

Four Fragile Freedoms: Bible Freedom

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Spilman Memorial Baptist Church

May 1, 2022

Text: 2 Timothy 3:1-5, 10-17

Purpose: To help the congregation understand that Baptists have, over the centuries, been an independent and a dependent people. Our past has been marked by dissidents who broke from the norm and yet were still dependent upon the larger body of Christ. One of our freedoms is biblical freedom.

A teenage boy had just gotten his driver's license and inquired of his father as to when they could discuss his use of the car.

His father said he'd make a deal with his son: "You bring your grades up from a C to a B average, study your Bible a little, and get your hair cut. Then we'll talk about the car."



The boy thought about that for a moment, decided he'd settle for the offer, and they agreed on it.

After about six weeks his father said, "Son, you've brought your grades up and I've observed that you have been studying your Bible, but I'm disappointed you haven't gotten your hair cut."

The boy said, "You know, Dad, I've been thinking about that, and I've noticed in my studies of the Bible that Samson

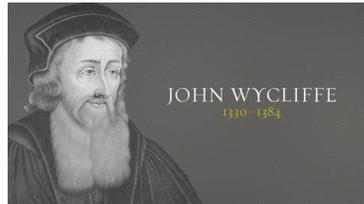
had long hair, John the Baptist had long hair, Moses had long hair...and there's even strong evidence that Jesus had long hair."

To this his father replied, "Did you also notice they all walked everywhere they went?"¹

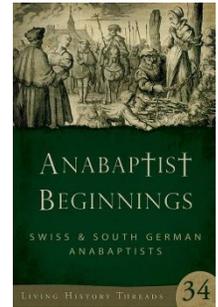
As 21st Century Christians we forget how many people struggled to get us the Bible we have today and the information in it. We take for granted that we have God's story to mankind and how through faith in Jesus Christ we can have life eternal.



We also take for granted the freedoms we experience. So many people through the years have given their lives for the freedoms we are getting ready to discuss over the next four weeks. People have died simply for translating the Bible into the language of the common person. One of the first bible translators, John Wycliffe took the bold step of putting the bible in the common person language. Prior to that, the only Bible the people had was written in Latin. John Wycliffe's impact was so great and the Catholic Church had such a hatred for him, that they had his bones dug up, burned them, and dumped them in the river.



Anabaptists (re-baptizers) stood on an important issue we take for granted today – baptism. They rejected infant baptism as unscriptural and embraced believer's baptism. During the early years of Baptists, many were martyred simply because they were a Baptist. As hard as it is for us to comprehend, we enjoy the freedoms today because others sacrificed their lives so we could have the freedom to worship as we wish.



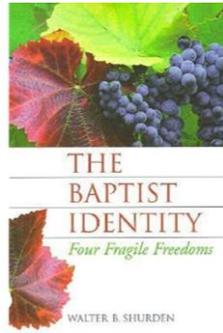
We also take for granted the freedoms we have here in America.

Six years ago, I took the bold stand of running for a political office in Washington DC. I felt there was a serious storm facing our nation and I felt compelled to run for the US House of Representatives. I felt that God was calling me to step up and make a stand for righteousness among a group of double minded ungodly leaders. Even though I was not successful in my bid for political office, I remain committed to step up, whenever called upon, to be a defender of freedom.



When Jeremiah returned to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, the enemies attacked them day and night. As they rebuilt the walls, the men would have a sword in one hand to defend themselves from the ever-present enemies, while helping place the stones back in place with the other hand. They would often take turns defending the gaps in the wall while others worked feverously.

Today, we begin a four-part sermon series. We will begin with Biblical Freedom. Over the next few weeks, I want us to consider Four Fragile Freedoms that are precious and dear to Baptists. These “Four Fragile Freedoms” include – Biblical Freedom, Soul Freedom, Church Freedom, and Religious Freedom. These four freedoms are not original to me. Walter B. Shurden has written an excellent book titled, “The Baptist Identity – Four Fragile Freedoms.”² Walter Shurden is probably the most well-known writer of Baptist history and interpreter of Southern Baptist life.

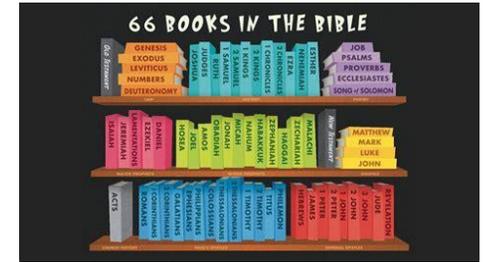


What I wanted us to explore for a few moments this morning is “What do we as Baptists believe?” Who are we? Where did we come from? And what is unique about the Baptist belief concerning Biblical Freedom.

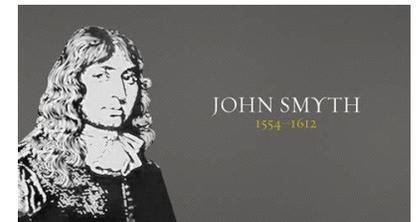


If we were to take a poll here this morning about where we began our spiritual pilgrimage, we would have divergent opinions and backgrounds. Over the years, I have found many people in Baptist churches that have come from a wide variety of faith backgrounds. Those backgrounds include, Mormon, Methodist, Primitive Baptist, Free Will Baptist, Holiness, Pentecostal, Episcopal, Lutheran, Catholic, and even a few rare individuals who have had a totally Baptist background. In many ways we are a product of a combination of these. In many ways, the distinctions between them are fading in most people’s minds. I still say what we believe is important!

First, I would like to say that Baptists do not have a monopoly on the Bible. As Baptists, we claim the same sixty-six books of the bible as the rest of the Protestant Christian community does. These books were accepted back in the fourth century as the accepted canon of scripture. Not only have Baptists inherited this text; we have also inherited many of our key doctrines and beliefs from others. There is no particular belief about God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit that is “Baptist” only. Even classic teachings that are often dubbed “Baptist” are really gifts from the early reformers in the sixteenth century – Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin. We did not invent “Salvation by Grace” or the “Priesthood of believers.” These doctrines began long before Baptists ever came on the scene.



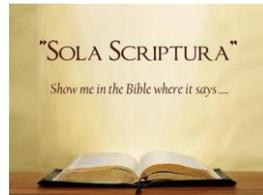
Most Baptist scholars trace our history back to a man named John Smyth. He was an Anglican clergyman in the Church of England. He became increasingly dissatisfied with the church and joined a group of Separatists in the town of Gainsborough. (They taught the church and state should be separated from the Anglican Church.) In 1606 he drew up a brief covenant for this group. William Bradford, one of that group and later a Pilgrim Father, described their break with their Anglican past.



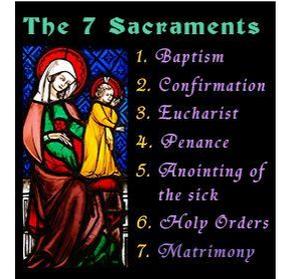
They shook off this yoke of antichrist bondage, and as the Lord's free people joined themselves (by covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel, to walk in all His ways made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavors, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them. (Bradford 9)

One of the things not apparent to us today is the great amount of oppression the average person endured under the leadership and ruling authority of the Catholic Church. The reformation was concerned with breaking away from the oppressive, unscriptural traditions and decrees of the Catholic Church. Prior to the fifteenth century, scripture was tightly controlled by the church and the average person did not have God's written word in a language they could understand. For a thousand years the only Bible the church had was translated from the Greek and Hebrew into Latin by Jerome. From the fourth century to the fourteenth century, the only text they had was in Latin and only a few could actually read or understand it.

With the invention of the printing press, biblical texts began to be distributed widely. Erasmus printed a Greek text that scholars began to read and then apply the principles they found there. The cry of the reformation was "*sola scriptura!*" Scripture alone. The Catholic Church still wanted to include "tradition," and "Papal decrees" as sources of authority. The reformers on the other hand, sought to depend on the "scripture alone."



The Separatist movement sought to pattern their lives after what they found in scripture – and nothing else. Prior to that, the scripture was followed BUT it was on equal footing with church tradition AND Papal decrees. There were numerous requirements instituted by the church that had no basis in scripture. There were feast days, fast days, infant baptism, last rites, purgatory, indulgences, confession, abstinence from marriage by the clergy, and the list was long. What the reformers found was many of the things the Catholic church taught were not found in the scriptures.



These Separatist wanted to throw off the yoke of oppression and embrace freedom. Freedom - to follow the scripture wherever it may lead – through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Over the centuries, Baptists have become known as people of the Book – God's Holy word. Baptists are among the most biblically literate people in religious life. We as a church need to recapture our understanding of the Bible and KNOW it. If you are sitting here in the pew and haven't opened your bible this week, I know you are seeking a word from God to come out of my mouth. But as Baptists, YOU need to spend time in the word. YOU need to hear God's voice through that written word. Study your Bible! Know it! Hide its words in your heart!

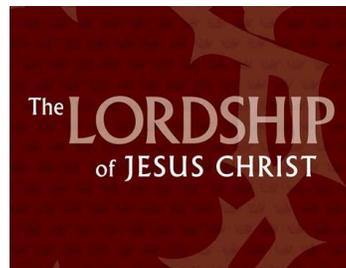


My greatest joy as a student of God's word and a pastor is to read and study God's Word. If you don't read your bible, learn from it, apply its principles in your life, then you might as well burn it. Because keeping it closed up on a shelf does you about as much good.

Many churches include a daily Bible reading schedule. If you follow it carefully, then you will finish reading the bible through in one year. Don't raise your hands! How many here can honestly say, "I have read the bible all the way through?" You can tell how much time a person spends in the word by looking at their bible. Many times, when I have been asked to preach the funeral of someone, I often ask the family if I may see the person's Bible to know more about them. You can learn a lot about a person by looking at their Bible! I am frequently encouraged by the look of it. If they loved it, it is marked, underlined and has notes in the margins.

Biblical freedom includes several aspects of how we relate with scripture and how we apply its precepts to our actions.

First, I want us to understand Biblical freedom means freedom "**under**" the lordship of Jesus Christ. What I mean by that is that we do not elevate scripture above Jesus Christ. We believe that the scripture points us to the One that was foretold as the coming Messiah found in the Old Testament. We acknowledge that scripture is "*God Breathed*" and in it we find the complete revelation of God's plan of salvation. Scripture only points us to Christ. Scripture is to be interpreted under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.



I was reading over Spilman's church constitution this week and see this church follows the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message." In that document it addressed this topic of the Bible. It says, "*The sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is Jesus Christ whose will is revealed in the Holy Scriptures.*" Jesus is a living Lord who still directs and guides His people.



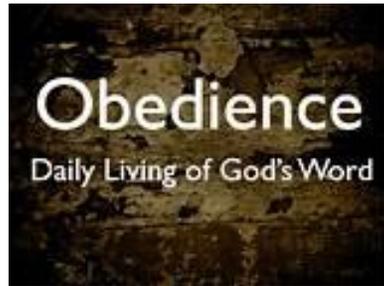
Secondly, Biblical freedom means freedom "**for**" the purpose of continuing to obey the Word of God. Baptists began with a dynamic (moving, fluid), rather than a static (stale, stagnant), understanding of the Bible. Unrestrained freedom to follow the Bible wherever it might lead was of first importance to Baptists.

When John Smyth, the founder of Baptists, followed this principal, he found that Baptism was intended for those that made a profession of faith in Christ. That is why we call baptism "Believers Baptism" instead of it being a ceremony a child receives as in infant. For Baptists, the Bible is and always will be the final authority. It is the final authority in moral responsibility, in theological beliefs, and in human relationships. The Bible is final, but human understanding of the Bible is never final or complete or finished.

Again, in the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message we affirm this truth.

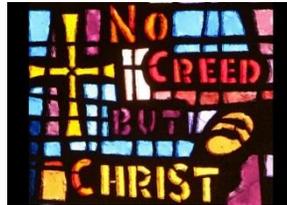
Baptists are a people who profess a living faith. This faith is rooted and grounded in Jesus Christ who is "the same yesterday, and today, and forever." Therefore, the sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is Jesus Christ whose will is revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

A living faith must experience a growing understanding of truth and must be continually interpreted and related to the needs of each new generation.



We have a living Faith! Some may argue that depending only on scripture as our authority may lead to serious misinterpretations of the scripture. Smyth and other Baptist reformers would agree – but they determined it was better to err on the side of scripture than to accept the teaching of a religious bureaucracy.

Thirdly, biblical freedom also means that we are free **“from”** any outside enforcement of a creed or statement.



Baptist churches have no pope, no bishop, no ecclesiastical body to report or be accountable to. We as a Baptist church, set our own policy, governance, and procedures. We are democratic and elect our own deacons, officers, and select our own Pastors. We don't have to pay an apportionment to a denominational office. We voluntarily associate with the Neuse Baptist Association which is comprised of a collection of 43 Baptist churches in the area. We associate with the NC Baptist State Convention. We voluntarily associate with the Southern Baptist convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. If we so desired, we could change any or all of these affiliations. We are a free people.

Over the centuries, Baptists have affirmed the central teachings of the church through “Covenants” and not creeds. (There is a significant difference!) Along with the

cry of “*Sola Scriptura*” (Scripture alone) there was a cry among the reformers of “This Lord and no more!” “This book and no more!”



BAPTISTS ARE NOT A CREEDAL PEOPLE. That is why some developments in Southern Baptist life were so disturbing to many people. Twenty-two years ago, the leadership in the SBC changed the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message. Today, with these changes it is referred to as the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message. In addition to the changes, they made this Statement of Faith into a creedal statement. The enforcement of this new CREEDAL statement caused Baptist Missionaries and workers to resign or be terminated because they did not want any creed but Christ, no creed but the Word of God. This shift in denominational thinking did not represent our historical Baptist roots.



For years, I felt these changes would continue to remain only on the national level. But the same mentality has invaded our state convention and tremendous shifts have begun to be made which causes great sorrow for me. A few years after the adoption of the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message, the crisis became so acute, that five of our Baptist colleges broke away from the NC Baptist State Convention. Campbell University, Chowan College, Mars Hill University, Gardner Webb University, and Wingate College are no longer bound to the NC Baptist State Convention through the appointment of trustees. They saw what happened on the national level with the seminaries and they

didn't want it happening to their institutions. The trust level was broken with a denomination that sought control instead of cooperation.

This also affected the Women's Missionary Union here in NC and the WMU's participation in State Baptist life was severed with many people being hurt by the betrayal. Our Baptist leaders have forgotten their Baptist roots and the results have been tragic.



Lastly, Baptist affirms that Bible Freedom means freedom “of” interpreting the scripture. The first president of the SBC in 1846, W. B. Johnson, listed five specific convictions of Baptists in the South in the middle of the nineteenth century.

These five fundamentals were:

1. The sovereignty of God in salvation
2. The supreme authority of the scripture
3. The right of each individual to judge for himself in his views of truth as taught in the scripture
4. Democratic church governance
5. Believers Baptism.



Baptists throughout the world have affirmed the divine inspiration and authority of the Holy Scriptures as the supreme and sufficient rule of our faith and practice: and the right and duty of individual judgment in the interpretation of it. (Parker 280)

Keep in mind; this does often bring conflict and misunderstanding. But the right of private interpretation does not mean that every interpretation is correct. But in love and acceptance we can affirm each other as we attempt to discover God's will for our life.

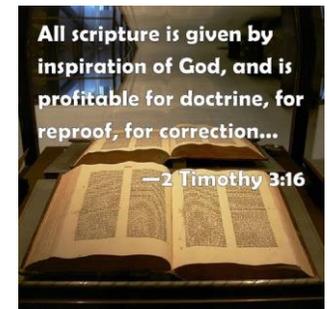
But this is hard work. We must dig deep into the scripture. You need to have a good Bible dictionary. Use a concordance to understand where these words and thoughts are found. Read the scripture. Become a person of the book.

Paul's word to Timothy in his second letter is a word for us today.

“But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, (v. 10) ...

But you must continue in the things which have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work”. (2 Timothy 3:14-16)



As Baptists, we need to recapture our freedom – freedom that is found only in studying, knowing, reading, and applying God’s word in our life. I challenge you to once again, be known as a “person of the Book” – God’s Holy Word.

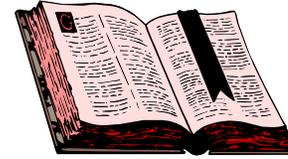


LET US PRAY

¹Mikey’s Funnies – May 5, 2008 – A License Funny forwarded by Trish Watlington

²“The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms” by Walter B. Shurden, Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1993, pages 9-20 quoted and cited in this sermon.

The Center of the Bible



This is pretty strange or odd how it worked out this way. Even if you are not religious you should read this. I thought you might find this interesting.

What is the shortest chapter in the Bible? Psalms 117

What is the longest chapter in the Bible? Psalms 119

Which chapter is in the center of the Bible? Psalms 118

Fact: There are 594 chapters before Psalms 118

Fact: There are 594 chapters after Psalms 118

Add these numbers up and you get 1188

What is the center verse in the Bible? Answer - Psalms 118:8

Does this verse say something significant about God's perfect will for our lives? The next time someone says they would like to find God's perfect will for their lives and that they want to be in the center of His will, just send them to the center of His Word!

Psalms 118:8 (KJV) "It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man."

Now isn't that odd how this worked out (or was God in the center of it)?