

“So You’ve Come to a Baptist College”¹

Dr. Greiner, Chaplain Cruze, Distinguished Guests, Members of the Faculty, Members of the Class of 2006, Student Parents, and other Students and Guests: It is an honor for me to be among you and to have the privilege of speaking to you as you begin another year of academic enterprise. I suspect that most of you are experiencing both stress and excitement as you engage the various beginnings of the new school year.

If you are a new freshman, you are inaugurating what will probably be one of the greatest adventures of your life. Some of you live in this area, and some of you are just arriving in Bristol from other parts of the country. Many of you are probably moving away from home for the first time, and all of you are beginning to experience more personal freedom than you have ever known. To be in possession of such freedom means that you now have more decisions to make than you ever had before. These decisions will be stressful, but decisions are choice-points through which you construct your adult Self, and this campus and this environment create a wonderful place to do that work.

If I were to ask you why you have come to college, or more particularly, why you have come to a liberal arts college, I suspect that you would offer a wide variety of reasons. Most of those reasons would probably circle around the idea of developing marketable skills. That will happen, of course, but I’m going to be so bold as to suggest that finding a job is not the most important reason that you are here.

It has been said that a question well asked is half answered, and it seems to me that the most important thing that can happen in your life during your college years is to experience an educational process that will help you to discover what the truly important questions in human existence really are. If all goes well, you will also make some progress toward discovering the directions in which answers to those questions may be experienced.

Most of you know that you are also coming to a college that is a Baptist college. For some of you that is important; for others it is inconsequential, or even a surprise. The fact that this is a Baptist college is highly significant as you begin your collegiate quest, however, and it is that difference to which I hope to introduce you this evening.

This college is affiliated with the Baptist General Association of Virginia, which is affiliated with a worldwide family of Baptists numbering about 100 million persons. My college roommate—and may you be so fortunate!—was Dwight Moody, who is now the Dean of the Chapel at our Alma Mater, Georgetown College in Kentucky. Dwight has suggested that

The church of Jesus Christ is like an orchestra. Each church and denomination plays its part. Catholics exemplify order, continuity, and loyalty. Presbyterians teach us about the sovereignty of God and the centrality of Scripture. Methodists brought to us new emphasis on revivals and spiritual disciplines. Pentecostals reintroduced healing to the

¹ A convocation address delivered by Rev. David Stancil, Ph.D., at Virginia Intermont College in Bristol, Virginia on August 27, 2002. Dr. Stancil is pastor of the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia.

modern church and embody what it means for the church to be a counter-culture to the prevailing secularism of our day. . . .²

What part do Baptists play in the orchestra? Everybody has some opinion about Baptists, and there are so many different kinds of Baptists that nearly every opinion has some truth about it! One of the reasons there are so many varieties of Baptists is that Baptists are passionately committed to the concept of freedom.

It may be that your opinion of or your experience of Baptists has little to do with freedom, but I hope that I can expand your understanding over the next few minutes. I'll be speaking about four kinds of freedom that are absolutely central for Baptists, with a question attached to each. The distillation of Baptist distinctives into these four freedoms comes from Dr. Walter Shurden of Mercer University.³ The four freedoms are:

Religious Freedom: *What will be your Commitment?*

Church Freedom: *Who will be your Community?*

Bible Freedom: *What will be your Authority?*

Soul Freedom: *Who will be your Guide?*

First, **Religious Freedom:** *What will be your Commitment?* It may surprise you to know that religious freedom was not established on our own shores when the Pilgrims landed here. The Pilgrims came to the New World to find religious freedom for themselves, but they did not extend this freedom to others. Ten of our original thirteen colonies had some form of an established state church, as they had had in Europe. Anyone who wanted to preach or to lead a church in the New World had to have a license from the established church, and if they did not, they were often fined, flogged, or imprisoned.

It was in this way that the Puritans drove Roger Williams out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and into the wilderness, where in 1636 he founded what would become the colony of Rhode Island, the first colony in the New World where religious liberty was guaranteed for every person. In 1639, Roger Williams founded the First Baptist Church of Providence, which was the first Baptist church in the New World.

Between the years of 1767 and 1778, forty-two Baptist ministers were imprisoned right here in Virginia for preaching without a license from the state church. Because of this persecution, John Leland, a Baptist minister here in Virginia, was the driving force behind the First Amendment to the Constitution, the sixteen most influential words ever written in support of religious liberty: "*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.*"

What do those words mean? Rivers of ink have been spilled in such explanation, but the principles involved are simply stated: Church and State shall be separate—not hostile toward each other, but separate—and Religious Freedom shall be afforded to every person within the bounds of this Republic. Religious Freedom means that persons in these United States have

² Dwight A. Moody, Free & Faithful Baptists: Christian Discipleship in the Twenty-First Century (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 1998), pp. 2-3.

³ Walter B. Shurden, The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1993).

complete freedom to worship God as their consciences direct them. Religious Freedom equally means that persons have the right not to be a part of any religious body at all, if that is their choice.

Religious Freedom in this country has been purchased primarily through the sacrificial commitment of Baptists, and authentic Baptists continue to defend it—for themselves, and for everyone else. What did Baptists want to do with their freedom? This question brings us to the second freedom Baptists hold dear: **Church Freedom**, and its attendant question, “*Who will be your Community?*”

As the years go by, I think that you will find that there are really only two questions that matter in life (I’ll mention a related question later). One of these questions is “How can my life have significance—to mean something, to have mattered—when all is said and done?” The other question is “How can I develop relationships—a durable community—to sustain me on the journey of life?”

The good news is that Jesus Christ gives us answers to these questions, and his answers are the only ones that really work. When Jesus began to teach, he gathered a dozen men around him—not academics or church folks, but ordinary men who were very much like the coarse and earthy fishermen in *The Perfect Storm*—and he began to show them how to become a different kind of community than the world had ever known.

Jesus’ disciples chose to cast their lots with him, and such choice is at the root of what it means to be Baptist. Dr. Fisher Humphreys of Samford University described the very first Baptist congregation this way:

Though believer’s baptism was practiced first by Anabaptists, it was a dramatic moment in the history of the Christian church when a group of English women and men in Amsterdam, under the leadership of John Smyth, renounced the baptism which they had received as infants as no baptism at all, and submitted to baptism as adult believers. In the winter of 1608 or 1609 Smyth baptized first himself and then the members of his congregation, thereby forming the first Baptist church.⁴

The significant thing about this event was that these believers, by studying the pages of the New Testament, concluded that Jesus’ call to follow him and to enter into the community he created was and is a commitment that must be voluntarily and intelligently undertaken. Having been baptized into the state church as children, those first Baptists began the practice known as “believer’s baptism,” which continues to distinguish Baptists from most other faith communities. Believer’s baptism means that Baptist churches baptize and count as their members only persons who have freely chosen (there’s freedom again!) to commit their lives to living in the Way of Jesus.

This commitment has had a broad effect. Church historian Martin Marty—a Lutheran—has written about the “baptistification” of American religion, “by which he means the

⁴Fisher Humphreys, *The Way We Were: How Southern Baptist Theology Has Changed And What It Means To Us All*, foreword by Walter B. Shurden, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), p. 36.

widespread acceptance among Americans of the idea that the only genuine religion is one that one accepts for oneself.”⁵

Now if you have any experience with churches at all, including any Baptist church we could name, you know that churches are filled with very ordinary people whose lives are imperfect and whose attitudes are frequently flawed. And you have probably said to yourself, “What’s up with that? Who needs it?” Those are very good questions.

Yes, churches are full of very ordinary, sinful people. But in our better moments, we are also people who are doing our very best to become more and more like the kind of community that Jesus calls us to be. Christian churches are composed of persons who know in our hearts that it is possible to build community on the foundation of repentance and forgiveness, just as Jesus taught. We in the churches give our best—though imperfect—efforts to building such community, and we invite others to freely join us on this journey.

The third freedom I want to examine with you is **Bible Freedom**: “*What will be your Authority?*” As you continue your life journey toward significance and community, how will you find your path? What will provide guidance along the way?

This magnetic compass I hold in my hand is an instrument that helps me find my way on geographic journeys. As you know, a magnetic compass points to magnetic North, not true North, and in order to use this compass effectively, I have to make adjustments to compensate for varying magnetic influences in different parts of the world.

This GPS receiver is an instrument that helps me find my way by pointing to true North. When I was on active duty in the Navy as an engineering officer on destroyers during the Viet Nam war, submariners bragged that their new GPS equipment could give their position within 350 feet. On a good day, this receiver will give my position within 15 feet!

While geographic location—where my body is—is frequently very important, it is not nearly so important as knowing my spiritual location—where my life is. This New Testament also shows direction and location. It shows me where my life is . . . and how to get to Jesus.

Because the Bible is so important in this way, Baptists have always been “people of the Book,” and Baptists have given themselves to making the Bible freely available to anyone who wants it. William Tyndale, an Anabaptist (forerunners of Baptists), was hanged and his body was burned in England in 1536 because he dared to translate the Bible into the language of the people so that even a plowboy could have one.

Sometimes, though, such Bible Freedom has ended up as freedom from the Bible. Dr. Bill Tuck, a former Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Bristol, put it this way:

Although the Bible is still popular and continues to be a national best seller, it is not authoritative for many, because it is unread and not understood by most people. . . . How is the Bible used by most people who purchase it? It is filled with newspaper clippings of weddings or funerals; roses are pressed in it; and pictures of children,

⁵ Ibid., p. 38.

grandchildren, or other relatives are kept there. It lies on a table like a magic talisman, signifying that this family is religious.”⁶

Sound familiar? I don’t know what your own experience with the Bible has been, but I encourage you to make an honest inquiry into the truth of the Bible a part of your academic journey while you are here. As Linus said to Charlie Brown, “I have begun to unfold the mysteries of the Bible.” “Really!” Charlie Brown said. “How?” “I’ve started to read it!” Linus replied. Because of Bible Freedom, you are able to do that, too.

Don’t let someone else do your Bible study for you. Get a copy of a modern edition of the Bible, and read the New Testament. It’s only about 350 pages long. But I warn you, the exploration will not be without risk. You will be changed.

Finally, I want to look with you at **Soul Freedom**: “*Who will be your Guide?*” Soul Freedom is that central freedom for which Baptists have fought for Religious Freedom, Church Freedom, and Bible Freedom. I have mentioned the Baptist commitment to personal religious experience. The great Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, contended that religion without vital personal experience is lifeless and dead, “just about as genuine as tea made from a bit of paper which once lay in a drawer beside another bit of paper which had once been used to wrap up a few dried tea leaves from which tea had already been made three times.”⁷

I suspect that many, if not most of you, have known persons who claimed to follow Jesus but whose lives gave little evidence of a commitment to follow him with passion and with integrity. Your own commitment to authentic living may have caused you to write off the religious enterprise as a misbegotten idea. With you, I have great concern for persons who “talk the talk” but don’t “walk the walk.” As evangelist Sam Jones said in a revival meeting in Owensboro, Kentucky, “You can be a good church member in Owensboro and not amount to much.”⁸ Such insipid churchgoing is not the goal of Soul Freedom. Passion and integrity are the goal.

In your academic pursuits here at VI you will study proper methods for conducting experiments in physics, in chemistry, and in biology. Some of you will take your understanding of music and playing instruments such as this magnificent organ to new levels. In each of these enterprises, “obedience precedes understanding.” That is, following proper procedures is essential to discovering or validating the principles that underlie physical realities or tonal harmonies. Experiments in the arena of spiritual realities are no different. In spiritual realities, too, “obedience precedes understanding.” As Bill Tuck observed,

When Jesus called his disciples, he didn’t give them some long list of beliefs to which they had to ascribe. What did he say to them? “Come, follow me.” When the disciples first began to follow Jesus, they didn’t begin to understand fully who he was. But they followed him and grew in their awareness of who he was and what he taught.”⁹

⁶ William Powell Tuck, Our Baptist Tradition (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1993), p. 29.

⁷ Malcomb Muggeridge, A Third Testament (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 138.

⁸ Moody, p. 36 (May, 1893).

⁹ Tuck, p. 24.

I'd like to invite you to enter into an experiment. There are many who try to dodge the question of who Jesus is by calling him a "great moral teacher." After saying this, these folk congratulate themselves on being very "open minded," "intellectual," and "inclusive," and, after "tipping their hats" to Jesus in this way, they then feel free to ignore him as they go about their lives. The truth of the matter is, though, that a truly intellectual approach to the question absolutely excludes the position such persons have chosen. Thinking of Jesus as a "great moral teacher" is not one of the options available. Why not?

The religious leaders in Jerusalem killed Jesus for many reasons, but one reason was central. Jesus was killed because he claimed to be God. Even a cursory reading of the four Gospels confirms beyond a doubt that Jesus said he was God. Now there are three—and only three—possibilities if a person claims to be God. The most likely option is that the person is mentally ill. Our psychiatric hospitals have many patients who think that they are God. When I served as a chaplain in Central State Hospital near Louisville, Kentucky, I talked with many of them.

The next most likely option is that a person who claims to be God knows this to be a lie, but uses this claim to gain power and influence over persons who can be persuaded that this is true. History is full of charismatic cultic leaders who destroyed entire communities through their evil influence.

The only other choice—the only other choice—is that a man who claims to be God is who he says he is. "Great moral teachers" have many things to teach us, but they don't claim to be God. I challenge you to examine the evidence for yourselves and to decide whether the Jesus you meet in the Bible is crazy, whether he is a manipulative liar, or whether he is in fact God.

Baptists give themselves passionately to the causes of Religious Freedom, Church Freedom, Bible Freedom, and Soul Freedom so that you will have the opportunity to decide for yourself the answer to the only question that will matter when all is said and done: as Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do YOU say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15).

With every other Baptist, I pray that your journey's end will lead you to the Cross.