

Bruce Gourley was a member of our church in Louisville while he was a student at Southern Seminary. Since then, he has lived in Montana, where he is the Executive Director of the Baptist History & Heritage Society. Bruce is also the online editor and a contributing writer for *Baptists Today*, and I'm always interested to read what he writes. Bruce has an article in the current issue of *Baptists Today* that taught me some things and reminded me of some things.<sup>1</sup>



The essay begins with this statement: “*Christians should be given preferential treatment throughout the United States, from public spaces to privately-owned businesses. And to deny the preferential treatment of Christianity is a violation of ‘religious liberty.’*”

Bruce suggests that this statement constitutes the “marching orders” of today’s “Christian Right,” a group that includes many Baptists. Before I go farther, what do you think of that statement? Do you agree or disagree, and for what reasons?

Although Baptists have considerable access to the halls of power these days, it was not always so. In the early days of our republic, Baptists were a persecuted minority, and one of the results of those fires of persecution that our forebears became passionately committed to the principle of religious liberty for all—not just Baptists. As George W. Truett, the long-time pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, put it, “**Religious liberty is the special trophy of the Baptists, won at fearful cost, and we ought not to forget it, nor allow anyone else to forget it.**”<sup>2</sup>

While “free and faithful” Baptists have, from America’s early days until now, stood firm in their contention for genuine religious liberty for every citizen, Christian, Jew, Muslim, or otherwise, those known as “the Religious Right” or “the Christian Right” have contended—and still contend—just as passionately for preferential treatment of their own version of Christianity. I was interested to learn from Bruce that one of the early battlefields of these “culture wars” was the matter of Sunday mail delivery.

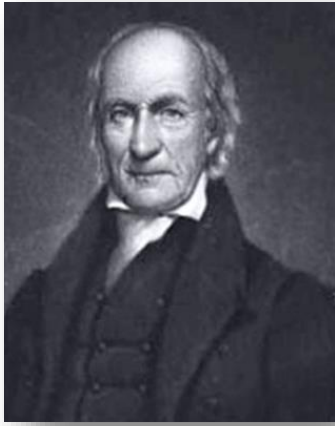
Beginning in 1775, when the Second Continental Congress appointed Benjamin Franklin the nation’s first Postmaster General, the Post Office delivered mail seven days a week, and in 1810, Congress wrote such Sunday delivery into the laws of the land. This enshrinement of Sunday delivery provoked the Christian Right to object that such delivery forced some believer’s to work on a Christian holy day . . . conveniently overlooking similar issues with the holy days of other faiths.

Sunday mail delivery thus became perhaps the first “hot-button” issue for the Christian Right, resulting in a twenty-year campaign to overturn it. The mail issue was couched in those days within a larger “moral campaign for the soul of America” (sound familiar?), and for the first time since the establishment of the First Amendment, the separation of church and state was truly endangered.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Gourley, “Religious Liberty Then & Now: Baptists and the Battle over Sunday Mail Delivery,” *Baptists Today*, February 2015.

<sup>2</sup> George W. Truett, “Baptists and Religious Liberty,” 1920.



Virginian John Leland, the nation's most influential Baptist and the third most influential voice for religious liberty in America after Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, wrote that legislating "holy days, creeds of faith, forms of worship" is a "deadly pill . . . rolled in honey."

"The honor of religion," he wrote, "the spread of the gospel, the piety and research of the reformers, the good of society, the safety of the state, and the salvation of souls, form the syrup in which the poisonous pill is hidden. It is from men, high in esteem for holiness and wisdom, that the worst of usages and most cruel laws proceed. . . . A man cannot give greater evidence that he is destitute of the meek spirit of Christianity, and ignorant of its genius, than when he makes, or urges others to make, laws to coerce his neighbors in matters of religion."

"Christianity," Leland continued, "is not only a good religion, but the only religion that ever met the sinner's wants and relieved his woes—the only religion that ever brought pardon to the guilty and gave assurance of eternal life . . . . Let Christianity operate in its own natural channel, and it is a blessing of immense worth; but turn it into a principle of state policy, and it fosters pride, hypocrisy, and the worst kind of cruelty."

Leland's arguments prevailed, and Sunday mail delivery continued until 1912, when it ended, not due to the Christian Right but due to worker demands for limited working hours. This vignette of American history was new to me, but the principles involved remain the same.

With ancient Israel as the possible lone exception, theocracy has been a disaster everywhere humans have tried it. Only when governments rule "by the consent of the governed" is human dignity and freedom protected, including the freedom of religion. Edmund Burke is still on target: "Those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it."

Dave

P.S. Two months from today, on May 3, the OMI Clergy will sponsor a seminar by Dr. Diana Hayes on "Race & Faith." I hope you'll mark your calendars for this very special event.

Dr. Hayes is a retired professor at the Catholic Theological Union in DC, and is the author or editor of the following books. (She has *three* earned doctorates!)

- *Trouble Don't Last Always: Soul Prayers*
- *And Still We Rise: An Introduction to Black Liberation Theology*
- *Hagar's Daughters: Womanist Ways of Being in the World*
- *Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States*
- *Were You There? Stations of the Cross*
- *Many Faces of the Church*
- *Standing in the Shoes My Mother Made: A Womanist Theology*
- *Forged in the Fiery Furnace: African American Spirituality*



Put this on your calendar. You don't want to miss this! 3 p.m. on Sunday, May 3.