



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

- 📖 The Baptist Contribution to Liberty  
(*Freedom*, pp. 36-43)

### Suggested Articles:

- 📖 The Field of Experience and Sensation  
(*Freedom*, pp. 48-52)
- 📖 The Field of Experience and Sensation  
(*Freedom*, pp. 88-93)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# The Baptist Contribution to Liberty

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.

## Prayer

Scripture Reading: Acts 12:1-19

## Reflection

Peter's miraculous liberation from prison has long served as an emblem of religious liberty. The believers in Jerusalem had singled out King Herod and Pontius Pilate as political leaders who conspired against Jesus (Acts 4:27); now the King was laying "violent hands upon some who belonged to the church" (Acts 12:1). After ordering that James, the brother of John, be "killed with the sword," Herod imprisoned Peter for preaching the gospel about Christ. Raphael's wonderful fresco *The Liberation of St. Peter* (1513) – shown on the cover of *Freedom* – interprets Peter's miraculous release as a sign that God will continue to protect the Church from rapacious political leaders of the artist's day.

In the seventeenth century, near the beginning of the modern political era, English Baptists played a significant role in seeking religious liberty for all people. Though we admire their courage, we often misunderstand their reasoning and goal, Jason Whitt observes. "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," he writes. And such views – which suggest we are "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" – are far from what the early Baptists intended.

Whitt highlights key differences between the early English Baptist and contemporary views of religious freedom.

- ▶ *The early English Baptist appeals for religious liberty* were radical for restricting the state's power to civil matters. They said the state had no authority to compel religious belief, because this would "usurp not the rights of the autonomous human individual, but the sovereignty of God," Whitt writes. Baptists had three concerns. Appealing to the parable of the weeds among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30), they said since God withheld judgment on disbelief until "the end of the age" (13:40), the authorities should do likewise. When a state excludes unbelievers from public life – or worse, tortures or kills them – it abridges God's freedom to redeem resistant souls even up to the "harvest time" (13:30). Baptists also argued that the state compelling religious practice caused unbelievers to commit grave sins of hypocrisy. And they gave a very practical reason: enforcing religious practice will cause unbelievers to avoid coming to the country, and thereby limit the opportunities for faithful evangelistic witness to them.

Baptists sought "freedom for God's activity of calling all



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people to salvation such that persons move from the world into the Church—the society in which Christ’s authority is recognized as ultimate,” Whitt concludes. Correlated with this is true human freedom—not each person being autonomous (literally, a “law to one’s self”), but permitted to join “a disciplining body that forms in its members those practices of living that...are consistent with the kingdom ethic.”

- ▶ *A very different view of religious freedom is common today.* It begins with the idea that “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).” One may have any religious belief one chooses, but it should play no role in public debate. John Locke famously writes in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), “the Care of Souls is not committed to the Civil Magistrates...” —a view early Baptists would readily accept—but he continues “...any more than to other Men.” Thus, caring for souls is not the business of the state, but neither is it the concern of anyone else, including the Church! Such “radical individualizing of the Christian faith was foreign to the earliest Baptists who understood the Church as a disciplined and disciplining community,” Whitt writes.

The modern approach to religious freedom stands opposed to the witness of Scripture and Christian tradition that it is God who chooses us, not we who choose God. And it distorts the body of Christ. “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,” Whitt concludes. Since “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.”

### Study Questions

1. How were the early English Baptist appeals for religious liberty more concerned with protecting God’s sovereignty (and opportunities for God’s people to cooperate in God’s purposes) than with advancing individuals’ rights and freedoms?
2. What are the essential differences between the early Baptist and the contemporary views of religious liberty? On each view, what do we need to be free *from*? To be free *for*?
3. Contrast the role of the Church, the gathered community of the body of Christ, in the early Baptist and the contemporary views of religious liberty.
4. According to Heidi Hornik, how does Raphael’s fresco *Liberation of St. Peter* develop a typology of divine liberation from tyranny? How was it interpreted in the fifteenth century? What can we learn from it today?

Departing Hymn: “A Hymn for Freedom”

# The Baptist Contribution to Liberty

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To understand the English Baptist appeals for religious liberty in the seventeenth century.
2. To contrast the early English Baptist view of religious liberty with contemporary accounts of religious freedom.
3. To consider the implications of each view of religious freedom for the privatization of faith and the role of the Church as the gathered body of Christ.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Freedom (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

## Begin with an Observation

Seventeenth-century Baptists called for religious liberty in order to carve out 'space' for their life together in Christian communities, uncontrolled by the modern nation state. Jason Whitt explains, "They aimed to create a distinct people whose lives were disciplined by and bound to God and one another."

Is it still important for us to appreciate and embrace this Baptist vision today? Scott Moore reminds us that powerful governments – even those committed to liberal democracy – can easily dominate the life of intermediate institutions.

In the modern world it is often assumed that what is most important about politics can be reduced to statecraft. But *politics* refers to so much more than statecraft.... Politics is about how we order our lives together in the *polis*, whether that is a city, a community, or even a family. It is about how we live together, how we recognize and preserve that which is most important, how we cultivate friendships and educate our children, how we learn to think and talk about what kind of life is really the good life.

(*The Limits of Liberal Democracy: Politics and Religion at the End of Modernity*, p. 15; quoted in *Freedom*, p. 92)

To understand the seventeenth-century Baptist contribution to liberty, we must explore the nature of their communities and their vision of a good life.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for wisdom to properly value and promote religious liberty in all countries.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Acts 12:1-19 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

This discussion focuses on how we should understand and appropriate the seventeenth-century English Baptist appeals for religious liberty. It is more than a history lesson however, for the early Baptist view of liberty raises

important questions about the role of religion in public life today and about the role of the Church as a gathered and disciplined community where we are bound to one another in Christ. Encourage members not only to contrast the early Baptist perspective with the view of religious freedom that predominates today, but also to explore which one is more faithful to Scripture and Christian tradition.

### *Study Questions*

1. Jason Whitt highlights three early Baptist appeals for religious liberty: using state power to punish unbelief and to enforce religious practice will short-circuit God's plan to graciously wait for unbelievers' response, cause unbelievers to commit the grave sin of hypocrisy, and discourage unbelievers from joining the society where they might be evangelized. These appeals emphasize God's freedom to save unbelievers without interference from the modern state that would use religious participation for its own purposes.
2. The seventeenth-century English Baptists valued freedom *from* enforced conformity to the national church (for the reasons stated above). They valued 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," Whitt writes. They believed "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...a disciplining body that forms in its members those practices of living that do not inhibit this freedom, but are consistent with the kingdom ethic."

The contemporary view of religious liberty sees it as a property of an individual's will. It values freedom *from* any external constraint on religious belief or practice—including the instruction of the Church, other Christians, and tradition. It values freedom *for* following one's own reason and participating (or not) in a congregation as a voluntary association that is like any other group of people who share common interests or cooperate for good works.

3. The contemporary view of religious liberty suggests the Church is a voluntary society one might (or might not) join, because salvation is "an unmediated one-on-one relationship between God and the individual believer." Whitt quotes Curtis Freeman's description: "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."

The early Baptists viewed the Church as an alternative polity, or community, to the ways of the "world." Within the Church, members grow to freedom as their consciences accept Christ's authority mediated to them through Scripture and church discipline. Early Baptists "called on the king not to preserve individual rights, but to recognize 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."

4. Raphael depicts three critical scenes from the biblical story—the swarm of soldiers guarding the prison door, the sleeping Peter being awakened by the angel, and the freed Peter walking with the angel past the sleeping soldiers—to emphasize that the Apostle's freedom is a gift from God. To make the artwork simultaneously a celebration of a victory for the Church over an invading French army in 1512, Raphael employs contemporary architectural details in the prison and uses the pope's visage to represent Peter's features. Encourage members to think of places in the world today where the Church suffers persecution under tyrants, or has been co-opted by the society for its purposes. How does God act to bring liberty?

### *Departing Hymn*

"A Hymn for Freedom" is on pp. 53-54 of *Freedom*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.