

We are a Freedom-Loving People!

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Text: Galatians 5:1, 13-14

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Thomas Helwys returned with the first band of English Baptists from exile in Holland in 1611. Helwys' wife, Joan, had earlier been imprisoned in England for her beliefs. Upon returning to England, they defiantly established their church just outside the London walls. Helwys wrote a book advocating religious liberty. It would be a stand that would eventually cost him his life. The Anglican State Church would tolerate no such challenge from the Puritans, the Separatists, or the Baptists.

Later, in the American colonies, Baptists again were persecuted for their beliefs. "Through loose-fitting windows, the cold east wind from the Boston harbor blew into the courtroom. A lean-faced magistrate stirred and loudly spoke his mind: 'This Roger Williams, with his heretical beliefs, is unsettling our colony... I will have no more of his false teaching about freedom... We must have him arrested forthwith and banish him to England.' A few miles to the north through the woods was Salem, another crude cabin settlement like Boston, where Roger Williams lived, the preacher who had come from England seeking freedom from the restrictions of the Church of England... The magistrate arose from his seat and strode toward a red-faced captain... 'Captain Wainwright,' he shouted, 'We want you to sail your ship out of Boston harbor.. Slip quietly into anchorage at Salem harbor, just about dark. Then you and two of your crew are to go to the log house of Elder Roger Williams and place him under arrest. Here are your papers.' The captain saluted and left on his assigned mission. But when the men reached Salem, they found no trace of Williams.

Williams had escaped into the wilderness in the middle of the winter, normally certain death. Except that Williams was a strong advocate of Indian rights, and he found a welcome among them. The Indians led him through the cold winter to a new home he purchased from them. "Standing upon a rock, Roger Williams named the place, Providence, in honor of the God to whom he gave thanks for their safe arrival... Soon others joined Roger and Mary Williams, even Catholics and Jews, and a great idea was launched in this new American colony. Liberty of conscience was to be the ruling principle, separating church from state and giving freedom to all minorities to practice their faith according to the dictates of their conscience.

No group fought harder for religious liberty in the colonial period of America than the Baptists. And thus was given birth our proclivity toward freedoms. Every Christian denomination believes in the Lordship of Jesus Christ. They all believe in the authority of scripture, and all organize into local congregations. And yet, every denomination within Christendom has a special contribution to offer to the whole. For the Quakers, it is their silent meeting. For the Presbyterians, it is the way they value

order and intellect. For the Amish, it is their separated lifestyle. For the Episcopalians, it is their Book of Common Prayer and liturgy. For the Catholics, it is the Eucharist and their heritage and hierarchy. For Baptists, clearly, our unique contribution is our freedoms. Baptists are the most dominant part of the so-called Free Church Tradition. No other group is so defined by freedom as Baptists.

Our freedoms are at times cumbersome and awkward. They make us appear needlessly individualistic and disorganized. Our churches and Baptist denominations often are messy and chaotic and quarrelsome. No one has the authority to bring things back together once pulled asunder. We start new churches more often by splitting older churches than by planned church planting. In our most chaotic moments, nearly every Baptist has prayed for a Bishop to ride into town on a silver stallion and sort things out! Alas, there are none to be found!

There once was a terrible shipwreck. There were only six survivors, all of whom miraculously swam to an uninhabited island for refuge. And, as it turned out, two of the survivors were Jewish, two were Catholics and two were Baptists. It's just human nature, but before long the two Jews got together and formed the Beth Israel Synagogue. And then, the two Catholics got together and formed the Blessed Virgin Catholic Church. Not to be out-done, the two Baptists got together and formed the First Baptist Church. And then, the Second Baptist Church!

Over the next few Sundays, I will be highlighting five liberties that shape who we are as Baptists. Unfortunately, many Baptists today have turned away from these liberties. The stereotypes of Baptists today is the opposite of freedom: we are frequently regarded as overly conforming, uptight and rigid, close-minded.

There are, however, a group of Baptists as devoted as ever to our Liberties. That is our tradition here at First Baptist Church and among American Baptists! We do not fit the stereotypes so many people have of Baptists. So, when people walk in the door and get to know us, they may be surprised.

In Paul's writing, he urges freedom in the Spirit and against adherence to written, legalistic code. "Christ set us free," Paul writes, "so then we should remain free!" (Gal. 5:1) The issue for Paul is not how well you follow the rules or keep the commandments, but how freely you allow the Spirit to work its way in your life. A written code, even the magnificent Law of Moses that had defined so much of Paul's life as a Pharisee, brings uniformity, and therefore restriction. It tells you what you can and can't do. It's an external source of authority that is common to both Judaism and Islam. But the work of the Holy Spirit, inside our lives, transforms us into an ever-greater reflection of Christ (4:18), and that brings freedom, not restriction. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (2 Cor. 3:17)

This morning, I want to begin by speaking of Church Liberty. You have just come through a period when you were searching for a new pastor. The American Baptist

Churches of the Great Rivers region was happy to advise you. But they have no authority over this church or its search for a new pastor.

This is why Baptist churches can sometimes do strange things: because no one can discipline them, offer correction, or demand accountability. We practice freedom of local congregations, which means for us the highest form of governance is not a Pope or Bishop, but the local congregation. Those who work for our denomination, work under the local churches, serving them.

While we are free as a church, we don't operate in isolation. An independent church is an oxymoron because all churches serve as Jesus prayed, "May they all be one as I and the Father are one." We are deeply connected at First Baptist Church...connected to the other churches in the Red Bridge area, connected to the American Baptist Churches of the Kansas City area, connected to other churches through Central Seminary and Bethel Center and William Jewell and Ottawa University. And while these associations are voluntary, they are nonetheless vital. We have much to learn from other churches, and much to share. We would lose our sense of mission if we became isolated and alone.

There seems to be a prevailing spirit among some newer and younger church leaders, that the pastor has the final word in the church. They expect conformity and treat their congregation as if it is their fiefdom. They enter churches in a unilateral spirit and impose their will without toleration of dissent. While this may have some popularity of the moment, it is the opposite of church liberty in which the collective wisdom of the people is sought as is the work of the Holy Spirit throughout the congregation. It is God's will, not the unilateral will of a leader, that is valued.

The second freedom I'll identify this morning is scriptural freedom. In too many churches, there is uniformity when it comes to interpretation of scripture: the way the pastor and core leaders view scripture is imposed on everyone. A very literalistic view of scripture tends to discourage scriptural freedom and to enforce uniformity of interpretation.

Baptists don't have creeds, we don't have confessions of faith, we don't have a Book of Order or a legislative record. Holy Scripture, the Old and New Testaments, are our sole written guide. And we should be listening to scripture, studying scripture and interpreting scripture throughout our lives. I've thoroughly enjoyed teaching the Tuesday morning Bible study. We have lots of opinions, perspectives, and insights – and none imposed upon the others. But we listen to each other as we listen to scripture.

The truth is that many Baptists today have been giving up their freedoms. Unfortunately, even within our own denomination, there have been efforts to impose a collective will upon congregations who have a minority perspective. Other Baptists have tried to breach the wall that has separated church and state. They have tried to put scripture in a doctrinal straight-jacket.

All the while, other denominations have ironically been moving closer to our freedoms. Martin Marty is one of the most astute observers of American religion, and he notes convincingly that most other Christians in America have experienced what he calls the “baptistification” of their traditions by flattening their hierarchies, giving their laity more voice, heightening their sense of soul liberty, and giving their local congregations more self-control. What we have so easily given away, others have gladly accepted!! I pray that in our years together at First Baptist Church we will stand our historic ground: that we affirm once again that we are a freedom-loving people. And while other Baptists may have bought into worldly standards of power, authority and control, we will not compromise the freedoms we hold dear.

One of the central themes of the Bible is human liberation from bondage. The central biblical story tells of a God who liberated the Jews from the suffering and bondage in Egypt and how Moses was sent by God to the Pharaoh to announce their liberation: “Let my people go!”

After William Wilberforce spent his lifetime in the British Parliament ridding the British Empire of slavery, and after we fought the Civil War to rid our nation of slavery, isn't it incredible that slavery still exists today? A child is trafficked every 30 seconds somewhere in the world, sold or lured into slavery. The average age of commercial sex slavery in the United States is 13 years old. Human trafficking occurs in 161 out of 192 nations, as it is a \$32 billion industry. Over 27 million persons are enslaved around the world. There exists an indentured class of workers who are not free and in some places in our world children are forced into rebel armies to fight without even knowing the cause. Sexual bondage among immigrant women and children is rampant. Extreme poverty itself is oppressive.

If only our bondage was limited to the institution of slavery, but in fact, there are many forms of bondage, many ways in which our freedom is limited.

All of us struggle with addiction of one form or another – it is a part of the human condition, a part of the struggle with evil that each of us face. It might be an attitudinal addiction, or an addiction to work, or food, or cigarettes, or drugs, or violence, whatever. The lure of giving away our freedom is a daily struggle for human beings.

Listen to medical doctor and highly acclaimed author Gerald May: “I am not being flippant when I say that all of us suffer from addiction. Nor am I reducing the meaning of addiction. I mean in all truth that the psychological, neurological and spiritual dynamics of full-fledged addiction are actively at work within every human being. The same processes that are responsible for addiction to alcohol and narcotics are also responsible for addiction to ideas, work, relationships, power, moods, fantasies and an endless variety of other things. We are all addicts in every sense of the word. Moreover, our addictions are our own worst enemies. They enslave us with chains that are of our own making and yet that, paradoxically, are virtually beyond our control. Addiction also makes idolaters of us all, because it forces us to worship these objects of

attachment, thereby preventing us from truly, freely loving God and one another... It is the absolute enemy of human freedom..." (Addiction and Grace, P. 3-4, Harper & Row)

And that is just what we do to ourselves. There are over-bearing spouses, dictatorial parents, controlling bosses and unjust systems in our economy that rob people of opportunity and freedom. Thus the core spiritual question is: How can we remain free? And who can liberate us? Those are fundamental, profound questions, and if we fail to ask we will surely not be free. I wish I knew why bondage is so attractive and so alluring. I only know that it is.

How can you and I enjoy God's gift of freedom? How can our Liberating God enter our lives and open up the doors to joy and hope?

Because of our emphasis upon freedoms, Baptist churches can be uniquely situated to help us face these spiritual issues. Peterson translates Galatians 5: "Christ set us free to live a free life. So take your stand! Never again let anyone (or anything) put a harness of slavery on you." (The Message)

So, my fellow members: Let us Take our Stand! Let us stand for Liberty! Let us stand for freedom! Let us create a permanent Hall of Baptist Liberties at the front of our church to remind ourselves and inform our visitors of our Liberties. Let us stand against all that oppresses and holds people down. With God's Empowering Spirit, let us offer freedom from tyranny, bondage and addiction to all who enter this church. Let Us Take Our Stand: for we are a Freedom-Loving People! Amen!