

# The True Meaning of the First Amendment

To believe that the Constitution requires a total separation of church and state is to believe a lie. Nowhere in the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, or any other founding documents of this nation will one find the phrase so often used today, “separation of church and state.”

Rather, the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution specifically provides that,

“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.”

Significantly, the phrase “separation of church and state” is not even mentioned in the *Congressional Record* from June 7 to September 25, 1789, the period that documents the months of discussions and debates of the 90 men who framed the First Amendment. Had separation been the intent of the First Amendment, it seems logical that the phrase would have been mentioned at least once.

In fact, the phrase “a wall of separation between church and state” was not even penned until 1802, 13 years after passage of the First Amendment. In a personal, private letter to a group of Baptist pastors in Danbury, Connecticut, Thomas Jefferson (who was not one of the 90 framers) used that phrase to assure the pastors that the newly formed federal government would not establish a specific denomination of Christianity.

Even so, no doubt exists that the framers of the Constitution intended that there be a differentiation between the church and the government, thus the words, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The church and the government were to be separate and distinct, yet both were to cooperate with each other.

As evidence that our founding fathers understood the interplay of religion and government, not the separation thereof, note the following quotations:

- George Washington: *“It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible.”*
- Thomas Jefferson: *“The Bible is the cornerstone of liberty. . . . Students’ perusal of the sacred volume will make us better citizens, better fathers, and better husbands.”*
- Andrew Jackson: *“That Book [the Bible] is the rock on which our Republic rests.”*
- Ulysses S. Grant: *“Hold fast to the Bible. . . . To the influence of this Book we are indebted for all the progress made in true civilization and to this we must look as our guide in the future.”*

The Christian heritage of this nation, as well as the influence of the truths of Christ and His Word in our nation’s government, is evidenced not only in the words of our founders, but in the government buildings themselves. For example:

- The Ten Commandments hang over the head of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.
- In the House and Senate chambers appear the words, “In God We Trust.”
- On the walls of the Capitol dome appear the words, “The New Testament according to the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”
- Engraved on the metal cap on the top of the Washington Monument are the words “Praise be to God,” and numerous Bible verses line the walls of the stairwell.

- The Eighty-third Congress set aside a room in the Capitol Building exclusively for the private prayer and meditation of members of Congress.

**Despite the claims of many, Jefferson’s “wall of separation” does not mean, and was not meant to mean, the exclusion of people of faith from impacting, participating in, or shaping government. Rather, it referred to the limit of the federal government from exercising any authority in matters of religion.**

**The phrase “separation of church and state” was not used to the detriment of people of faith until the Supreme Court picked it up in 1947 in *Everson v. Board of Education*. But even the Supreme Court acknowledges the significant role Christianity played in the founding of our country, as well as the influence of Christian teaching on our nation. Consider the following statements from various Supreme Court opinions.**

- 1892 *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*: “Our laws and our institutions must necessarily be based upon and embody the teachings of the Redeemer of mankind. It is impossible that it should be otherwise, and in this sense and to this extent our civilization and our institutions are emphatically Christian.”
- 1952 *Zoarch v. Clauston*: “The First Amendment does not say that in every and all respects there shall be a separation of church and state. . . . We find no constitutional requirement which makes it necessary for government to be hostile to religion and to throw its weight against efforts to widen the effective scope of religious influence.”
- 1971 *Lemon v. Kurtzman*: “Separation is not possible in the absolute sense. Some relationship between government and religious organizations is inevitable.”
- 1985 *Wallace v. Jaffree*: “The ‘wall of separation between church and state’ is a metaphor based on bad history, a metaphor which has proved useless as a guide to judging. It should be frankly and explicitly abandoned.”

**Since its ratification in 1791, the First Amendment has guaranteed, not prohibited, religious freedom in America. Therefore, America’s children who attend the nation’s public schools have, among others, the rights of religious speech and expression outlined below:**

- Students MAY pray, evangelize, read Scripture, distribute literature, and invite fellow students to participate so long as such actions are truly initiated by the student, are truly voluntary, and are not disruptive or coercive.
- Students MAY express their religious views during a class discussion, in written or oral reports, or as a part of an assignment so long as the expression is relevant to the subject under consideration and meets the requirements of the assignment.
- Students MAY study the Bible and perform religious songs as a part of a secular program of education if the school should choose these as a part of its curriculum.
- Students MAY form religious clubs if the school allows at least one other noncurriculum-related club to meet during noninstructional time and must be given full access to all school facilities, resources, and equipment used by secular student clubs.
- Students MAY wear clothing or jewelry displaying religious messages to the same extent that other messages are permitted.

Here is a list of what churches can and cannot do regarding “political” activity and maintain their tax-exempt, nonprofit status:

- Churches CAN conduct nonpartisan voter registration/education drives.

- Churches CAN host candidate forums where all are invited and treated impartially.
- Churches CAN rent a church mailing list (at market value) to a candidate.
- Churches CAN publish neutral news stories on political candidates, including information regarding public endorsements candidates have received from a variety of organizations.
- Churches CAN invite a political candidate to attend a church service or meeting, as long as other candidates have the same opportunity and no church representative endorses or solicits funds on behalf of a candidate.
- Churches CANNOT endorse a political candidate.
- Churches CANNOT make an outright donation of a mailing list to a candidate.
- Churches CANNOT participate in fundraising projects for political action committees.
- Churches CANNOT sell a political ad at a discount rate if no other advertisers are offered the same discount.
- Churches CANNOT pay to attend a caucus for a state or national political convention.
- Churches CANNOT make in-kind or independent expenditures in favor of or against candidates.

In conclusion, pastor and author John Piper is on target in saying, “The First Amendment has been so twisted in the service of secular antagonists as to make it the warrant of harassment against Christians.”<sup>1</sup> We hope that this brief overview of what the First Amendment *really means* will empower you to boldly claim your freedom to express your faith.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Piper, *Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1998), p. 345.