
I Love and Admire the Separation of Church and State!

**An article for *The Cathedral Times*
by the Very Rev. Sam Candler, *Dean of the Cathedral***

Last week, a self-designated prayer rally on the National Mall, in Washington, D.C. billed itself as a “rededication of our country as one nation under God.” Participants claimed to be preparing for a 250th anniversary of our independence. Apparently, however, some of the sentiment there went towards denying the “separation of church and state” principle upon which our country was actually founded.

This is not new material for me. I am an ordained minister of the gospel, and I have been leading churches through the relationship between church and state for over forty years. Thus, I am writing this week to remind my readers of what I have said before. What I might say later this summer, as these sorts of rallies continue, is not a new reaction for me. I have been saying the same thing for my entire ministry: I love and admire the United States principle of the separation of church and state. I believe it is critical for a healthy country, and I believe it is critical for a healthy religion.

Take a look back at archives of my own sermons, either here at the Cathedral of St. Philip ([“I Want to Observe Dependence Day!”](#)) or even on Day 1 in the year 2000 ([“Independence Day”](#)).

Here is an excerpt from that 2020 sermon, still valid for today:

“When European settlers gathered in this world three centuries ago, their firm religious sentiments were also solidly embedded in their political structures. It was unthinkable that a state—or a country-- could exist without some accompanying established religion.

To this land, these folks also brought their religious faith. They were Anglican, German Lutheran, Swiss and Dutch Reformed, Anabaptist, Quaker, Jewish, and Puritan. Let us never forget when we celebrate the Fourth of July in our churches, the startling and sometimes conflicting diversity of religious expression in the early American colonies. When charters were granted to various individuals and companies in the colonies, those charters usually stipulated what sort of religious expression was to be allowed. This was true in Western Europe, and it was to be true in the new colonies.

Thus, religious passions often became the drivers of political division. We would do well in these days of religious political partisanship to heed what our ancestors learned..... Something new happened in this country, something for which I give gracious thanks this week. The founders of our country figured out a way to separate church and state in a way that gave enormous freedom to each....

By the time of the Declaration of Independence, Americans knew first-hand what religious intolerance was like. They knew what happened when a party or a state or a country tried to impose its own particular brand of Christianity, or its particular brand of passion, on its people. Such behavior did not lead to liberty, freedom, and independence. It led to dissension, oppression, and even death.

Part of the great American experiment, then, promulgated in the United States Constitution, was the dis-establishment of religion. No one religion, nor one group's form of religion, nor one group's form of passion, whatever it is, would be the standard of government in this new land. We are dependent upon that constitutional principle.

This decision was a beautiful one, for it allowed the brilliant diversity of American religion, and American passion, to flourish.

As a Christian in these United States of America, I give thanks today for the separation of church and state, the separation of passion and government, a separation which allows both religion and government to be truly free."

Those were my words of six years ago, and of twenty-six years ago. I am not making this up as I go along. This is our history.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip