders sought to preserve that principle by carefully limiting the jurisdiction of civil government.

Ellen White warned that the final conflict would arise when those constitutional restraints began to disappear.

As America commemorates 250 years of constitutional government, the preservation of liberty of conscience deserves more than patriotic celebration. It deserves careful vigilance. Liberty has rarely been lost all at once. More often it has been redefined—gradually, respectfully, and with the best of intentions. The issue has never been whether religion should influence society. The issue has always been whether civil government should exercise authority over worship.

That question stood before Nebuchadnezzar.
It stood before Darius.
It stood before Pilate.
It confronted the Pilgrims as they struggled to extend the liberty they themselves had sought.

According to Revelation, it will soon stand before the entire world once again.

Appendix A

Selected Statements from the Presidential Religious Liberty Commission
The purpose of this appendix is to provide several representative statements from the Presidential Religious Liberty Commission and its members that are discussed throughout this booklet. They are presented so readers may examine the Commission's own language alongside the constitutional and biblical principles discussed in the preceding chapters.

1. Dan Patrick -Chairman, Presidential Religious Liberty Commission
On "Separation of Church and State"
"...the separation of church and state is not in the Constitution... From this day forward, that phrase should have no power over people of all faiths ever again in America."

2. Presidential Religious Liberty Commission Report
From a Wall to a Bridge
"The concept of a 'wall of separation between church and state' can wrongly imply that church and state are opposed to one another... Perhaps a better analogy is that religious liberty acts as a bridge between church and state."

3. Recommendations of the Commission
Among the recommendations discussed in this booklet are:

- Expanded partnerships between government and faith-based organizations.
- Increased opportunities for religious organizations to participate in government funding.
- Repeal of the Johnson Amendment.
- Additional executive guidance concerning religion in public life.
- Creation of a Presidential Medal of Religious Liberty.

These recommendations are presented by the Commission as ways to strengthen religious liberty.

4. Bishop Robert Barron - Member, Presidential Religious Liberty Commission
On Religion in Public Life
"If you marginalized and privatized religion, democracy is in danger... Values is up to me. My gender, it's up to me. The whole structure of my life, it's my choice. That's deadly to our democracy."

Questions for the Reader
After reading the report and the statements above, consider the following questions:

- Does the Commission define religious liberty in the same way America's founders defined it?
- Does replacing a "wall" with a "bridge" preserve the constitutional limits placed upon civil government, or does it encourage a different relationship between government and religion?
- Can government become an institutional partner with religion while remaining outside the jurisdiction of the conscience?
- How should Christians encourage religion's influence upon society while preserving the constitutional principle that civil government possesses no authority over worship?

These are the questions this booklet has sought to examine.

Appendix B

The Great Controversy over Liberty of Conscience- A Biblical and Historical Timeline

c. 605 B.C. — Daniel 3: Worship by Civil Decree

King Nebuchadnezzar erects a golden image and commands all nations to worship it under penalty of death. The issue is not civil government itself, but civil government exercising authority over worship.

c. 539 B.C. — Daniel 6: Prayer Forbidden

King Darius signs a decree prohibiting prayer to anyone except the king for thirty days. Daniel obeys the king in all lawful matters but refuses to surrender his conscience to civil authority.

A.D. 31 — Christ Before Pilate

Jesus declares: *"My kingdom is not of this world... if My kingdom were of this world, then would My servants fight."*

Christ distinguishes His kingdom from the kingdoms of this world and establishes the biblical boundary between civil authority and the conscience.

A.D. 31 — "Render Unto Caesar"

Jesus teaches that Caesar has legitimate authority—but only within the sphere God has assigned him.

A.D. 31–33 — The Apostles Before the Sanhedrin

Peter declares: *"We ought to obey God rather than men."*

The apostles recognize the legitimacy of civil authority while affirming that God's authority over the conscience is supreme

The Development of American Religious Liberty

1636 — Roger Williams Calls for a "hedge or wall of separation" protecting the church from civil power.

1773–1774 — Isaac Backus Distinguishes the two governments ordained by God that "ought never to be confounded together."

1780s — John Leland Argues that liberty of conscience is far more than mere toleration because government possesses no rightful authority over religion.

1785 — James Madison Publishes his *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments*, defending liberty of conscience and arguing that religion is exempt from

the authority of civil society.
1791 — The First Amendment Congress is forbidden from establishing religion while protecting its free exercise.
1790 — George Washington Promises that the United States gives "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."
1802 — Thomas Jefferson Describes the First Amendment as building "a wall of separation between Church & State."

The Historical Debate
1832 — Gregory XVI *Mirari Vos* Rejects unrestricted liberty of conscience.
1864 — Pius IX *Quanta Cura* Describes liberty of conscience as "a most pestilential error."
1888 — Leo XIII *Libertas* Argues that unrestricted liberty of worship is not true liberty.
1965 — Vatican II *Dignitatis Humanae* Affirms immunity from coercion in religious matters while presenting this as a development of Catholic teaching. Yet, claiming not to have changed.

The Prophetic Perspective
1900 — Ellen White
Warns of efforts to amend the Constitution restricting liberty of conscience and identifies this as the beginning of the Sunday movement.

The Great Controversy
States: "To protect liberty of conscience is the duty of the state, and this is the limit of its authority in matters of religion."

She also warns: "Let the restraints now imposed by secular governments be removed... there would speedily be a revival of her tyranny and persecution."

Today -2026 — Presidential Religious Liberty Commission
The Commission recommends a "bridge" rather than a "wall" between church and state and calls for expanded institutional cooperation between government and religion, raising the constitutional questions examined throughout this booklet.

TWO VISIONS. ONE FUTURE.

THE CHOICE IS BEFORE US.

WHICH FOUNDATION WILL AMERICA CHOOSE?

A BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL STUDY OF
RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, CHURCH AND STATE,
AND THE CONFLICT OF THE AGES.

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