

"A Flaming Torch"

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My most memorable moment at a meeting of the General Assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship came at the Ft. Worth Convention Center in 1992. Dr. Samuel Proctor, grandson of slaves, brilliant Baptist educator, and master of the pulpit was preaching. He was faithfully following the five point preaching pattern of great African American preachers: (1) start low, (2) go slow, (3) get high, (4) strike fire, (5) retire. Dr. Proctor was at the fourth stage: he was striking fire.

In that mesmerizing, rhythmical cadence where tone is so powerful that it almost obscures content, he was reminding us that the Nazi triumph occurred in one of the most enlightened, most theological, most intellectual, and most cultural centers of Europe. Germany was no hick back country, uncivilized and uneducated. This was the theological home, said Proctor, of Luther and Schleiermacher. This was the cultural home of many of the great musicians of the modern world. This was the philosophical home and intellectual center of critical thought. And Dr. Proctor kept ticking off the names of all the great minds and large souls that had shaped modern Germany. And then Proctor turned to the side of the pulpit, raised his arms above his heads, bent his knees, and brought his arms down while he screamed, "And along came a paper hanger! A paper hanger! A paper hanger!" And, as I recall, he sat down.

Dr. Proctor sat down because he knew that we could complete the story. He knew that we knew that with the "paper hanger" came deep, dark things in Germany. These things were so deep and so dark that some would find it impossible to talk about them a half century later. I saw with my own eyes a survivor, a rabbi, go blank one night when he was asked to recall what it was like to try to survive in the concentration camp as a teenager. And these things were so deep and dark that some people in the last half of the twentieth century denied that they ever happened. The deepest and

the darkest of all these things we call the Holocaust, a deep, deep, deep, darkness for the Jewish people and for all the rest of us.

BLIND MIXING OF CHURCH AND STATE

But we must never forget that there was also great darkness for Christ's Church. That Body of Christ, transcending all principalities and powers, got all tangled up in what was called the "myth of blood and soil." And some, **within** the church, interpreted the myth as light. But it proved to be a very deep darkness. They called it "German Nationalism," but it was really manic patriotism, a knee-jerk devotion to a fourth rate God, born of fear. And then many of the Christians took off and started calling themselves "**German** Christians." But all the pathos and the passion fell on the first rather than the second word. They were Germans who happened to be Christians rather than Christians who happened to be Germans. They proudly flung swastika across Christ's altar. Good people, Christian people, people like you are, got blinded by the darkness; they were fearful of the light. They no longer knew their real Fuehrer.

Let me be clear at the outset. I am not suggesting that we are on the lip of any kind of political totalitarianism in this country. I don't believe that.

I am suggesting, however, that there are "American Christians" for whom the adjective is more important than the noun.

I am suggesting that some Christian churches in our country have been transformed into political temples and some pastors have embraced the moniker of "patriot pastors."

I am suggesting that devoted theocrats have an eye on the machinery of national and state governments, and that they make no apology for it.

And I am suggesting that a skewed reading of our nation's history is sending forth armies of buck privates scurrying to wreck Jefferson's wall.

IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE

But many blithely say, "It can't happen here." The last time I heard that was in a hotel lobby in Houston, Texas, in 1979, after the annual meeting of the

Southern Baptist Convention when the fundamentalists began their complete takeover of the SBC.

"But we have a Constitution that makes things clear," so it cannot happen here.

"We have a Bill of Rights and the First Amendment that makes things even clearer."

"Our national pluralism will not permit it to happen here."

And in an otherwise beautiful and provocative book, *American Gospel*, Jon Meacham optimistically forecasts that it cannot happen here because of the existence of a sane middle in American life that will not permit it to happen here.¹

IT CAN HAPPEN HERE

Let me tell you why I believe it can happen here, this idolatrous mixing of church and state.

It can happen here because "Generation Joshua" is loose in our country. Have you heard of "Generation Joshua?" It is an effort by Michael Farris, founder of Patrick Henry College, to turn Christian, home-schooled students into political foot soldiers to gain political power in order to subsume everything—entertainment, law, government, and education—under their right wing version of Christianity. Like Joshua of the Hebrew Bible, Generation Joshua's job is to possess the land, to conquer the land, or, in the words of the religious right, "to take back the land." And, according to Michael Harris, in the spring semester of 2004, Patrick Henry College had more interns in the White House than any other college in the nation.² **It can happen here because of a religious right-wing militancy.**

It can happen here because by 2004 The Christian Coalition gave 42 out of 100 United States senators a rating of 100%. More than half of the senators received ratings of 83% by the militant Christian Coalition. **It can happen here because sincere religious ideologues are rampant in our country, and they mean business.**

It can happen here because a recent survey of 100,000 high school students in America concluded that one out of three students believes that the First Amendment goes TOO FAR in the rights it guarantees! That last sentence ought to be absolutely horrendous to your ears. In fact, that sentence reminds me of a phone call we got about 12:30 one night when we were living in Louisville, Ky. The call was from Wayne Dehoney, pastor of Walnut Street Baptist Church in the city. He said, "Walter, this is Wayne Dehoney, I just received a call from Cullman, Ala., and Grady Nutt was killed in a plane crash tonight. I knew that you were close friends, so I am calling to tell you so that you can go be with his wife." It was my first and only death notice in the middle of the night. I remember saying in stunned shock and disbelief, "Wayne, you are going to have to say that again." He said, "I understand." And then, with all those years of pastoral care under his belt, he slowly said once more, "I received a call from Cullman, Ala., and Grady Nutt was killed in an airplane crash tonight."

I do not trivialize my dear friend Grady Nutt's death by saying to you that, if you hear it carefully, the sentence about the high school students and the First Amendment has all the tone and sound of a death announcement in the middle of the night about someone you love. So I want to repeat it, slowly, so that it will sink in: ONE IN THREE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THIS REPUBLIC SAYS THAT THE FIRST AMENDMENT OF THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES GOES TOO FAR IN THE RIGHTS IT GUARANTEES TO YOU AS A CITIZEN!

The survey did not end there, however. It contained more surprises. More shocking still, only one-half of the students surveyed said that a newspaper should be allowed to publish freely without government approval of stories.³

My friends, we are talking about my grandchildren's future here! This is America's tomorrow speaking! One third of them want the freedoms of the First Amendment curbed. And one half of them want newspapers to secure government approval for their stories!! These are astonishing and inconceivable attitudes for high school students in the United States of America. This survey is a terrible, scary phone call in the middle of the night about what has happened and what is happening in our nation. **It can happen here because of ignorance of our history.**

And the situation differs little among many in our Baptist denomination. I am 69 years old. I have been in the ministry since I was 18 years old. The math is easy. 18 from 69 is a half century plus. For a full half century now, I have been roaming the Baptist yard, mostly in the white Baptist yard of the South to be sure, loving and being loved by Baptist people, observing Baptist practices and preaching, and celebrating with them the principles for which they have stood.

And here's the truth if I have ever told it: When I entered the Baptist ministry as a youngster in 1955, and for at least 30 years afterward, if you preached a sermon in a Baptist church on the separation of church and state and religious liberty or freedom of conscience, you would have them snoring in their pews in a matter of minutes! The benediction became wake-up time. All of that "freedom stuff" enshrined in the First Amendment was old hat to Baptist folk who had been to Baptist Training Union and studied just a tad of the Baptist heritage.

But not today! Today you preach a sermon on absolute religious liberty for **all** people ... preach a sermon on the real implications of genuine separation of church and state ... preach a sermon on freedom of conscience and freedom of the press, and you will begin to feel "sanctuary electricity." "Sanctuary electricity" is when the preacher viscerally knows that the right button has just been hit. Negative energy begins to flow in the room, and it showers the pulpit.

But to the contrary,

- if you preach a sermon in many Baptist churches today and say, so as to reinforce their prejudices, that the phrase "separation of church and state" is not in the Constitution, and
- if you preach that the First Amendment has been misinterpreted and taken too far, and
- if you preach that all religious groups may have freedom in this country but Christianity stands in an historically privileged position in the eyes of the government, and
- if you preach that our nation is going to hell in a hand basket because of a judiciary that does not acknowledge our Christian values and symbols and,

- if you say that there is a methodical and carefully designed war on Christians in American society,
- and if you preach that this country has always been a Christian nation but is now losing its moorings, ...
- if that's what you tell them at 11:00 on Sunday morning, sanctuary electricity will become sanctuary applause!

It can happen here because many Baptists, of all God's people, have lost their way.

WHY WE MUST HAVE THE BJC

And that, my friends, is why the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty is essential to our life together. The BJC is one year older than I.

So all of my life, the BJC has been telling us that one of the ways in which we love God is to "do unto others as you would have others do unto you." One of the ways we love God is to defend fair play and equality in American religious life, says the BJC.

All of my life the BJC has been helping the Kingdom Of God to gain ground by trying to convince churches that they are stronger on their own than when leaning on Caesar.

All of my life the BJC has passionately reminded Baptists of a noble heritage that celebrates rather than emasculates separation of church and state.

All of my life the BJC has been preaching what Baptists have preached from their beginning: **freedom of conscience is God's Will for creation!**

A FLAMING TORCH

The biblical image that comes to me when I think of the BJC is that Flaming Sword that God fixed on that wall in Genesis 3. I like to think of the BJC, not as a sword, a weapon of war, but as a kind of Flaming Torch, a Flaming Torch for Freedom and Liberty. This Flaming Torch is positioned on the Wall of Separation, guarding the way to the garden of religious freedom and to the tree of separation of church and state. I am willing even to allegorize the cherubim, those heavenly messengers who helped keep an eye on

those who would chip away at the wall. I've named the cherubs! I call them J. M. Dawson; Emmanuel Carlson; James E. Wood, Jr.; James M. Dunn; and J. Brent Walker. And other cherubim, staff members of the BJC, worked the wall with them, keeping an eye out for transgressors.

I MEASURE MY WORDS WHEN I SAY THAT **I believe with all my heart and soul that one of the most important religious organizations in this republic is the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty.** One of the reasons I have always admired the BJC is its ecumenical nature. The BJC is not simply a Baptist thing. The BJC is a human thing. It does not matter whether you are Baptist or Buddhist, Methodist or Muslim, Assembly of God or atheist, the BJC is a flaming torch guarding God-given freedoms for your children and grandchildren. I wish you could have heard Rabbi David Saperstein this past spring at Mercer University talk about what the BJC has meant to the Jewish people in this country.

And I sincerely believe that the BJC is needed more today than at any time in its history. MORE THAN AT ANY TIME SINCE ITS FOUNDING! It started in 1936, but it is needed more today than in 1936 or 1946 or 1956 or 1966 or any other decade!

No battle stays won! If we don't keep a sickle in our hands the garden of freedom will be overtaken by the weeds of religious discrimination. The BJC is our sickle for beating back the weeds of encroachment of church on state and state on church.

I think of the BJC this way. Every time Brent Walker answers the phone at the BJC and helps someone understand the arcane issues of church and state, he has just answered the phone for me—and you!

Every time Holly Hollman or Brent Walker or any other staff member writes an article to clarify the weighty issues of politics and piety, they have just written that article for me—and for you!

Every time I have watched James Dunn and Brent Walker testify on television before a congressional hearing on issues of separation of church and state, I have thought that they testified for me—and you!

And now the BJC is in a campaign to build a Center for Religious Liberty in Washington, D.C., on Capitol Hill. Candidly, I have come today, out of a deep belief in the ministry of the BJC, to ask you to help to do two things to help build this needed Center.

First, make a personal gift. Every one of us in this room has a church or an educational institution or a ministry of some kind that demands our full attention and most of our money. I understand our loyalties to those ministries. But my friends, we have only one Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. I implore you to rededicate yourselves to religious freedom and the separation of religion and government and the mission of the BJC. I ask you to join Kay and me in helping to build a Center for Religious Liberty in the most powerful political city on the planet. Do something great big for your children and grandchildren! Leave part of your money to the BJC!

Second, each of us here knows people who need a place to park their money for the the Kingdom of God. Make a contact on behalf of the BJC. Give Brent Walker their names. The BJC needs what you can do, but it also needs you to put it in touch with people who can do more than you can do.

Back several years ago, when "Honk, if you love Jesus" was on every other car bumper in North America, I saw a beat up ole car with several different colors of paint on it huffing and puffing down the interstate. It appeared to be a wreckaholic! But on the bumper was a bright, shiny sticker that said, "If you love Jesus, push!"

Would you, please? PUSH for the Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty!

¹ Jon Meacham, *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2006). This is an inspiring book that may be the key to countering the religious right-wing on issues of church and state. But I am uneasy with Meacham at two points. One, he fails to understand that the argument is not simply between the religious right and the secular left. Many religious people and religious organizations oppose the strategies and goals of the religious right. Two, basing his

argument on "it has never happened here," he appears a bit too optimistic that the center will hold for the future.

² See Michael Farris, *The Joshua Generation* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2005) 158. I was introduced to "Generation Joshua" by Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006). Goldberg's book is packed with information about the massive network of the religious right. In addition to Goldberg, I also recommend Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), especially chapter six, "The Entwining of Church and State," and Rabbi James Rubin, *The Baptizing of America: The Religious Right's Plans for the Rest of Us* (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 2006).

³ See "First Amendment No Big Deal, Students Say," accessed on 15 June 2006 at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6888837/>.