

## Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

November 26, 2019

We've had some interesting and energetic discussions lately in Church Council meetings on the subject of what it means to "be a Baptist." This is indeed an interesting question, and I often tell people that "whatever your image or stereotype of Baptists may be, we have Baptists who will fit that!"



You may know that Baptists get our name from the Anabaptists of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Like the term, "Christian," "Anabaptist" was originally meant as an insult. The prefix "ana" means "again," and comes from the Baptist conviction that Christian baptism is to be experienced by persons who have confessed their faith in Jesus for themselves. In those early days, this meant that Anabaptists baptized believers "again" who had been already baptized as infants.

The idea of "believer's baptism" is a crucial one for Baptists. The question is not a matter of "how much water" was used (i.e., was the baptism by immersion); nor is the question about who performed the baptism (i.e., whether the person performing the baptism was "a Baptist").

There are two central baptismal concerns for Baptists: (1) did baptism precede or follow a person's confession of personal faith in Jesus—their experience of being "born again" (John 3:3); and (2) was that baptism understood as sign and symbol, not something that conveyed salvation?

For Baptists, baptism is not the last step of salvation. Baptism is one of the very first steps of obedience after salvation. Baptism is "by faith alone," whether or not one has experienced Christian baptism (Ephesians 2:8-9). Baptists believe that personal religious experience of salvation is essential for membership in the Body of Christ, and baptism is somewhat analogous to "putting on the uniform" of such membership in the visible Church.

Baptists neither discount nor denigrate those whose baptism was otherwise, and we are very happy to acknowledge such folk as sisters and brothers in Christ. The question of "believer's baptism" has nothing at all to do with whether or not someone is a bona fide follower of Jesus. The question has to do with whether someone wishes to identify themselves as a "Baptist."

In my view, our congregation has as wide a door for membership as could possibly be imagined while still being a Christian congregation. We accept as "Associate Members" any follower of Jesus who has not chosen to experience "believer's baptism"; and we accept as "Members" any follower of Jesus who has experienced "believer's baptism."

One of the places where congregations sometimes "draw the line" is with respect to who is allowed to receive communion. Here, too, we are as open as can be, inviting any who consider themselves to be followers of Jesus to join us in fellowship at the Lord's Table.

The ONLY thing a "Member" can do that an "Associate Member" cannot do is to serve as the "President" of the congregation, which we call the "Moderator." EVERYTHING ELSE

---

**CBF: transforming Oakland Mills into a community others wish to replicate.**

Archived Laptops are available at [http://www.dcstancil.com/daves\\_laptop](http://www.dcstancil.com/daves_laptop)

1 | Page

is JUST THE SAME. The logic behind this distinction is apparently (it preceded me) that the President of the Congregation should be someone who has chosen to be “a Baptist.”

In addition to “believer’s baptism,” other Baptist distinctives include commitments to the authority of Scripture, the “priesthood of believers,” the autonomy of the local congregation, and religious liberty for all . . . and there are others. If you’d like to know more, I recommend the short book, *Our Baptist Tradition*, written by my friend Bill Tuck.

With this *Laptop* I’m including a description of the ways in which persons can become members of this congregation, and an address I once gave on the subject of Baptist beliefs.

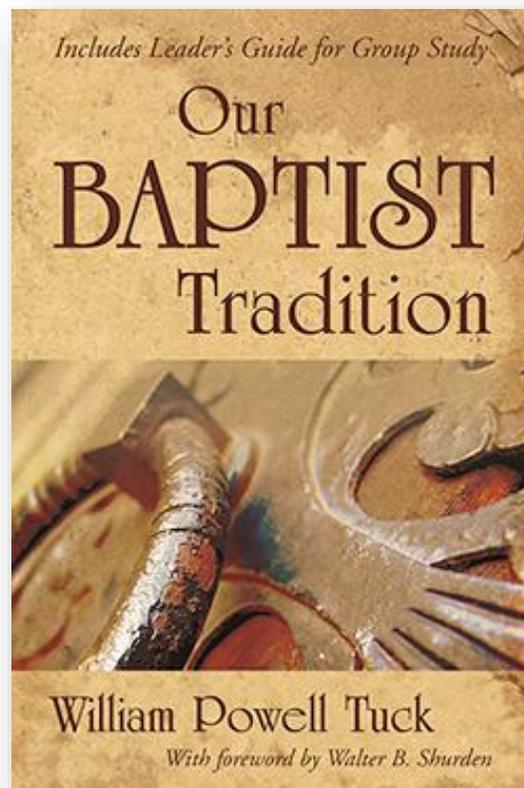
While I am a Baptist for what I believe to be solid theological reasons, *one’s denominational affiliation is really not the crucial thing at all. **The crucial thing is personal faith in our crucified and risen Lord.** This is the Good News!*

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God”*  
(John 3:3).

*“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”*  
(John 14:6).

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life”*  
(John 5:24).

Dave



---

**CBF: transforming Oakland Mills into a community others wish to replicate.**

Archived Laptops are available at [http://www.dcstancil.com/daves\\_laptop](http://www.dcstancil.com/daves_laptop)

2 | Page

# Membership Options at Columbia Baptist Fellowship

If this is your Situation	These are your Opportunities
<p><b>If you have never publicly professed your faith in Jesus as your Lord &amp; Savior . . .</b></p> <div data-bbox="172 380 716 569" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; text-align: center;"> <p><b>Option 1: First-time Confession of Faith</b></p> </div>	<p>You may make that profession during the invitation time in any service. After you have discussed your commitment with one of our pastors, you will be baptized by immersion during a special service of celebration and commitment that will be scheduled later in room 100, usually on a Sunday afternoon. Your membership will be confirmed at the next Business Meeting.</p>
<p><b>If you are currently a member of another Baptist church . . .</b></p> <div data-bbox="164 726 732 919" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; text-align: center;"> <p><b>Option 2: Transfer of Membership</b></p> </div>	<p>You may ask to have your membership transferred from that congregation by making that desire known during the invitation time in any service. After you have discussed your commitment with one of our pastors, we will write to your previous congregation to alert them to your desire to move your membership, and your membership will be confirmed at the next Business Meeting.</p>
<p><b>If you are not able to transfer your membership from another Baptist congregation, or if you're currently a member of another Christian denomination . . .</b></p> <div data-bbox="224 1178 683 1371" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; text-align: center; margin-bottom: 20px;"> <p><b>Option 3a: "By Statement"</b></p> </div> <div data-bbox="228 1419 688 1780" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; text-align: center;"> <p><b>Option 3b: Baptism or Associate Membership</b></p> </div>	<p>If you have committed your life to Jesus and have received Christian baptism by any mode following your confession of faith in Jesus (that is, you have received "believer's baptism" rather than "infant baptism"), you may express your desire to become a member of CBF during the invitation time in any service. We'll ask you to affirm your faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior and to confirm that you have previously received believer's baptism (by any mode). After you have discussed your commitment with one of our pastors, your membership will be confirmed at the next Business Meeting.</p> <p>If you have committed your life to Jesus but have not experienced believer's baptism, you may either request baptism (which will be by immersion in this case) or you may ask to become an Associate Member. After you have discussed your commitment with one of our pastors, your membership will be confirmed at the next Business Meeting.</p>

(continues . . .)

**If you have committed your life to Jesus and have been baptized in another Christian church and wish to worship with CBF and participate in CBF programs and ministries, but do not want to become a Member . . .**

**Option 4a:  
Associate  
Membership**

**Option 4b:  
Dual Membership**

If your membership is in a Christian church in which believer's baptism is not the norm (such as faith groups that practice infant baptism followed later by confirmation), and you don't wish to be baptized by immersion at this point in your journey, you may ask to move your membership and to become an Associate Member of CBF during the invitation time in any service. Associate Members are able to vote in Business Meetings and are able to exercise their gifts among us in every position except Pastoral Staff and Church Moderator. After you have discussed your commitment with one of our pastors, your membership will be confirmed at the next Business Meeting.

Sometimes persons come to us from other Christian congregations and wish to retain membership in that previous congregation. In that case, you would not be "moving your membership" to CBF and would ask to become an Associate Member at CBF while remaining a member of the other congregation ("dual membership"). As stated above, Associate Members are able to vote in Business Meetings and are able to exercise their gifts among us in every position except Pastoral Staff and Church Moderator. After you have discussed your commitment with one of our pastors, your membership will be confirmed at the next Business Meeting.

# ***What We Believe: What Does It Mean to be a Baptist at Columbia Baptist Fellowship?***

Thanks for your interest in Columbia Baptist Fellowship, and thanks for your interest in learning more about what we believe. Such investigation is truly essential when considering where to worship and serve our Lord.

If you know anything about Baptists at all, you know that Baptists do not require agreement with specific creedal statements. At the same time, there are a number of things that Baptists generally believe, and most of us believe these things at CBF.

As you can see in the documents that describe the various ways to become a Member or Associate Member at CBF, it's not actually required that you "become a Baptist" to be a vital member of this congregation. Even so, you will likely feel more at home among us if you find yourself in general agreement with the principles described below.

There are many Christian groups that adhere to some, or even most, of these principles, but Baptists are among the few who believe them all. Should you wish to examine any of these more extensively, you might begin with *The Baptist Faith & Message* (1963), a longer document you can find on this site that gives more explanation and many more supportive Scriptures than I've included here.

I've also attached at the end of this summary a short essay that gives a somewhat different summary of these matters as well as more history of where Baptists originated. So let's begin . . . .

## **SHORT VERSION**

1. We believe the Bible is authoritative for all matters of faith and practice, and is fully sufficient to lead us to salvation and to Abundant Life.
2. We believe that Jesus Christ of Nazareth was both fully God and fully human, that He died in our stead, was raised for our salvation, and is worthy of our full allegiance and obedience, even unto death.
3. We believe that salvation is completely a gift of grace from God, which we receive by confessing and repenting of our Sin and placing our faith and trust in Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior.
4. We believe that every born again person is indwelt by God's Holy Spirit and that every believer can approach God directly and with confidence through Jesus ("the priesthood of the believer").
5. We believe that all truly born again persons will be brought safely into the New Creation by the power and testimony of Jesus alone ("once saved, always saved").
6. We believe that New Testament baptism is by immersion, following personal confession of faith in Jesus.
7. We believe that while every born again person is a member of the Church Universal, only born again, baptized believers are candidates for membership in the Church Visible and Temporal.

8. We believe that Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Communion) should be understood as remembrances and symbols rather than as "infallible transmitters of God's grace."
9. We believe that each congregation should be independent and self-governing, and that each member has a voice and a vote equal to every other member.
10. We believe that Christian congregations do well to cooperate with one another in the work of evangelism and missions.
11. We believe in religious liberty for all and in the separation of Church and State.

## ANNOTATED VERSION

### 1. The Authority & Sufficiency of Scripture

- a. In order to begin at all, we need a "place to stand," some source of knowledge and authority from which we derive our remaining principles. For Baptists, this "place to stand" has always been the Bible itself. The *Baptist Faith & Message* affirms that "has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. It reveals the principles by which God judges us; and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ."
- b. Many people affirm the authority of the Bible, but it is another thing entirely to actually make the Bible God's ultimate authority for your beliefs and behavior. While none of us will ever do this perfectly, we do take the Bible seriously and do our best to conform our behavior and practice to what we believe it teaches . . . with the help of the Holy Spirit.
- c. See Psalm 119:11, 97-112; Luke 24:13-45; Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21

### 2. The Deity & Lordship of Jesus Christ

- a. You perhaps noticed that the *Baptist Faith & Message* statement about the Bible ended with "The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ." For Baptists, and indeed, for most Christians, understanding what the Bible teaches is always anchored in our personal experience of Jesus as our Savior and Lord, and we read all Scripture through that experience.
- b. As difficult as it may be to grasp, we believe that Jesus of Nazareth was and is God in human flesh, and we come to that conclusion along a path very much like the one the first disciples followed.
  - i. Long familiar with "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," those first-century believers became persuaded that Jesus of Nazareth was somehow that same God, just as He said He was. And then, on Pentecost, the Father sent the Spirit just as Jesus had promised, and those believers became persuaded through their own personal experience that the Spirit was somehow that same God, as well.

- ii. The idea of the “Trinity” developed over time as Christians tried to make sense of their experience with this Three-Personal God. The early Church Councils were greatly concerned with defining what understandings were “orthodox” and which were “heterodox” or “heresy,” and the Creeds they formulated were sometimes fiercely debated. The *Apostles’ Creed* (c. A.D. 140), the *Nicene Creed* (c. A.D. 325), the *Athanasian Creed* (c. A.D. 350), and the *Chalcedonian Creed* (c. A.D. 451), are the most famous of these pronouncements.
- c. For Jesus to be “Lord” means that He has the right to our allegiance and the authority to direct our behavior.
- d. See Matthew 16:13-16; John 1:1-14, 10:30, 14:6, 9; Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 2:15-20; Revelation 5:1-14, 19:11-16

### **3. Salvation as God’s Gift of Grace, received through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ**

- a. God loved the world so much that He gave us His Son to provide for our salvation. Sinners all, we are restored to relationship with God (“saved”) only by turning from our sin (repentance) and trusting Jesus to save us (faith).
- b. As Baptists understand the New Testament, our salvation is “by grace through faith . . . plus nothing.” Salvation is not grace + faith + baptism. Salvation is not grace + faith + good works. Salvation is not grace + faith + church membership. Salvation is by grace + faith + nothing.
- c. See John 3:16, 14:6; Romans 6:23, 10:9-13; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 2:8-10; Hebrews 7:25-27

### **4. The Principle of “Soul Competency,” or “The Priesthood of the Believer”**

- a. Our ability to make decisions is a gift from God. Each person must use this gift to decide for herself or himself whether or not to follow Jesus. This crucial decision must be freely and intelligently made, and any attempt to coerce such commitment is a violation of human freedom before God.
- b. In the Old Testament, people had access to God only through the priests and the sacrificial system of the Temple. Now, by God’s grace, every believer has equal and direct access to God through the Holy Spirit, who lives within those who follow Jesus. While we certainly benefit from the insight and instruction of other believers, we no longer need an intermediary between us and our Father. We are welcomed into His heart.
- c. See Jeremiah 31:31-34; Matthew 27:50-51; John 3:16; Ephesians 2:11-22; 1 Peter 2:9-10

### **5. The Perseverance of the Saints, or “once saved, always saved”**

- a. The question of whether or not a believer can lose his or her salvation has been hotly contested across the centuries. There are certainly passages in the New Testament that, if taken by themselves, would lead to the conclusion that one’s salvation can be lost or abandoned, but Baptists have generally been

persuaded that Jesus' own words are testimony to "once saved, always saved." You can study the Scriptures for yourself and make your own judgment:

- b. See John 10:27-30, 11:25-26; Romans 8:31-39; Galatians 2:21; Ephesians 1:13-14, 2:8-9; 2 Timothy 1:9, 12; 1 Peter 1:3-5; 1 John 2:19, 5:1, 11-13

## **6. Baptism, by immersion, of believers only**

- a. Jesus commanded us to baptize as a sign of repentance (Matthew 28:19), and only persons who understand and are convicted of their sin are able to repent. Baptists, therefore, do not practice infant baptism, but baptize only those persons old enough to understand and turn from their sin.
- b. Baptists baptize by immersion because this was the universal practice of the early church, because the word, "baptize," means "to immerse or to sink," and because baptism by immersion best symbolizes our spiritual death and resurrection through Jesus.
- c. See Mark 1:9-11; Acts 2:38, 41, 8:12, 26-38, 16:11-15, 25-34

## **7. Regenerate Church Membership**

- a. In the New Testament, persons professed their faith in Jesus, were baptized, and became members of the local congregation of believers, almost always in that order. Accordingly, Baptists generally admit to "membership" only those persons who have placed their faith in Jesus and experienced "believers' baptism." At CBF, persons who are born again followers of Jesus but who have not experienced believers' baptism (i.e., they experienced infant baptism) can become Associate Members. Full membership is available after believers' baptism as a reaffirmation of their faith.
- b. Ephesians 2:19-22, 4:1-16; Colossians 1:9-14, 3:12-17; Hebrews 10:19-25

## **8. The Ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, viewed as Reminders rather than as Sacraments**

- a. Baptists regard the experience of Baptism and Communion (or the Lord's Supper) as practices that Jesus told, commanded, or ordered His followers to continue until His Return. This "ordering" is why Baptists call these practices "ordinances."
- b. Some Christian groups add the practice of Foot Washing to the list of ordinances (with what could be argued is good reason). Other groups add a number of practices they call "sacraments." In general, a "sacrament" is a religious practice that is believed to convey some spiritual reality that be conveyed in no other way. Because Baptists do not see "sacramental" theology clearly taught in the New Testament, we do not add other formal practices to Baptism and Communion, and we regard these observances as expressions of faith and obedience, not as "infallible transmitters of God's grace."
- c. See Matthew 26:17-30, 28:18-20; Mark 1:9-11, 14:12-21; Luke 22:7-20; John 13:1-17; Romans 6:1-7; 1 Corinthians 11:23-29

**9. The Autonomy of the Local Church, with each Congregation being Independent and Self-Governing, and with Members possessing Equal Rights & Privileges**

- a. There are three primary ways in which Christian groups organize themselves, and there is evidence for each of these approaches in the New Testament.
  - i. In the “Episcopal” approach, authority is exercised “top-down,” from bishops to pastors and priests and then to members. This is rather like nations governed by kings (Acts 15:1-29; 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 16:1-3).
  - ii. In the “Presbyterian” system, authority is exercised by a group of elders, both lay and clergy, who are elected by the congregation. This is rather like nations governed by representative democracy (Acts 14:23, 15:22).
  - iii. In the “Congregational” system, authority is exercised by the membership through direct voting and decision making, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. This is rather like a pure democracy, which seldom exists among nations; but this is the way in which most Baptist congregations are organized, and in which we attempt to function (Acts 2:42-47, 6:1-6, 13:1-3).
- b. See Matthew 18:15-20; Acts 2:42-47, 6:1-6, 11:29-30, 13:1-3, 14:23, 15:22; 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 16:1-3; 2 Corinthians 8:1-13; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1, 5

**10. Voluntary Cooperation among Churches for Evangelism & Missions**

- a. As we’ve seen, it is God’s purpose that every human person be so transformed through personal faith in Jesus that they are ready, willing and able to spend eternity with God.
- b. It is God’s further purpose that followers of Jesus join their lives with local congregations for mutual encouragement and growth and to join their lives in carrying out what is known as “The Great Commission” (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8).
- c. Because each congregation is autonomous, with Christ Himself as its Head (Ephesians 1:22, 5:23; Colossians 1:18, 2:19), no congregation has authority over another congregation. At the same time, Baptist congregations have long made common cause with one another in order to carry this Great Commission into all the world.
- d. See Genesis 12:1-4; Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; Romans 10:13-15; 2 Corinthians 8:1-8, 16-9:15; Galatians 2:1-10

**11. Religious Liberty for All and Separation of Church & State**

- a. The very first words in the *Bill of Rights* in the U.S. Constitution are these: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” (the beginning of the First Amendment). The framers of the Constitution had personally witnessed the negative effects of “established” or state-supported religion, and they earnestly desired to avoid those effects in the new nation. They had also seen the persecution that

inevitably follows privileging one faith group over another, and they wanted to avoid that, as well.

- b. Having originated in persecution, Baptists have long been champions of religious liberty, and most historians credit colonial Baptists with the clear and careful religious liberty that is enshrined in our Constitution. At the same time, Baptists are also quick to point out that “freedom OF religion” was never intended to become “freedom FROM religion.” In our day, secularism is working hard to have itself established as the de facto religion of the land, and Baptists continue to press forward to prevent ANY faith (and secularism is “faith”) from being privileged in these United States.
- c. See Matthew 22:15-22; Acts 5:27-42; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-6; 1 Peter 2:13-17

# “FOUR FRAGILE FREEDOMS”

Acts 16:16-34 <sup>1</sup>

If I were to ask you why you're a Baptist or why you attend this particular Baptist church, I suspect that you might offer a wide variety of reasons. My good friend, Dwight Moody, 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 modern church and embody what it means for the church to be a counter-culture to the prevailing secularism of our day. . . .<sup>2</sup>

So 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. Today's emphasis in *It's Time! is It's Time . . . to Rediscover the Baptist Heritage & to Renew the Baptist Witness*, and it's the idea of freedom that I want to highlight about our heritage this morning.

Dr. Walter Shurden of Mercer University, an historian of Baptists and their ways, has distilled Baptist distinctives into what he called “four fragile freedoms.”<sup>3</sup> Those four freedoms form the skeleton for this message, and I've attached a question to each of them that may help us to drill down into their meaning. The four freedoms and their attendant questions go like this:

**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, or 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.

---

<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on March 21, 2010. This sermon was originally a convocation address delivered at Virginia Intermont College in Bristol, Virginia on August 27, 2002.

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

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

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. Growing out of this persecution, John Leland, a Virginia Baptist minister, 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.**”

Rivers of ink have been spilled in explanation of these sixteen words, 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 genuine 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.

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

As the years accumulate, I think that you’ll find that there are really only three questions that matter in life. The first of these questions is “How can my life have significance—to mean something, to have mattered—when all is said and done?” The second question is “How can I develop relationships—a durable community—to sustain me on the journey of life?” (I’ll come to the third, and most important question, at the end.)

The Good News is that Jesus Christ gives us answers to both of 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 working men—and He began to show them how to become a different kind of community than the world had ever known.

Jesus’ disciples chose to follow 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.<sup>4</sup>

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

---

<sup>4</sup>Fisher 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.

from most other faith communities. Believer's baptism means that Baptist churches baptize and count as their members only persons who have freely chosen 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 widespread acceptance among Americans of the idea that the only genuine religion is one that one accepts for oneself.”<sup>5</sup>

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 may very well have said to yourself, “What’s up with that? Who needs it?” Those are very good questions.

It’s quite true that churches are full of very ordinary, sinful people. But in our better moments, we’re also people who are doing our very best to become more and more like the kind of community that Jesus calls us to be. Our churches are composed of persons who know in our hearts that it really 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 consider with you is **Bible Freedom**: “*What will be your Authority?*” As you continue your life’s journey toward significance and community, how will you find your path? What will provide guidance along the way?

I once had a very nice magnetic compass to help me find my way on geographic journeys. My compass broke, but I’m sure you know that a magnetic compass points to magnetic North.

This GPS receiver is an instrument that helps me find my way by pointing to true North. Back in the day when I was an engineering officer on destroyers during the Viet Nam war, submariners bragged that their new GPS equipment could locate a submarine within 350 feet. Now, nearly forty years later, this receiver gives my position to within six feet!

Now while *geographic* location—where my body is—is frequently very important, it’s not nearly so important as knowing my *spiritual* location—where my life is. This Bible also shows direction and location. It shows me where my life is . . . and how to get from where I am 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 one. 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 led to freedom from the Bible rather than freedom for the Bible. Dr. Bill Tuck, a pastor friend of mine, 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. . . .

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

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

Does that 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 life this year. 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’re 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 the anchoring freedom that has caused Baptists to fight for Religious Freedom, Church Freedom, and Bible Freedom. I’ve already 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.”<sup>7</sup>

I suspect that many, if not most of us, have known persons who claimed to follow Jesus but whose lives gave little evidence of a commitment to follow Him. Unfortunately, there are quite a few folk 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.”<sup>8</sup>

Such insipid churchgoing is not the goal of Soul Freedom. Soul Freedom intends to make possible Jesus followers whose lives are prayer-filled, Bible-centered, virtuous, compassionate, integrated, and spiritually powerful!

The question that goes with Soul Freedom is “Who will be your Guide?” For Christians, there is no Guide but Jesus of Nazareth, the fullness of the eternal God disclosed in human flesh; and it is only in obedience to Him as the Guide for Life that we find genuine Soul Freedom and real spiritual power.

There are many today who try to avoid obeying Jesus by writing Him off as a “great moral teacher.” After saying this, such 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 an intellectually honest approach to the question of who Jesus is absolutely excludes the position they 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 primary. 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.

---

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

<sup>7</sup> Malcomb Muggeridge, *A Third Testament* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 138.

<sup>8</sup> Moody, p. 36 (May, 1893).

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 worked for a semester as a chaplain in Central State Hospital near Louisville, Kentucky, I talked with a number 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 it 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.

---

<sup>9</sup> See C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (HarperOne, 2001), pp. 40-41.