

Presented by

**Dave Edwards, President of Grand Valley Interfaith Network (GVIN)
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In the United States, we entered into a sacred compact, in 1776 and again in 1787. We created what Martin Luther King Jr later named our Beloved Community. Our founding documents set forth aspirational as well as operational goals and methods by which we intend to fulfill our vision. We fought a Civil War to end slavery and to extend our covenanted Beloved Community to all.

Among the most noble principles we adopted is Freedom of Religion. Freedom of Religion is imbedded in the First Amendment to our Constitution and is one of our most treasured freedoms. The Constitution's First Amendment states that ***"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."***

Roger Williams, who founded Rhode Island, as well as the first Baptist church in America, was the first American to state the necessity of establishing "a wall or hedge of separation" between the "wilderness of the world" and "the garden of the church." Williams' metaphor was meant to explain his belief that an authentic Christian church would be possible only if there was such a separation.

In 1802 Thomas Jefferson sent a letter to the Danbury Connecticut Baptist Association. Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and a leading advocate of including a Bill of Rights in the Constitution, wrote in explaining the First Amendment: "I contemplate with sovereign reverence that [the] 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,' that would thus build a wall of separation between Church and State."

In turn, the Supreme Court applied the establishment clause to states with the 14th Amendment and has used the doctrine to uphold the wall of separation between church and state.

On June 28, 2022, speaking at a Sunday religious service at the Cornerstone Christian Center in Basalt, Colorado, U.S. Representative Lauren Boebert told worshipers: "The church is supposed to direct the government. The government is not supposed to direct the church. That is not how our Founding Fathers intended it." She added: "I'm tired of this separation of church and state junk that's not in the Constitution. It was in a stinking letter, and it means nothing like what they say it does."

Gwen Calais-Haase, a political scientist at Harvard University, told The Washington Post that Boebert's interpretation of the Constitution was "false, misleading and dangerous." Calais-Haase said she was "extremely worried about the environment of misinformation that extremist politicians take advantage of for their own gains." Steven K. Green, a professor of law and affiliated professor of history and religious studies at Willamette University, agreed, saying, "Rep. Boebert is wrong on both matters."

"While the phrase separation of church and state does not appear verbatim in the Constitution, neither do many accepted constitutional principles such as separation of powers, judicial review, executive privilege, or the right to marry and parental rights, no doubt rights that Rep. Boebert cherishes," wrote Green, the author of "Separating Church and State: A History." The Supreme

Court has since cited Jefferson's letter in key cases, according to the Freedom Forum Institute, an advocacy group that works to raise awareness of First Amendment rights.

Prof. Green told The Post that those in the generation that founded the United States "saw religious disestablishment as working in both directions: protecting the state from religion and vice versa." The concept around separate spheres of civil and religious authority goes as far back as the Middle Ages and the Protestant Reformation, he said. "In fact, one of the leading controversies that preceded the American Revolution involved widespread opposition to efforts to create an Anglican bishop in the American colonies, which colonists feared would increase the political power of the church and infringe on civil liberties," Green said.

The calls for a separation between church and state intensified in the 1800s as Americans feared the dominance of the Catholic Church over government issues. Boebert also thanked Donald Trump for his presidential role: "God called a man who was not a politician to run for office, and I believe he was anointed for that position. He answered that call," she said. I believe that Boebert's characterization of Trump is wrong.

The act of anointing someone with oil was a way of signifying God's approval. Anointing also signifies God's power and authority. God will never call to his service a man who lies and distorts. In Judaism, Elijah anointed Elisha to take his place as a prophet. God had chosen both of them. In Christianity, John the Baptist is such a prophet, and Jesus is the one John anoints in God's name.

On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr led the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. He and others spoke before the Lincoln Memorial, facing the Washington Monument, and in the distance, the Capital grounds and the Capital itself. On January 6, 2020, President Trump led his legions to the Capital grounds, and ultimately into the Capital itself. Only the Secret Service kept him from grabbing a flag and storming Congress.

Two more divergent events could hardly be imagined. They took place two and a half miles apart, 57 years from each other.

One gathering spoke of nonviolent action to achieve change, bringing the message of peace and justice to Congress. A National Parks guard, at the podium to protect King and the other speakers, turned to the crowd at King's last words and reported that the guard felt wave upon wave of spirit coming from the crowded congregants to King in answer to his message. It was the closest he had ever felt to experiencing God.

The other incited the crowd he had assembled to overthrow our government, hang Vice President Pence, kill or imprison our Senate and House, and establish himself as President for life. A collective spirit of anger overwhelmed the crowd as the leader pumped hatred, bile and intransigence into their blood. The crowd surged at the Congress waving flags, fists and weapons, shouting Trump's exhortations and then stormed the Capital. Inside the Capital, at 2:18 p.m. Boebert tweeted, "The Speaker has been removed from the chambers." but she did not specify where Pelosi had gone. Claims that Boebert compared the day to 1776 and was seen giving a tour of the Capitol before the insurrection are correct, though the nature of the tour is disputed.

One group, predominantly black, sought to influence government within the confines of the First Amendment. This group expected their religion to influence, persuade and convince politicians to listen to the plaintive voices of the oppressed and to pass legislation to redress the conditions

that led them to Washington, namely racism, lack of jobs, and lack of economic freedom and progress. They adhered to peaceful, nonviolent means to achieve their ends.

The second group raised their voices, fists and weapons, pushed and climbed their way into the Capital to threaten Congress, to force their will upon Congress and to conquer our government. The second group came to destroy the First Amendment along with the government that was created to uphold it. This group was predominantly white.

King's demeanor was peaceful and strong. Trump's demeanor was militant.

King's voice was plaintive, persuasive, moving. Trump's voice threatened his opponents with death and destruction.

Theologian Martin Buber told us that only deep and abiding honesty allowed us to be in communication with our God. In that state, we could hear the voice of God within us, could commune with God, and could learn what it is we should do to better ourselves and to repair the world.

We know and recognize in the bravery, honesty and commitment to justice that a person is true with God. The other side of Buber's work is a warning of what happens to a person's soul when they lie to themselves, to others and to God.

The wrath of God is visited upon such a person in the form of utter silence. There is no communication between a soul that lies, that does not seek forgiveness for its lies, and does not seek to redeem itself. Such a person is cut off from God, from others and ultimately, from its own soul. A soul that lies, makes up alternate realities, and confabulates lies with truth led the January 6th crowds.

What we require of ourselves is that in cherishing our own religious liberty, we in turn accommodate others' religions, live in peace with them, not attempt forceable conversion of our citizens to our beliefs or practices, not demand to have our own religion either declared as the national religion nor expect our religion to govern our nation. We restrict religious infiltration of the political sphere. While each religion is free to attempt to influence the nation's policies, laws, and foreign affairs, no religion is free to impose its beliefs and practices on others through the power of our government. We are in a perilous time, when all of us have to cherish and preserve our right to believe as we choose, to practice our religions within the framework of peaceful coexistence, and to resist attempts to enforce one religion's beliefs and practices upon all the rest of us.