

# In Defense of the Separation of Church and State

## Principles and Model Letters for the Presidential Religious Liberty Commission

**Deadline:** Monday, July 13, 2026

**Send to:** RLC@usdoj.gov

**Note:** Comments will be published on the Commission’s website (personally identifying information is redacted). Write in English. Each person should personalize their letter — individual voices carry more weight than identical mass letters.

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### PART 1 — THE PRINCIPLES

As set forth by A. T. Jones in *The National Sunday Law (1889)*, *The Two Republics (1891)*, *Civil Government and Religion*, *The Rights of the People*, and *the American Sentinel*

#### 1. The Two Jurisdictions: “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21)

This is the foundation of Jones’s entire argument. Opening his testimony before the United States Senate Committee on Education and Labor on December 13, 1888, against Senator Blair’s national Sunday-rest bill, Jones stated the principle in his own words:

“The principle upon which we stand is that civil government is civil, and has nothing to do in the matter of legislation, with religious observances in any way. The basis of this is found in the words of Jesus Christ in Matthew 22:21.” — *The National Sunday Law*, p. 11

And on the meaning of Christ’s words:

“In this the Saviour certainly separated that which pertains to Caesar from that which pertains to God. We are not to render to Caesar that which pertains to God; we are not to render to God by Caesar that which is God’s.” — *The National Sunday Law*, p. 11

Christ Himself divided human obligation into two spheres:

- **Duties owed to God** (the first table of the law — worship, reverence, the Sabbath, conscience): these belong to God alone, and no human power may enter that sphere.
- **Duties owed to our fellow man** (the second table — life, property, honesty, reputation): only here does civil government have rightful jurisdiction.

Jones drew the conclusion without compromise:

“These are duties that men owe to God, and with those the powers that be can of right have nothing to do... we deny, forever, the right of any civil government to legislate in anything that pertains to men’s duty to God under the first four commandments.” — *The National Sunday Law*, p. 19

When the state legislates on duties owed to God — mandating a day of observance, posting commandments by force of law, sponsoring religious instruction — it invades the divine jurisdiction. As Jones told Senator Blair regarding the Lord’s day itself:

“If it is the Lord’s day, we are to render it to the Lord, not to Caesar. When Caesar exacts it of us, he is exacting what does not belong to him, and is demanding of us that with which he should have nothing to do.” — *The National Sunday Law*, p. 19

## 2. Government Derives Its Just Powers from the Consent of the Governed

The Declaration of Independence declares that governments derive “their just powers from the consent of the governed.” From this Jones drew an unanswerable deduction: **no man can delegate to government a power he does not himself possess over his neighbor.** I have no authority over my neighbor’s conscience; therefore I cannot confer such authority upon the state. It follows that any governmental power over religion is a *usurped* power — never a just one.

## 3. Rights Are Inalienable Because They Come from God, Not from Government

The rights of conscience are not grants from the state; they are the endowment of the Creator. Government exists to *protect* rights, not to define or distribute them. A state that claims power to favor religion today implicitly claims power to restrict it tomorrow — for the power that gives can also take away.

Jones also warned, in the introduction to his published Senate argument, that the danger applies even to legislation favoring one’s *own* faith:

“No man can allow any legislation in behalf of the religion, or the religious observances, in which he himself believes, without forfeiting his own religious freedom.” — *The National Sunday Law*, p. 4

## 4. Religion Enforced by Law Is Religion Corrupted

Genuine faith operates by love and conviction alone. Civil force can produce hypocrites and conformists; it can never produce a Christian. When the church reaches for the arm of the state, she confesses she has lost the power of the Spirit. This is why separation **protects the church as much as the state.** James Madison, architect of the First Amendment, wrote in 1822:

“Religion and Government will both exist in greater purity the less they are mixed together.” — Madison, letter to Edward Livingston, July 10, 1822

## 5. The Uniform Lesson of History: The Union of Church and State Always Produces Persecution

This is the central thesis of *The Two Republics*, Jones's 900-page comparison of the two great republics of history — Rome and the United States. In its preface, Jones stated the contrast in the book's most famous passage:

“The principle of Rome in all its phases is that religion and government are inseparable. The principle of the government of the United States is that religion is essentially distinct and totally separate from civil government, and entirely exempt from its cognizance. The principle of Rome is the abject slavery of the mind; the principle of the United States of America is the absolute freedom of the mind.” — *The Two Republics*, Preface

The historical record he assembled:

- **Rome, fourth century:** Constantine enacted the first civil Sunday law (March 7, A.D. 321). The church, courting imperial power, obtained religious legislation. Within generations came ecclesiastical supremacy, the persecution of “heretics,” and centuries of religious tyranny — the first republic destroyed by the union of church and state. Jones devoted entire chapters to this: “The Union of Church and State,” “The Original Sunday Legislation,” “The Church Usurps the Civil Authority.”
- **Colonial America:** wherever churches were established by law, there was persecution — Baptists whipped in Virginia, Quakers hanged in Boston, Roger Williams banished from Massachusetts.
- **The United States, 1885–1896:** Seventh-day Adventists were fined, jailed, and sentenced to chain gangs in Tennessee, Arkansas, and other states under Sunday laws — for quietly working on their farms on Sunday after keeping the Bible Sabbath. Religious persecution on American soil, in the name of Christian morality.

Jones's conclusion: it is not *which* religion unites with the state that determines the outcome; it is the *union itself*. Every union of religion and civil power, of whatever creed, ends in the persecution of dissenters.

## 6. No Majority Has Rights Over Any Conscience

The rights of the people (*The Rights of the People*) are **individual and inalienable** rights, not majority privileges. A majority of ninety-nine percent has no more authority over the conscience of a single individual than a lone tyrant has. The First Amendment exists precisely to place conscience beyond the reach of any vote. A Christian majority that employs the state betrays Christianity and the republic at once.

## 7. Civility, Not Morality: The Limit of Civil Law

Jones distinguished between **morality** (man's relation to God — beyond the reach of law) and **civility** (relations between men — the proper object of law). Two of the section headings of his Senate argument state it plainly: “The Civil Power Enforces Civility” and “Earthly Governments Civil, Not Moral.” The state punishes theft not because it is sin, but

because it violates a neighbor's right. When the state attempts to enforce religious morality as such, it makes itself the arbiter of sin — a role belonging to God alone. As another of Jones's headings declares: "Only God Can Enforce the Decalogue."

## 8. Why the Founders Established the Separation

The founders were not enemies of religion; many were devout believers. They established separation because **they knew history**:

- They came out of centuries of European wars of religion and recent colonial persecutions.
- **Roger Williams** (1644), a Christian minister banished by a colonial establishment, called for a "hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world" — to protect the church.
- **Jefferson** drafted the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom (enacted 1786), which declares that "Almighty God hath created the mind free," and enacts:  
"That no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief." — Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, 1786
- **Madison**, in his *Memorial and Remonstrance* (1785), argued that religion is a matter between man and his Creator, prior to all claims of civil society, and warned that the same authority which can establish Christianity may establish one sect above all others. Late in life he confirmed the constitutional design: "Strongly guarded... is the separation between religion and Government in the Constitution of the United States" (Madison, "Detached Memoranda"). And writing to Baptist churches in North Carolina, he described himself as "having always regarded the practical distinction between Religion and Civil Government as essential to the purity of both."
- **The Virginia Baptists**, persecuted under the established church, were Madison's and Jefferson's decisive allies — separation was the achievement of *believers*, not skeptics.
- **Article VI of the Constitution**: "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust" — the only mention of religion in the original text, and it is an exclusion. Jones applied this clause rigorously in *The Two Republics* (pp. 801ff.), arguing that even indirect religious tests violate it.
- **The First Amendment (1791)**: its two clauses — no establishment, and free exercise — form a single shield. To weaken one is to weaken the other.
- **Jefferson to the Danbury Baptists (1802)**: the First Amendment built "a wall of separation between Church & State."

To claim that separation derives from modern atheistic ideology is to invert history: it was born of persecuted faith and of the Protestant conviction that conscience answers to God alone.

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## PART 2 — MODEL LETTERS

Eight different approaches. Each member chooses one, personalizes it, and sends it.

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### LETTER 1 — The Two Jurisdictions (Jones’s central argument)

#### **Subject: Public Comment on Draft Report — Civil Government Has No Jurisdiction Over Duties Owed to God**

Dear Members of the Religious Liberty Commission,

I write as a Seventh-day Adventist Christian, heir to a religious liberty tradition articulated by Alonzo T. Jones, who testified before the United States Senate in 1888 against national Sunday legislation.

Jones opened that testimony with a principle my church still holds: “The principle upon which we stand is that civil government is civil, and has nothing to do in the matter of legislation, with religious observances in any way.” He grounded it in the words of Christ Himself — “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21) — and explained: “In this the Saviour certainly separated that which pertains to Caesar from that which pertains to God. We are not to render to Caesar that which pertains to God; we are not to render to God by Caesar that which is God’s.”

Our duties to our fellow men — respecting life, property, honesty — fall within the rightful jurisdiction of civil government. Our duties to God — worship, devotion, conscience — belong to God alone. As Jones told the Senate: “We deny, forever, the right of any civil government to legislate in anything that pertains to men’s duty to God under the first four commandments.”

Several recommendations in the draft report cross that boundary: directing the Department of Justice to reinterpret the Establishment Clause against church-state separation, supporting mandated Ten Commandments displays in public schools, and expanding government-sponsored religious instruction. However well-intentioned, each of these seats civil power in authority over duties owed to God.

My church remembers where that road leads: in the 1880s and 1890s, Adventists in this country were jailed and sentenced to chain gangs under Sunday laws enacted in the name of Christian morality.

I urge the Commission to revise its report to affirm that civil government’s jurisdiction ends where duties to God begin, and to defend both religion clauses of the First Amendment with equal vigor.

Respectfully, [Name, City, State]

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## LETTER 2 — The Founders' Intent

### **Subject: Public Comment — Separation of Church and State Is the Founders' Design, Not Modern Ideology**

Dear Members of the Religious Liberty Commission,

I respectfully challenge the draft report's suggestion that strict church-state separation derives from a modern secularist ideology. The historical record shows the opposite: separation was established by the founders, urged on them by devout believers.

Roger Williams, a Christian minister banished by a colonial religious establishment, called in 1644 for a wall of separation to protect the garden of the church from the wilderness of the world. The persecuted Baptists of Virginia — whipped and jailed under an established church — became James Madison's decisive allies. Madison's Memorial and Remonstrance (1785) argued that religion is a matter between man and his Creator, prior to all claims of civil society. Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom (1786) declared that Almighty God created the mind free, and enacted "that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever." The Constitution's only reference to religion, Article VI, commands that "no religious Test shall ever be required." The First Amendment then bound the federal government with two clauses that form a single shield: no establishment, and free exercise.

These men were not secularists imposing a "God is dead" philosophy. Madison himself, reviewing the American experiment, concluded that "religion and Government will both exist in greater purity the less they are mixed together" (letter to Edward Livingston, 1822), and described the "practical distinction between Religion and Civil Government as essential to the purity of both."

I urge the Commission to remove recommendations that would weaken the Establishment Clause and instead to honor the founders' actual design: a government with no authority over religion, and a religion free from government.

Respectfully, [Name, City, State]

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## LETTER 3 — The Warning of History (the thesis of *The Two Republics*)

### **Subject: Public Comment — Every Union of Church and State Has Ended in Persecution**

Dear Members of the Religious Liberty Commission,

History offers one unbroken lesson on the union of religion and civil power: it ends in the persecution of those the majority calls heretics.

In 1891, Alonzo T. Jones published *The Two Republics*, a nine-hundred-page study comparing Rome and the United States. His conclusion is stated in its preface: "The principle of Rome in all its phases is that religion and government are inseparable. The

principle of the government of the United States is that religion is essentially distinct and totally separate from civil government, and entirely exempt from its cognizance. The principle of Rome is the abject slavery of the mind; the principle of the United States of America is the absolute freedom of the mind.”

The record supports him. In the fourth century, the church courted the Roman Empire and obtained the first civil Sunday law under Constantine in A.D. 321. Within generations, that alliance produced ecclesiastical supremacy, the persecution of dissenters, and centuries of religious tyranny. In colonial America, wherever churches were established by law, Baptists were whipped, Quakers were hanged, and dissenting ministers were imprisoned. And in the 1880s and 1890s, Seventh-day Adventists were fined, jailed, and sentenced to chain gangs in Tennessee and Arkansas under Sunday laws — American citizens persecuted on American soil in the name of Christian morality.

The lesson is not that any particular church is dangerous. It is that the union itself is dangerous, whatever the creed. Power entrusted to enforce religion will always be used against someone’s conscience — and the persecuted are always the minorities of their day.

The draft report proposes to reinterpret the Establishment Clause, to litigate for mandatory religious displays in public schools, and to expand state-sponsored religious instruction. These are the first steps down a road whose end history has mapped in detail.

I urge the Commission to withdraw these recommendations and to affirm church-state separation as the proven safeguard of religious liberty for all.

Respectfully, [Name, City, State]

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## **LETTER 4 — The Adventist Testimony (lived experience)**

### **Subject: Public Comment — My Church Was Persecuted Under Religious Laws in America; Do Not Rebuild That Road**

Dear Members of the Religious Liberty Commission,

I am a Seventh-day Adventist. For my church, religious persecution in America is not a hypothesis — it is family history.

Between 1885 and 1896, scores of Adventists were prosecuted under state Sunday laws. Men were fined, imprisoned, and sentenced to labor on chain gangs alongside criminals — for the crime of quietly plowing their fields or working in their shops on Sunday, after having rested on the Bible Sabbath. These laws were defended, then as now, as expressions of the nation’s Christian morality.

In 1888, our representative A. T. Jones testified before the Senate against a national Sunday-rest bill. He warned even the religious majority that supported it: “No man can allow any legislation in behalf of the religion, or the religious observances, in which he himself believes, without forfeiting his own religious freedom.” That principle — not

hostility to faith — is why we have defended the separation of church and state for 140 years, through the American Sentinel of Jones’s day and Liberty magazine in ours.

I commend the report’s support for workplace religious accommodation, which protects Sabbath-keepers, and its concern for conscience rights. But I urge the Commission to reconsider the recommendations that would weaken the Establishment Clause, mandate religious displays in schools, and expand government-sponsored religious instruction. Laws favoring majority religious practice always fall hardest on religious minorities — we bear the scars that prove it.

Protect free exercise for all, and keep the state forever out of the business of religion. The two commitments stand or fall together.

Respectfully, [Name, City, State]

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## **LETTER 5 — The Purity of Religion (the evangelical case for separation)**

### **Subject: Public Comment — Separation Protects the Church; State Sponsorship Corrupts It**

Dear Members of the Religious Liberty Commission,

I write as an evangelical Protestant who believes the gospel needs no help from Caesar.

Genuine faith operates by love and conviction alone. Civil power can compel outward conformity; it can produce hypocrites; it can never produce a single Christian. When the church reaches for the arm of the state, she confesses that she has lost confidence in the arm of the Lord. James Madison observed that “religion and Government will both exist in greater purity the less they are mixed together” — and American history has vindicated him. Precisely because no church here has been established, faith in America has flourished as nowhere else in the Western world. Madison himself noted that after Virginia ended its establishment, the devotion of the people “manifestly increased by the total separation of the church from the State” (letter to Robert Walsh, 1819).

State-mandated Ten Commandments displays and government-sponsored religious instruction do not honor Scripture; they cheapen it, reducing the sacred to civic wallpaper and making the state the interpreter of God’s law. (Which version of the Decalogue would the state post — the Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish numbering? The question itself shows the state deciding religious controversies it has no competence to decide.)

I therefore ask the Commission to strike the recommendations that entangle government with religious observance, and to trust the gospel to do what it has always done best when left free: persuade.

Respectfully, [Name, City, State]

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## LETTER 6 — The Rights of the People (individual rights vs. the majority)

### **Subject: Public Comment — No Majority Has Rights Over Any Individual's Conscience**

Dear Members of the Religious Liberty Commission,

The rights protected by the First Amendment are individual and inalienable. They are not privileges distributed by majorities.

The Declaration of Independence teaches that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. From this follows a decisive principle: no person can delegate to government a power he does not himself possess. I have no authority over my neighbor's conscience; therefore I cannot confer such authority upon the state — and neither can a hundred million citizens voting together. Any governmental power over religion is thus not a just power but a usurped one.

This is why conscience was placed beyond the reach of any vote. A majority of ninety-nine percent has no more rightful authority over the conscience of one dissenter than a lone tyrant has. And as A. T. Jones warned the Senate in 1888, the danger extends even to the majority itself: "No man can allow any legislation in behalf of the religion, or the religious observances, in which he himself believes, without forfeiting his own religious freedom." The precedent that empowers today's majority will bind it when it becomes tomorrow's minority.

The draft report's recommendations — reinterpreting the Establishment Clause, promoting mandatory religious displays, expanding state religious instruction — all rest on the premise that a religious majority may use civil power to advance its faith. That premise is false, and it is dangerous to every American.

I urge the Commission to ground its final report in the inalienable rights of individuals, not the preferences of present majorities.

Respectfully, [Name, City, State]

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## LETTER 7 — The Ten Commandments in Schools (specific critique)

### **Subject: Public Comment — State-Mandated Decalogue Displays Make Government the Arbiter of Sacred Law**

Dear Members of the Religious Liberty Commission,

I hold the Ten Commandments to be the sacred, binding law of God. It is precisely for that reason that I oppose the report's recommendation that the Department of Justice support litigation for state laws mandating their display in public schools.

First, the Decalogue's opening commandments concern duties owed to God alone — worship, reverence, the Sabbath. When the state posts and promotes these by force of law, it assumes authority over the first table of God's law, a jurisdiction no civil government

possesses. As A. T. Jones argued before the United States Senate in 1888: “We deny, forever, the right of any civil government to legislate in anything that pertains to men’s duty to God under the first four commandments.” One of the section headings of his published argument says it in five words: “Only God Can Enforce the Decalogue.”

Second, the state cannot post the Ten Commandments without first deciding religious questions: Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish traditions number and translate the commandments differently. A mandated display necessarily adopts one tradition’s version, making the government an arbiter among faiths — the very evil the Establishment Clause forbids.

Third, coerced familiarity is not conversion. Children compelled to view sacred text as state-issued décor learn to regard it as ordinary, not holy. Scripture is honored by free hearts, homes, and churches — not by statute.

If the Commission wishes to strengthen the moral formation of children, let it champion parental rights, religious school choice, and robust free exercise — all without placing God’s law under Caesar’s seal.

Respectfully, [Name, City, State]

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## LETTER 8 — Commend and Caution (the balanced approach)

### **Subject: Public Comment — Strengthen Free Exercise for All; Do Not Weaken the Establishment Clause**

Dear Members of the Religious Liberty Commission,

Thank you for your labor on behalf of religious liberty. As a Seventh-day Adventist, I warmly commend several elements of the draft report: robust workplace religious accommodation (essential to Sabbath-keepers like me), conscience protections in health care, defense of houses of worship, and streamlined religious accommodation in the military. These strengthen the free exercise of religion for Americans of every faith, and I support them.

Precisely because I cherish free exercise, I must respectfully oppose the recommendations that would erode its twin safeguard, the Establishment Clause: the proposed reinterpretation of church-state separation, support for mandated Ten Commandments displays in public schools, and expanded government-sponsored religious instruction.

The two religion clauses are one shield. Non-establishment is what makes free exercise secure: a government with no authority to sponsor religion has no authority to suppress it. A. T. Jones, testifying before the Senate in 1888, stated the principle on which my church still stands: “Civil government is civil, and has nothing to do in the matter of legislation, with religious observances in any way.” History confirms it everywhere it has been tested — from fourth-century Rome, to colonial New England, to the Sunday-law prosecutions

that sent members of my own church to chain gangs in the 1890s. The state that favors the majority's faith today acquires the precedent to burden the minority's faith tomorrow.

I ask the Commission to finalize a report that advances every free exercise protection in the draft while removing every measure that entangles government with religion. That combination — and only that combination — is full religious liberty.

Respectfully, [Name, City, State]

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### PART 3 — PRACTICAL INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Choose ONE letter** and adapt it: add your name, city, and one or two personal sentences (your profession, your experience with Sabbath accommodation, your family's history in the church). Individual voices carry more weight than identical texts.
  2. **Send to RLC@usdoj.gov by Monday, July 13, 2026.**
  3. **Do not include** information you would not want published — comments are posted on the Commission's website (personally identifying information is redacted, but be prudent).
  4. **Tone:** firm on principle, respectful in form. No partisan attacks — the argument is constitutional, historical, and biblical.
  5. **Distribute the eight letters** among different groups in the church so the Commission receives the full breadth of the argument: divine jurisdiction, the founders, the warning of history, the Adventist testimony, the purity of religion, individual rights, the specific Decalogue critique, and the balanced approach.
  6. **Coordinate with PARR** (the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty department) of your Conference/Union and with *Liberty* magazine — the church's institutional submission and members' individual letters reinforce one another.
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### Source Note on Quotations

- A. T. Jones, *The National Sunday Law: Argument of Alonzo T. Jones before the United States Senate Committee on Education and Labor, Washington, D.C., Dec. 13, 1888* (American Sentinel, 1889) — quotations from pp. 4, 11, 19.
- A. T. Jones, *The Two Republics; or, Rome and the United States of America* (1891) — quotation from the Preface.
- James Madison, letter to Edward Livingston, July 10, 1822; letter to Robert Walsh, March 2, 1819; "Detached Memoranda."
- Thomas Jefferson (drafter), Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, enacted January 16, 1786.
- U.S. Constitution, Article VI; First Amendment (1791).

All quoted works are in the public domain.