



Here & Now

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An update for Florida Baptist Historical Society Board of Directors and Friends

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Dear Board Members and Friends of the Florida Baptist Historical Society,

Sam Hill is just one of those people you are glad to know. It is my belief that he and Martin Marty are the two sharpest minds, lecturers and writers of American religion in this generation. Born in 1927, Sam is professor emeritus of religion at the University of Florida. He also taught at Stetson and the University of North Carolina. Sam is retired now in Florida and Jerry Mae and I had lunch with him not to long ago. I told him I had one primary question I wanted to ask. Assuming the premise that there are eight basic Baptist characteristics, which one is most under threat right now. The surprise came to me not in his answer, but how quickly he answered. Without any hesitation he said, "religious liberty."

As Baptists this should be a five alarm, screaming call to action. A man who taught religion, edited and wrote about American religion in a Bible belt setting, has sent out a notice that "religious liberty" is in danger.

This is a concern that should constitute recall, research and a plan of action. We as Baptists need to remember the rocky road of religious tolerance that we have traveled for 400 years. In 2016, in the United States, Baptist work is more than tolerated. It is generally publicly appreciated and applauded. This did not come easily.

Jesus viewed government as public ministry and calling. Maintaining order, collecting taxes and minting coins were government functions that were necessary and helpful. Paul extended prayerful concern for those who had authority over citizens. All of this was in the context of proper Christian living and Spirit filled ethical conduct.

Governments came and went and religious persuasions and cults multiplied down through the centuries. By 1600 there were those in England who experienced severe persecution for their refusal to support a state church, and they came to the new world with a burning desire for religious freedom and liberty.



Roger Williams

However all was not well. Nine of the original thirteen colonies had a tax supported state church. Over 500 Baptist preachers in Virginia were thrown in jail for preaching without a license from the state. It was 1832 before Connecticut and Massachusetts would rid themselves of a state church. Baptists have felt the blow of religious suppression and seen the chaos and failure that comes from a lack of religious liberty. Roger Williams (1603-1683), John Clarke (1609-1676), Hezekiah Smith (1737-1805) and John Leland (1754-1841), are Baptist names that ought to be as well known to Baptists as Charles Spurgeon, Jimmy Carter and Billy Graham. Those early champions of religious liberty were willing to stand for freedom of religious thought and expression.

Dr. Hill is right. Religious freedom is at risk. We who call ourselves Baptists must stand tall for religious tolerance, expression and a free church in a free state.



Sam Hill

Martin Niemoller (1892-1984) was a German pastor who stood against Hitler. He was a German submarine commander in World War I, but a pastor and eventual concentration camp prisoner in World War II. He had a well known statement that has been variously remembered and translated, but it still has a powerful message.

“First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

Honoring those who honor Christ,



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Martin Niemoller