

Thomas Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists

Thomas Jefferson's Jan. 1, 1802, letter to the Danbury, Conn., Baptist Association is a seminal document in American church-state history. In the letter, Jefferson used the metaphor of the "wall of separation between church and state," a phrase that, as the Supreme Court once noted, has come to be accepted as an authoritative declaration of the scope and meaning of the First Amendment.

Religious Right groups often spread misinformation about the letter in an attempt to discredit its importance. To set the record straight and understand why the letter is important, it's necessary to read first the Danbury Baptist letter to Jefferson and understand why they sent it.

Religious Right groups frequently assert that the Baptists wrote to Jefferson because they wanted him to issue a proclamation calling for a day of fasting and prayer or because they were alarmed over a rumor they had heard that a national church was about to be established.

These assertions are not true. The Baptists wrote to Jefferson to commend him for his stand in favor of religious liberty and to express their dissatisfaction with the church-state relationship in Connecticut.

Jefferson considered using his reply to explain why he, as president, refused to issue proclamations calling for days of fasting and prayer. Jefferson's attorney general, Levi Lincoln, recommended against this, so Jefferson used the letter to make a statement about the importance of church-state separation.

Below is the transcript of each letter. Original spelling, punctuation and capitalization have been retained.

The Baptist Address:

The address of the Danbury Baptist Association, in the State of Connecticut; assembled October 7th 1801.

To Thomas Jefferson Esq., the President of the united States of America.

Sir,

Among the many millions in America and Europe who rejoice in your Election to office, we embrace the first opportunity which we have enjoy'd in our collective capacity, since your Inauguration, to express our great satisfaction, in your appointment to the chief Magistracy in the United States: And though our mode of expression may be less courtly and pompous than what many others clothe their addresses with, we beg you, Sir to believe, that none are more sincere.

Our Sentiments are uniformly on the side of Religious Liberty – That Religion is at all times and places a Matter between God and Individuals – That no man ought to suffer in Name, person or effects on account of his religious Opinions – That the legitimate Power of civil Government extends no further than to punish the man who works ill to his neighbour. But Sir our constitution of government is not specific. Our antient charter, together with the Laws made coincident therewith, were adopted as the Basis of our government at the time of our revolution; and such had been our laws & usages, & such still are; that Religion is considered as the first object of Legislation; & therefore what religious privileges we enjoy (as a minor part of the State) we enjoy as favors granted, and not as inalienable rights: and these favors we receive at the expense of such degrading acknowledgements, as are inconsistent with the rights of freemen. It is not to be wondered at therefore; if those who seek after power & gain under the pretence of government & Religion should reproach their fellowmen – should reproach their chief Magistrate, as an enemy of religion Law & good order because he will not, dares not assume the prerogative of Jehovah and make Laws to govern the Kingdom of Christ.

Sir, we are sensible that the President of the united States is not the national Legislator & also sensible that the national government cannot destroy the Laws of each State; but our hopes are strong that the sentiments of our beloved President, which have had such genial Effect already, like the radiant beams of the Sun, will shine & prevail through all these States and all the world till Hierarchy and Tyranny be destroyed from the Earth. Sir, when we reflect on your past services and see a glow of philanthropy and good will shining forth in a course of more than thirty years we have reason to believe that America's God has raised you up to fill the chair of State out of that good will which he bears to the Millions which you preside over. May God strengthen you for the arduous task which providence & the voice of the people have cal'd you to sustain and support you in your Administration against all the predetermin'd opposition of those who wish to rise to wealth & importance on the poverty and subjection of the people.

And may the Lord preserve you safe from every evil and bring you at last to his Heavenly Kingdom through Jesus Christ our Glorious Mediator.

Signed in behalf of the Association,

Neh'h Dodge

The Committee

Eph'm Robbins
Stephen S. Nelson

Jefferson's Reply:

To mess. Nehemiah Dodge, Ephraim Robbins, & Stephen S. Nelson, a committee of the Danbury Baptist association in the state of Connecticut.

Gentlemen

The affectionate sentiments of esteem and approbation which you are so good as to express towards me, on behalf of the Danbury Baptist association, give me the highest satisfaction. my duties dictate a faithful & zealous pursuit of the interests of my constituents, & in proportion as they are persuaded of my fidelity to those duties, the discharge of them becomes more and more pleasing.

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, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church & State. adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.

I reciprocate your kind prayers for the protection & blessing of the common father and creator of man, and tender you for yourselves and your religious association, assurances of my high respect & esteem.

Th. Jefferson

Jan. 1. 1802.

If you would like to learn more about religious liberty, please contact:

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