

The Meaning of the Baptist Experience: Baptist Freedoms

*A sermon preached on Galatians 5:1 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on July 1, 2018*

As a Baptist pastor, I've heard my fair share of Baptist jokes — like the one about gathering 100 Baptists in a room to hear 200 opinions. Or the one from our wonderful and holy and faithful deacons who told of the two people talking, where one asks the other, “What would you be if you weren't a Baptist?,” to which the other responded: “Ashamed!” But perhaps my favorite comes from Alabama Baptist historian Wayne Flynt: “Everyone knows Baptists like to fight nearly as well as they like to sing and eat.”¹

We come to a two week exploration of our Baptist identity by way of those who have gone before us, those whose commitments to freedom and faithfulness in an uncoerced expression of Christianity have surely informed that which we have inherited. For no matter how long or how fervently you have claimed “Baptist” as part of your identity, you certainly remember some folks in your life who have shaped how you understand Baptists to be — like the childhood Sunday School teacher whose knowledge of scripture wove right into the cadence of her speech, or the fiery preacher lambasting anyone who would interfere with God's hand in your life; the denominational leader lamenting the heavy hand of the state prioritizing certain religious expressions over others, or the outlier whose proclamations made you wonder how the two of you could share space under the Baptist tent. Couple such relationships with a healthy heaping of homemade peach cobbler at a

¹ Wayne Flynt, *The Crafts of Preaching and Writing Baptist History*, p39.

church pot luck and ten verses of “Just As I Am,” and we can find ourselves reflecting on our Baptist heritage both theologically and culturally.

What I’ve just described is what my Baptist pastor, educator, and author grandfather Bill Hull called “the meaning of the Baptist experience.” A decade ago, he wrote a little booklet published by the Baptist History and Heritage Society called just that: “The Meaning of the Baptist Experience.” For Baptists, he says, religion is viewed “primarily as a reality to be *experienced* rather than a ritual to be enacted, as in Catholicism; a doctrine to be affirmed, as in Protestantism; or an ethic to be observed, as in Judaism.”² Thus, a religious experience, you see, is personal and particular, something that demands the engagement with all five senses and one’s full attention to God’s work in the world through the witness of scripture, the person of Jesus, and the movement of the Spirit. “It’s hard to put it into words,” we say, “you’ll just have to experience it for yourself.” Or in the words of 1st John, it’s that “which we have *heard*, which we have *seen* with our eyes, which we have *looked* upon and *touched* with our hands.”

So imagine with me if you will – the year is 1609, the place is England, and the spirit of reformation is still alive and well. With those 95 Theses in hand, Martin Luther has stormed the church to break its authoritative grip on reading and interpreting scripture, delivering it from the hierarchy of the papacy into the hands of the people. Then came leaders like John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, who longed to return the church back to its New Testament origins and who pressed against not just the authority of the church but the authority of the state too. To them, choosing one’s faith was a matter of

² William E. Hull, *The Meaning of the Baptist Experience*, p7.

personal conviction not state coercion. Thus, baptizing infants into the state-controlled Church of England before these boys and girls could make decisions of faith for themselves was crucial enough to their whole understanding of Christianity that it demanded protest. King James the First of England wanted no part of these “separatists” and “dissenters,” as they were derisively called, so in order to flee violent persecution at the hands of the state, a group of the separatists sought asylum in Holland. There, they were finally free to practice their faith as their consciences so dictated. So when John Smyth baptized himself in 1609, the first Baptist church was born.³

On the other side of the pond, nearly half of those 102 first travelers on the *Mayflower* identified as these religious Separatists. Leaders like Roger Williams who founded the colony later known as Rhode Island did so desiring it to be ‘a shelter for persons distressed of conscience.’⁴ His leadership among others ensured that the Baptist vision of a free state and a free church was secured in the very DNA of the United States. And as our new country began living into that reality, it was Baptists like John Leland who continued to insist on ‘the right of all people to think for themselves, no matter what the results might be.’⁵ And so you hear — from even our earliest days, the Baptist experience was one defined by *freedom*.

³ This very brief recap of the origin story of those first Baptists is compiled primarily from four sources: Bill Hull’s *The Meaning of the Baptist Experience*; Fisher Humphreys, *Baptist Theology*; Bill Leonard, *Baptist Ways and Baptist Questions, Baptist Answers*.

⁴ As quoted by Bill Leonard in *Baptist Ways*, p74.

⁵ Hull, p11.

III.

Perhaps it's why the Baptists have long found Galatians 5:1 to be a rallying cry so central to their understanding of the gospel. "For freedom Christ has set us free!" Paul writes to the church at Galatia. "Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

Those Galatians remembered the slavery of old, the bondage of the former gods that demanded their idolatry now freed with God's unbridled love of them and unconditional grace for them in Christ. They heard the rumblings of the Judaizers that would demand they be circumcised before being fully welcomed into the faith. But here Paul is clear — while freedom means liberation from the forces that enslave us, it does not mean liberation from the relationships to which we should be bound. To those Gentiles new to the faith, Paul says "you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only don't use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence — for "unrestrained permission to do whatever you please"⁶ — but *through love become slaves to one another.*" What God asked of them for such boundless welcome was love in return, and love of neighbor in response.

Pastor George Mason says this, "Independence from the rule of others can turn into a dependence on the rule of self. And that is not the direction of true freedom. If we are loving our neighbor as ourselves, freedom is neither dependence nor independence; it is interdependence. I am only as

⁶ Great quote from Robert A. Bryant's commentary, "Galatians 5:1, 13-25," *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3*, p187.

free as you are, because our lives are tied together in the body of Christ.”⁷ *For we have been crucified with Christ, right?*

For Baptists, this particular experience of freedom as interdependence on God in Christ within the body of believers is perhaps best described by historian Buddy Shurden who identified ‘four fragile freedoms’ as fundamentally central to the Baptist identity – Bible freedom, soul freedom, church freedom, and religious freedom.⁸ These four distinctives are directly informed first by our reading of scripture and exhortations like “for freedom Christ has set us free,” but also by our shared history of Smyth and Helwys, religious persecution and shelter for those distressed of conscience.

First for Baptists is **Bible freedom**, the “historic affirmation that the Bible, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, is to be central in the Christian life, and that all Christians have both the right and responsibility to study, interpret, and obey scripture.” Within this Bible freedom is the freedom we experience ‘*under*’ Christ. Meaning – we are to interpret the Bible within our personal experience under the authority of Jesus.⁹ But Bible freedom is also ‘*freedom for*’ the access of all people to its holy words *for* their unfolding obedience to God, ‘*freedom from*’ any religious authority, person or creed,

⁷ George Mason, “The Direction of Freedom,” a sermon preached among Wilshire Baptist Church on June 26, 2016, https://www.wilshirebc.org/download_file/view/3635/ .

⁸ Unless otherwise noted, any direct quote in these next several paragraphs on the four fragile freedoms comes directly from their definitions as described in the seminal work for Baptists – Walter B. Shurden’s *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms*, as timely in 2018 as it was when written 25 years ago in 1993!

⁹ This tenant of the faith has been affirmed again and again throughout our history, once even by our church’s former pastor Ralph Herring, who upon the occasion of Baptists in America’s 150th anniversary, led a committee of Southern Baptists in 1964 to create a statement called “Baptist Ideals” which opens with these words: “The ultimate source of Christian authority is Jesus Christ the Lord.” As quoted by Shurden, p11.

that would stand in the way of the individual's experience of God in Christ as revealed through scripture, and '*freedom of*' interpretation by each individual believer.

The second freedom for Baptists is **soul freedom**, that "inalienable right and responsibility of each person to engage with God without the imposition of creed, the interference of clergy, or the intervention of civil government." If you've hung around Baptists for any length of time, you may have alternately heard this described as 'soul competency' or 'the priesthood of the believer.' But regardless of the terminology used, each of these phrases is describing the foundational sacredness of the individual's personal *experience* of God. If every individual is created in the image of God, then each individual is competent under God to make decisions of moral, spiritual, and ethical implications. We recognize this, then, as we baptize believers, those who have not been coerced into faith or inherited without examination, but rather acknowledging through this outward, communal sign of an inward, personal grace that the response to the experience of God is a voluntary commitment uniquely shaped by the individual.

The third freedom for Baptists is **church freedom**, the affirmation that local churches are autonomous and free under the authority of Jesus to make their own decisions about all manner of things – worship, leadership, governance, mission, vision. Like several other sister denominations, Baptists are part of the long Protestant tradition called "free churches." By naming our freedom as individual churches to live into what John Claypool once called 'the shape of our obedience' as a local body of believers, Baptists honor the particularity of each local church. They recognize that what may work for a

147 year-old congregation in an urban center of a Southeastern midsize city doing ministry out its front door and its back door like ours, may not be what is needed for a brand-new church plant in suburban D. C., or a farmland family congregation in rural Kentucky. Local church autonomy means that there's no bishop or convention or even a pastor like me dictating how we are to organize ourselves as a church; rather, we do so congregationally, expecting full participation from all of us within. Our particular church's freedom to make its own decisions also gives us the freedom to affiliate with other churches in order to do together what we cannot do alone, efforts like sending missionaries around the world or creating theological schools to train future generations of our pastors and leaders.

And finally, the fourth freedom for Baptists is **religious freedom**, that bedrock principle that led Smyth and Helwys to imagine a new way of being Christian, which says that we are to have "freedom of religion, freedom from religion, and freedom for religion, insisting that Caesar is not Christ and Christ is not Caesar." Freedom of religion demands full religious liberty for all faiths, not just religious toleration for some faiths or our faith. Thus freedom from religion says that 'one's right not to believe is as sacred as one's right to believe.' And freedom for religion maintains that in order for religious liberty to best be exercised and protected, the church and the state must be separate, neither interfering with the mission or work of the other but rather

moving in parallel motion on either side of the metaphorical ‘wall of separation’ between them.¹⁰

Now you might wonder how these four fragile freedoms lift off the page and enter into our Baptist experience, so let me give you some examples.

By exercising our Bible freedom, we have Sunday School classes and small groups who meet all throughout the week, filled with individuals who open the scripture and share their unique interpretation of what they hear within. As the pastor, I don’t sit with every Sunday School teacher or class member each week and tell him or her how to read that week’s scripture. I don’t control what interpretation is voiced, and I may not even agree with what’s being shared!

By exercising our soul freedom, we answer with Peter Jesus’s personal question, “who do you say that I am?” with the personal confession we claim in baptism, “Jesus Christ is Lord.” We may argue with one another’s opinions on the nature of God, or the problem of sin, but when we live into soul freedom, we cannot argue the personal experience an individual has had with the risen Christ, chosen not coerced.

By exercising our church freedom, we are able to call a minister, or tear down two buildings, or design our worship, or clarify a mission and vision, or reshape our governance, or go out and serve the community as we the people of First Baptist Church on Fifth in 2018 feel so led. Even though we

¹⁰ Former Baptist Joint Committee Executive Director Brent Walker has helpful things to say about religious freedom. Many of these resources can be found on the BJC’s website (<http://bjconline.org>), and the one which assisted me most was his sermon “The Top Five Myths of the Separation of Church and State” found here: <http://bjconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Top-5-myths-of-separation-of-church-and-state-1.pdf>

share part of a name and a home, that makes us different from Ardmore, or Knollwood, or Northwest, or Peacehaven, or Calvary.

By exercising our religious freedom, we gather here today, without threat of persecution or oppression, in order to freely worship the God we claim. And because it means so much to us to do so, we partner with organizations like the Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty to raise our voices when we see the state trespassing on that freedom for anyone of any faith or no faith.

I'm sure you hear in these freedoms the inherent risk that comes when loosing the Bible or the church or the soul or the state. And I hope you hear too the responsibility to exercise these with care, "standing firm," as Paul exhorts us, "to not submit again to the yoke of slavery." For "where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom!"

IV.

At the very first meeting of the Baptist World Alliance in 1905, a man named John D. Freeman offered words that still ring true today: "The world has not outgrown the need of Baptist principles. It was never in greater need of them than it is today. Our principles have not yet manifested the full force that is in them. New light and power are to break forth from them in the days to come. Loose them and let them go."¹¹

So in the spirit of the one who for freedom has set us free, may too we be a people, formed by our experience of the risen Christ, who are sent forth into the world liberated and liberating through that same freedom. May God loose us for the sake of the truth that sets all people free! Amen.

¹¹ As quoted by Shurden, p55.