

## **The Gospel According to the Baptists**

**John 8:31-32; Galatians 5:1-13**

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It was 402 years ago. Baptists had not yet blossomed, though the seeds were planted. A man named William Bradford wrote the following words, which describe a handful of men and women who made up the Gainsborough Separatist Church in England. Two leaders in that church were John Smyth and Thomas Helweys. This is what Bradford said of that church in 1606. It is his paraphrase of their church covenant:

*...They shook off this yoke of antichristian bondage,  
and as the Lord's free people joined themselves  
(by covenant of the Lord) into a church estate,  
in the fellowship of the gospel,  
to walk in all His ways made known,  
or to be made known unto them,  
according to their best endeavours,  
whatsoever it should cost them,  
the Lord assisting them.*

We now call these forerunners of Baptists the “English Separatists.” They saw themselves as “the Lord’s free people,” freed finally from the Roman Catholic Church, freed even from the Church of England, freed they hoped from all civil authorities and ecclesiastical hierarchy, freed to walk in God’s ways as they understood God’s ways whatever it should cost them. They saw themselves as the Lord’s free people, yet they continued to endure persecution from both the state government and the established church. Therefore in 1607, Smyth and Helwys took a small group of these free followers of Christ, who had left the Roman Catholic Church and separated from the Church of England, to Amsterdam. There they began what modern historians believe was the first Baptist church.

They were driven by a passion to be free before God. They were convinced that the human conscience is accountable to God alone. Therefore, civil authorities, they believed, had no business arresting people whose religious beliefs were not orthodox. People had a right not to belong

to the state sponsored church, even to be an atheist if they truly were. They believed that heavy-handed clergy should not interfere with the individual and his or her relationship with God. They believed that for faith to be real it had to be freely chosen. Forced religion was no religion at all. Compulsory beliefs were not a true reflection of the heart. When these freedom-loving followers of Christ got to Amsterdam, they performed a radical act of freedom, which is one of the great stories of our heritage. In an act of spiritual defiance, throwing off the shackles of forced faith, they disbanded their church altogether. The pastor, John Smyth, resigned. The deacons all resigned their office. Everyone then renounced his or her baptism, which was administered as an infant in the Catholic Church or the Church of England. There they stood before God with no baptism and no church membership. John Smyth, who was the pastor, then baptized himself by as a believer. Then he administered believer's baptism Helwys and about forty others, and onto the world scene walked, dripping with the waters of baptism, the first Baptists.

This great story from our heritage ends on a sad note. Smyth came to doubt the validity of his self-baptism and eventually renounced it and his new church membership. He died shortly afterwards a member of no church. Helwys eventually led a small group back to England, and in Spitalfield, a section of London, they founded the first Baptist church on English soil. Helwys was arrested because of his unorthodox beliefs and put in prison. He died in Newgate Prison in 1616. The Baptist publishing house Smyth and Helwys is named after these two freedom loving Baptist pioneers.

Fellow Baptists, that is the spiritual cradle that rocked Baptists. Dissent. Imprisonment. Struggle. Demand for freedom of conscience. Insistence on genuine spiritual experience. Regardless of the consequences, they sounded a call for freedom in Christ before God our Father led by the prompting of the Holy Spirit. We could call it the gospel according to the Baptists, and we today are a part of that lineage.

Where did this passion for freedom come from? It came from their personal experience with the Bible. The invention of the Gutenberg press in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century and the subsequent availability of the Bible in the common languages enabled the faithful in the pews to read and study the Bible for themselves. Smyth and Helwys and others found a message in the Bible that was different from the one given to them by the priests and bishops. They

read these words of Jesus spoken to a group of Jewish people who knew what it meant to be enslaved in Egypt and then to be enslaved to the Law:

*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*

Then they turned to Paul's letter to the Galatians, considered by many to be Paul's greatest defense of freedom, and they read these words:

*For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*

Paul was addressing one of the first heresies to face the early church. A group of itinerate preachers came through Galatia preaching a gospel different from the one Paul preached. In chapter one Paul writes, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel." These itinerate preachers were Jews who had converted to Christianity and carried into Christianity their commitment to the Law of Moses. To be a good Christian, they taught, you also must be a good Jew. So if you were a Gentile, like the people of Galatia, and you wanted to be in the church, you first had to convert to Judaism. Males had to be circumcised. They had to keep the Jewish festivals and holy days. They had to keep the Law of Moses. In chapter two, Paul calls these itinerate preachers "false brethren" who secretly came in to "spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us." This is what Paul wrote to the Galatians: "we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you."

And what was the truth of the gospel that Paul wanted to remain for them? It is this: *that a person is saved by grace through faith, not by obedience to the Law.* They had already been down that road of salvation by works. They learned painfully that they couldn't be good enough to be good enough. There was no end to the demands of the Law. So Paul reminded them of the message that stands at the center of our faith: "For freedom Christ has set us free." And then Paul cautioned them, "Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Don't go back to what we know won't work.

That is what the early Baptists read when they opened their New Testaments. Smyth and Helwys and others died for that freedom in Christ. Upon Helwys imprisonment, John Murton became the leader of the Baptist church. He too was imprisoned. While in prison he wrote two significant treatises on religious freedom. Like others, he too died in that prison in 1626.

Sounds like a dark day for Baptists, doesn't it? One might think the Baptist voice was silenced or was being silenced, but consider this. By 1650, just 24 years later, at least forty-seven General Baptist churches existed in England. In 1639 Roger Williams started the first Baptist church in "ye wilderness," as they called America. There would be no silencing the Baptist voice, and here is why: the human conscience demands to be free. God made us free. Christ set us free. And Baptists died to remain free. They would say that nothing less than the gospel itself was at stake.

Hear this caveat, though. This freedom is not permission to be irresponsible. This is how Paul put it: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another." Yes, we are free before God, and responsible to God. While we are able to use our freedom for self-indulgence, know that we must give account to God. Freedom in Christ is balanced by responsibility to God.

We are living in a different time now. Smyth and Helwys would not recognize some of the practices that carry the name Baptist today. I feel certain they would disavow the legalistic, manipulative, and creedal expressions of Baptist faith today. They would have nothing to do with Baptists who try to force their faith on others. And they would cringe when they hear some of us say, "I'm embarrassed by the name Baptist."

Baptists, a great challenge is placed in our lap today. We have a heritage of which we may be rightly proud. Blood just like yours and mine has been shed to forge a Baptist identity of freedom in Christ and respect for the honestly held convictions of others. I wonder how many of our forefathers and mothers died in prison for that? I wonder what that cumulative number of years in prison would be? I wonder how many were flogged in the town square? How many had possessions taken away? How many were run out of town or disowned by family?

Here is something we can do. Let us resolve to be an authentic, informed expression of our Baptist heritage. We're Christians first, yes. But we are Christians who have chosen a channel named Baptist to express our faith. It is characterized by dissent, imprisonment, struggle, demand for freedom of conscience, and insistence on genuine spiritual experience. Regardless of the consequences, let us sound a call for freedom in Christ before God our Father led by the prompting of the Holy Spirit. That is the gospel according to the Baptists.

### Closing Prayer

Lord, we are humbled when we consider the sacrifices of those who have gone before us. Remind us that treasures not guarded can become treasures lost. Amen.