

James M. Dunn, religious liberty advocate, dies at 83: People

by [Cherilyn Crowe](#) in the [August 5, 2015](#) issue

James M. Dunn, who led the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty for nearly two decades, died of a heart attack July 4 at age 83. He was known for his stalwart defense of religious liberty, colorful turns of phrase, and bow ties.

“The 20th century had no greater champion of religious freedom—of conscience—than James Dunn,” said Oliver “Buzz” Thomas, who was general counsel of the organization under Dunn. “James understood the dangers of civil religion.”

In his career Dunn also served as a pastor and professor of Christianity and public policy at the School of Divinity at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Dunn shepherded the Baptist Joint Committee through the 1980s and '90s, during the split in the Southern Baptist Convention. Although in 1991 the BJC lost all financial support from the SBC—previously its primary funding source—Dunn expanded backing from other Baptist bodies.

“Coming to the nation’s capital the same month Ronald Reagan was inaugurated as president, James instantly was thrown into battle with a new administration committed to a fundamental alteration in church-state relations,” said Stan Hastey, who worked with Dunn at the BJC.

Dunn opposed a Reagan-supported amendment that would have encouraged government-sponsored prayer in schools.

“But James Dunn didn’t just say ‘no’ to bad ideas,” said Brent Walker, current BJC executive director. “He also worked to create constitutionally acceptable and common sense solutions.”

As an alternative to the prayer amendment, Dunn and the BJC supported allowing students to gather voluntarily before and after school for prayer and other religious exercises in club meetings, a view enshrined in the Equal Access Act of 1984.

In his first column for the BJC's magazine, Report from the Capital, Dunn wrote: "To translate the revealed message of God's love into public policy is a massive and sometimes tricky undertaking, but our generation is not the first to try. God's children have been bringing morality to public life for centuries. Christian social ethics is a well-developed discipline, not merely a collection of reactions to news reports." —Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty