

The Baptist Contribution to Liberty

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Any contemporary view of religious freedom that isolates and internalizes faith is contrary to the freedom envisioned by the early Baptists who called for religious liberty. They aimed to create a distinct people whose lives were disciplined by and bound to God and one another.

Baptists have long considered themselves to be at the forefront of calls for religious liberty. From their origins in seventeenth-century England to the early days of the fledgling American republic, and now into the twenty-first century, Baptists have claimed religious liberty as one of the characteristics that distinguishes them as a unique people. It was this commitment to religious liberty that spurred Baptists such as Isaac Backus (1724-1806) and John Leland (1754-1841) to call on the framers of the American Constitution to instantiate the separation of church and state as a hallmark of the new nation.

For most Baptists in the United States today a corollary to their understanding of religious liberty is the belief in soul competency, the idea that each individual believer stands before God alone in a relationship that is a personal matter between that soul and the divine. They say that religious liberty secures every individual's freedom to determine his or her own religious beliefs apart from coercion by government (or any other institution).

While this understanding of religious liberty as individual freedom has become the standard for contemporary Baptists in the United States, it is not the conception of religious liberty first promulgated by Baptists in England. This contemporary view – that each individual has the right to choose theological beliefs from a vast array of options based on which ones best suit the

individual's desires apart from coercion by any authority – misses completely the intent of the early Baptist calls for religious liberty. The early English Baptists were not primarily concerned with individual human freedom, but with divine freedom. Religious coercion of belief was not primarily an affront to the individual's rights, but to the sovereignty of God. It was God's freedom that was at the center of Baptist calls for religious liberty.

Contemporary accounts of religious freedom that isolate the individual from all sources of authority save for personal reason betray a deep influence from Enlightenment thought rather than Baptist origins. These accounts tempt us to think of ourselves as isolated individuals whose faith is solely interiorized and who have no true connection with fellow believers other than our voluntary and changeable associations with them. How did we arrive at this point of confusion, and what are the implications of this turn from original Baptist ideals for believers today?

EARLY BAPTIST CALLS FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

When Baptists began voicing their appeals for religious liberty to King James I (1566-1625, ruling England from 1603), they based their arguments in the familiar language of two swords: the sword wielded by the civil authorities and the sword of the ecclesial authorities. The conventional view held that the civil sword and the ecclesial sword were to work together to enforce religious conformity and unity in all the lands of Western Europe. Thus, heresy was punishable not merely by church censure, but also by the powerful justice of the state authorities. While Protestants might offer hearty criticisms of imprisonment and corporal punishments at the hands of Catholic princes, their charges were based on what they believed to be the theological error of the Catholic Church. They had no qualms with making use of the state to punish religious offenses. Even in England it was commonly accepted by religious leaders that the best means to secure the peace and order not only of the Church, but also of the state as a whole, was enforced conformity to the national church – at the edge of the sword of the king's soldiers if necessary.

Baptist appeals for religious liberty in the seventeenth century stand out not because they deny the theory of two swords, but for the radical suggestion that the civil sword has no authority in ecclesial affairs. Thus, Thomas Helwys (c. 1550-c. 1616) inscribes this message to King James on the flyleaf of his now famous work *The Mystery of Iniquity* (1611/1612): "The king is a mortall man, and not God therefore hath no power over ye immortal soules of his subiects, to make laws and ordinances for them, and to set spiritual Lords over them."¹ Articulating for the first time the principle of religious freedom that would become one of the hallmarks of Baptists, Helwys argues that the king's authority and power are limited to civil affairs, and that any attempts to legislate beyond those bounds, particularly to matters pertaining to the soul, impinge upon what belongs solely to God. That is, for the king to attempt to compel religious belief is to usurp not the rights of the

autonomous human individual, but the sovereignty of God.

The earliest English Baptists believed the key point at issue in calls for religious liberty is the matter of salvation. They developed their case with a two-pronged attack. On the one hand, they appealed to Christ's parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24-30) as support for their cause, pointing out that the Son of Man will withhold judgment until "the end of the age" (cf. Matthew 13:40), allowing both the good and the bad to grow together. The great concern for these Baptists was not punishment, but rather the hope that all persons who might be saved would be saved. John Murton (1585-c. 1626), a member of the original Baptist congregation in Amsterdam, wrote in 1620:

...they that are now tares may hereafter become wheat,...they that are now no people of God, nor under mercy, as the saints sometimes were, may hereafter become the people of God, and obtain mercy, as they. Some come not till the eleventh hour: if those that come not till the last hour should be destroyed because they came not at the first, then should they never come, but be prevented. And why do men call themselves Christians, and do not the things Christ would?²

These Baptists sought to convince the English authorities, both civil and ecclesial, that the proper concern for Christians is the salvation of all those who would come to Christ. To punish non-believers by exclusion from the public life of the nation, or even worse, to inflict on them torture or death because they would not believe (or believed wrongly), is counter to the very purpose of Christ who is willing to hold off judgment to the end. Ultimately, humans cannot know God's purposes and work, so to impose punishment for religious non-conformity is an abridgment of God's freedom to call resistant souls even up to the "eleventh hour."

The second prong of the Baptist argument claims that enforced conformity to Christian faith actually works contrary to the ends of God, since compelling religious practice will "cause men and women to make shipwreck of faith and good consciences, by forcing a religion upon them even against their minds and consciences."³ In other words, those who perform even right acts of worship apart from faith conviction thereby commit grave sins. From the Baptist perspective, then, enforcing religious conformity not only fails to bring salvation, but also ultimately causes those so compelled to bring damnation upon themselves. A further concern is that in any country where faith is enforced under the threat of persecution, people who are not of the faith will avoid that realm. As a result, in such a land there will be no opportunities for true evangelistic witness. Speaking to a monarch and state church that believed they were defending God's kingdom by compelling worship and combating heresy, the Baptists contended that the opposite effect is actually achieved. Civil compulsion of religious faith only hinders those who are outside of God's kingdom from having their consciences swayed and convinced.

THE CHURCH AND LIBERTY

The Baptist concern, of course, was the establishment of a true Church of baptized believers. Speaking of the Church, Leonard Busher asserts in his 1614 work *Religion's Peace: A Plea for Liberty of Conscience*: “they that will be of the true faith and church, must be called thereunto out of the world, by the word of God, in every nation.”⁴ For Baptists, the words “church” and “world” designate divergent polities where Christ’s authority is either accepted or rejected by people’s consciences. Busher points out that it is through the preaching of the gospel that the Spirit of God convinces people’s consciences so that they move “out of the world” and into the Church. The work of the Church is the preaching of the gospel so that those of the world can become part of the Church. Therefore, the Church positions itself as a distinct body politic within the land, one that seeks to continually expand as people are free to respond to the sovereign calling of God. The early English Baptists were expressing their rejection of a medieval and Magisterial Reformation social imagination that conceived of the Church and state together as encompassing a single society.

In their calls for religious liberty, the early English Baptists sought freedom from a conception of Christendom that imagined true Christian faith could be compelled by the civil authorities and that the faith must be defended against dissenters by the sword of the state. Positively, the freedom they desired is freedom for God’s activity of calling all people to salvation such that persons move from the

world into the Church—the society in which Christ’s authority is recognized as ultimate. The freedom they imagined in religious liberty is not a freedom grounded in individual rights or understood as each person being autonomous (literally, a “law unto one’s self”). These are modern understandings of liberty. Instead, for early Baptists freedom is first God’s nature, and only derivatively are humans free

as God calls them from bondage to sin that is characteristic of the world, and into God’s own freedom that characterizes the Church. This freedom for humans comes by God’s gracious activity: when they are oriented to God as their end, they can enjoy lives that rightly exhibit the practices of God’s kingdom. The Church must be a disciplining body that forms in its members those practices of living that do not inhibit this freedom, but are

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consistent with the kingdom ethic. The state might still claim from its Christian citizens their obedience to civic laws, taxes, and even military service. Nevertheless, the state's authority always meets its limit when it confronts those demands upon persons made by Christ.

THE MODERN ACCOUNT OF FREEDOM

A very different conception of freedom dominates in contemporary society. The modern conception of freedom—a product of the Enlightenment thought of such seventeenth-century luminaries as Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and John Locke (1632-1704), and entrenched in American political thought by Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) and James Madison (1751-1836)—holds above all else “the inviolable liberty of personal volition, the right to decide for ourselves what we shall believe, want, need, own, or serve.”⁵ On this view, liberty belongs to the individual's will, which is free only when it is not bound by any constraints greater than itself. Its sole authority is that individual's unaided reason, which Enlightenment thinkers assume is innate (i.e., it exists prior to any social conventions, traditions, or religious beliefs), universal (i.e., the same in all human beings), and neutral (i.e., not unduly influenced by or in the service of any moral perspective).

This Enlightenment account of the impartiality of reason is the basis of the idea that everyone should appeal only to reason when debating matters of public interest. It is alleged that violent disputes in the public square—from the persecution of religious dissenters by state churches to the long warfare among newly-formed European states—are rooted in cultural particularities and sectarian interests, but reason allows us to transcend all that divides us. Now for reason to take its proper place, on this view, religion must be relegated to the individual's private life. Once it is interiorized in this way, one's religion is properly a matter of no one else's concern.

In his *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), John Locke borrows from Baptists the view that the concern of the civil government reaches only to those matters that secure the good of the commonwealth. He famously writes, “the Care of Souls is not committed to the Civil Magistrates...,” a sentiment with which the early English Baptists would heartily agree. But notice how Locke concludes this statement: he adds “...any more than to other Men.”⁶ That is, the care of souls is not the concern of civil authorities, but neither is it the concern of anyone else, including the Church.

Such a radical individualizing of the Christian faith was foreign to the earliest Baptists who understood the Church as a disciplined and disciplining community. Locke, however, is clear: “A Church then I take to be a voluntary Society of Men, joining themselves together of their own accord, in order to the publick worshipping of God.”⁷ If the Church is merely a voluntary society, it has no claims on an individual beyond what that person allows. Each individual chooses (volunteers to join) the particular congregation that she finds most acceptable to her conscience. If that congregation ceases to be

appealing, she moves on to another group that agrees with what she has deemed, according to her reason, to be correct for herself. The individual is the final arbiter and authority for all questions of belief; in the end, an individual needs no one else for the religious life.

Isaac Backus and John Leland are the key Baptist leaders in the fledgling American republic who worked to have religious liberty enshrined in the Bill of Rights. Unlike their English Baptist forebears, however, Backus and Leland do not ground their calls for religious liberty in a concern for God's sovereignty. Instead they are influenced by Locke's political theory when they ground religious liberty in an emphasis on human rights that must be guaranteed by the civil state. Their view of the Church betrays a similar modern influence when they imagine it is a voluntary organization of individuals, not the disciplining community envisioned by English Baptists a century earlier. With Backus and Leland, a clear trajectory is set among American Baptists towards an internalized faith that understands freedom as personal volition unhindered by the claims of any external authority.

In the twentieth century, many Baptists continue down this path of thinning out their ecclesiology so that the Church is little more than an association of like-minded individuals whose privatized faith exists prior to their joining an ecclesial community. I frequently encounter this way of thinking

among my Baptist students, who describe their religious pilgrimage like this: "Though I was raised in the Church, my faith was really my parents' faith. Yet when I was [here they describe some seminal experience], I made the decision to follow Christ and my faith became my own." While their making faith personal is very commendable, these students' "Jesus and me" way of expressing their commitment betrays a disturbing modern mindset. First, they think that their faith can be "possessed," that it is (like other things they own) something they have chosen apart from any authority or tradition in their lives. Furthermore, they think that their faith is completely internal. The implication is that their Christian commitment is authentic only because it has been disconnected from the particularities of their history and tangle of their relationships.

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FREEDOM IN CHRISTIANITY

This modern approach to religion—though it may at first glance seem unobjectionable to many raised in Baptist or other evangelical congregations—is inherently dangerous. Its call for individuals to choose a faith (and by their choice to validate that faith) stands opposed to the witness of Scripture. The Christian assertion has always been that it is God who chooses us, not we who choose God. On this crucial point Calvinists and Arminians agree: it is only God’s grace that allows people to respond to God’s saving claim on their lives. The modern conception of the human individual as independent from all attachments one has not chosen for oneself, as an autonomous entity freely choosing what one will accept or reject, is not Christianity, it is idolatry. As Rodney Clapp observes, this is the self being worshipped as God.⁸

When freedom is confused with the unhindered play of our desires, Christian faith is reduced to an unmediated one-on-one relationship between God and the individual believer. The Church becomes secondary, and often superfluous: it becomes a collection of individuals who share similar spiritual interests and perhaps feel obliged to cooperate for the pursuit of certain good works. Yet, because each individual is autonomous, living a faith disconnected from anyone else or any authority other than one’s own reason, the ecclesial communion is not essential to anyone’s salvation. Salvation becomes a matter of personal accounting. Curtis Freeman describes this modern view of freedom and Church well when he writes,

The individual offers faith and in return God provides salvation. In the economy of this individualistic scheme, salvation is severed from membership in the church, since believers enjoy private fellowship with Christ and must subsequently enter into voluntary fellowship with the church. Christians that choose not to unite with fellow believers may be in violation of the admonition not to neglect meeting together, but their relationship to Christ remains unaffected by their isolation from the church.⁹

In this scheme, the Church has little to offer the individual beyond spiritual encouragement.

Freedom, as understood by the Church through most of the Christian tradition that the early English Baptists inherited, finds its source in God’s sovereignty. It never separates individuals from one another or from all external authorities, but results in people fully living their humanity, rightly oriented to God and in relationship with one another. Baptists express this conviction in the 1644 *London Confession* when they they proclaim the Church to be “a company of visible Saints, called and separated from the world, . . . and joyned to the Lord, and each other, by mutuall agreement, in the practical injoyment of the Ordinances.”¹⁰

Any notion of freedom that isolates and internalizes faith is simply contrary to the freedom envisioned by the Baptists who first issued calls for religious liberty. They called on the king not to preserve individual rights, but to rec-

ognize God's sovereignty to call all people to faith. Importantly, they aimed at creating a distinct community, a people whose very lives were disciplined by their participation together in the faith, bound to God and one another. They never sought to uncouple people from one another, as if an individual's faith could exist apart from life in community with other believers. "This interconnection between belief, the believer, and other believers is such that relation with Christ is never simply between the individual and Christ but rather between the believer and 'the whole Christ' (*totus Christus*) who is head and body," Freeman notes.¹¹

True freedom is found in a community that recognizes its submission to the authority of Christ, a community where individual members can express their faith only as they remain bound to one another in Christ. Far from the modern attitude that cuts individuals free from every authority that might hinder their desires and intentions, true freedom submits itself to the authority of the Church and acknowledges its need of all who share Christian community together.

NOTES

1 A photocopy of this handwritten note is reproduced in Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, edited by Richard Groves (1611/1612; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), vi.

2 John Murton, *An Humble Supplication to The King's Majesty; as it was presented 1620*, in Edward Bean Underhill, ed., *Tracts on Liberty of Conscience and Persecution 1614-1661* (1846; New York: Burt Franklin, 1966), 215.

3 Leonard Busher, *Religion's Peace: or A Plea for Liberty of Conscience*, in Underhill, ed., *Tracts on Liberty of Conscience and Persecution 1614-1661*, 36.

4 *Ibid.*, 55.

5 David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 22.

6 John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, edited by James H. Tully (1689; Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1983), 26.

7 *Ibid.*, 28.

8 Rodney Clapp, *Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2000), 47.

9 Curtis Freeman, "Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Communion Ecclesiology in the Free Church," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31:3 (Fall 2004), 259-272, here citing 263.

10 *First London Confession*, Article XXXIII, in William Lumpkin, ed., *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 165.

11 Freeman, "Where Two or Three Are Gathered," 263-264.



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