

***The Persuasive Church:
True Freedom and the Freedom of Truth***
John 8:31-36; 2 Corinthians. 3:17-4:2

A sermon for First Freedoms Project
George A. Mason
Senior Pastor
Wilshire Baptist Church
Dallas, Texas
April 2005

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press: or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America: It's not Scripture, but it's hard to imagine it springing forth from the human imagination of without Scripture. We won't say after reciting it, *This is the Word of the Lord*, but we should say in unison and without hesitation, *Thanks be to God!*

The First Amendment guarantees freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and freedom to pursue justice. It's not gospel, but it is good news. It's not the gospel truth, but the truth of the gospel leads us to these very truths of freedom.

The little-known secret of these words—inspired and inspiring (if not divinely inspired) is that Baptists were the chief conspirators in their adoption. More secularly-minded patriots joined the Baptists in taking the handcuffs off of truth so that it could do its freedom work freely. We are more concerned, however, with how our Baptist forebears got to these truths of freedom from our understanding of true freedom, and how Baptists today may stay tethered to freedom's truths.

John Leland, a Virginian and a Baptist evangelist, had been jailed in America for preaching the gospel without a license. He didn't take it personally, but he personally took it upon himself to see that not only was he vindicated but the whole idea of religious liberty was, too. Before 1791 and the passage of the Bill of Rights, Americans from one state or commonwealth to another suffered but did not welcome different religious views than those held by the majority. Leland saw, as did Roger Williams of Rhode Island before him, along with the first Baptists in England and their older Anabaptist cousins in Europe, that diverse religious opinions should not be tolerated but celebrated. If the Spirit of God wishes to do a new thing in the world, the voices of God's prophets must be heard with respect, and not silenced by fear of the truth.

Leland threw his support to James Madison to represent Virginia at the ratifying constitutional convention only after extracting a promise to press for full



A cooperative
effort with
congregations
to celebrate
and support
a free press
and religious
liberty.

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religious liberty and not just toleration. Listen to Leland's view and see if you are his kind of Baptist still: *Government has no more to do with the religious opinions of men than it has to do with the principles of mathematics. Let every man speak freely without fear, maintain the principles that he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God or twenty Gods; and let government protect him in doing so, i.e., see that he meets no personal abuse, or loss of property, for his religious opinions. ... If his doctrine is false, it will be confuted, and if it is true, (though ever so novel,) let others credit it.*¹

Well, can you vote for that? Many Baptists and other Christians today cannot. One out of three teenagers in a recent study thinks that the First Amendment goes too far in granting freedom of religion and speech and press. They think some censorship would not be a bad idea.² Now some of that can be accounted for by a lack of education and life experience. But sadly, plenty of well-educated grownups make the same argument today—and more tragically, some of them are Baptists!

The usual line of reasoning goes like this. Puritan Christians came to these shores seeking to set up a colony of heaven on earth based upon biblical principles; thus America is really a Christian nation, they say. America is true to its roots only when the government prefers the Christian religion, even if tolerating others. But the Massachusetts Bay Colony was a spiritual and political failure. The colonial idea of established churches in each state where one church had the right to grant or limit religious freedom to others was deemed wrongheaded. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights granted nothing: it only secured what was granted by God and should not be denied by any human authority. That we needed these documents to begin the American experiment in religious liberty only proves that the way forward is not back to the Puritan plan but to the Baptist idea.

So where do Baptists get this notion of civil liberty? What are the roots of political freedom? Baptists go to the Bible and reason from there. While others might point to the natural dignity of the individual, we point to the claim that every person is created in the image of God and is therefore responsible to God. That is, we are made as response-able creatures—able to respond to God. So, to get between the God who calls us and the creature that responds to that call is to get in the way. It's to be where one does not belong—whether that one is a civil magistrate or a church minister. It's to put oneself in the place of the one mediator between God and human beings—Christ Jesus the Lord.

And this hones in on the matter better than anything. Jesus Christ himself is the agent of true freedom. We are not truly free just by virtue of our being human. Sin makes slaves of us all. Only Christ can set us free, because, as the Son of God, he alone has the power to make us also sons and daughters of God. But Christ does not force himself upon anyone. He gives himself to us and calls us to respond. And he does so persuasively, sending his Holy Spirit as a secret agent, working an inside job in pricking our conscience and nudging our will and warming our heart. At no time, however, does God coerce our belief. And Baptists believe that if persuasion is good enough for God in eternal affairs, it is good enough for us in temporal ones.

The government should never coerce citizens in matters of faith, nor should the church employ coercive power over the government to achieve its goals. The First

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Amendment strikes just the right balance in protecting the church from the state and the state from the church—thus the so-called “wall of separation between church and state.” The phrase is rightly credited to Thomas Jefferson, but a Baptist named Roger Williams used the word “hedge” rather than wall a century and a half earlier. It fits the Baptist idea of the church being not just a persuaded church, in which each person must be persuaded in his or her own mind to join the church, but the church is also a persuasive church, bearing witness and making our case for the truth in the free marketplace of ideas.

Listen to the contrast between two Christian preachers, one who rejects this view and one who accepts it.

Our job is to reclaim America for Christ, whatever the cost. As the vice regents of God, we are to exercise godly dominion and influence over our neighborhoods, our schools, our government, our literature and arts, our sports arenas, our entertainment media, our news media, our scientific endeavors—in short, over every aspect and institution of human society.³

And now hear these words:

It is the consistent and insistent contention of our Baptist people, always and everywhere, that religion must be forever voluntary and uncoerced, and that it is not the prerogative of any power, whether civil or ecclesiastical, to compel men to conform to any religious creed or form of worship, or to pay taxes for the support of a religious organization to which they do not belong and in whose creed they do not believe. God wants free worshipers and no other kind. ... Christ’s religion needs no prop of any kind from any worldly source, and to the degree that it is thus supported is a millstone hanged about its neck.⁴

The first preacher (who conducts a TV ministry from his large church in Florida) believes the church must have dominion over the state and all its institutions, by means of coercive power if necessary, whether anyone agrees or disagrees with it. The second view was expressed by the late, great pastor of the First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, George W. Truett. On the steps of the Capitol Building in Washington, D. C. in the year 1920, he recalled the history of our Baptist movement, emphasizing this principle of freedom in all things, and the idea of persuasive power as sufficient to achieve spiritual ends.

For the same reasons, Baptists promote freedom of inquiry in education and freedom of the press. If Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, as he says, honest inquiry into any matter will finally end at the feet of the one who is himself the Truth. It may take time for the truth to become evident, but truth cannot be helped and can only be hindered by those who would control the search for it.

Some years ago a prominent Baptist pastor declared that if the leaders of the convention should declare that “pickles have souls,” then teachers in Baptist schools would be obligated to teach just that.⁵ That’s a dilly, huh? Makes me a sour puss, just thinking about it. The same man once tried to convince a Baptist

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journalist not to publish the facts about a certain preacher's ethical lapses. He appealed to the scriptural story of Noah to say that a Christian reporter has the responsibility to "cover his brother's nakedness." Right. And what about the apostle Paul's notion of the *open statement of the truth* being commended *to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God*?

Baptists have long held that we should *tell the truth and trust the people*. But these days principles of freedom such as these are under assault from within even our own Baptist family. Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, says that he is not sure that the First Amendment would stand the test of a vote among Baptists today.⁶ This is why we need sermons preached and lessons taught and institutions dedicated to the advancement and preservation of the Baptist way.

This is why we have established and must support organizations such as the Baptist Joint Committee, the Associated Baptist Press, and Baptists Today news journal that keep these "first freedoms" ever before us. They tell us the truth unconstrained by political partisanship or personal agendas. They understand that true freedom is slavery to Christ, but that we must promote freedom for everyone or we will have freedom for no one. We must all do our part. We must tell the story of Baptists. We must call the world's attention to the truth that is in Christ, which is the world's last and only hope. But we must utilize the weapons of the Spirit and never the sword of the state to accomplish God's work in the world.

We have seen a remarkable example of this in our lifetime. While Baptists have long been at odds with the Roman Catholic Church over matters of religious liberty, the recently deceased Pope John Paul II showed why the persuasive way of witness to the truth of Christ is the only way that leads to freedom.

In 1979 the communist government of Poland, fearing a backlash from the people and sure that they could contain the masses by controlling the news, granted the pope the right to visit his native country. That visit was the beginning of the end of the atheistic state in Poland. The pope did not call for revolt against the government, he merely charged the people to remember who they really were: they were to be a "special witness to [Christ's] cross and His resurrection," he said. The people erupted. *We want God!* they shouted. *We want God!*

Word about that powerful spiritual moment passed quickly all through Poland. But when people went home and turned on the news, the state-controlled media showed only a brief shot of the pope, without the crowds, and only showed him speaking for a second or two. The people compared the reality they felt at the Mass to the propaganda reported by the media. "It's all lies," they said. "It's over." When 10 million Poles began to say it together, the house of cards that was communism fell at last.⁷

The truth, and only the truth, shall set us free. And freedom to tell it truly is a human right that Baptists have an unending duty to protect and promote. Let us not faint or fail. Amen.

Free to worship.
Free to know.



(Endnotes)

¹ John Leland, *The Rights of Conscience Inalienable, and Therefore Religious Opinions Not Cognizable by Law* (New London: T. Green & Son, 1791).

² "Study shows American Teenagers Indifferent to Freedoms," Associated Press (Jan. 31, 2005), cited by Walter B. Shurden, "Becoming a Revolutionary," in *Baptist Studies Bulletin* Vol. 4, No. 4 (April 2005).

³ Quoted by Bob Moser, "The Crusaders," in *Rolling Stone* (April 7, 2005).

⁴ "Baptists and Religious Liberty," <http://www.bjcpa.org/Pages/Resources/Pubs/truett.html>.

⁵ Cited by Mike Clingenpeel, "The Gravel Rule," *The Religious Herald* (August 1996), see <http://www.txbc.org/1996Journals/August%201996/Aug96TheGravelRule.htm>.

⁶ Reported by Shurden, op. cit.

⁷ Peggy Noonan, "One Sermon in Poland Changed the 20th Century," in *The Dallas Morning News* (April 7, 2005).