

Outline

Walter Shurden, The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms

I. Introduction

Shurden asks, “What makes a Baptist a Baptist?” His answers include

*) a primary approach to a serious and sincere study of Scripture that derives general theological principles,

*) a mood that stresses freedom, choice and voluntarism in matters of faith,

*) a style, posture and spirit of faith that pervades its principles, one that’s best identified as freedom.

These freedoms yield diversity in the forms and practice of faith within the denomination, which is threatening to some. It flows naturally from the Baptist preoccupation with the right of choice.

II. Bible Freedom

A. Definition: Bible Freedom is the historic Baptist affirmation that the Bible, under the Lordship of Christ, must be central in the life of the individual and church and that Christians, using the best and most scholarly tools of inquiry, are both free and obligated to study and obey the Scripture.

B. Freedom

1. Under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Freedom of access to the Bible and freedom of interpretation are the means of arriving at the mind of Christ, who is Lord of the Bible.
2. For the purpose of continuing obedience to the Word of God. It’s the final authority in moral responsibility, in theological beliefs, and in human relationships. The Bible is final, but human understanding of the Bible is never complete or finished. The approach is one of openness to the ongoing study of the Bible under the guidance of Christ.
3. From all other religious authorities. Baptists are historically anti-creedal but not divorced from the faith of the ecumenical church. Baptists have periodically adopted doctrinal statements, but avoid confessional or prescriptive statements.
4. Of interpretation. The responsibility is clear to study and seek to understand the Bible.

C. Responsibility

Insistence on direct access and freedom of interpretation and a belief in the centrality of the Bible in the lives of individuals yields the responsibility to bring the best of scholarship to bear on our study. We each need to apply good principles for interpreting the Bible: what did the statement mean in its original setting? When was it written? Under what circumstances? What thought patterns dominated the world of the writer? Does this word mean the same today as when written? Have we in our time narrowed definitions or muddied the boundaries? Have we fallen back on subjectivism: ‘well, this is what it means to me’?

III. Soul Freedom

- A. Definition: Soul Freedom is the historic Baptist affirmation of the inalienable right and responsibility of every person to deal with God without the imposition of creed, the interference of clergy, or the intervention of civil government.
- B. Supporting understandings:
 - 1. Jesus (Matt 16:13) insisted on a personal response to the question of his identity and set aside the idea that he can be authentically understood by survey or majority vote;
 - 2. Every/each human is created in the image of God and therefore competent under God to make moral, spiritual and religious decisions;
 - 3. Faith is relational, not ritualistic. It doesn't mean self-sufficiency, but that grace is always personally appropriated. This freedom affirms the centrality of the individual over the institutional, the priority of the personal over the sacramental, and the preeminence of direct access over indirect.
 - 4. Confession born of conviction is a way to understand soul freedom. Conviction and conversion both occur uniquely for each person. Christian conversions are not all instant.
 - 5. Baptism for believers is the key concept, not immersion. A person should be able to make a free and voluntary choice for Christ.
- C. Responsibility
 - 1. To make moral, spiritual and religious decisions with the best application of an understanding of Jesus Christ as one can wield, intending to obey.
 - 2. To commit to growth and maturation in the faith.
 - 3. To move against formalistic requirements for "ways", such as those that arise from habit or are delivered by institution, keeping them delineated from the "what" [response/interpretation/decision/relation] and the "who" [individual/personal and God.]

IV. Church Freedom

- A. Definition: Church freedom is the historic Baptist affirmation that local churches are free, under the Lordship of Christ, to determine their membership and leadership, to order their worship and work, to ordain whom they perceive as gifted for ministry, male or female, and to participate in the larger Body of Christ.
- B. Free to follow voluntarily. The church is a people with a free double promise: to follow Jesus and to help each other [covenant] struggle to follow Jesus. The church strives to have a membership composed only of those who sincerely want to be a part

of it, a Believers' Church. Baptists have acknowledged that the one Body of Christ does not begin or end with their local church or their denomination.

- C. Free to govern obediently. Baptists hope to implement Christ's rule using the mechanism of full participation of the congregation, acknowledging that authority is placed in the hands of all members of the church.
 - 1. Democratic polity is a statement of the equality of all believers in determining the mind of Christ. Baptists do not equate the voice of the majority nor of an authoritarian pastor with the voice of God.
 - 2. It does not mean isolation of churches one from another. Associations strengthen witness and unity in Christ.
- D. Free to worship creatively. Church freedom yields different forms of worship from surprisingly formal to exceedingly informal. Whatever its form, it is the act of the entire believing community and not separate performances.
- E. Free to minister responsibly. No pastor has official or constituted authority to 'rule over' a congregation.
- F. Responsibility
 - 1. Engage in witness and mission with other congregations and denominations, i.e. associate.
 - 2. Participate in the official decision-making of the church, including those about worship style and other practices.
 - 3. Participate in deciding how the church will witness: evangelism, mission, social justice. How does/will the church become a servant?

V. Religious Freedom

- A. Definition: Religious freedom is the historic Baptist affirmation of freedom OF religion, freedom FOR religion, and freedom FROM religion, insisting that Caesar is not Christ and Christ is not Caesar.
- B. Witnesses to religious freedom include historic (and current) Baptists John D. Freeman, Smyth, Helwys, E.Y. Mullins, R. Weaver, J.M. Dawson, George Truett, J.E.Wood, Hugh Wamble and James M. Dunn.
- C. The passion for religious freedom is anchored to the nature of God, the nature of humanity and the nature of faith. God, not nations or courts or human law, is the ultimate source of liberty. It would debase God's creation to deny any person the freedom of conscience.
- D. It does not mean religious toleration, which is a concession and a measure of expediency. It is a right and a matter of principle, for all not just a few or a majority. It means separation of church and state, not accommodation of church with state.

E. This is the freedom most obviously and directly under threat from without. Justices have considered such freedoms useless in judging, notably Rehnquist. From within it is threatened by a theocratic mind-set popular in fundamentalist circles. Another popular and subtle threat is the confusion of citizenship and discipleship.

F. Responsibility

1. Move to maintain the distinction between and separation of church and state for civic leadership.
2. Act within to ensure the understandings that public schools are representative of the state, that taxes belong in public programs not private religious ones, and that religious and civic symbols in the same context tend to conflate that which they symbolize in the minds of some.
3. Pray for the state and declare the judgments of God related to government, citizenship and the rights of all.
4. Provide moral and spiritual reinforcement for the truths which undergird justice and peace.

VI. Conclusions

Baptists are not always perceived in the light of these freedoms. But this voluntary approach to life and faith is at the core of what it means to be a Baptist.

Freedom-lovers have no choice but to be vigilant in the defense of freedom.