

Freedom's Holy Light

A sermon by Dr. J. Daniel Day
Pastor, First Baptist Church of Raleigh, N.C.
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There was a time when Waynesville, North Carolina, was known to outsiders--if at all--as a nice, little mountain town in western North Carolina. However, three weeks ago Waynesville became the latest poster-child site in America's ongoing religious-political melodrama. And, God bless us, we Baptists were right in the big, sticky middle of it!

As tempting as it is to let this one go with just a shudder of disbelief, the fact is this event with the East Waynesville Baptist Church only illustrates the anguish our entire nation is experiencing at the interface of religion and politics. A "culture war" is being waged with heavy religious artillery. You know the battle-fronts: prayer in public schools, the public display of the Ten Commandments, "under God" within our pledge of allegiance, public tax dollars for private schools and faith-based ministries, etc. The list goes on, but in virtually every case the contest concerns our understandings of what Baptists call "soul freedom" and the political corollary of this freedom, the separation of church and state.

My friend Walter Shurden says that not too many years ago these terms could roll off a Baptist preacher's lips and it was a given the crowd would nod agreement and awaken only at the invitation hymn. The subject was just that boring. Not so today. Our cultural waters have become so murky that even in this church with its historic commitment to Baptist principles, some probably question the tradition. So today I revisit this embattled core conviction.

I begin with the foundational understanding that freedom is God's gift to humankind. Adam and Eve were given a command by God, but they were also given the freedom to disobey the command. The ability to heed or to defy God was theirs. Freedom was theirs. Later in the biblical story the mournful voices of Israel's prophets and psalmists speak for God: "O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways" (Ps. 81:13). But they would not. Nonetheless God preserved in them this freedom to stay or go. Even later in the biblical story we learn of Jesus who comes to set us free from sin and death and to grant us the liberty of the children of God, the liberty to serve God with glad and thankful hearts. But once again, God doesn't push this down our throats.

From this foundational understanding comes a simple yet far-reaching conclusion. True religious faith cannot be compelled. In order for faith to be faith, it must be freely chosen faith. It must be a voluntarily given faith or your own; otherwise it is a meaningless sham. This idea is not that hard to grasp. For a frivolous analogy consider the fact that you can make an N.C. State grad learn the words and tune of the Tarheel alma mater (and yes, Wolfpack grads do have that intellectual ability!), and you might even make a Wolfpacker sing it. But you'll never make them believe it! Nor will you ever make them love it, or make them contribute to the Rams Club or send their kids, willingly, to Chapel Hill. And if you're silly enough to try, all you'll accomplish is rebellion.

Now you must know that within the Christian family tree we Baptists sit on the rebellious limb. From our birth in the early 1600s in England our battle cry was "Give us Freedom!" Especially "soul freedom." Baptists said to the established church and government of England, "Don't tell us what we must believe! Don't tell us we must recite your creeds or say your prayers! Don't tell us we haven't the right and the responsibility to come to our own religious convictions and practices!" For saying such rebellious words British Baptists like John Bunyan spent years in jail. When Baptists came to America they said the same thing to the established churches in the colonies and for doing so they were whipped and fined and run out of town. Soul freedom was that important.

Baptists endured this persecution not just to gain their own freedom but the freedom of all--even those whose religious convictions were most distasteful to them. Ours wasn't just a self-serving campaign for toleration of the weird Baptists, but a radical call for the full and free practice of soul liberty for everyone.

The First Amendment to our Constitution, an amendment Madison introduced and championed, says "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." That's a Baptist-inspired contribution to these United States of America.

So, if one begins as I do, with a belief that only voluntary faith is valid faith, it leads you to some unexpected political places. You wind up, as Baptists who know their history should wind up, appearing to some people to be anti-prayer and even anti-God.

For instance, history-conscious Baptists see today's debate over school prayer quite differently than some others do. Because soul freedom is the only soil from which true personal faith can stem, we see the removal of mandated prayers as being actually a gain for faith. Instead of being provided a government-endorsed prayer to pray, children have the freedom to pray or not to pray whatever prayers they choose. Contrary to the charge that "children can't even pray in school anymore," children may pray in school every day, and many do so. What is prohibited is the school's imposition of a prescribed prayer upon its students. Soul freedom is honored. Nobody is told what they ought or must believe about God or religion or prayer. It's in the hands of pastors like me and church people like you to make the case for faith and to nurture it.

It is past time for Baptists to revisit the historical rock from whence we are hewn and to have the courage to reclaim an audacious faith in freedom and in the power of our own gospel. I say this because the choir grows daily of those who insist America once was and must again become an avowedly "Christian" nation. Many leaders of this choir even offer revisionist histories of our founders' studied avoidance of any governmental entanglement with religion. Not surprisingly, these advocates of a "Christian" America fail to specify whose version of Christianity would be chosen as the standard for this "Christian" nation. The Protestant Fundamentalist version? The "enlightened" Liberal version? The Mormon version? The Roman or Orthodox Church's version? If you think the U.S. Supreme Court has its critics now, what awaits us when that Court is called upon to be America's College of Cardinals?

Believe me, I do understand the concerns voiced today by millions of alarmed Americans. I even share those concerns. These are unnerving times. But before we start to join the chorus of those who want to mandate that our particular religious opinions, practices and slogans must dominate the culture, let history offer insight.

In 1787, as soon as the Constitution of the United States was presented to the states for their ratification, people of faith were alarmed by how shorn of religion it was. Why, there was not one mention of God within it, and it even explicitly rejected any religious qualification whatsoever for office holders! Moreover, there was this First Amendment proposing to outlaw the possibility of any assistance to any religion! Many religious communities went into a tizzy of lobbying against this madness. Some state legislatures immediately reacted by protecting their states from this godless constitution by piling religious requirements into their state constitutions. But in the next 35 years, one by one those statutes were repealed, because year by year the policy of soul freedom proved its wisdom.

Witness the case of Lyman Beecher, a Congregationalist pastor in Connecticut who vigorously opposed the movement in Connecticut to disestablish the Congregational Church in that state. In his memoirs he admits that it was "as dark a day as ever I saw" when he lost this battle. But in retrospect this loss was "the best thing that ever happened to the state of Connecticut" because "it cut the churches loose from dependence on state support. It threw them wholly on their own resources and on God."¹ Losing the crutch of government helped the church to walk. Freedom worked!

Today we are called upon to display a similar faith in freedom. Admittedly, our nation now includes people of all religions and no religion at all, and that appears to pose greater risks than we think our forebears faced. But wouldn't it be ironic if, in the very period when we Americans are offering our children in battle and emptying our national treasury to advance the banner of political freedom around the world, that we ourselves would diminish religious freedom?

We are called upon today not only to display faith in this freedom, but also to display faith in this gospel we profess. Do we really believe that when Jesus is lifted up he will draw all men unto himself (John 12:31)? Or is it more true that when Jesus is lifted up he actually needs the assistance of Caesar to accomplish his work? So much of today's push for a "Christian" America strikes me as a replay of those in Jesus' day who would have made him king right then and there. He fled them then and he will not be so foisted upon the world today. He will draw the world, he will woo the lost, he will win the battle. But not by fiat, not by force, but by love. We have redeeming, glad, good news to share with a lost world. Freedom's holy light draws those who will be warmed, who will see. Let us dare to trust the light.

¹Cited in Edwin S. Gaustad, *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land: A History of Church and State in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 38-39.

Dr. J. Daniel Day is a native of Oklahoma and has been pastor of First Baptist Church of Raleigh, N.C., since 1996. He graduated from Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee, Okla. and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.