

*“So if the Son sets you free,
you will be free indeed.”*

JOHN 8:36

CHAPTER *One*

Traveling the Long Road to Freedom

“Now who can hear Christ declare that his kingdom is NOT OF THIS WORLD, and yet believe that this blending of church and state together can be pleasing to him?”

— ISAAC BACKUS¹
(1724–1806) Baptist pastor,
Advocate for religious liberty

YOU JOIN A CROWD IN the public square, wondering what has attracted them. Pushing to the front of the group you see a man, stripped naked to the waist, tied cruelly to a pole, being beaten with a long whip with three cords. The big, burly man wielding the whip obviously is some sort of government-appointed executioner. From time to time he stops and spits on his hands to get a better grip. The sound of the whip ripping flesh from his back is met with determined silence by the victim. Twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven times the whip lashes the bare back. Not even a whimper, much less a scream of pain, escapes him.

“Stand back,” someone warns. “You will be spattered with blood!”

You ask, “What crime did he commit? How many lashes is he to receive?”

You are told, “He is a pastor and conducted a worship service not authorized by the government, and he taught doctrine not approved by the official church. He will get the maximum the law allows—thirty lashes.”



You pull your coat more closely around you as the autumn night brings a chill. When you pass the town jail you hear quiet sobbing from a woman inside. You shudder at the thought of being confined in a cold, damp, dark prison.

You ask a passerby, “Who is the woman inside? What did she do to deserve this treatment?”

The stranger answers, “She is a widow, a godly soul. All she did was refuse to pay the government required tax to support the official church, a church whose doctrines she does not believe. She’s been there many days. Others, many as old, frail, and sick as she is, are being thrown in jail for not paying taxes to support a church whose doctrines they do not believe.”



You smell the pungent odor of burning sulfur as you approach the prison. As you move closer, you see that from behind the prison bars a young man stands preaching to the unruly crowd gathered. Through feverish lips he clearly proclaims the gospel.

You inquire of one in the crowd, “Who is he? What has he done? Why is there such a strong odor of sulfur?”

With a sneer, the man replies, “He is a preacher who dares preach without permission from the government. The stench of burning sulfur along with the rats, lice, dampness, and hunger he will not forget. And he will be in there for weeks.”



Where and when did these atrocities take place? You might think they occurred in some faraway country where religious freedom is unknown. No, they took place in America—when the land we term *the land of the free* knew little about religious freedom.

If you live in the United States today, the circumstance is much different. You can

- worship according to your beliefs without fear of government persecution
- belong to a church of your choice and not one the government controls
- support your church with tithes and offerings and not taxes
- share your faith without danger of arrest and imprisonment
- possess a Bible, read it openly, and interpret it personally
- choose not to believe in or practice any religion.

Only a few generations ago you would not have been free to do any of these. In many places in the world today this is still the case. Religious freedom is rare in much of the world. ²

Yet, if you are like many people, you likely take such freedom for granted. Seldom do we pause to be grateful for freedom and for the sacrifices of those who have made it possible.

Religious freedom has come to us at a high price. Multiple thousands of people have suffered and died for the belief that all people should be free to exercise whatever religious faith they hold or even to hold no religious faith at all.

The people of no other nation enjoy more religious freedom than we do in the United States of America. Yet, ironically those who first settled here from Europe did not practice religious liberty. In fact, more than 200 years passed before full religious freedom became a reality.

“The freedom road” is long and difficult, marked by many, twists, turns, obstacles, and detours. Built by the sacrifice of a multitude of people over many centuries, it is marked by the blood of those who died that we might live in a land blessed with religious liberty.

Baptists played a significant part in building “the freedom road”—not just for themselves but for all people. Come, let’s walk the road

that led to religious freedom and meet many of these Baptists who made a difference, including those described in the opening incidents of this book.

The Beginnings

“The freedom road” begins literally at *the beginning*—at the beginning of the creation of the world and of humans. The Book of Genesis makes clear that God created man and woman with freedom—religious freedom. They were free to fellowship with God, to follow God’s will—or not (Genesis 1:26–3:24). If God had wanted to create puppets, creatures with no ability to make choices, God could have done so. But God chose to create human beings with the freedom to choose. God told Adam, “You are free” (Gen. 2:16). Even after humankind sinned in disobedience to God, “God gives us both the privilege and the responsibility of choice.”³

From the beginning the Bible indicates that God did not force his will on people. Thus for any individual or organization to endeavor to rob people of freedom by forcing them to worship God or by denying them the opportunity to fellowship with God according to the dictates of conscience is to thwart God’s intent for human life. Freedom is a God-given right.

The Bible also indicates that freedom is a fearsome responsibility. Exercised in accord with God’s will, it brings blessings. Used in violation of that will, it brings suffering. The Old Testament is filled with incidents illustrating these truths, beginning in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. Obedience to God would have brought them life; disobedience brought death (Gen. 2:15–3:24).

God’s gift of the Ten Commandments assumed the ability of people to understand them and the freedom to reject or accept them (see Exodus 20:1–17). With acceptance came blessing, but with rejection came punishment. Competence and freedom of choice were assumed. When Israel prepared to advance into the Promised Land, Joshua challenged the people, “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15). Such a challenge would have been

meaningless if the people had no competency or freedom to choose. Freedom with accountability is a gift from God to human beings.

God intended people to be free to exercise their God-given competency. However, from early times efforts have been made to curtail religious freedom through persecution.

For example, in the Old Testament, King Nebuchadnezzar violated the religious freedom of his subjects by demanding they worship a golden idol. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused. The king had the three cast into a fiery furnace, where God protected them (Daniel 3:1–30). Later, King Darius demanded that all people worship in a certain way. Daniel refused to relinquish his religious freedom. He chose to disobey the king’s law and worshiped the true God. As a result he was thrown into a den of lions, but God kept him from harm (Dan. 6:1–23). These followers of God were willing to suffer in order to exercise their God-given right to worship according to the dictate of conscience. They set an example of resisting efforts to crush religious freedom.

The New Testament Pattern

“The freedom road” passes through New Testament times. The New Testament record affirms religious freedom, but it also illustrates fierce efforts to eliminate it. In the first century the Roman Empire controlled the part of the world where the Christian movement began.

Rome ruled by careful organization and by acquiring information about its subjects. Thus Emperor Caesar Augustus demanded that a census for purposes of taxation be taken of all the people within the empire. Each person was required to return to the place of birth to be registered. In compliance with this edict Mary and Joseph journeyed to Bethlehem. There Jesus was born (Luke 2:1–20).

The Roman Empire sometimes delegated authority to local rulers, such as Herod, who was ruler or king of the territory in which Jesus was born. When the Wise Men told Herod they had journeyed to see the newborn king, Herod feared this child would be a threat to

his throne. Therefore he ordered the death of all infants and children two years old and younger who lived in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1–18). Jesus escaped, his parents having been warned in a dream by an angel to flee.

Thus, the very beginning of the Christian movement was accompanied by persecution. Persecution has continued to be a threat to the Christian movement in one form or another ever since.

Jesus' earthly ministry emphasized the importance of religious freedom. He proclaimed that he had come to set people free (Luke 4:16–21). The Jewish people lived under strict rules and regulations developed and enforced by religious authorities. Jesus realized that much of this ritual robbed people of the joyful, free worship of God that was the right of every person. By his teachings and actions Jesus endeavored to set people free (John 8:31–32).

In his ministry, Jesus consistently followed the principles of religious freedom. He never coerced anyone to become his disciple. Jesus indicated that people were free to believe or not to believe in him, but they were held accountable for their choice (John 3:16–21). Some believed and followed him, but some did not (Matt. 19:16–22).

Jesus spoke harshly of the religious leaders and their depriving people of freedom. He promised to set people free. In so doing he ignited the anger of the Jewish religious leaders (John 8:33–59). They in turn aroused resistance among the people to Jesus, claiming he was a heretic. As a result, Jesus encountered increasing hostility during his brief three-year earthly ministry. The religious leaders succeeded in getting Jesus arrested and charged with heresy. He was tried before the Sanhedrin, the religious supreme court of the Jews (Luke 22:66–71).

Rome delegated a great deal of authority to the Sanhedrin, but not that of the death penalty. The authority to impose the death penalty was reserved for Roman governors. Therefore, the religious leaders developed the false accusation against Jesus that he opposed payment of taxes to Caesar, claimed to be a king, and was a threat to Roman authority. This was a criminal charge, not a religious one.

Although Roman authorities were tolerant of various religions, they were highly intolerant of any threat to order. Too, they were

vicious in putting down any danger to the rule of Rome. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, reluctantly agreed to the execution of Jesus by crucifixion. Although Pilate said he found no basis for the charges against Jesus, he gave in to the pressure of the mob calling for Jesus' crucifixion (Luke 23:1–25).

Thus the religious and civil authorities collaborated in the persecution and death of Jesus. This sinister combination was a harbinger of things to come. The union of religion and government would result in the mutilation and death of multitudes of Christians in the centuries that followed.

Persecution Under the Roman Empire

At first only the Jewish religious authorities and not the Romans were involved in the persecution of the Christians. Rome initially considered the Christian movement as a sect of Judaism, and Judaism was an officially tolerated religion.

Persecution by Jewish Religious Leaders

After Jesus' resurrection, the proclamation of the gospel by Jesus' disciples through the power of the Holy Spirit resulted in thousands of people coming to faith in Christ. The apostles clearly believed in freedom of choice. For example, in Peter's sermon at Pentecost he declared, "Repent and be baptized" (Acts 2:38). The huge response of the people stirred the Jewish religious leaders to try to stifle the Christian movement (Acts 1–8).

The temple authorities in Jerusalem had armed police at their disposal. Unwilling to grant the new movement religious freedom, they ordered the police to arrest the leaders of the Christian movement. The religious authorities threatened them, demanding that they not speak about Jesus. The apostles replied that they must obey God, not human beings (Acts 4:19–20; 5:29). Thus what was to continue for centuries began in the first century: the denial of religious liberty and persecution of Christians by religious authorities.

This persecution became increasingly severe. Stephen, a leader in the Jerusalem church, was stoned to death for his testimony about Jesus (Acts 6:8–7:60). His death was an example of an act of cruel execution by religious leaders on someone who held beliefs different from their own. Such atrocities were repeated tens of thousands of times in the following years.

So severe was the persecution that most of the followers of Christ were driven out of Jerusalem. As they traveled, they shared Christ. Thus the gospel spread, partly as a result of persecution. One of the early persecutors, Saul, became a follower of Christ and, known generally as Paul, helped to spread the gospel through his preaching, teaching, and writing (Acts 9:1–30).

Persecution by Roman Authorities

The ministry of Paul brought the Roman government once again into collaboration with the religious authorities. Several times during his traveling ministry Paul encountered opposition from the Jewish religious leaders or from people who worshiped one or more of the various pagan gods. When the opposition turned into a riot, the Roman officials became involved (Acts 19:1–41). The Romans were not tolerant of riots and disorder.

Such a situation was the cause of a long imprisonment of Paul by Roman authorities. While in Jerusalem on a mission of mercy, Paul became the innocent center of a riot at the temple. The Jewish religious leaders accused Paul of being the cause of the riot. Paul was arrested by the Romans, not for his religious views but because he allegedly had created disorder (Acts 22:22–23:35).

Paul was a Roman citizen and demanded to be treated as a citizen, even appealing his case to Caesar (Acts 26:32). The last part of the Book of Acts tells the story of his imprisonment and being taken to Rome as a prisoner (Acts 21–28). Once again religious authorities used the government in efforts to stifle religious freedom and the Christian movement.

A few years later Rome began to persecute Christians apart from any instigation by Jewish religious leaders. The Roman emperors

increasingly demanded that people worship pagan gods. Some emperors even claimed they themselves were gods and should be worshiped. Failure to worship them brought severe punishment. Christians would not worship pagan gods or Caesar as Lord. For them, only Jesus was Lord.

The early Christians' commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ set the example for generations to follow in their insistence on religious freedom. They believed no person other than Jesus is due worship and no one should claim lordship except Jesus.

Since the early Christians would not hail the emperor as Lord or give in to government efforts to force them to do so, these early followers of Christ suffered terrible persecution. Treason was the basic charge against the Christians by the empire because in the Roman mind the state's welfare depended on all people following the religious rituals prescribed by the government.

Under the tyrannical rule of Rome, thousands of Christians were massacred in the first three centuries of the Christian movement. Godly people who were no threat to Rome endured terrible torture and death. An example of this treatment was the elderly Polycarp. Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John, was leader of the church at Smyrna.

The account of Polycarp's execution in A.D. 168 indicates the cruelty of Roman persecution and the lack of religious freedom:

The Stadholder [governor] admonished him to have compassion for his great age, and, by swearing by the Emperor's fortune, to deny Christ. Thereupon Polycarp gave the following candid reply, "I have now served my Lord Christ Jesus eighty-six years, and He has never done me any harm. How can I deny my King, who hath hitherto preserved me from all evil, and so faithfully redeemed me?"

After being threatened with wild beasts and fire, Polycarp said, "But why delayest thou? Bring on the beasts, or the fire, or whatever thou mayest choose: thou shalt not, by either of them, move me to deny Christ, my Lord and Saviour."⁴

In times of the most severe persecutions, the fury and cruelty of the Roman state against the Christian movement resulted in torture and forms of execution too horrible to detail. The result of the entanglement of religion and government in the Roman Empire should have sent a warning signal to future generations to avoid such entanglement. Unfortunately, most failed to heed the warning.

A Catastrophic Turn in “The Freedom Road”

Even under the lash of persecution, the Christian movement grew. Some Roman emperors viciously persecuted Christians, but some did not. When Constantine became emperor, the entire situation changed. Some thought it was for the better, but ultimately it proved for the worse.

The Influence of Constantine

Throughout the first three centuries of the Christian movement, the Roman Empire experienced numerous murders, battles, and intrigues as people vied to rule the empire. In A.D. 312 Constantine defeated a rival for control of the western part of the empire. Of the decisive battle, the historian Williston Walker states,

But on the eve of the battle at the Mulvian Bridge, Constantine had a dream in which he saw the initial letters of the name of Christ with the words, “By this sign you will conquer.” Taking this as an omen, he resolved to trust his cause to the God of the Christians and had the Chi-Rho monogram painted on the shields of his soldiers.⁵

Constantine won the battle and thereafter favored the Christian religion.

In A.D. 313 Constantine and Licinius, the ruler of the eastern part of the empire, issued the Edict of Milan. The edict legitimized Christianity and was intended to bring a halt to persecution of Christians. However, Licinius reneged on the promise and began

persecution. Constantine attacked and defeated him in A.D. 324. Constantine thereafter halted persecution of Christians. Williston Walker comments, “Constantine was the sole ruler of the empire, and churches awoke to find that the cause of Rome and the cause of Christ had become one.”⁶

Constantine did not make Christianity the official religion of the empire, but he favored Christianity and provided many benefits. He was not baptized until shortly before his death and continued through his reign to patronize various gods. However, when he built a new city, often termed the “New Rome,” he filled it with Christian churches and symbols, not pagan idols and temples. It became known as Constantinople (now Istanbul).

Constantine wielded great influence on the development of the Christian movement. Historian Robert Baker notes,

Although Christianity did not become the official religion of the Roman Empire until the closing years of the fourth century, the work of the Emperor Constantine (A.D. 323–337) in controlling church life and showering favors upon Christians began the melancholy story of union between the secular and religious leadership that has cursed the world from that time to the present.⁷

One of the disastrous consequences of church-state union was the stream of people who came into the churches after the government favored Christianity. Prior to this time only convinced believers were in the churches. Historian Bruce Shelley states,

Now many came who were politically ambitious, religiously disinterested, and still half-rooted in paganism. This threatened to produce not only shallowness and permeation by pagan superstitions but also the secularization and misuse of religion for political purposes.⁸

In A.D. 325 Constantine called all of the bishops in the empire to meet at Nicaea to settle certain theological disputes. Constantine presided, an ominous sign of the beginning of the union of church and state. It would not be the last time that a government official utilized church leaders to expand and consolidate power.

The Union of Church and State

In A.D. 380 a major step toward church-state union took place. The Roman rulers Gratian and Theodosius I “made belief in Christianity a matter of imperial command.”⁹ Williston Walker comments, “Clearly, in the minds of Gratian and Theodosius, Christianity was now the official religion of the empire, and all others were forbidden, including deviant forms of Christianity itself.”¹⁰ The command did not bring religious freedom but rather intensified persecution of those who did not agree with the doctrines of the official government-supported church.

The Roman belief that the welfare of the empire depended on religion led to the establishment of Christianity as the official religion because the emperors concluded that Christianity (their version) was the best religion for the sake of the empire. Therefore, people who did not believe and worship in accord with the official religion were considered traitors and worthy of death.

The imperial decree stated:

It is Our Will that all the peoples we rule shall practice that religion which the divine Peter the Apostle transmitted to the Romans. We shall believe in the single Deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, under the concept of equal majesty and of the Holy Trinity.

*We command that those persons who follow this rule shall embrace the name of Catholic Christians. The rest, however, whom We adjudge demented and insane, shall sustain the infamy of heretical dogmas, their meeting places shall not receive the name of churches, and they shall be smitten first by divine vengeance and secondly by the retribution of Our own initiative, which We shall assume in accordance with divine judgment.*¹¹

The emperors lavished financial support and positions of power on leaders of the official church. Too, they continued to influence the development of what they considered to be orthodoxy by punishing those they deemed unorthodox. Their primary motive was to have a strong unified state. They believed that a strong nation depended on

a common religion enforced by the government and held by all citizens. This view later held sway in what was termed *Christendom*.

Due to various causes the churches of the western and eastern portions of the empire drifted apart and developed different approaches to theology, worship, and organization. Rome became the dominant center of the western portion and Constantinople that of the eastern. From this point on in our journey on “the freedom road,” we will focus on the West, for in the West religious freedom as we know it finally emerged—but only after a long and bloody struggle.

The Relation of Church and State

As the Roman Empire crumbled, weakened by corruption from within and attacks from without, the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church grew more and more powerful. The bishop of Rome became the head of the type of Christian movement that had the favor of the government. The development of the papacy was well under way. By the mid A.D. 400s, the bishop of Rome had become the authoritarian head of the churches in the West, a position affirmed by the emperor.

The doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church likewise were being developed and enforced. For example, salvation from hell to heaven was only through the sacraments administered by the church. Infants received baptism, one of the sacraments. Sprinkling or pouring of water began to replace immersion as the form of baptism. The Lord’s Supper became a ceremony in which the bread and juice were transformed into the body and blood of Christ by the words of a priest. The Latin translation of the Bible by Jerome, the Vulgate, became the “normative version of the Scriptures for churches in communion with the see of Rome.”¹² Any who did not follow the teachings of the church could be excommunicated, cutting them off from the sacraments,

Throughout most of the Middle Ages¹³ in Europe a constant struggle existed between the pope and the political leaders for supremacy. First one and then the other claimed ultimate authority. Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne as emperor in A.D. 800.

Such an act might indicate the supremacy of church over state, but not so. “As emperor, Charlemagne felt called to rule his people both in civil and in ecclesiastical matters. He appointed bishops just as he named generals. . . .”¹⁴ He also forced people whom he conquered to be baptized.

Later popes attempted to assure the supremacy of church over state. In the latter part of the eleventh century Pope Gregory VII in the *Dictatus Papae* (Dictates of the Pope) issued a collection of brief statements that summarized official views of the Roman Catholic Church. Included were these statements about the pope:

“That he alone can depose or reinstate bishops.”

“That he alone may use imperial insignia.”

“That he himself may be judged of no one.”

“That he may absolve subjects from their fealty to wicked men.”¹⁵

This edict in essence declared that in the union of church and state the church was the superior partner. In a showdown between the pope and kings, King Henry IV resisted papal authority and as a result was excommunicated. Never before had a pope deposed a king. In A.D. 1077 the king humbled himself in the snow for three days outside a castle at Canossa, where the pope was residing. Only then did Pope Gregory VII release him from excommunication.

Persecutions by Church and State

For the next few centuries regardless of whether church or state seemed to be in ultimate control, the official governments for the most part carried out the basic wishes of the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic faith was enforced by government officials. Religious freedom did not exist.

Not everyone followed the dictates of the Roman Catholic Church, however. History records that various groups maintained their own beliefs and worship practices that were contrary to the official ones. Likely there were others not recorded in history. These various groups

endeavored to exercise religious freedom by practicing their own faith, but they were severely persecuted by the official church and the government in power. People labeled as “heretics” were hounded, arrested, humiliated, beaten, tortured, and often executed. Threatened with death if they did not confess belief in the “official” doctrines of the state-supported church, many refused and were burned alive.

The Waldensians are an example of such a group. The founder of the movement was Waldes (about A.D. 1140–1218), a wealthy merchant of Lyons. In what he considered obedience to the teaching of Christ, he gave up his wealth and committed himself to living in poverty and preaching in public. He believed “the Bible, especially the New Testament, is the sole rule of belief and life.”¹⁶ The Roman Catholic Church responded by excommunicating his followers, known as the Waldensians. Other groups that refused to abide by the official rule of the Roman Catholic Church were also excommunicated and condemned as heretics.

However, various “heretical” groups continued to grow, exercising what they considered a right to practice their faith freely and preach publicly. In an effort to stamp out such groups, the Roman Catholic Church established the papal Inquisition or Holy Office in A.D. 1233. It “developed into a most formidable and fearsome organ.”¹⁷ Using heinous torture to root out heretics and secure confessions, the church inquisitors turned condemned people over to civil magistrates for punishment. Those so condemned usually suffered the penalty of being burned alive at the stake in a public ceremony.

Church and state, pope and emperor, often were divided in a struggle for ultimate authority. However, they were united in efforts to crush religious freedom. Various Scriptures were interpreted to justify harsh persecution, even death, such as Luke 14:15–24.¹⁸ In the minds of both civic and church leaders, religious freedom was a threat not only to the souls of people but also to the stability of society. To allow “heretics” freedom to share their views was considered irresponsible. To undermine the authority of the established church was to threaten the concept of the divine right of kings and therefore the stability of government.

Thus those who were considered to be heretics were viewed as a threat not only to the Roman Catholic Church but also to kings. Those who would not bow to the union of church and state were considered not only to be heretics but also traitors. The general population believed such people deserved to be exterminated, much as a dreaded disease needed to be eradicated.

Uniformity in doctrine, not diversity, was considered a model society, even if such uniformity had to be gained by force. The pattern of the New Testament churches was abandoned. The example of Jesus in always using persuasion and never coercion was ignored. The spirit of the Jewish Sanhedrin and of the pagan Roman emperors who abhorred religious freedom prevailed.

Conclusion

In the midst of the Middle Ages, any hope of religious freedom seemed ridiculous. The forces of an established church and the power of secular rulers welded together appeared to be an impregnable defense against any effort for religious freedom. However, just when such freedom seemed impossible, the first glimmers of a new day began to be evident. That is the subject of the next chapters.