

Four Fragile Freedoms: Soul Freedom

Spilman Memorial Baptist Church

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May 15, 2022

Text: Matthew 16:13-16

Purpose: To help the congregation realize that we have tremendous freedom. One of the freedoms is the freedom of the individual to respond personally to the gospel. It must be a personal experience and it must be voluntary.

Soul Freedom is the historic Baptist affirmation of the inalienable right and responsibility of every person to deal with God without the imposition of creed, the interference of clergy, or the intervention of civil government.

After twenty years of shaving himself every morning, a man in a small Southern town decided he had enough. He told his wife that he intended to let the local barber shave him each day. He put on his hat and coat and went to the barbershop, which was owned by the pastor of the town's Baptist church. The barber's wife, Grace, was working that day, so she performed the task. Grace shaved him and sprayed him with lilac water and said, "That will be \$20." The man thought the price was a bit high, but he paid the bill and went to work.



References

¹Mikey's Funnies – April 7, 2016

²[The Story of Christianity](#) by Justo L. Gonzalez, Part II page 76.

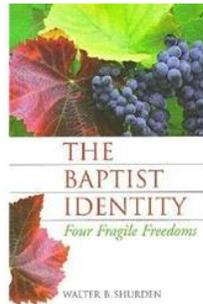
³The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms by Walter B. Shurden. Many quotes and statements are taken from Chapter two – Soul Freedom.

⁴Two additional books that may be helpful in understanding this ideal of Soul Freedom. 1) [A Free Church Perspective: A Study of Ecclesiology](#) by Steward A. Newman, 2) [Introducing Southern Baptist: Their Faith and their Life](#) by C. Brownlow Hastings – A good resource for Roman Catholics.

The next morning the man looked in the mirror and his face was as smooth as it had been when he left the barbershop the day before. “Not bad,” he thought, “At least I don't need to get a shave every day.” The next morning the man's face was still smooth! Two weeks later the man was STILL unable to find any trace of whiskers on his face. It was more than he could take, so he returned to the barbershop.

“I thought \$20 was high for a shave,” he told the barber's wife, “but you must have done a great job. It's been two weeks and my whiskers still haven't started growing back.” The expression on her face didn't even change, expecting his comment. She responded, “You were shaved by Grace. Once shaved, always shaved.”¹

Two weeks ago, we began a series on the four freedoms that Baptists have identified as foundational to who they are and what they believe. They are Biblical freedom, Soul freedom, Church freedom, and Religious freedom. In the message two weeks ago, I proposed that Biblical freedom was at the core of who we are and what we consider as authoritative in our life. As Baptist's, we would rather err on the side of following the scriptures than following the teachings of an authoritative ecclesiastical body. This fiercely independent spirit was born out of a desire to follow God - no matter what happened or what would personally occur to them.

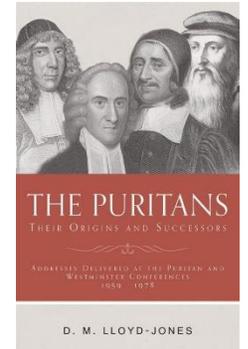


During the sixteenth century the winds of freedom began to blow. In England the Government headed by Henry VIII split away from the Roman Catholic Church. This division in 1534 created the Anglican Church. Its theology was the

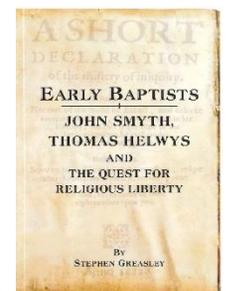
same as the Roman Catholic Church, its policies were the same (with some exceptions), but the Anglican Church declared that the King was the “supreme head of the Church of England.”² Even today in England, the government's King or Queen is considered the head of both the government as well as the church.



Even after that declaration of independence from the Roman Catholic Church, the winds of change continued to blow. There were people that wanted to help purify the Church of England and bring about the reforms they thought necessary to make it scripturally correct. These were known as the Puritans. They attempted to work within the context of the Church of England for reform. Many tried, but some became frustrated by the union of government and faith. If you attacked the teachings of the church, it was as if you were attacking the King of England.



Out of the group of Puritans, a group of Separatists evolved. Two of those Separatists were Smyth and Helwys. They moved from England due to religious persecution in England, to Amsterdam in Holland. They joined another group of Separatist already there and formed the first Baptist church in late 1607. While there they were struggling to define who they were and what they believed. One of the leaders, Johnson, felt that based on scripture that



there were four offices in the church. They were pastors, teachers, deacons and elders.

But Smyth and Helwys only endorsed two offices in the church, they were pastors and deacons. Eventually these two groups do what Baptist churches do best when there is a disagreement - they split. Even later, Smyth and Helwys split again with Smyth staying in Holland and Helwys returning to England. (If those names don't sound familiar to you, they should. We currently use the Smyth and Helwys Sunday school literature here at Spilman. It is a large Christian publishing house.)

Today in most of our Baptist churches, we only have two ordained offices in the church – the pastor and deacons.

Within this early community of faith, there was a tremendous desire for following what the scripture taught. If the scripture taught it, then they wanted to follow that. If the scripture didn't teach it, then they refused to participate in it.

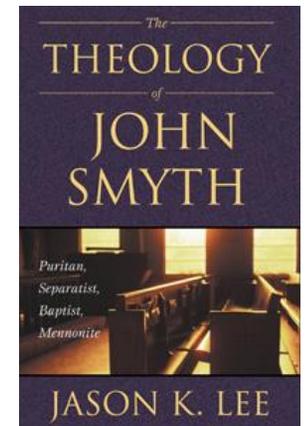
During this period of time in history, it was accepted that when a child was born, they would be baptized in the church. The church was the place where the town's birth records were kept. Once you were baptized you automatically became a citizen in the community. The church and the government were joined together in the governance of the people. They worked so closely together, that the decision of one affected the other. If someone were to say that infant baptism was



not scriptural, then you would be going against the tradition of many centuries. To speak against infant baptism was to speak against a person's citizenship.

That is why those that were most hated during this time were called Anabaptist. This literally means re-baptizers. Anabaptist were against government, against the Church of England, against the Roman Catholic Church, and against infant baptism. This word Anabaptist was a word of derision and hatred. Almost every group hated this group.

Smyth and Helwys didn't necessarily want to be associated with that group but found they held similar beliefs that were found in scripture. So, in 1608 or 1609, Smyth stood before the congregation and poured water over himself as a way of indicating that the church should be comprised only of individuals that have made a personal, intentional, public profession of their faith in Christ. He then proceeded to baptize the remaining members of the congregation. So, the first mode of baptism for Baptist's was actually pouring water over an individual instead of immersion. That came along shortly afterwards and has been Baptist's understanding of how scripture indicates baptism should be conducted.

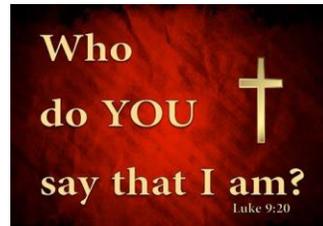


Soul freedom over the years has taken on various terminologies. Phrases like;

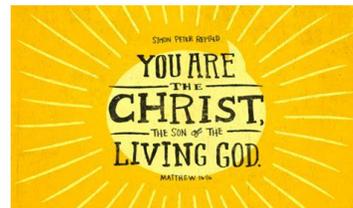
- Individual competency
- The competency of the soul before God
- Personal faith

- Soul liberty
- Believer's priesthood
- Conversion by conviction

In each of these phrases, we find the Baptist understanding of Soul freedom. It comes back to our response to what we find in Matthew 16:15, “*But who do you say that I am?*” “Who is Jesus Christ?” This question requires a personal response. Baptists insist that as an infant you cannot make that decision. Only as you learn more about Christ, as you grow in your understanding of who He is, can that decision be made. Soul freedom affirms the sacredness of individual choice. Baptists have often been accused of being excessively individualistic. Yet this has become a badge of honor.



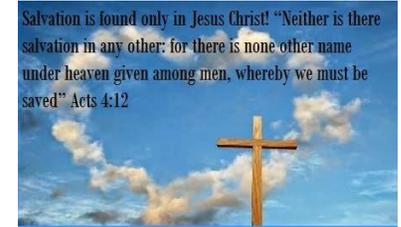
Baptist emphasis on the individual is based on the biblical affirmation that every human being is created in the image of God. Over the years, theologians have debated exactly what is meant in Genesis 1:26, “*Let Us make man in Our own image.*” When we read Psalm 8 and put it with this passage in Genesis, we find that each individual is of infinite worth and dignity. When Jesus confronted Peter with the question, “*Who do you say I am?*” his response was individualistic. Peter responded, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*”



Baptists insist that a saving faith is personal, not impersonal. Salvation is found in a relationship with Christ and not in the rituals or traditions found in a church.

Salvation is derived directly from our encountering Christ, not the teaching of the church. It is when the sinful individual comes before a loving righteous God that salvation can be obtained.

History helps us understand the Baptist position in this matter. Even a century before Baptist emerged in England, Martin Luther challenged the medieval theology of the Roman Catholicism. The theology of the Catholic Church taught that God's grace was centered IN the church and was mediated THROUGH the sacraments (infant Baptism, confirmation, eucharist, marriage – to name a few) BY the priests. The Catholic Church teaches grace was institutionally based, sacramentally received, and indirectly mediated. To that, Luther said, “NO!”³



Baptist's later joined the chorus that the individual comes before God personally, directly, and voluntarily. **An individual comes to Christ without the imposition of creed, the interference of clergy, or the intervention of civil government.**



This was foretold in the Old Testament in Jeremiah 31:33. “*I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.*” God would write on the hearts and minds of man, not on tablets of stone. Why? Because knowledge of God is personal and individual.

Some have misinterpreted this “Soul Freedom” to mean that we are self-sufficient. As Baptist we don’t say that we can save ourselves. We affirm that we are saved by the grace of God. But it is personally appropriated. No one can save you by proxy. One person cannot be baptized for another person. We are saved one by one, person by person, and individual by individual. The theme of the individual in a community of faith is central to the Old and New Testament. Salvation is not church by church, or community by community, or nation by nation. It is lonely soul, by lonely soul. Even the liberal Baptist social gospel theologian, Walter Rauschenbusch, says that salvation is a personal experience.



Peter responded to what Jesus asked. Peter said, “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*” Jesus said, “*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.*” (Matthew 16:17)

Soul freedom means the right to choose. Faith is voluntary. No one is forced to believe because no one can force another to love. They may obey for a time, but for real love to occur, it must be voluntary.



Sooner or later, you too will have to answer the question of Jesus. “*Who do you say I am?*” The Baptist word for the world is that each individual is free to answer and is responsible for answering. There is an old spiritual that answers that question. “It is not my mother; it’s not my

brother, but it’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.”

Two weeks ago, I mentioned a group within Baptist life known as the fundamentalists. The fundamentalist movement within Baptist Life culminated their changes in the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message. They insist that there is a formula that must be followed in order to secure salvation. I am of the opinion that correct and intellectual assent to the truth of the gospel does not equate salvation. It must be experienced individually and personally.

Another interesting aspect of Soul freedom is that there is not any one correct way in



which a person comes to God. God has encountered people in many different situations and many different manners. Some have come to know God through a fiery preacher during a revival. If you experienced conversion like this, you may think that is the only way to come to God. Others have always known about the love of God from the day they were born. Some point to Saul on the road to Damascus as the proper encounter with God. All I can affirm is that there is a great diversity in which we encounter God.

That early church in Amsterdam was concerned about making a public



statement of their faith in God. That Baptism was for believers only. Today we often associate Baptist by the WAY in which we baptize individuals. We fully immerse

them in the water as opposed to sprinkling or pouring. Those early Baptists weren't so concerned about the MODE at the time. What was important was the WHO was being baptized. From their investigation of the scripture, the church was to be comprised of believers only. It took 40 years before these Baptists began immersion as the primary mode of baptism.

Once they affirmed Biblical Freedom, they came to the understanding that now they needed Soul Freedom. The natural result of that was believer's baptism. ⁴

Brownlow Hastings worked with the Home Mission Board attempting to create a better understanding between Southern Baptists and other religious groups. In his book, *Introducing Southern Baptists*, he helps us understand this idea of Soul Freedom.

"It is easy of us to yield our integrity, and responsibility to some accepted authority: beloved pastor, honored teacher, influential book – even an edition of the Bible – respected parents or a dynamic church. These all have their proper role of influence, but the final choice of belief and practice must be made in the secret of the soul's naked presence before God alone. I may pray in corporate prayer or use a devotional prayer book but unless their words are truly MY words, I have not engaged God for myself. I have only, "said my prayers." I may study the Bible under great teachers and share with devoted Christian friends, but I must finally judge what is true, not because I find it agreeable to me, but because the inner witness of the Spirit convinces me. I may profit by the testimony of another's experience in the Lord, but I do not need and cannot repeat his experience. I need my own." (p.24)

The Christian faith is personal, experiential, and voluntary. Baptists really do believe that you have to "make up your own mind." The question that I want to leave you with, "Have you made up your mind?"



Have you confessed your sins and asked Him to forgive you of your sins? God's word promised us, "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" I John 1:9

There are many people that claim there are many ways to God. But God sent his one and only Son, Jesus Christ to be our Savior. Jesus' death on the cross paid the penalty for our sins. "*All that call upon the name of the Lord WILL BE SAVED.*" (Romans 10:13)



Is Jesus Christ YOUR Savior? No one can make this decision for you. Your parents cannot do it for you. Your spouse cannot do it for you. Your friend cannot do it for you. YOU MUST MAKE UP YOUR OWN MIND.

If you have taken those steps toward God, have you followed up that decision in Baptism? Mark 16:16 says, "*He who believes and is baptized shall be saved; he who does not believe shall be condemned.*"

Today is the day of salvation! Believe in Him and be saved!

LET US PRAY