

How we got that way



Faith . Freedom . For All.



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In the United States, one can count 28,921,564 individual Baptists in 122,811 local churches in 63 different denominational bodies.¹ Worldwide one can identify 37,334,191 Baptists in 157,240 local Baptist churches.² Those are impressive statistics of no small measure. So why then does that idiosyncratic Baptist Farmer Preacher, Will Campbell, say in several of his books that not many Baptists exist any longer? What Campbell means, I gather, is that not many Baptists continue to act out of the muscular Baptist tradition of freedom, including religious liberty and separation of church and state.

How is it in your part of the country? Are Baptists widely and popularly recognized today as the "stout champions of freedom"? Or is the popular image of Baptists in your part of the world by non-Baptists what it is in mine? And that is that we are narrow, provincial, even reactionary Christians, not freedom-loving freedom-fighters. Baptists in many places today are not seen as those who keep a sickle in their hands to root out the weeds of oppression and totalitarianism in the garden of life.

Walker Percy, the psychiatrist turned novelist, was, for my money, one of the most prophetic and perceptive readers of American life in the last half of the twentieth century. Here is what Percy said about the Baptists he knew in the Deep South. He said they are a group of evangelistically repulsive anti-Catholics who are political opportunists advocating scientific creationism in the public school system.³

Surely one must not swallow uncritically Walker Percy's assessment. But I concede that he was in fact describing what many assume the Baptist identity to be today. Baptists are simply not perceived as freedom-lovers and freedom-givers and freedom-protectors by many persons in America today. If that is the case, and I think to a great degree it is, it is sad, sad, sad.

It means that Baptists have come a long, long way from home, from their humble beginnings and struggling origins. Most of us when we think of Baptists and freedom in the last half of the twentieth century could probably point to only three movements: (1) African-American Baptists and the struggle for civil rights in America, (2) the Baptist World

Alliance and its involvement in religious liberty and human rights issues around the globe, and (3) The Baptist Joint Committee in Washington, D.C., and its pit-bulldog defense of religious freedom and separation of church and state in the United States.

We can thank God for all three because each in its own way has rung sharply and loudly the note of freedom, a note which has become fainter and fainter for some Baptists in the last half of this century. Today many Baptists know the words of freedom, but they have forgotten the music. But both the music and the words in the Baptist heritage speak words and make melodies of no uncertain sound. Both the lyrics and the tunes in the Baptist past speak harmoniously and unambiguously of absolute religious liberty based upon principle, not expediency. And they speak of the political derivative of religious liberty, the separation of church and state.

How did we Baptists get to these ideas of absolute religious liberty and separation of church and state? There is no doubt that we did. Even some of our fiercest historical opponents affirm this. So how did Baptists get beyond "establishmentarianism," which was so much a part of the concept of Christendom in Europe and England and New England and in most of the American colonies?

And how did Baptists get beyond mere "tolerationism"? Tolerationism, while a gigantic step beyond establishmentarianism, never discovered the spacious land of freedom of conscience. And how did Baptists get beyond "accommodationism"? Accommodationism — the seductive idea that all Christian denominations would share equally in the bounty of the state — how did Baptists get beyond that one?

In some instances, as Baptist history will document, we sputtered at times in getting beyond accommodationism, but in the end our forebears recognized its inadequacies and inequities and "leveler" heads prevailed. How did Baptists get to these heady ideas of religious freedom for absolutely everybody and separation of church and state for both the good of the church and the good of the state? As I said, there is no question that Baptists got there. How did they?

I will suggest that Baptists finally got that way because of three factors. First, Baptists got that way because they were birthed in adversity. Second, Baptists got that way because their peculiar Christian convictions and common sense encouraged theological diversity. Third, Baptists got that way on religious liberty and separation of church and state because, birthed in adversity and with Christian convictions encouraging theological diversity, they inevitably sealed their convictions by engaging in political activity. They got that way because of their birthing, their believing, and their way of being in the world.

Baptists came from the womb of the seventeenth century English Reformation and landed immediately in hostile territory. Almost twenty-five years ago I published a little book titled *Not A Silent People: Controversies That Have Shaped Southern Baptists*.⁴ Some may recall that I titled the very first chapter “Here Come the Battling Baptists.” After twenty-five years I remain convinced of the appropriateness of the title of the first chapter to describe the emergence of Baptists as a distinct denomination.

Baptists emerged as a specific body in the midst of a crippling adversity. They came battling! If you ever write an historical essay on early Baptist life in either England or the American Colonies, a good place to begin your research is in the records of court proceedings, search warrants, and prison records. While that story of repression and oppression may be over-dramatized, and even skewed in a comprehensive retelling of the Baptist story, it is nonetheless a fact that Baptists bled in their earliest years of the seventeenth century, and they remained handcuffed in much of the eighteenth century. They bled from the whip of religious oppression, and they were constricted by the arms of both church and state and of the two acting in concert.

The historical context is crucial. Queen Elizabeth reigned in England from 1558-1603, the last half of the sixteenth century, and she tried valiantly to settle the problem of an emerging religious pluralism in England. The Queen attempted to build a tent big enough to accommodate a passionate, powerful, and proliferating pluralism. She failed. The old dream of the Medieval Synthesis with all of life united around a single ruler and a single expression of religion was slowly crumbling in the dust of blazing individual freedoms. In the end, the so-called Elizabethan Settlement settled nothing.

When Elizabeth died in 1603, James I, formerly James VI of Scotland, came to the throne, stirring hope in the hearts of Puritans and more radical dissenters. After all, James was coming from The Church of Scotland. But Puritans and non-conformists hoped in vain. James’ immediate and persistent remedy for the knotty problem of religious fragmentation in England was simple: forced uniformity!

James I and Charles I, who succeeded James and who

reigned till 1649, both reacted with horror to the idea of liberty of conscience. Rather James and Charles affirmed the divine right of kings and the divine right of bishops as one and the same. It was a scrambled-eggs society. Church and State came on the same plate and all mixed together. Baptists, virtual babies on the religious scene, tried to unscramble the political-ecclesiastical eggs, maintaining, among other things, that the state has no say-so over the soul of a person.

During James’ reign from 1603-25, the Separatists, from whom the Baptists would themselves eventually separate, multiplied. The Separatists had no reason to be surprised, however, when the King’s fist came down hard on them. Less than a year after coming to the throne, James I called the Hampton Court Conference in January 1604 to deal with the petitions made by the Puritans, a people not nearly so liberal as the Separatists, for reform in the church. When the Puritans demanded modification of the episcopacy, James declared, “No bishop, no king.” And then reacting to the slightest tinge of religious liberty, James said in kingly fear and sarcasm:

*Jack and Tom and Will and Dick shall meete, and at their pleasure censure me and my Councell and all our proceedings. Then Will shall stand up and say it must be thus; then Dick shall reply and say, nay, narry, but we shall have it thus.*⁵

James I, like so many of his age, caricatured religious pluralism because he simply could not imagine a society built on the freedom to choose one’s faith. And so that there could be no mistake of the King’s point of view, James declared of the Puritans at Hampton, “I shall make them conforme themselves, or I wil harrie them out of the land, or else doe worse.”

It was during James’ reign that the little group at Gainsborough, led by John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, pioneers of the Baptist movement, left their homeland of England in 1608 to find religious refuge in Holland.

And it was during Charles’ reign that folks swarmed to New England to escape the merciless hand of Archbishop William Laud. Laud, who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633, and Charles I, the monarch who favored him so, would in the end both feel the sting of political and religious persecution in their own executions.

And it was during the reigns of James and Charles that Baptists peppered both royalty and religion with some of the first and most forceful tracts ever written on religious liberty.

John Smyth’s 1612 “Propositions and Conclusions ...” was, according to William Lumpkin, “perhaps the first confession of faith of modern times to demand freedom of conscience and separation of church and state.”⁶ Said Smyth, “... the magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force or

compel men to this or that form of religion, or doctrine: but to leave Christian religion free, to every man's conscience ... for Christ only is the king, and lawgiver of the church and conscience (James 4:12).⁷

Thomas Helwys, upon returning to England with a remnant of Smyth's group, released in 1612 his document titled *A Short Declaration of the Mistery of Iniquity*. He was rewarded with a prison sentence, but not before this pioneer Baptist freely professed of the Roman Catholics of England that our lord the King hath no more power over their consciences then ours, and that is none at all: for our Lord the King is but an earthly King, and if the Kings people be obedient & true subjects, obeying all humane lawes made by the King, our lord the King, can require no more. For mens religion to God, is betwixt God and themselves; the King shall not answer for it; neither may the King be judg betwene God and man. Let them be heretikes, Turks, Jewes or whatsoever, it apperteynes not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.⁸

First, Smyth; second, Helwys; and then Leonard Busher. Busher wrote *Religion's Peace: A Plea for Liberty of Conscience*, which Leon McBeth called "the first Baptist treatise devoted exclusively to religious liberty."⁹ Published in 1614, Busher asserted that "as kings and bishops cannot command the wind, so they cannot command faith." He continued, writing the following in capital letters: "IT IS NOT ONLY UNMERCIFUL, BUT UNNATURAL AND ABOMINABLE; YEA, MONSTROUS FOR ONE CHRISTIAN TO VEX AND DESTROY ANOTHER FOR DIFFERENCE AND QUESTIONS OF RELIGION."¹⁰

And then John Murton in *Persecution for Religion Judg'd and Condemn'd* (1615, 1620, 1662) confessed he was compelled to write because of "how heinous it is in the sight of the Lord to force men and women by cruel persecution, to bring their bodies to a worship whereunto they cannot bring their spirits."¹¹ Starkly, he wrote, "that no man ought to be persecuted of his religion, be it true or false ..."¹²

It is important to pause and remember that Baptists in the 17th century confronted religious restrictionism from both the courthouse and the church house, from both the monarchs of England and the bishops of the Church of England. It did not end there, however. Neither the Puritans, the Presbyterians, nor the Separatists in England advocated complete soul liberty. And things were no better in New England. There Obadiah Holmes was publicly whipped on the streets of Boston. And as a result, John Clarke, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Newport, Rhode Island, wrote a document for Old England with the ominous title of "Ill Newes From New England." There, in the New World, Isaac Backus had to write as late as 1773 a pleading work titled "An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty." Two decades later John Leland (1791) wrote a pamphlet "The Rights of Conscience Inalienable," saying that "Government has no

more to do with the religious opinions of men, than it has with the principles of mathematics." Leland continued, "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 so doing."¹³

So born in the midst of great pain with freedom denied, Baptists, a minority people, grounded their affirmation for religious freedom to some degree in their own historical experience of deprivation. There is nothing quite so strong as the testimony of the oppressed, unless it is the testimony of the oppressed which has gone public so that all can see and hear. You will remember that Martin Luther King Jr. was criticized because, as some said, "He was simply trying to attract the media." King responded that such was precisely what he was trying to do. He sought to attract a crowd to expose to the nation and the world the denial of basic human rights. Helwys, Busher, Murton, Clarke, Williams, Backus, and Leland penned their fiery tracts and pamphlets for precisely the same reason. As the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was born from freedoms denied, just so the Religious Rights Movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Baptists "got that way" on religious liberty and separation of church and state because they were born in adversity.

Second, Baptists got that way on these issues because their Baptist interpretation of the Christian faith and human life encouraged theological diversity. Let us be sure of what I am saying. To say that their convictions encouraged diversity does not suggest in the least that Baptists had no firm certainties regarding cardinal Christian truths, nor is it to say that their opinions were flabby with an "anything goes" approach to the Bible and theology. They were as certain, even dogmatic, about their views as the most fervent bishop in the Church of England. The difference, however, was that the bishop's commitments led to uniformity while the theological approach of Baptists led to diversity.

What do I mean when I say that Baptists' convictions encouraged theological diversity and ultimately religious liberty and the separation of church and state? Recently I encountered a gripping and felicitous phrase in Charles Talbert's commentary on Luke's gospel. Writing about the parable of The Good Samaritan, Talbert quoted W.A. Beardslee who spoke of "The way the world comes together again through the parables."¹⁴ If you want to know "how the world came together" for Jesus, you have to read his parables. If you want to know "how the world came together" for disciples of Jesus, you have to read the parables. "How the world comes together!" Simple but descriptive words.

"How the world came together" for Baptists — their inner life, their thought processes, their inner spiritual world — in the seventeenth century issued in freedom of conscience.

Baptists grounded their lives in a view of the world which led inevitably to soul liberty. Their commitment to religious liberty and separation of church and state did not come simply from their historical circumstances of adversity. Indeed, had Baptists never felt the sting of religious and civil oppression, the distinct way “the world came together,” if logically followed, would have still led to religious liberty and separation of church and state.

Of course, Baptists are as riddled by sin as any group that ever lived. We are as liable to conscript the Bible and theology in the service of self-interest as anybody. Baptists have been vulnerable, therefore, to build their case for religious freedom on mere expediency. At times they have done exactly that. Indeed what worries one about some contemporary Baptists in America is that principle has been sacrificed upon the altar of expediency.

It is easy to “holler” freedom when you are the one who does not have it. It is a more principled position, however, to cry for freedom when you are in the majority but now lift your voice on behalf of new minorities. All of Baptists’ moral shortfalls notwithstanding, when one reads the historical record of Baptists whole, one sees that Baptists committed themselves to ideas which compelled them to plead for religious liberty and separation of church and state on the basis of principle, not expediency.

How did “the world come together for Baptists”? Very quickly, I want to approach the topic from five directions, all of which overlap and all five of which state why Baptists “got that way” on religious liberty and separation of church and state.

First, how did the world come together for Baptists biblically? That is, how did they read their Bibles?

Second, how did the world come together for Baptists theologically? How did they think about God and humanity?

Third, how did the world come together for Baptists ecclesologically? How did they think about the church?

Fourth, how did the world come together for Baptists philosophically? With what kind of common sense did they approach life in general?

And fifth, how did the world come together for Baptists historically? How did they read human history? Baptists planted their convictions concerning religious liberty in all five soils. A brief word about each of the five.

First, Baptists called for religious freedom because of the way they read the Bible. Like all people Baptists went to the Bible with lenses that refracted the truth of God to them in a certain way. Leon McBeth pointed out that seventeenth century Anglicans tended to read church-state issues in light of the Old Testament. They liked, for example, the

King motif in the history of Israel. Even some Separatists, such as John Robinson, spoke of the godly magistrate and the magistrate’s authority to punish religious error, basing this on the power of Old Testament kings. Baptists, on the other hand, spent almost all their time interpreting the New Testament.

Baptists, for example, went to the New Testament to persuade others of the separation of the civil and spiritual kingdoms. Advocating religious liberty never meant that Baptists denied proper authority to civil rulers. In fact, Baptists were Romans 13 people, fond of quoting “let every person be subject to the governing authorities.” McBeth was right when he said, “The fact that many Englishmen associated Baptists with ... Anabaptists who disdained magistracy, plus the thought that spiritual liberty would lead to political anarchy, helps explain the frequent and insistent professions of civil loyalty by Baptists.”¹⁵

But Baptists saw two spheres in the Bible. Romans 13 was for the civil, but James 4:12 — “There is one lawgiver and judge” — that is, the Lordship of Christ, was for the church. Thomas Helwys in *The Mystery of Iniquity* clearly set out the concept of the two spheres, civil and spiritual. He used Luke 20:25 as his proof text and says he is willing to render obedience to Caesar in matters of the temporal order but he adds, “farr be it from the King to take from Christ Jesus anie one part of that power & honor which belongs to Christ in his kingdome.”¹⁶ Roger Williams used this two-sphere model in his famous ship metaphor.¹⁷

Another favorite biblical text for Baptists was Matthew 13:24-30, the parable about the tares and the wheat growing together. Both should be tolerated until the judgment day, they argued.¹⁸

Moreover, Baptists said the apostles did not use force but they endured scourging and stonings and the like. The worst they did to those who would not receive the gospel was to shake the dust off their feet (Matthew 10:14; Luke 10:11; Acts 13:51).¹⁹ Also, the New Testament, said Baptists, stressed that we are not to lord it over one another (Mark 10:35ff).²⁰

Second, Baptists called for religious liberty because of the way the world came together for them theologically. I mention only three theological themes. Baptists anchored their passion for religious liberty to (1) the nature of God, (2) the nature of humanity, and (3) the nature of faith.

Religious freedom, said the early Baptists, is rooted in the nature of God. A Sovereign God who dared to create people as free beings is portrayed in the Bible as a liberating Deity. Throughout the Old Testament, God is set against persons and institutions that restricted the freedom of God’s people. And the complete thrust of Jesus’ ministry was to free people from all that would hold them back from obedience to God. Freedom for Baptists was far more than a

constitutional right or a governmental gift. God, not nations or courts or human law, is the ultimate source of liberty.

While early Baptists, especially General Baptists, stressed free will, they also emphasized the Sovereignty of God. Richard Overton wrote a satirical and humorous masterpiece in the seventeenth century titled “The Arraignment of Mr. Persecution.” Personifying the practice of religious oppression, Overton places “Mr. Persecution” on trial. At the preliminary inquest ten persons bring charges. “Mr. Sovereignty of Christ” is the first to testify against Mr. Persecution, saying he is an “arch-traitor” to the rule of Jesus Christ over the consciences of humankind.²¹ One can render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar but the soul, said Baptists, belongs to God alone.

Baptists also based their call for religious liberty on the biblical view of persons. Created in the image of God, a human being is the crowning work of God’s creation (Psalm 8). Human personality is sacred and life’s highest value. To deny freedom of conscience to any person is to debase God’s creation.

Third, and I think here we come to the essence of how the world came together for them, Baptists insisted on soul liberty because of their understanding of faith and the nature of the spiritual life. “To be authentic,” Baptists yelled, “faith must be free.” Backus spoke for all the Baptists who had gone before him and all who would come after him, “True Religion is a voluntary obedience to God.” Baptists have said it in many ways, but it lies at the heart of how the world comes together for them.

“Where there is no autonomy, there is no authenticity.”

“If faith is to be valid, it must be voluntary.”

“To cram a creed down a person’s throat is rape of the soul.”

“The only conversion that counts is conversion by conviction.”

Martin E. Marty called it “Baptistification.” It is an approach to life that underscores freedom, choice, and voluntarism in matters of faith. This is, in my judgment, the core value of the Baptist people.

Third, Baptists called for religious freedom because of their ecclesiological convictions. “The world came together” for them with a certain view of church. Just as salvation was the work of God but never imposed, the church was the work of the Holy Spirit but one was never coerced in it. Helwys had an ecclesiology, says McBeth, where the church was “primarily spiritual rather than organizational. Response to God was highly personal and individualistic. Not only was it impractical and unscriptural to attempt to legislate such a spiritual relationship, it would be completely impossible to

do so.”²² And in the opening paragraph of Leonard Busher’s 1614 *Religion’s Peace: A Plea for Liberty of Conscience*, Busher argued that the church is created not by being born into it but by being reborn, a matter of personal, spiritual response to God.²³

In his 1615 Confessional Statement, Richard Overton argued that “Christ allowed full power and authority to his church, assembled together, cordially and unanimously, to choose persons to bear office in the church. And these and no others are to be included, viz. (the offices), of pastors, of teachers, of elders, of deacons, of sub-ministers, who, by the Word of God, from every part are qualified and approved.”²⁴

Overton is arguing against the power of the bishops over the churches, and he is giving a definition of the church as a “gathered church.” One of Overton’s recurring themes was “the sole authority of Jesus Christ versus ecclesiastical hierarchy.”²⁵

Fourth, the world came together for Baptists philosophically in a natural and common sense sort of way. Early Baptists used exceedingly practical arguments in support of their contention for freedom of conscience. Thomas Helwys, for example, claimed that religious persecution was both unnecessary and ineffective. The spiritual kingdom does not need the aid of the state, he said. Moreover, rather than producing religious uniformity and protecting civil loyalty, persecution drives people to do the opposite, confirming them more solidly in their judgments. Forcing religion upon people only makes hypocrites out of them. Another practical issue, said Helwys, one that surely did not set well with the likes of James I, was that civil rulers usually are not spiritually fit to preside over religion.²⁶

Listen to this natural rights argument! The use of force in matters of religion, said Busher, “is not only unmerciful, but unnatural” Equality in matters of the heart, he contended, was the only path to civil tranquility. Injustice breeds disorder.²⁷ Further, Leonard Busher argued in *Religion’s Peace*, as Thomas Helwys before him, that quite apart from the question of right and wrong, coercion in religion is simply not effective in stamping out heretics. Heresies cannot be killed by fire and sword, Busher said, but only by the word and spirit of God.²⁸

In what I take to be a most significant and relatively unknown essay, Glen Stassen in “The Christian Origin of Human Rights,” argues that the origin of human rights is not found in the rationalism and individualism of the Enlightenment but in the free churches at the time of the Puritan Revolution, a good half century prior to the Enlightenment.²⁹ Free churches, Stassen argues, based their arguments on biblical, theological, and rational grounds. While reason was not the primary grounding of the Baptist argument, it was certainly present.

Stassen uses Richard Overton, a sixteenth century General

Baptist, to make his point. In Overton's "The Arraignment of Mr. Persecution," which I have already referred to, Overton has a mock trial for Mr. Persecution. The trial ends with a concluding statement from Justice Reason. Not Justice Bible, mind you, or Justice Theology, or Justice Christ, but Justice Reason! Justice Reason, in his conclusion, says that Mr. Persecution threatens "the general and equal rights and liberties of the common people ... their native and just liberties in general."³⁰ Baptists distinguished religious liberty and religious freedom as belonging to all persons as persons and not to Christianity or to people of a particular brand of Christianity.

Grounding the argument for religious liberty in natural reason is important because it gives Christians the opportunity to identify with non-Christians in the struggle for human rights. All of us know the story of how Baptists in America united with those of diverse religious views, many of whom were very rationalistic, to move closer to the ideal of religious liberty.³¹ What Stassen observed about human rights in general can be applied to the Baptist drive for religious liberty in particular: "The ethic of human rights can be a universal ethic, not because its source is a common philosophy believed by all people but because its intention and application affirm the rights of all persons."³² No wonder Helwys said, "Let them be heretikes, Turks, Jewes, or whatsoever, it appertynes not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure."

Fifthly, while not a major argument, Baptists called for religious liberty on the basis of history itself. Busher chided proud old England by comparing it to Muslim Constantinople. "I read that Jews, Christians, and Turks, are tolerated in Constantinople," he said, "and yet are peaceable, though so contrary the one to the other."³³ And Richard Overton, taking the historical evidence in another direction, pointed to historical examples in Germany, Holland, France, Scotland, and Ireland and asked what caused that civil unrest but "this devilish spirit of binding the conscience"?³⁴

So the world came together for Baptists biblically, theologically, ecclesiologically, philosophically, and historically in such a way that it drove them to a "theology of pluralism." Birthed in adversity, Baptist convictions issued in diversity.

It is obvious from all that I have said that Baptists were far from passive observers in their quest for religious freedom. They got that way on issues of conscience because their convictions issued into activity. To say something is one thing; to act on what you say is quite another thing. Actions confirm and deepen rhetoric. You believe it more once you do something about it.

Back several years ago when the "Honk if you love Jesus" bumper stickers were popular, I saw a clunker of a car hobbling down the interstate. Bent up, broken down, with several colors of paint on it, and puffing down the road, the

bright new bumper sticker read, "If you love Jesus — Push!" Honking is not enough! Baptists certainly "honked" about religious liberty; they did more than "honk," however.

They lobbied with their lives and pens, and they lobbied together as a denomination, not simply as lone individuals howling in the night against the cold winds of constrictivism. When one starts pushing at whatever she is honking about, the thing tends to get positioned firmly in the soul. There was a Baptist joint committee long before there was a Baptist Joint Committee in 1936. Baptists lobbied jointly with their pens and lives for religious liberty. They even broke laws deliberately and premeditatedly.

Thomas Helwys spoke not only for himself, but for his little band of believers when he wrote *The Mystery of Iniquity*. Near the close of his document, Helwys uses the plural in more than an editorial way:

*Let none thinke that we are altogether ignorant, what ... war we take in hand, and that wee have not sitt downe and in some measure throughly considered what the cost and danger may be: and also let none thinke that wee are without sense and feeling of our owne inability to begin, and our weaknes to endure to the end, the weight and danger of such a work: Lett none therefore despise the day of small things.*³⁵

Let none despise the day of small beginnings, indeed!

In no place in Baptist life does one see political engagement by the entire denomination better than in America in the work of Baptist associations in the eighteenth century. The temptation in Baptist historiography has been to isolate the accomplishments of salient individuals without recognizing and giving due credit to the denominational context within in which the individuals worked. John Leland cannot be understood apart from his work on behalf of associations in both Virginia and New England. Isaac Backus, likewise, cannot be properly appraised apart from the Warren Association.

In its 1791 circular letter the General Committee of Virginia described itself as the "political mouth"³⁶ of the Baptists of Virginia, a heritage I would suggest that the Baptist Joint Committee has perpetuated in grand style. And the Warren Association of Rhode Island adopted in 1769 a "plan to collect grievances" on issues of religious freedom.³⁷

The Warren Association subsequently appointed a personal agent to act for the association. The agent became the voice of the Warren Association on behalf of religious liberty. The first agent was Hezekiah Smith, the incomparable pastor of the Haverhill Baptist Church in Haverhill, Massachusetts. The second was John Davis, pastor of the Second Baptist Church in Boston, who was selected to act for "Baptists as a denomination." Had Davis not died suddenly, he might have become one of American Baptists' greatest champions of religious freedom. Immediately before his selection as agent for the Warren

Association, Davis had taken a strong stand for religious liberty in Boston. This incident had brought him to the attention of the Warren Association. And except for Davis' sudden death Baptists may have never heard of Isaac Backus as a great activist for religious liberty.

Backus became the third agent of the Warren Association. Most of Backus' treatises and sermons on religious freedom were written after he assumed the office of "agent" of the Warren Association. His petitions, memorial, and remonstrances were usually signed, "Isaac Backus, Agent of the Baptist Churches."

Here is my point: The Baptist fight to disestablish state churches was not a political fray which courageous individuals entered alone; it was a melee in which the entire denomination was involved. Many Baptists in America may have forgotten that it was the struggle for religious liberty and the struggle for an educated ministry which first brought Baptists in America together. Foreign missions is often given that credit, but that is to read later affections back into early Baptist history. Not until William Carey and 1792 did Baptists get together on global missions. Years prior to Carey, Baptists had been plugging away for soul liberty.

Interestingly, it is on issues of religious liberty that Baptists of America still cooperate more than they do on any other issue. It has been an ecumenical force for Baptist life for most of Baptist history. Their denominational cooperation in lobbying on behalf of religious liberty and separation of church and state has made them more committed to the concepts for which they lobbied.

Groucho Marx once said, "I didn't like the play, but then I saw it under adverse conditions — the curtain went up!" And so the Baptist people. They did not like what they saw in England and the colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but they had no choice. The curtain had gone up. They were birthed in adversity. And that historical experience, plus the way the theological world came together for Baptists and the fact that they would not remain passive in the face of freedoms denied — those were the factors that explain how Baptists "got that way" on issues of the freedom of conscience and separation of church and state.

I would only add of our time: If we love freedom, we are going to have to unite with the Baptist Joint Committee and push — HARD!

A nationally noted church historian, Dr. Walter B. Shurden gave this presentation at BJC's 1996 Religious Liberty Conference. He is the author of some of the seminal works on being Baptist, including The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms. He and his wife, Dr. Kay Shurden, endowed the Walter B. and Kay W. Shurden Lectures on Religious Liberty and Separation of Church and State with BJC: BJCOnline.org/ShurdenLectures.

ENDNOTES

- ¹For the U.S. statistics, see Robert Gardner, "Baptist General Bodies in the USA," Baptist History and Heritage 31/1 (January 1996) 50.
- ²For world statistics, see Albert W. Wardin, editor, Baptists Around the World (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995) 473.
- ³For references in Walker Percy's writings see his following novels, The Second Coming (New York: Washington Square Press, 1980) 218; Love in the Ruins (New York: Avon Books, 1971) 22; Thanatos Syndrome (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1987) 347.
- ⁴Originally published in 1972 by Broadman Press in Nashville, TN, a revised edition was issued in 1995 by Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. of Macon, GA.
- ⁵As cited in H. Leon McBeth, English Baptist Literature on Religious Liberty to 1689 (New York: Arno Press, 1980) 4. This book, a reprint of McBeth's 1961 doctoral dissertation at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth, TX, is a marvelous resource for the subject at issue.
- ⁶William L. Lumpkin, Baptist Confessions of Faith (Valley Forge PA: revised edition, 1969) 124.
- ⁷Lumpkin, 140.
- ⁸H. Leon McBeth, A Sourcebook For Baptist Heritage (Nashville TN: Broadman Press, 1990) 72.
- ⁹McBeth, English Baptist Literature ..., 39.
- ¹⁰As cited in McBeth, A Sourcebook ..., 74.
- ¹¹Ibid., 75.
- ¹²Ibid.
- ¹³L. F. Greene, editor, The Writings of John Leland (New York: Arno Press, 1969) 184.
- ¹⁴See Charles H. Talbert, Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 124.
- ¹⁵McBeth, English Baptist Literature ..., 72.
- ¹⁶Cited in Ibid., 33.
- ¹⁷See Anson Phelps Stokes, Church and State in the United States (New York: Harper & Bros., 1950) 1:197.
- ¹⁸Glen H. Stassen, Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 146.
- ¹⁹Ibid., 147.
- ²⁰Ibid., 150.
- ²¹Ibid., 145.
- ²²McBeth, English Baptist Literature ..., 33.
- ²³Cited in McBeth, A Sourcebook ..., 73.
- ²⁴Cited in B. Evans, The Early English Baptists (London: J. Heaton & Son, 1862) I:255.
- ²⁵Stassen, 143.
- ²⁶McBeth, English Baptist Literature ..., 37.
- ²⁷McBeth, A Sourcebook ..., 74.
- ²⁸McBeth, English Baptist Literature ..., 44.
- ²⁹While not arguing precisely as does Stassen, E. Glenn Hinson maintains something of the same in James Leo Garrett, Jr., E. Glenn Hinson, and James E. Tull, Are Southern Baptists "Evangelicals"? (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983) 178.
- ³⁰Stassen, 148.
- ³¹Robert T. Handy, "The Principle of Religious Freedom and the Dynamics of Baptist History," Perspectives in Religious Studies 13/4 (Winter 1986) 28.
- ³²Stassen, 156.
- ³³McBeth, A Sourcebook ..., 74.
- ³⁴Stassen, 146.
- ³⁵Cited in McBeth, English Baptist Literature ... 38.
- ³⁶See Walter B. Shurden, Associationalism Among Baptists in America: 1707-1814 (New York: Arno Press, 1980) 208.
- ³⁷Ibid., 212.