

Freedom From: Fighting Against Religious Mastery

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Gal. 5:1-6

Ann Coulter does not speak for me, but she sells enough books that she must speak for someone ... I hope not you. Here's a timely sample from September 12, 2001: *We should invade their countries, kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity. ... We carpet-bombed German cities; we killed civilians. That was war. This is war.* ["This Is War," cited by Sojourners online, 8 Sept. 2006.]

Now granted, the day after the 9/11 attacks, Americans were shaken and anything intemperate said in the heat of the moment could be more heat than light. But crisis reveals character more than forms it. What people really believe is uncovered in moments like that. In case you wonder whether Ann Coulter has rethought her position, here's a quotation from February of this year: *I think our motto should be, post 9-11: 'raghead talks tough, raghead faces consequences.'* [From a CPAC conference, reported by CSN News, cited by Sojourners online, 8 Sept. 2006.]

Just what consequences would those be? That they convert to Christianity on pain of death? That we put a gun to their heads in order to turn their hearts to the Lord Jesus Christ? Even if we succeeded in converting our enemies to Christianity, converting them by means of coercion would not be converting them to Christ; it would only be converting them to a form of religion Christ would not own. It would be a Christ-less Christianity, which followers of Christ can never accept. The dean of Baylor's Truett Seminary, Paul Powell, has written: *We can force outward conformity but not inward commitment.* The results are always disastrous when we do. Says Powell, *Coercion can only result in people becoming hypocrites, not genuine Christians. ... Persuade, yes; coerce, never. The gospel is to be shared, not shoved.* [Back to Bedrock: Messages on Our Historic Baptist Faith, BaptistWay Press, chap. 7, passim.]

Baptists have fought against any use of force to achieve spiritual ends. Many of you may be surprised to learn that. You've been embarrassed by too many Baptists in recent years, especially with their all-knowing and intolerant attitudes. I know way too many that have left the Baptist church or have refused ever to go into one because of our narrow-minded antics. So let me repeat this again another way: Baptists are *for* freedom! We came into being fighting against religious mastery, whether by princes or popes or even preachers. We have held high the banner of freedom, because we believe that no one comes to true faith in Christ who does not come freely; even as we believe that no one comes to true freedom who does not come to it through faith in Christ.

Faith and freedom cannot live long without each other. Faith is freedom's oxygen; freedom is faith's carbon dioxide. Faith and freedom breathe off of one another like flora and fauna in a God-ordained spiritual ecology. So much so that you can look upon any expression of faith and tell how genuine it is or healthy by the degree of freedom you see in it. Likewise, when people crow about freedom, you can judge its staying power by the measure of faith that animates it. A freedom that boasts in having no boundaries is license rather than freedom; and that kind of freedom will collapse on itself.

More on that next week. This week and next we will hear the Baptist clarion call to freedom. At our best Baptists have gotten this right. We are freedom fighters— fighting against anyone claiming religious mastery over any other; and fighting for spiritual mastery that tames our wanton desires by the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ living within. The latter we look at next week, the former today.

Some Islamists dumbfound us these days by denying religious liberty to anyone, sentencing to death Muslims that convert to Christianity, declaring separation of church and state an affront to God, and seeking an Islamic theocracy wherever the majority confesses that there is one God and Muhammad is God's prophet. We call them fanatics and radicals and think them uncivilized. I cannot defend their views, but I remind you that all Muslims do not agree with them either. Even if the Qu'ran plainly states things that support these views, the Bible also plainly states things that could lead us to extremism, and has. Islam is overdue for the kind of Reformation that Christianity needed and got— a reformation that sought kernel of the faith and left behind the shuck. The question is not what our scriptures say as how we interpret the will and ways of God through them.

Islam is a fact of history that Christians need to learn to deal with constructively rather than destructively. We cannot and must not take the position that the only options are to convert or kill them on the one hand, or 'live and let live' on the other hand. Christians tried the convert or kill plan in the Spanish Inquisition. It was a dark time for our faith to which we must never return. The policy of live and let live has been the dominant modern European view, and they are finding it fatal in dealing with Islamic militants, whose motto is 'change or die.' We must not be passive, but instead actively engage our Muslim neighbors. We must pray for changes within Islam itself and by our relationships hope that they will rethink their vision of Islam toward non-Muslims, whether or not any converts to Christ.

Let's remember that it took sixteen centuries after the birth of Christianity to make the case for full religious liberty. And it took a courageous turn in the American experiment with the First Amendment to make it stick.

The pastor of the first Baptist church in history challenged the king's authority over the church. Thomas Helwys and his small band of Baptists believed there is one mediator between God and the individual soul— Jesus Christ, and him alone. No one may stand between the individual and his or her relationship to God. In 1612 Helwys wrote an address to King James I called *A Short Declaration on the Mystery of Iniquity*. Catchy

title, don't you know?! It reads in part: *The King is mortal and not God; therefore hath no power over the immortal souls of his subjects to make laws and ordinances for them and to set spiritual lords over them.* That was so well received that the king threw Helwys into Newgate Prison never again to see the light of day, dying in that dark place four years later. But he was illumined to the end by a faith in freedom and a freedom of faith that lives still. Every time you read a King James Bible, you might remember that the same monarch that gave us the Bible in our own tongue, thus democratizing the faith for his subjects, at the same time denied those principles when anyone like Baptists disagreed with him.

This is your Baptist heritage, my friends. We sadly live in a day when Baptist pastors are arrested for civil disobedience for trying to block the rightful removal of the Ten Commandments' monument in Montgomery, Alabama, from the state judicial building. They forget their heritage. They assert their liberty at the expense of the liberty of others. I do not have time to recount in detail the heroism of Baptists like Roger Williams, Obadiah Holmes, John Leland, Henry Dunster, and others. These suffered persecution, imprisonment, public humiliation and social rejection in Colonial America for their commitment to full liberty. But what we can do today is reaffirm our resolve for religious liberty for everyone, which is more than tolerance for those that disagree with us. By doing so, we commit ourselves to standing up for the rights of others— the right to believe differently from us, and the right not to have our faith shoved down their throats in public spaces as we claim our majority privileges.

For freedom Christ has set you free. This is the Apostle Paul's declaration of liberty from every form of religious tyranny, no matter how well intended. He sees all attempts to force conformity to someone else's brand of spiritual experience to be a violation of the deeply personal and liberating grace of God in Jesus Christ. It is slavery, not freedom, a submission to human masters that usurps the proper relationship of the soul to its Maker.

St. Paul knows whence he speaks. This same Paul once took it as his personal mission to coerce conformity to his brand of Judaism. He stood by quietly affirming of the stoning of Stephen, a follower of Jesus he thought deserved death for preaching a nonconformist message of faith in Christ Jesus. This same Paul set out for Damascus with papers permitting him to persecute Jews who believed in Jesus. He would have them believe as he or suffer the consequences. Yet God intervened on that road to Damascus, blinding him until he could see— until he could see that faith and freedom cannot be divided.

Certain so-called Judaizers told the new Galatian Christians that they should not eat certain foods and must observe Jewish laws, especially circumcision, or else their faith would be vain. Paul considers them law enforcement officials undermining true faith by robbing it of freedom, instead of revolutionary soldiers of grace. He will have us fight any such efforts to deaden faith by depriving it of liberty.

How much better that Christians become known as heralds of freedom! How much better still that Baptists reclaim our place on the front lines of this fight for freedom!

One way to do that is to ask yourself every time you are tempted to claim a privilege of faith for yourself at the expense of someone else whether you would want someone else to treat you that way. For instance, before you decide to fight for your right to have prayer in the public schools, ask yourself whether you would be happy to be a Christian minority in a school where Hindus or Muslims or Jews were the majority and you had to sit by powerless as they prayed prayers you could not join in without violating your spiritual conscience. Would you feel as comfortable in a public school in Utah as in Texas? Ask yourself in your business or community how you would want your faith treated. Then love your neighbor as yourself by fighting for your neighbor's right to have a faith like yours, to have a faith unlike yours, or even to have no faith at all.

I agree with the great and beloved former pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, George W. Truett, who once said that while he wished for all people to come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, he would not lift one finger to coerce one soul to faith. We Baptists must share our faith and invite others to experience Christ for themselves, but we do so only in the context of freedom. We therefore speak respectfully and graciously, using all our wits to persuade family, friends, and neighbors of the true freedom found only in faith in Jesus Christ. But we swear off any attempt to be a master over another.

We close with another great line from Truett, delivered on the steps of the U.S. Capitol Building in 1922: *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 believe. God wants free worshipers and no other kind.* [http://www.bjconline.org/resources/pubs/pub_truett_address.htm]

If you believe this way, you might be a Baptistô a Wilshire Baptist anyway. And if you believe this way, we urge you to walk this way. If not, may we persuade you with all respect and Christian love to change your mind and walk this freedom road with us?