

THREE SENTENCES ON BAPTIST FREEDOM

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During the SBC controversy, while I was still on the faculty at Southern Seminary, a graduate student of mine, knowing how grieved I was about the fundamentalist takeover of the SBC, met me in Norton Hall and said, "I dreamed about you last night." He said, "I dreamed your old home place out in the country in Mississippi burned down, and we got there too late to save it; we could do nothing but watch it burn to the ground."

The SBC was my home for over three decades, but, for me, it burned to the ground, no doubt about it. The CBF is my contemporary home, no question about it. CBF is where Kay and I give our money and energy. But the ABC is my historical home, and there is no question about that either.

Who you are in the Baptist family is a matter of enormous joy to many of us who look at you from the outside. And I am especially glad to be honored to speak to a group at my historical home who has hurled the flag of Baptist freedom atop your masthead. So many thanks for the invitation.

My wife and I have been members of the First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, GA for almost a quarter of a century. It, too, is very much "home" to us. Not long after we became members, I became interim pastor of our church, an interim that lasted over a year.

During that year, I led a series of Wednesday night sessions entitled "The Faith of our Friends." I invited individual clergy from other denominations each Wednesday evening to come to our church at the top of Poplar and tell us about their group and what makes them tick. So I invited the Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, all those churches in which many of our members had grandchildren. I don't know about the ABC, but one of the major contributions Baptists in my part of the world have made to the Kingdom is the way we have given up some of our best and brightest to other Christian groups.

I also invited the Catholic priest who worked across the street at the beautiful St. Joseph's Catholic Church. His name is John Cuddy. John Cuddy is one of those sweet, post Vatican II priests who took John XXIII seriously. Unlike some other Catholics, John Cuddy never tried to put the toothpaste back in the tube that Vatican II squirted out. He was and, though retired, he remains the most beloved minister of our town. Our Baptist people certainly appreciated his irenic spirit on that Wednesday night.

After he finished his brief presentation, Father Cuddy engaged the congregation in some Q and A. Eventually I was wrapping things up and I said, "Father Cuddy, we have asked you about the Catholics tonight, but in closing I want to ask you about the Baptists. What is the very first thing that comes to your mind when you think about the Baptists?" He did not blink. He did not think. "Freedom," he said, tersely. I turned to the congregation and said, "Here is a Catholic priest who pays allegiance to the Pope, and he knows more about us than some of our Baptist kinfolk know."

And now, let me give you three brief sentences about Baptist freedom.

**SENTENCE ONE:
"FREEDOM" IS NOT A BAPTIST SYNONYM
FOR RECKLESSNESS.**

Let me repeat: Freedom is not a Baptist synonym for recklessness. Rather, "freedom" is the essential DNA of the Baptist organism.

I am sure there are exceptions, but I am very honest when I say to you that I don't know any Baptist who has lobbied for "freedom" who has also equated that freedom with irresponsibility.

The most progressive Baptists that I have ever known understand that there is a Statue of Responsibility beside the Statue of Liberty in the Baptist house.

We know that freedom in Christ mandates service for Christ. The best definition of church that I have ever heard is "All who love Christ in the service of all who suffer." Those of us who call for Baptist freedom know that.

So contrary to what some seem to allege, "Soul Freedom" is not a Baptist mantra of liberalism, drunk on self-indulgence. The entire theological spectrum, from fundamentalist to liberal and all that is between, requires freedom. Without it none - not one of us! - has a permanent place to stand.

So, "Freedom" is not a nasty little slogan designed to dodge serious discipleship. Freedom is the only path that leads to a serious following of the Carpenter. And that is what the voluntary nature of Baptist life is about! Serious discipleship! When Baptists called for believer's baptism, they wanted one thing: for every individual to have the freedom to take seriously following Jesus. That is why every baptismal pool in every Baptist church throughout the world is watery testimony to soul freedom.

Baptists have not shouted "freedom" to escape the will of God; they have treasured freedom so that they could obey the will of God.

Our Baptist ancestors and all who follow in their train did not embrace soul freedom to denounce the Bible as the Word of God; they caressed freedom so that they could affirm the Bible as the Word of God.

It never dawned on our ancestors to pit "soul freedom" against "biblical authority." They did recognize, however, that "soul freedom" could and would issue in diverse interpretations of the Bible.

So let's be clear. "Soul freedom" encourages diverse interpretations. It does not suggest in the least, however, that Baptists have no firm certainty regarding the centrality of Holy Scripture. Our struggling forebears were as certain and dogmatic (and at times sarcastic and mean) about their views as the most fervent bishops in the Church of England. They were as certain and dogmatic as the most rigid Puritans of New England. However, there was a huge, huge difference! The theological dogmatism of the bishops and the Puritans led to coerced uniformity, while the spiritual convictions of Baptists led to voluntary diversity.

And that was a difference that made a difference!

*It made a difference in how they read the Bible.
It made a difference in how they thought of church.
It made a difference in their attitude toward creeds.
It made a difference in the role of the state
in matters of the soul.*

Soul Freedom issues into different interpretations!

In the long and ugly SBC war between the moderates and the fundamentalists, the fundamentalists claimed the high ground. They argued that the central issue in the conflict was the nature of the Bible as the Word of God. It was a clever strategy. It was a winning strategy. But it was never, ever reality. The conflict centered on many things, including Baptist polity, creedalism, the nature of theological education, and many other things. But it was not the centrality and importance of the Bible in our personal and communal lives. It was the diverse interpretation of the Bible that caused the conflict. And sometimes I think even the moderates didn't get it.

Several years into the controversy I was preaching in a church one Sunday. I did what I almost always do when I read the scripture of the morning. I held the Bible up before the people, and I said, "This is the Word of God and it is for us this morning." After the service a young seminarian, graduate of one of the moderate seminaries, came up to me with an accusation masked in a soft question: "Dr. Shurden, when you hold your Bible up like you did and say what you say about it, aren't you afraid that someone is going to think that you are an inerrantist?" I said, "I am not an inerrantist. I am more afraid that someone is going to think that I do not believe the Bible is the Word of God." My friends, you and I must not let others take the Bible away from us simply because we have different interpretations of the Bible.

I encourage you to go back and read Baptists' earliest cries for freedom. Read Thomas Helwys' 1612 *The Mystery of Iniquity* and John Clarke's 1652 *Ill Newes from New England* and Obadiah Holmes' 1675 *Last Will and Testimony*. These Baptists, who spoke from the underside of life, did not use freedom to engage in a kind of navel-gazing individual freedom with no concern for the greater common good. They did not plead freedom to bypass the Bible. They agitated for freedom, they went to jail for freedom, they bled for freedom because they believed the Bible required it. They believed in the seventeenth century what you and I must believe in the twenty-first century: freedom of conscience is God's Will for creation!

"FREEDOM" IS NOT A BAPTIST SYNONYM FOR RECKLESSNESS.

SECOND SENTENCE: FREEDOM IS TERRIFYING.

Freedom terrifies! Freedom is even terrifying for those who lobby for it. Ask Martin Luther what kept him up at night for years. Ask your teenagers today. They wonder where and how far this new-found liberty will lead. Freedom often plagues the freed one with self-doubt: Will I be able to handle this stuff? How do I negotiate my way through life with this dynamite in my hands? Freedom is terrifying. It is so terrifying that some Baptists yield up one of their most precious rights of all: the right to the Bible for themselves. They get intimidated by louder and more certain voices.

But freedom is also terrifying for those who have to give it up! Ask the Catholic Church of Luther's time. Ask any mother or father of teenagers. Freedom-giving is an act of unmitigated courage and uncommon trust.

Read the early criticisms of Baptists. The adversaries viewed Baptists as theological and ecclesiastical terrorists because of the Baptist emphasis on freedom. In 1680 John Russel, second pastor of the First Baptist Church of Boston, fired off an apologetic for Baptists. Russel had to defend Baptists against what

he called "scandalous things"--being schismatics, embracing immoral persons, disturbing the peace, undermining true churches, neglecting public worship, engaging in idolatry, and acting subversive of civil government.

These stubborn, cussed ancestors of ours deliberately, premeditatively broke laws. Baptists got into civil disobedience long before the 1960s. The Puritans viewed our folks as subversives of both church and state. The Baptists of Boston responded: "what we have done is not in rebellion nor transgression to turn from following the Lord or worshipping him . . . , but that we may with more freedom of spirit worship the Lord together in purity." Freedom of spirit! They needed it in the seventeenth century and we need it the twenty-first century.

Freedom is terrifying. And freedom is terrifying because freedom means change. And change, what the New Testament calls "metanoia," that's some of the hardest work of all. Is there any more wrenching work in the whole wide world? Isn't that the work that really makes us sweat? Have you seen that T-Shirt? In bold letters on the front are the words: CHANGE IS GOOD! Then below it in very tiny letters are the words: "you go first." Remember that when you ask others to change. Remember that when you are going through personal change.

Molly Marshall reminded us at Green Lake one night a few years back that we have too often equated the Holy Spirit with tranquility and peace. We too soon want to sing "there's a sweet, sweet spirit in this place," rather than "Onward Christian Soldiers." But we forget at our peril. At times Jesus disturbed. He divided. He angered. But he never shut anyone out, not even his fiercest critics. He bristled at those who did, even his own disciples who hacked off the ear of an enemy. In Scripture the Spirit of God is depicted not as calming water but as scorching Fire, Thunder, and Lightning!

Take conflict and struggle and trouble out of our history and you don't have much left. It is altogether possible to read biblical history, Christian history, and Baptist history and to conclude that some of the biggest conflicts in those stories were the nudgings of God's Spirit.¹

Freedom is a heady wine. One must pour it carefully.

FREEDOM IS TERRIFYING.

**SENTENCE THREE:
WE CAN NEVER, EVER LET UP ON OUR WORK
FOR BAPTIST FREEDOM.**

We must work hard to show to all, Baptist and non-Baptist, that Baptist freedom is not a cover up for theological and moral recklessness. We must work hard to dispel the fear of freedom from those who are most frightened by its sound and by its challenge. But even when Baptist freedom is misunderstood and even when freedom frightens, we must never, ever let up in our work for Baptist freedom.

Somewhere about the year AD 409, Alaric and his Visigoths parked themselves at the gates of Rome. In his masterful retelling of that story in *How The Irish Saved Civilization*, Thomas Cahill described the Romans' arrogant and contemptuous attitude toward Alaric: "He might as well have been," said Cahill, "the king of the Fuzzy-Wuzzies, or any other inconsequential outlanders that civilized people have looked down their noses at throughout history." The Romans, supremely confident of handling this nuisance, dispatched a couple of envoys to conduct the tiresome negotiations with Alaric and rid themselves of these smelly barbarians.

The Roman envoys played poker with empty bluffs. They tried to intimidate. "The invincible strength of Rome's warriors will doom any of your misguided attacks," warned the Romans. But Alaric the Barbarian, a humorous as well as a sharp man, responded gleefully, "The thicker the grass, the more easily scythed."

Recognizing now that they had no fool on their hands, the Romans asked finally, and in desperation, what was Alaric's price of departure.

Alaric answered somewhat matter-of-factly: his men would sweep through the city of Rome, take all the gold, all the silver, and everything of value that could be moved. They would also take with them every barbarian slave in Rome's custody.

The Romans protested hysterically. But through their now anxiety-ridden laughter and feigned anger, the Romans asked Alaric, "But what will that leave us?"

Alaric paused. "Your lives," he said.

After years of hand-to-hand combat with our fundamentalist sisters and brothers (mostly brothers!), we moderate Southern Baptists went to Atlanta on a very hot 23rd of August in 1990 and launched a new movement. We call it, as you know, CBF. I wish I had time to tell you why I hope nothing like that ever happens to you folks in the ABC.

We went to Atlanta, but, truth be told, we went *only with our lives*. The denomination was in the process of being carted off by folks with an attitude, an attitude of intolerance and narrowness that had been standing at the gates of the SBC, not simply since 1979 but, as Luther Copeland said, in one of the best Baptist books ever written, since 1845.² But then, when American culture began to change dramatically around 1980, the attitude began to strut triumphantly and somewhat haughtily over both culture and Caesar and Christ. The attitude swept through Nashville and the SBC and co-opted the 150-year history of the Southern Baptist Convention.

And so they walked off with all the gold and the silver, the six seminaries and the mission boards and Sunday School Board and the Christian Life Commission and everything that was of value at the national denominational level. We got out . . . with our lives . . . and some good colleges and universities and a couple of state conventions. But mostly, we got out with our lives.

And one other thing. We got out, and I do not blush to say it, with the Baptist convictions. They forgot to take the heritage with them. Or else they did not want it. And here, my friends, is where your organization comes in.

I have no idea what will happen to the ABC in the future. God knows that I wish for you good things. But I have no idea what shape it will take tomorrow. Or who will be in charge. Or what point of view on soul freedom, biblical authority, homosexuality and a host of other issues will prevail. But the most important thing is to hang on to the principles that shaped you, to the core Baptist ideas that you outline in *The Judson Declaration* (<http://www.baptistprinciples.org/declaration.htm>) and that have buoyed Baptists for 400 years. They are worth more than denominational gold and silver.

Never, ever let up on your work for Baptist freedom.

¹ Think of biblical history and the conflict among the Jews concerning entrance into the Promised Land. Only two, Joshua and Caleb, wanted to go; most did not. Think of the debate, so clearly evident in Scripture over the establishment of a monarchy. Some embraced the idea; others resisted. And think of the conflict between the prophetic critique of the Temple and the priestly defense of it. Think of the New Testament period and that critical 15th chapter of the book of Acts, and the story of the breaking down of racial and ethnic barriers. Think of Christian history and the critical sixteenth century when unspeakable conflict led to the emergence of Protestantism and even to the renewal of Catholicism. Think of Baptist history and that historic day when young William Carey, pleading with Baptists to get the entire world on their hearts, heard the command from one of his elders to sit down because God could do his work without human assistance and Carey's missionary cause.

² See E. Luther Copeland, *The Southern Baptist Convention and the Judgment of History: The Taint of an Original Sin*, University Press of America, 1995.

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