

April 10, 2005  
College Baptist Church

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### **Liberty for the Gospel**

1 Cor 9:12-23

#### Affirmation #10 -- Religious Liberty

*"We believe that every human being has direct relations with God and is responsible to God alone in all matters of faith; that each church is independent and must be free from interference by any ecclesiastical or political authority; that therefore, Church and State must be kept separate as having different functions, each fulfilling its duties free from dictation or patronage of the other."*

The 10th Affirmation in the doctrinal statement of the Baptist General Conference lays out a conviction about religious liberty that, historically, is as distinctive of the Baptist church as the doctrine of believers baptism by immersion is, that we studied last week among the two Ordinances. In fact, the depth of conviction that baptism is a sign that should be expressed by believers on the grounds of their own individual faith is directly related to the principle on which this 10th Affirmation rests.

It actually even goes back to the fundamental principle of the doctrine of God and his purposes in creation that we learned earlier: God does everything he does for the sake of his own glory. Jesus operated by the principle Paul lays out in 1Cor 10:31: Whatsoever he did, whether he ate or drank, he did it all to the glory of God.

Paul quotes this bedrock principle from Isaiah 45:23 in Romans 14:11 -- "By myself I have sworn," God says. "From my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: To me every knee shall bow and every tongue swear allegiance." Notice the context. Paul quotes that in the course of reminding us that at the end of history we will all stand before the judgment seat of God (Rom 14:10); and 14:12 goes on to conclude from that the principle on which this Baptist distinctive of the 10th Affirmation stands:

Therefore--at that judgment seat, since the sovereign God of this universe will accomplish his purpose in history, and bring every knee to bow and every tongue to confess that Jesus is Lord, whether we love that conclusion and joyfully spend eternity with Jesus or hate that conclusion and spend eternity in the hell of running away from Jesus--every single one of us will give an account of himself to God.

It won't matter what family we were born into. It won't matter what church we were born into or what church may have taken care of us. It won't matter what schools and businesses we were associated with. It won't matter in what country we had our citizenship. What will matter is what matters in our baptism: our faith, and our faith alone.

This is the argument for which Baptists have historically gone to the mat. It's what made Baptists most distinct from all the other historic denominations. It's the issue that led to the greatest number of Baptist martyrdoms. The faith by which we are justified is at the end of the day--more importantly at the end of history before the judgment seat of God--going to have to be the faith of our own individual heart; and that faith won't truly be faith if it isn't willing, voluntary, uncoerced, and personally passionate.

That same treatise that is quoted in the meditation in the bulletin from a famous Baptist pastor in Virginia during the founding days of America's independence also said this: Every person must give an account to God, and therefore should be free to serve God in a way which best reconciles with personal conscience. If government can answer for individuals at the Day of Judgment, it should control them in religious matters; otherwise government should let all persons be free.

But the American revolution wasn't the first place that Baptists became distinctive for arguing for religious liberty. Most people identify the Baptist movement in America with Roger Williams, who formed the first Baptist church in the colonies in Rhode Island in the late 1630's because the religious authorities in Massachusetts banished him from their colony for elevating the conscience of the individual above the authority of the established Puritan Congregational church. His colleague, John Clarke, who planted the second Baptist church in Rhode Island a short time later, had also been imprisoned in Massachusetts for his preaching.

It was not just government authority over the individual conscience that Baptists were objecting to. It was the authority of religious bodies, too.

A generation before Roger Williams founded Rhode Island in the American colonies, the first two Baptist pastors in England, John Smyth and Thomas Helwys were arguing against the oppression of individual conscience in the early 1600s when James I (of KJV fame) was passing laws requiring everyone in England to belong to the Church of England and worship God from the same prayer book.

Smyth and Helwys left England to look for refuge in Holland in 1608, just about the same time the Mayflower Pilgrims did. Four years later Smyth wrote a treatise that historians say was probably "the first confession of faith of modern times to demand freedom of conscience and separation of church and state." Here is what he wrote: "the magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force or compel men to this or that form of religion, or doctrine; but to leave Christian religion free, to every man's conscience...for Christ only is the king, and lawgiver of the church and conscience."

His friend Thomas Helwys eventually returned to England with some of Smyth's group, just as the Pilgrims did on their way to the Plymouth Plantation. But Helwys wasn't so fortunate as the Pilgrims to find a new place of freedom to worship. Back in England he published a pamphlet against the established religion called "A Short Declaration of the Mistery of Iniquity," and King James threw him in prison for it. He died in prison.

Here's the interesting thing that Helwys died for: His pamphlet wasn't arguing for his own Protestant Baptist freedom. He was arguing for the freedom of the Roman Catholics in England to worship the way they wanted! Here is what he wrote:

"Our Lord the King hath no more power over their consciences than ours, and that is none at all: for our Lord the King is but an earthly King, and if the Kings people be obedient & true subjects, obeying all humane lawes made by the King, our lord the King can require no more. For men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves; the King shall not answer for it; neither may the King be judge between God and man. Let them be heretikes, Turks, Jewes or whatsoever, it apperteynes not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure."

There is the principle again from Rom 14:12. Each of us individually will have to render account of ourselves before God. Therefore each of us individually must have the freedom and responsibility for our faith, and not yield that up to any other human authority, whether governmental or ecclesiastical. Churches must have liberty from the authority of the state. And individuals must have liberty from the authority of the church. Roger Williams called this "soul liberty."

There was a time when this principle of soul liberty was so controversial that Baptists were put into prison and even martyred for it. Today in America, this Baptist principle has made such successful headway that just about every religious person would agree with it, and it's hardly controversial at all. It's part of the American way of life. I even tease my Anglican friends here in Hillsdale who have created two new Anglican churches out of the original Episcopal church, that was all there was when we first came to town 17 years ago, of being more Baptist than the Baptists in insisting on their freedom to worship God according to their own consciences.

Martin Marty, the widely published church historian at the U of Chicago, calls this American principle "Baptistification." It's the principle of freedom, choice, and voluntarism in matters of faith.

It's the principle that Martin Luther followed when he stood before the established Roman church of Constantine in the person of the Roman Catholic emperor Charles and said, "Here I stand, ... unless my conscience is taken captive by the Word of God I can do no other." And yet the Lutheran church itself became the new established church of Germany and Sweden and Norway and Denmark.

It's the principle that the Separatist Pilgrims of Plymouth Rock and later the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay colony followed in freeing themselves from the uniformity of the crown in England under James and Charles. And yet they re-established their own church in the new world and wanted to force Roger Williams and John Clark to conform with them.

It's the principle the Presbyterians of Scotland followed in dissenting from the imposition of the Church of England upon their worship, and still the government of Scotland taxed their people to support the Presbyterian pastors of their country.

The same John Calvin who wanted his freedom from the Roman Catholic church of France was not above using his government in Geneva to punish heresy. His good friend, Nicholas Zurkinden, a member of the council of Bern that enforced death sentences for religious non-conformity later on expressed his baptistic reservations about it in a letter to Calvin. He wrote:

"I freely confess that I also am one of those who desire to see the sword used as seldom as possible as a means of compulsion upon the opponents of the faith: and I am moved not so much by the Scripture passages which are cited, to keep the edge of the sword away from the treatment of matters of faith, as the unbelievable examples which have occurred in our time in the punishment of the Anabaptists. I was witness here when an eighty-year-old grandmother and her daughter, a mother of six children, were led to their death for no other reason than that they rejected infant baptism in accord with the well-known and common teaching of the Anabaptists."<sup>[1]</sup>

But this is also the principle that the free churches of Germany and Scandinavia followed in separating themselves as house churches and small movements in those countries to create the Free Churches: the Evangelical Free Church of Norwegians; the Evangelical Covenant Church of Swedish immigrants to America; and the Swedish Baptists, who later became the Baptist General Conference.

When I was about 7 years old or so and first learning the wonders of the English dictionary, it was part of the lore of those days that the longest word in the dictionary was "antidisestablishmentarianism." None of us had any idea what that word meant, but we were all in awe of the word and were proud that we knew it and knew how to pronounce it. I doubt whether in this age of making up 27-letter words for every new drug that is invented, our old word is still the longest word in the dictionary. But as it turns out, opposition to what that word, antidisestablishmentarianism, stands for is at the heart of what it has always meant to be Baptist.

We oppose the establishment of religion by government; we would disestablish any church that wants to ally itself with the power of the government to coerce people to comply with doctrine or to pay taxes to support the work of the ministers of the church; and we'd stand against anyone who was antidisestablishmentarian. The Baptist principle of religious liberty, soul liberty, is anti-antidisestablishmentarianism!

Today, thanks to the success of this Baptist principle, opposition to what that word stands for is also at the heart of what it means simply to be American.

I heard a speaker at the college recently speaking about liberty and the images that have been used to symbolize it over the ages. He mentioned, without really discovering a reason why it was used, that the early American colonialists were fond of using a tree to stand for liberty. If we use that image this morning, you can think of this tree of religious liberty as having two primary roots, and then a lot of fruit. The root that I've been talking about is the historical one. Religious liberty became an issue in the church because so many people felt so deeply the oppression and coercion of lacking it. The tree grew in part because people desired this liberty so passionately that they would die for it.

But it wouldn't be a tree worth cultivating if it didn't have another root into the authority of the Word of God. Religious liberty is not freedom from the authority of God. Living under the authority of God as our absolute sovereign and king is what true and genuine liberty is, because, unlike fallen human rulers, God exercises his sovereign authority in overflowing mercy and love

towards us. There is no greater benefit in all the universe than living under the loving direction of the God who gave up his own divinity to dwell among us as human and gave up his human life to die so that we could live.

Ultimate freedom is found in the good news of the gospel of the Kingdom and rule of God.

So we turn most importantly to see what the root of Scripture contributes to the tree of our religious liberty. The historical root of human experience and desire means nothing, if the biblical root of God's revelation doesn't support this tree. So turn again with me to Paul's discussion of freedom in 1Cor 9 and let's see how he connects liberty to the gospel. Then we'll come briefly at the end to consider some fruits of application of this tree of soul liberty.

In 1 Cor 9, Paul begins a discussion of what his freedom is and what it means in the context of his gospel ministry. "Am I not free?" he asks at the beginning of the chapter. The reason he raises this question of liberty is important. It's because the Corinthians have been arguing that their liberty in Christ, their liberty from the authority of Jewish Law under the gospel, means that they ought to have the right to eat meat, even if that meat has been religiously contaminated by being part of a pagan sacrifice to a Roman god.

Paul's argument goes to the heart of Christian theology here in his response to the Corinthians, and it is essential to our understanding of the principle of religious liberty that Baptists have been so adamant and courageous in defending. Follow with me his line of thinking in this reply.

Yes, we have rights, he says. And yes, we are quite free in that sense. The apostles have a right to marry. Preachers have a right to a salary for their preaching. And the Corinthians have a right to eat meat, even if the Jews may have scruples about it because of their Law.

But in 9:11 he says, I haven't exercised those rights. I don't have a wife. I won't take money from you for my ministry in Corinth. I'm going to make tents for my living instead. And the implication is, even though I have a right to eat meat, I'll give that right up in a heartbeat, anytime the gospel of Christ is at stake. Because I'll endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

So at first it sounds as if he might be arguing against religious freedom! My freedom needs to be sacrificed, it sounds like he is saying, if it ever threatens to compromise the duty and requirement of preaching the gospel.

It's not freedom that matters. It's religious authority that's imposed upon me that matters.

But that's not his argument and he is quick to clarify what it is he really wants to argue for. The reason why he is so ready to give up his rights is not because freedom is not a priority for him. It's not because necessity and duty in compliance with authority take precedence for him. It's just the opposite, in fact.

The reason why he's ready to give up his rights to a wife and a salary and to meat in Corinth, is that he would rather die than lose his ground for boasting. Boasting? This is all about pride and arrogance? Not in himself. What kind of boasting matters to Paul? He said it back in the first chapter, quoting from Jer 9:23. "Let him who boasts, boast in

the Lord." Being proud of God, giving God all the glory: that's what Paul will give up everything else to do. That, in a word, is when he feels most liberated!

And here's the surprising thing: preaching the gospel, by itself, isn't the ground of the kind of boasting that gives God all the glory. Preaching the gospel is a duty. It's a necessity. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! Necessity is laid upon me.

There is authority that Paul acknowledges. It comes from God. And wherever it comes from God, Paul says it's a necessity to submit to it. Even governmental authority should be respected as a duty. Even the authority of the pagan Roman emperor, even though he is an opponent of Christian worship, is a necessity to submit to. That's what he argues in Romans 13. But only up to the limits of religious conscience and faith.

Paul doesn't think it's a necessity to worship the Roman gods and offer his annual pinch of incense to the deity of the Roman emperor, even if the authority of the Roman government should be respected in every other sense.

But he does say in Rom 13:6, in this week before April 15, "Pay your taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed." His argument derives from the very same words of Jesus that historic Baptists have always quoted to support the separation of church and state: "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's" (Mt 22:21; Mk 12:17; Lk 20:25).

Being motivated by duty and necessity is good within the limits of conscience. That far he agrees with the antidisestablishmentarians. Authority has its place. And when it's in that place, we ought to respect it. But then in v.17 he says to everyone who wants to operate by authority and by rights and by duty and by necessity: the Baptist principle of religious liberty is a deeper and more ultimate principle for motivating Christian life and obedience than authority and duty. This is the principle worth dying for, because here is where we find our boast. Here is where we find the glory of God at stake, and here is where we find our own Christian joy at stake.

"If I do this of my own will, then I have a reward. If I do my duty just because it's my duty, even though it's not my own will and delight, then I am just fulfilling my required stewardship. It's a good act. But it's not a free act.

The irony is that our Christian acts don't become free and rewarding and finally glorifying to God until they're done because we enjoy the merciful character of God so much that we imitate it in laying down our own rights and in going beyond our own necessities to delight in loving other people more than ourselves. That's ironic because this looks to the world like the activity of a slave. Love makes us servants of other people. But when we give up our own rights to take responsibility for other people's needs and do it in genuine love because we like what we're doing and aren't doing it because we have to, that's religious liberty. And that love embodies the heart of the gospel.

It's what Jesus did, who had the right to sit in heaven at the right hand of God but gave that right up to come to earth and die for us. He did it for the joy that was set before him of extending the mercy of God to needy sinners. It's what God did, who had the right to sentence each one of us to hell for our turning away from him to love the little promises of the world more than we loved him, yet God gave up his Son for our salvation. And here in 1 Cor 9, it's what Paul strives to do: becoming all things to all people, no matter how much he has to give up for it, all (v.23) for the sake of the gospel so that he could pass on its blessings to other people.

True religious liberty consists in the joyful willingness we exercise when we love other people for their benefit and for the sake of the glory of God. Duty falls short. Necessity falls short. Exercising our rights falls short. And doing what is right because of the authority of someone else falls short. Because they all lack the freedom of joyful faith from the heart of a willing individual. Paul says he only succeeds in boasting in the Lord when he is happy in loving other people. That's the Baptist principle of religious liberty.

Let me mention briefly then a few fruits of this tree of religious liberty by way of application.

First, we believe "that each church is independent of other churches." Free churches, such as Baptist churches, call this the principle of "local church autonomy." The local church answers ultimately to no human authority beyond itself in interpreting the Word of God, which is its final authority; not to a higher denominational authority, not to a bishop or pope, and not any government authority. "We believe every human being must be free from interference by any ecclesiastical or political authority."

That means, second, that "therefore, Church and State must be kept separate as having different functions, each fulfilling its duties free from dictation or patronage of the other." Churches shouldn't take government money for their ministry, and governments shouldn't tax churches as a way of manipulating what they do.

Baptists believe there shouldn't be any kind of established state religion, but that everyone should be free to worship God, or to worship many gods, or to worship no god as their own conscience dictates. George Mason had originally proposed that the Virginia state constitution read, that "all men are equally entitled to tolerance according to the dictates of conscience." James Madison, and the Baptist John Leland in Virginia argued that it wasn't good enough to let the Anglican church be established and just make sure it tolerated all the other denominations. It wasn't good enough until the bill read, "all men are equally entitled to free exercise of religion according to the dictates of conscience."

Baptists think people should be free to pray in school, but that no one from the school should put a prayer into the mouth of somebody else. We ought to be able to have public prayers in school, provided the one praying says, "In Jesus name, \*I\* pray," not "In Jesus name \*we\* pray" if there should happen to be some present who don't acknowledge Jesus as their Lord and high priest.

Religious liberty is not first of all a political principle. It is a theological commitment that honors God first by affirming that true worship can only come from a heart of faith, uncoerced by external authority but free to pursue its delight in God as an intrinsically glorious and satisfying object of love.

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