

**CLOSING ARGUMENT:**

**What Jefferson Really Meant by Separation of Church and State**  
**5 INSIGHTS EVERY AMERICAN NEEDS TO KNOW**



# Closing Argument: What Jefferson Really Meant by Separation of Church and State

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5 INSIGHTS EVERY AMERICAN NEEDS TO KNOW



On April 13, 2019 Americans will celebrate Thomas Jefferson's 276<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Even though he was born long ago, Jefferson's legacy - and his long record of outstanding accomplishments - continue to impact America's religious and political discourse to this very day.

Specifically, Jefferson's ideas and, of course, his prolific writings, still have a profound influence as it relates to religious liberty.

Likely, most Americans associate Jefferson as the author of the 1776 Declaration of Independence. But in addition to that foundational document, a few years later, in 1779, Jefferson wrote the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which became a source of inspiration for the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Indeed, scholars, historians and legal experts consider Jefferson a distinctive figure during the founding of the United States of America, as well as a pioneer of religious liberty and a bold defender of freedom as a whole.

Today, Americans still remember Jefferson and his legacy on our political and religious discourse - and they especially associate him with one common phrase that we commonly encounter: the wall of separation between church and state.

What exactly is the *wall of separation*?

It's a common question that many Americans ask.

Broadly speaking, the wall of separation refers to the idea that government and religion are two separate institutions, and that government should not establish a national religion or church.

Sadly, however, there are people in certain circles who have twisted and turned Jefferson's wall of separation of church and state into a distant distortion from its original meaning. They argue that government and religion should never, under any circumstances be mixed together.

Even worse, they've used their distorted interpretation of the phrase as a club to punish any person of faith who dares to bring their faith and religious beliefs into the public square. But is that what Jefferson really meant when he wrote those words?

What do his other writings on religion and religious liberty reveal about what he intended to communicate through that phrase?

In this exclusive report, we're taking a deeper look at 5 key quotes from Thomas Jefferson that will help you better understand the context behind the highly distorted wall of separation.

With this resource, you'll be equipped to reclaim the legacy of America's third president, and one of the greatest statesmen and proponents of religious liberty that the world has ever seen.

# The Wall of Separation

## What It Is and What It's Not

ABOVE ALL, EVERY AMERICAN MUST KNOW THIS CRITICAL FACT:

The phrase *separation of church and state* does not appear anywhere in the text of the U.S. Constitution, or in any of the 27 subsequent Amendments.

So, if it's not in the U.S. Constitution, where and when did the phrase originate?

To understand what Jefferson meant when he wrote the wall of separation phrase, we have to consider the context.

### Historical Context

After being elected President, a religious group in Connecticut – the Danbury Baptists – wrote Jefferson a congratulatory letter, praising him for being an advocate of religious liberty. Naturally, following their adulation of the President, they appealed for his intervention because they were concerned about Connecticut's weak religious liberty protections.

In 1802, Jefferson wrote a letter in response to the Danbury Baptists, in which we find the all-too familiar wall of separation phrase:



*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..."*

It's important to remember that the phrase comes from a letter. We find it in a piece of personal correspondence from Jefferson, not a binding government document or an official executive decree, and much less an adopted law or a constitutional amendment.

A careful reading of the letter shows that Jefferson is addressing the Danbury Baptists' request for federal involvement on a state religious matter. And though he was sympathetic to their request, Jefferson uses the metaphor of a wall to explain that the federal government could not get involved because it was a state issue.

Today, many opponents will take the wall of separation phrase from the Danbury Baptist letter and apply it liberally, claiming that the Constitution – and the First Amendment, in particular – completely separate religion and the civil state.

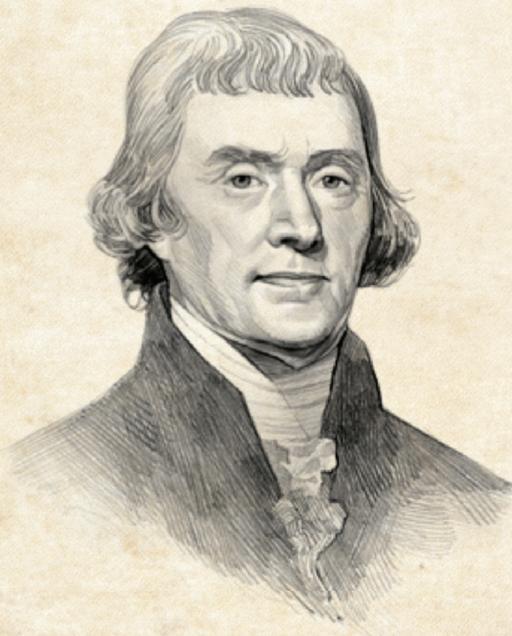
But when we look at history in the proper context, it's clear that the wall of separation of church and state is NOT a strict separation in which religion is to be systematically removed from public life.

Instead, the wall separation of church and state, as found in the Danbury Baptist letter, was Jefferson reinforcing the idea that:

- **People can freely believe and live out their faith, without the federal government interfering.**
- **States can govern and manage their own religious affairs, without the federal government interfering.**

When we study many of Jefferson's other writings, we see that he advocated separation in the sense that the federal government should not have the power to coerce citizens in regard to their religion. But we would be remiss to classify Jefferson as someone who never wanted, under any circumstances, to mix religion and government.

Let's take a look at several of those writings and what they reveal about Jefferson's views on religion and religious liberty – which are also going to help us see the bigger context of what Jefferson intended to convey through the wall of separation phrase.



# 5 Insights from Jefferson on Religion and Religious Liberty

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Jefferson's wall of separation is perhaps one of his most widely known statements.

However, limiting and confining Jefferson to this one quote robs us of seeing the full picture and extent of his legacy.

Hearing the rest of what Jefferson had to say will help you understand what he actually believed about our most fundamental freedom, as well as what he intended to communicate through the wall of separation phrase.

If you ever find yourself in a situation where you have to clarify what Jefferson actually meant by separation between church and state, then you'll want to be familiar with these 5 important statements that Jefferson made regarding religion and religious liberty.

## 1

Jefferson authored the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, a statement about the freedom of religion, conscience, and the role of government. In 1786, the Virginia General Assembly adopted this particular document. It is considered the forerunner and a source of inspiration for the religious freedom protections that would be written into the First Amendment.

In that document, Jefferson wrote:

**“We the General Assembly of Virginia do enact that no man shall... suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.”**

**Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, 1779**

There are a few key points we can extract from this statement.

For one, Jefferson clearly articulates that government should not punish citizens because of their religious beliefs or for living according to their faith or deeply-held convictions. Doing so, he said, is a violation of their natural, God-given rights.

Additionally, Jefferson emphasizes that people would have the liberty to profess – that is to publicly express – their religious opinions and beliefs. Known to be a careful and thoughtful writer, Jefferson likely utilized the

word “profess” intentionally as a way of communicating the idea that people have a right not just to believe and hold religious views, but also to outwardly express and proclaim them in the public sphere.

In a culture that’s increasingly hostile against faith, this quote serves well as a counter punch. Jefferson’s writing conveys this core principle:

**• If you’re a person of faith or an American who lives consistent with your beliefs and your conscience, then you can certainly bring those beliefs into the public square without the government punishing you for doing so.**

## 2

In 1808, Jefferson wrote a letter to Reverend Samuel Miller to give further clarification that the federal government had no business telling religious groups what to believe or what not to believe. Here is a short quote from that letter:

**“I consider the government of the U.S. as interdicted [prohibited] by the Constitution from intermeddling with religious institutions, their doctrines, discipline, or exercises. This results not only from the provision that no law shall be made respecting the establishment, or free exercise, of religion, but from that also which reserves to the states the powers not delegated to the U.S.”**

Letter to Rev. Samuel Miller, 1808

Keep in mind that Jefferson wrote this letter after his wall of separation letter to the Danbury Baptists.

That’s important because, in his letter to Rev. Miller, Jefferson essentially gives a deeper explanation of what he meant in his prior letter to the Danbury Baptists. He notes that the government of the United States – that is,

the federal government – is forbidden from meddling in the internal affairs of churches, houses of worship and other religious institutions.

Jefferson then follows it up by giving a clarification of what the First Amendment was designed to do, which was to ensure that Americans could live out their faith freely and openly, and to prevent the federal government from establishing a national church.

## 3

The same year that he wrote to Rev. Samuel Miller, Jefferson wrote another letter, this time to the Virginia Baptist Associations of Chesterfield, in which he stated:

**“In reviewing the history of the times through which we have past, no portion of it gives greater satisfaction, on reflection, than that which presents the efforts of the friends of religious freedom, & the success with which they were crowned. We have solved, by fair experiment, the great & interesting question Whether freedom of religion is compatible with order in government and obedience to the laws; & we have experienced the quiet as well as the comfort which results from leaving every one to profess freely & openly those principles of religion which are the inductions of his own reason, & the serious convictions of his own enquiries.”**

Letter to the Virginia Baptist Association of Chesterfield, 1808

At some point, you’ll probably come across someone who argues that religious liberty is just an excuse to discriminate, or who suggests that religious people are using religious liberty as a weapon to impose their will or forcefully shove their religious views onto others.

Their argument is partially based on a misguided view about Jefferson’s wall of separation.

They claim that the wall of separation is necessary to keep

# 5 Insights from Jefferson on Religion and Religious Liberty

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people of faith from monopolizing political power. Without the wall, we'd be left with an intolerant and bigoted America, where a majority faith would punish religious minorities and push them to the margins of society.

But when you look at the quote above, we can draw a different conclusion, and instead, see that Jefferson would most likely have disagreed with their logic.

First of all, Jefferson notes that it took a significant amount of work to figure out that religious liberty – and allowing religious people to freely live and express themselves in our society – actually makes for good, orderly government and a better society.

Based on his quote, he saw religious liberty as a key part of our country being able to run smoothly. Therefore, it's likely that Jefferson would not have advocated to keep religion or religious people completely out of America's governmental institutions.

In a way, Jefferson was giving himself a little bit of credit. He expressed to a religious group that protecting religious liberty in the Constitution was turning out to be a good thing for everyone. In essence, that it was beneficial for all Americans to allow people of any faith to freely and openly live out their faith.

## 4

The next year, Jefferson penned a letter to Richard Douglas and the Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Connecticut, in which he wrote:

**“No provision in our constitution ought to be dearer to man, than that which protects the rights of conscience against the enterprises of the civil authority.”**

Letter to Richard Douglas, 1809

And in another similar letter a few years later, Jefferson wrote the following to Richard Rush:

## 5

**“I have considered it [religion] as a matter between every man and his maker, in which no other, & far less the public, had a right to intermeddle.”**

Letter to Richard Rush, 1813

In both of these statements, we see Jefferson addressing one important idea. Jefferson explains the inherent connection between religious freedom and the freedom of conscience, which is the freedom that all Americans have to believe what they want to believe, and to live according to their deepest convictions.

And that's a right protected by the Constitution, whether someone is religious, whether they belong to a particular church or faith group, whether they're atheist or agnostic, et cetera.

Once again, we note how Jefferson expresses an all-too important principle that - unlike the wall of separation - is found in the Constitution: that government cannot arbitrarily tell Americans what to believe or not to believe, or to stop citizens from living out their faith or conducting their lives, work and activities in accordance with their faith.

And above all, it's interesting to highlight that Jefferson refers to this as the most important protection that we can find in the U.S. Constitution.

## Conclusion

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Before his passing, Jefferson designed his own tombstone to ensure he was remembered for three specific accomplishments: authorship of the Declaration of Independence, authorship of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom and Father of the University of Virginia.

So we must ask ourselves: If the wall of separation was Jefferson's foremost contribution, wouldn't he have chosen to be remembered by that at the end of his life?

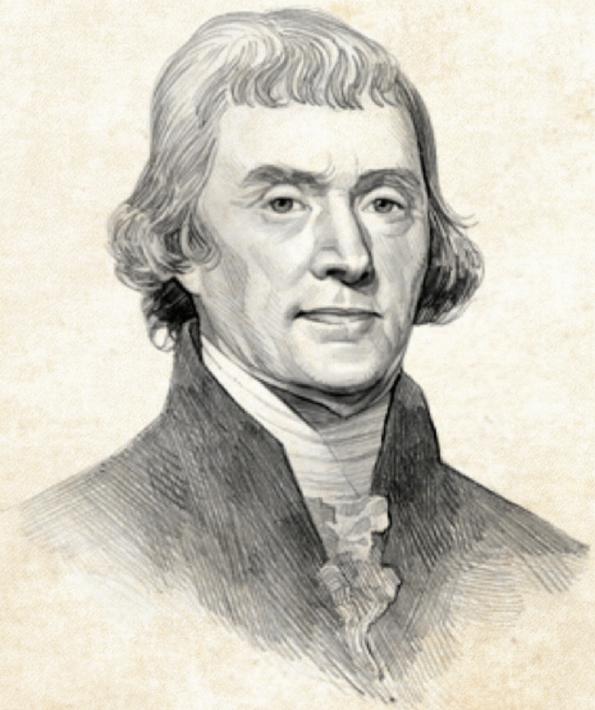
Interestingly, Jefferson wanted to be remembered for something more - as being someone who fought for the God-given right of religious liberty.

Despite the bulk of historical evidence, including the volumes of Jefferson's writings, as well as his own actions as President, many opponents of religious liberty

stubbornly continue to distort the wall of separation and its meaning.

And because their hijacking of the wall of separation is not going to end anytime soon, we at First Liberty want you to have this useful resource at your disposal. Whenever you come across those who staunchly want religion cleansed from the public, you'll be ready to counter them with the facts - that the wall of separation was never meant to remove religion and religious people from government or from public life.

Today, Americans like you can commemorate and honor Jefferson's legacy and his cherished inheritance to our country - especially on religious liberty - by putting a stop to those who have twisted and distorted his words.



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