

One Baptist's View of the Importance of Religious Liberty

Pastor David C. Hodgdon, Baptist

It will serve well to introduce my thoughts by sharing some important truths about Baptist beliefs. These doctrines reflect the great importance that freedom has for the vast majority of Baptists.

As I share these thoughts I hope to convey to you that, as a Baptist, I can not at any point speak for any other person but myself. We, as Baptist, hold to the truth that each and every individual must develop their own personal understanding and faith. This right and responsibility is extremely important in the formation of the Baptist denomination. Thus this paper will reflect an American's view of Baptist beliefs. However, it is impossible to state the official stance of the Baptist denomination. We have no authority outside of the Bible. No individual can make the claim that they are the authority or the spokesperson for Baptists. We are encouraged to read the Bible as the inspired word of God. We should of course, reflect together on the meaning of its message. However, we must individually respond to God in the freedom He has given to us. It is impossible to coerce anyone to true faith. As Baptists we champion the idea of genuine faith based on the understanding that each individual has developed through study, reflection and prayer. Thus, with no authority to dictate or define proper belief, each individual is free to come to their own conclusions. We place a strong emphasis upon the need to express thoughts, questions and conclusions. The goal is for each individual to possess a faith that has been tried tested and is prepared to face questions in the future. The free expression of ideas is crucial for this to be achieved.

However, we can deduce some basic ideas and beliefs that are held in common by most Baptist. We can understand, from history and from documents produced to reflect doctrinal agreement, what most Baptists believe concerning the freedom to exercise one's faith, speech and expression of worship.

We accept the Bible as the sole authority for matters of faith, practice and in worship. Throughout scripture the freedom to choose is of the utmost importance. Although many have misinterpreted some epics of the Old Testament to reflect a religion of control and suppression I see the obvious theme of choice to be prevalent. Whether the passage is

interpreted as history, poetic reflection or parable a consistent understanding that personal choice is natural. Within each story, lesson, law or song the community or the individual is brought to a point of choice. Choice based upon their faith rather than coercion. Although consequences due to the choices made are inevitable, the freedom to accept or reject ideas or disciplines is consistently expressed.

As humans we are by nature creatures of choice. It is impossible to force someone to believe.

Within the New Testament we find an ongoing struggle between Jesus and religious authorities of his time. This conflict continued to plague his followers after his death. Added to the challenge of religious opposition by leadership headquartered in Jerusalem, the early church also had to contend with religious persecution from Roman authorities for three centuries. However, persecutions enacted locally, regionally and nationally, were not able to contain the young church as it continued to grow throughout the Roman Empire. The great irony of Christian history is found in the level of control exerted by Rome after Constantine legalized Christianity. The church that grew in spite of persecutions from several different sources became one of the strongest movements in history. When the Roman government adopted Christianity as a legal religion it eventually grew to become one of the strongest organizations in opposing the freedoms the martyrs died to achieve.

The re-occurring theme of opposition to Christ was evidenced in many ways. The culmination of this conflict is the most important event of Christ's ministry. His insistence in speaking what he believed to be true eventually put him on the cross. We understand that the values of Jesus should become normative for all Christians. If the willingness of Jesus to speak freely the truths of his gospel brought him to martyrdom, we too must see that freedom of expression as important.

For Paul and others, who were a part of the early church, the value of expression indeed became normative. The value of expression brought persecution and even death for many. Their willingness to suffer was due in part to their believe that truth will eventually prove itself more powerful than opposition. The will to tell what they believed to be true created a movement that changed the course of history.

The freedom of expression was not necessary for the church to thrive. However, it is a God given right to be able to think. It is also a right to be able to express those thoughts. It is crucial in the development of genuine faith. It is critical in the refining of real faith. It is impossible to share this faith with out the potential of communication.

As we reflect on the power of truth and remember what it has done in the history of the church, we must also question the use of force and coercion.

If the truth need not be augmented by the suppression of differing ideas, then truth can indeed stand on its own surrounded by opposition and falsehood. Ideas that are not true can be neutralized without force or punishment. Falsehood is best revealed for what it is in an arena where ideas can be shared and questioned.

It was not only the influence of ideas that surfaced during the period of the Enlightenment and the Reformation that brought Baptists to their current beliefs. Seeing the eventual result of oppression and persecution was influential in establishing a foundation of personal freedom for early church leaders. Having seen and experienced suppression Baptists helped in formulating some of the ideas expressed in documents assuring the freedom of religion in the United States. After seeing the difficulties created by merging the state's power of government with a religious body, the formers of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights were persuaded to maintain a separation of power between any church and the United States Government.

This made it possible for the State to concentrate upon its function. It also made it possible for anyone to question, respond and worship or not worship as they chose.

This separation continues to allow us to openly formulate our faith. Again we will formulate our own faith. It can not be coerced. Behavior can be regulated and enforced. Genuine faith will be developed by each individual. If the individual is to be able to understand and experience faith, freedom of expression will only enhance the process.

The Great Experiment that began in the United States in 1776 has had incredible repercussions around the world. It drew its inspiration from a number of different sources. We are celebrating one of the sources of free thinking today. As we contemplate all the contributions that have made freedom possible around the world we would be amiss if we did not consider the drive for religious freedom. Just the motivation for religious freedom has been at the root of mankind's struggle for freedom. The

achievement of any freedom owes much of its success to those who followed the example of Christ and the early church. In their desire to express what they found most important in life. This example was set for others to follow. Let freedom ring. May the expression of thought remain a human right for all who can now afford it. May it become a reality for all who currently fear to freely speak. May we continue to believe that all truth will be vindicated by her children as the free expression of ideas purges falsehood.

Let Freedom Ring.

David C. Hodgdon Pastor of Rome Baptist Church