



SBAOC Weekly Update

NEWS & PRAYER REQUESTS

If you have any news, prayer requests, or events that you would like to have included in this update, please email the information to spurgeonassociation@gmail.com or call us at 785-456-8513.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY: THE GLORY OF BAPTISTS

Timon Cline

The Founders Journal, Winter 2020

(<https://founders.org/2020/04/10/religious-liberty-the-glory-of-baptists/>)

Henry C. Vedder, in his *Baptists and Liberty of Conscience* (1884), proudly declared that the “glory of Baptists” was that they were the first to advocate religious liberty for all people. B.H. Carroll, founding president of Southwestern Theological Seminary, echoed this sentiment in his sermons outlining distinctive Baptist principles. Are these claims legitimate or self-interested posturing? Upon reviewing the unique contributions of Baptists to the Western tradition of freedom of speech and religion, it becomes apparent that Vedder and Carroll were on to something. Indeed, Baptists were among the first to argue against government censorship and religious coercion, something for which most historical accounts of the subject do not afford early Baptists credit.

Most accounts of the development of the Western political theory look to figures like John Milton, John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, or James Madison as the chief architects of modern conceptions of liberty. In one respect this tendency is appropriate, but it does not tell the whole story.

Modern Baptists have a vested interest in drawing attention to the significant role Baptists played in the development of religious liberty, telling the whole story, as it were. Ignoring this facet of the Baptist tradition is to dishonor the lineage of early Baptist figures who suffered for liberty of conscience, speech, and religion. To rediscover this aspect of Baptist heritage one must begin with the very inception of the English separatists of the 17th century.

English Beginnings

Upon succeeding John Smyth as the leader of the Baptist sect (what came to be identifiable as the first General Baptist church), Thomas Helwys set about outlining his beliefs in a series of books written between 1611 and 1612. Therein he attacked the main religious groups. He saved particular disdain for the Anglican and Roman churches and their hierarchical control, which he claimed robbed men of their freedom in Christ, a decidedly Protestant position.[1] Within these writings he also

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PURPOSE STATEMENT:

We unite as an association of Southern Baptist churches in order to manifest the glory of God above all. We purpose to do this by seeking spiritual awakening and revival by intense prayer and earnest obedience to Scripture. We covenant to strengthen and support one another, motivated and guided by the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, by facilitating faithful preaching of the Word of God, proclaiming the gospel of the risen Lord Jesus Christ to all, making and gathering disciples, planting churches and coordinating unified missions efforts.

“If there is no church... should you not commence one?” C. H. Spurgeon

COMMENTS ON OUR PURPOSE STATEMENT

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“When I seem to you at any time to be intoxicated as it were by the hurry, the business, or the dissipation of life, spare not the best offices of friendship; recall me to that sobriety and seriousness of mind, which become those who know not when they may be called away: place before me the solemn triumphs of which you have been a spectator, and animate me to press forward in emulation of so glorious an example. To die the death, we must indeed live the life, of Christians. We must fix our affections on things above, not on things on the earth. We must endeavor habitually to preserve that frame of mind, and that course of conduct, with which we may be justly said to be waiting for the appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ. I know not any description of a Christian which impresses itself so forcibly as this on my mind.”

William Wilberforce

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expanded Smyth’s arguments (from Article 84 of Smyth’s Long Confession) for freedom of conscience, a truly unprecedented endeavor in early 17th century England.

The radical nature of Helwys’ assertions, through which he extended complete liberty to all faiths,[2] is difficult for contemporary observers to grasp, but it must be remembered that even the Peace of Augsburg (1555) did not truly establish religious liberty as we now think of it. It merely set forth the principle of *Cuius regio, eius religio* (“whose realm, his religion”). In Helwys’ day, religious affiliation was still dependent on the religious position of the monarch; and it was not until the trial and execution of Charles I in 1649 that the rule of monarchs could be challenged.

The subject of religious liberty in particular was dealt with in Helwys’ 1612 publication, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, published almost as soon as Helwys and his compatriots, who had parted ways with John Smyth in Holland, had returned to English soil. It was framed as an appeal to King James I, to whom Helwys sent a copy, for liberty of conscience for all citizens of all faiths. It marked the first real defense of religious liberty and freedom of conscience published on English soil.

“Let the King judge, is it not most equal that men should choose their religion themselves, seeing they only must stand themselves before the judgment seat of God to answer for themselves... [We] profess and teach that in all earthly things the king’s power is to be submitted unto; and in heavenly or spiritual things, if the king or any in authority under him shall exercise their power against any they are not to resist by any way or means, although it were in their power, but rather to submit their lives as Christ and his disciples did, and yet keep their consciences to God.”[3]

Furthermore, Helwys stated,

“The King is a mortall man and not God, therefore hath no power over immortal soules of his subjects to makes lawes and ordinances for them and to set spiritual Lords over them.”[4]

“... 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.”[5]

Here Helwys was espousing the scripturally defined limits of the two kingdoms (secular and ecclesiastical),[6] thereby affirming the supremacy of Christ’s authority.[7] In more ways than one, he was foreshadowing Madison’s statement in Memorial and Remonstrance, “The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man,” and that it is the height of arrogance for a civil magistrate to think himself a competent judge of religious truth.[8] In response to Helwys’ book, James I had Helwys thrown into Newgate Prison, where died in 1616.

But Helwys was not alone in his advocacy. A lay member of Helwys’ congregation, Leonard Busher, likely a Dutch immigrant to London, described as “a poor man laboring for his daily bread, yet with some measure of learning,”[9] joined the conversation in 1614 with a tractate entitled, *Religious*

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Peace or a plea for liberty of conscience. [10] Busher's work is the earliest English publication dedicated exclusively to the defense of religious liberty, [11] and anticipated many arguments from John Milton's *Aeropagitica* and *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*. While it is often said that *Aeropagitica* was somewhat preceded in content by Henry Robinson, William Walwyn, and Roger Williams (also a Baptist), Helwys and Busher beat all four to the punch by several decades. In *Religious Peace*, Busher argued for uncensored speech; that anyone, regardless of religious association, should be permitted to "write, dispute, confer, and reason, print and publish any matter touching religion." [12]

Busher posited that persecution and censorship based on religion would "cause men and women to make shipwreck of faith and good consciences, by forcing a religion upon them even against their minds and consciences." [13] Since faith was a gift of God and an inward work of the Spirit, no authority could compel it, and to do otherwise was "wholly against the mind and merciful law of Christ." [14] Thus, Busher surmised that religious liberty was a God-given right [15] and that persecuting individuals "to death, because they will not hear and believe, is no gaining of souls unto God, but unto the devil." [16]

As a caveat, like Milton, Busher did not advocate legal protections that would allow rampant idolatry to flourish. Indeed, even the 1596 True Confession, written by English Separatists in Amsterdam, held that magistrates were justified in rooting out "false ministeries" and "counterfeyt worship of God", by which the authors meant idol worship and vain superstitions, for the sake of peace. [17] But this did not negate a spirit of tolerance and patience toward even blatant error and ignorance, to be exhibited amongst Christians on debatable matters of polity and practice. Dogmatic certainty and brotherly tolerance are not mutually exclusive. This brand of ecumenism was propagated widely by the early Baptists and their associations. [18]

Church leaders, Busher said, should place their confidence in the word proclaimed, understanding, "that it is preaching, and not persecuting, that getteth people to the church of Christ." [19] Religious oppression in any era, Busher believed, is actually "to force and constrain men and women's consciences to a religion against their wills, [and] to tyrannize over the soul, as well as over the body." [20] Busher concluded emphatically that "it is not the gallows, nor the prisons, nor burning, nor banishing that can defend the ... faith," but only "the word and Spirit of God." [21]

After Helwys' imprisonment and subsequent death, John Murton took up the mantle at Spitafield Church and joined Busher in the fight with a book defending the Baptist position called *Objections Answered... That no man ought to be persecuted for his religion, so he testifies his allegiance by the Oath, appointed by Law*. Following Helwys, Busher, Murton, many others of Baptist leanings like John Bunyan carried on the work at the public level in England. [22]

Enshrined in the Confessions

The positions established by Helwys, Busher, and Murton were not only furthered in the public square but were enshrined confessionally by both General and Particular Baptists. The First London Baptist Confession (1644/1646) declared it the duty of magistrates "to tender the liberty of men's' conscience," and therefore not require citizens to violate such. [23] The General Confession of 1660 declared that "it is the will, and mind of god (in these Gospel times) that all men should have the free liberty of their own Consciences in matters of Religion, or Worship, without the least oppression, or persecution." [24] And furthermore that,

"[b]ut in case the Civil Powers do or shall at any time impose things about matters of Religion, which we through conscience to God cannot actually obey, then we with Peter also do say, that we ought (in such cases) to obey God rather than men; Acts 5. 29. and accordingly do hereby declare our whole, and holy intent and purpose, that (through the help of grace) we will not yield, nor (in such cases) in the least actually obey them; yet humbly purposing (in the Lords strength) patiently to suffer whatsoever shall be inflicted upon us, for our conscionable forbearance." [25]

The Second London Baptist Confession (1677/1689) followed suit with both brevity and clarity, holding that "God alone is Lord of the Conscience, and hath left it free from the Doctrines and Commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or not contained in it." [26] It is clear from this confession that the Particular Baptist adherence to Reformed soteriology fueled their claim to religious liberty. If man is saved by grace through faith alone according to God's sovereign election, then it is foolhardy to think man can be coerced into savingly confessing true religion. Additionally, as Johnathan Leeman has pointed out, it is also worth acknowledging that Baptist ecclesiology established in the confessions is intrinsically conducive to religious liberty, and separation

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of church and state, a correct understanding of the division between the City of God and the City of Man.

The affirmation of these principles in the early confessions, and thus by the early congregations, shows that the ideas of the early Baptist defenders of freedom of conscience were universally accepted and solidified as distinctives in the Baptist tradition. The tradition was then transported to the American colonies.

Transported to the Colonies

While in England to obtain a patent to unite the settlements in Rhode Island, Roger Williams, founder of the First Baptist Church in America, penned *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution for Cause of Conscience*, drawn from the ideas of John Murton. The following year, Williams returned to his colony of “soul liberty,” and ultimately influenced the discourse on religious liberty thenceforth. [27] The 1647 Code of Laws of Rhode Island reflected the marriage between Baptist distinctives and classical republican principles of government and inserted them into the public discourse in the colonies. It closed with, “[o]therwise than thus what is herein forbidden all men may walk as their consciences persuade them, everyone in the name of his God. And let the saints of the Most High walk in this colony without the molestation, in the name of Jehovah, their God, forever and ever.”[28]

Colonial America became home to the most ardent defenders, religious liberty and other inalienable freedoms. Many of these defenders were amongst the founders themselves, a group of men that were “politically the most innovative men of their age.”[29] Baptists, per usual, remained in the thick of it, often in the face of intense persecution. Figures like Obadiah Holmes, Isaac Backus, and John Leland championed the cause of “soul freedom” all across New England and Virginia in the lead up to the American Revolution. Their basic polemic was that religious freedom is not a spoil of politics, to be divvied out to—and defined by—the highest bidder. Rather, religious freedom is a transcendent right, acknowledged by government, but impossible to legislate into, or out of, existence. “[R]eligion,” Backus noted, “is a voluntary obedience unto God which therefore force cannot promote.”[30]

John Leland’s treatise, written soon after the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, *The Rights of Conscience Unalienable*, was among the first Baptist works in the new republic to reassert the principles of his forebears. Consistent with Baptist before him, he held that “Every man must give an account of himself to God, and

therefore every man ought to be at liberty to serve God in that way that he can best reconcile it to his conscience.”[31]

And of course, no discussion of religious liberty is complete without some mention of the Danbury Baptists and their correspondence with Thomas Jefferson. As should be apparent now, their stance was not novel in the context of historical Baptist principles. That faithful group of Connecticut Baptists was merely guarding an inherited soteriological and anthropological pillar of their faith. “Our sentiments are uniformly on the side of religious liberty: that Religion is at all times and places a matter between God and individuals, that no man ought to suffer in name, person, or effects on account of his religious opinions, [and] that the legitimate power of civil government extends no further than to punish the man who works ill to his neighbor.”[32]

As more Baptist congregations were established in America, the statements in the early English confessions appeared, with only insignificant variations, in their confessions. Among others, the Philadelphia Confession (1742), the New Hampshire Confession (1833), and the Abstract of Principles (1858), all held that God is the only Lord over the conscience, and not to be supplanted. Thus, the transference of the beliefs of the English Baptists to the Americas was made, laid out and affirmed in no uncertain terms as a written apology to the world, and a testament to the Baptist contribution to religious liberty.

Conclusion

The words of these early Baptists and their successors, enshrined in their confessions and transported to the new world, reinforce the words spoken by George W. Truett on the steps of the U.S. Capitol in 1920: “Baptists... have never been a party to oppression of conscience.”[33] Not only have Baptists themselves not been complicit in the oppression of the conscience but they have historically been the leaders in its active defense.[34] Robert G. Torbet has said that “Baptists have made a unique contribution to Protestantism, for which the world is their debtor, in their consistent witness to the principle of religious liberty,”[35] as well as its “logical corollary... the principle of the separation of church and state.”[36] Accordingly, Baptists have “earned the acclaim of free men everywhere.”[37]

The 17th and 18th centuries mark a period of intellectual brilliance and innovation in almost all areas of human life. It was a truly an age of genius, as historian A.C. Grayling

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has called it.[38] Included therein is the development of the conception of religious liberty, to which, as is hopefully now clear, Baptists made indispensable contributions. As we celebrate religious freedom and its defenders, like James Madison, let us not forget to afford due credit to our Baptist forbears for their contributions to the American legacy of religious freedom, a legacy upon which, according to Truett, the longevity of our nation depends.

[1] See Joe Early, Jr., *The Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 171-173; see also Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1965), 482 (“With respect to [the] basic tenets of Protestantism’s revolt... the Baptists... made the most far reaching contribution by carrying each principle to its consistent end, thereby strengthening the Protestant position.”).

[2] *First Freedom: The Beginning and End of Religious Liberty*, ed. Jason G. Deusing and Thomas White (B&H Academic, 2016), 41.

[3] Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, ed. Richard Groves (Mercer University Press, 1998).

[4] Quoted in Torbet, 38 (from the flyleaf of *the Mystery of Iniquity*).

[5] See also John Murton, “Persecution for Religion Judged and Condemned [Followed by] An Humble Supplication to the King’s Majesty” (1620) in *Tracts on Liberty of Conscience and Persecution, 1614-1661*, ed. Edward Bean Underhill (London: J. Haddon, 1846), 230 (echoing Helwys with a similar statement).

[6] See generally, David VanDrunen, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms* (Crossway, 2010).

[7] Helwys, *The Mystery of Iniquity*, 49 (“Far be it from the King to take from Christ Jesus any one part of that power and honor which belongs to Christ in his kingdom.”).

[8] James Madison, “Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments,” http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/amend1_religions43.html.

[9] Reprinted in *Tracts on Liberty*, 1-81.

[10] Torbet, 38.

[11] See William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopedia* (Baptist Standard Bearer, 1988), 699 (stating regarding Busher’s *Persecution for Religion Judged and Condemned* that “[n]o writer in the nineteenth century... has a clearer conception of religious liberty than the writer of this book.”).

[12] Quoted in Torbet, 38-39.

[13] Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (Broadman Press, 1990), Section 3.3 (Leonard Busher).

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] See Leon McBeth, *English Baptist Literature on Religious Liberty to 1689* (New York: Arno, 1980), 47.

[16] McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, Sec. 3.3.

[17] Article 39; John Smyth himself also stated in a 1607 letter to Richard Burnard that “it is the Magistrate’s office to . . . abolish idolatry and all false ways. . .” M. Dorothea Jordan, “John Smyth and Thomas Helwys: The Two First English Preachers of Religious Liberty. Resemblances and Contrasts,” *The Baptist Quarterly*, 188 (2006), https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bq/12-06-7_187.pdf.

[18] See Torbet, 43-45 (discussing early Baptist associations).

[19] McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, Sec. 3.3.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] Quoted in Torbet, 39; Significantly, Busher was also apparently the first to propose in print adult baptism by immersion, some thirty years before Particular Baptists adopted the practice in the 1644 Confession. John Spilsbury’s Particular Baptist Church in London appears to be the first to exclusively practice immersion. Torbet, 486; see also John Spilsbury’s Confession, Article 8 (affirming freedom of conscience).

[22] See William L. Davis, “John Bunyan’s Influence on Religious freedom in the Early American Republic,” *Bunyan Studies: A Journal of Reformation and Nonconformist Culture*, 21 (2017) https://www.academia.edu/35335076/John_Bunyan_s_Influence_on_Religious_Freedom_in_the_Early_American_Republic.

[23] Article 48.

[24] Article 24; see also *The Orthodox Creed* (1678).

[25] Article 25.

[26] Article 21: 2; this language is echoed in Article 17 of the Baptist Faith and Message (1925, 1963, 2000), see Tom Nettles, “Article 17: Religious Liberty,” *Baptist Press* (Sept. 9, 2002), <http://www.bpnews.net/14206/baptist-faith-and-message-article-17-religious-liberty>.

[27] See Jon Meacham, *American Gospel: God, The Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* (Random House, 2006), 55-56 (discussing Williams’ influence).

[28] Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopedia*, 698; *A History of New England: Containing Historical and Descriptive Sketches*, vol. 1, ed. R. H. Howard and Henry E. Crocker (1880), 400.

[29] Niall Ferguson, *The Square and the Tower: Networks and Power*, from the Freemasons to Facebook (New York: Penguin, 2018), 115.

[30] Isaac Backus, *Pamphlets, 1754- 1789*, at 315 (emphasis in original).

[31] John Leland, *The Rights of Conscience Inalienable* (1791), available at <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/quotes/john-leland-the-right-of-conscience-inalienable-on-religion-as-a-matter-between-god-and-individuals>.

[32] “Letter from the Danbury Baptist Association,” *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 35: 1 August to 30 November 1801 (Princeton University Press, 2008), 407-409.

[33] See also J. H. Rushbrooke’s (a contemporary of Truett’s) 1939 lecture, “Earnest to Make Others Free,” available at https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bq/36-3_108.pdf.

[34] See *First Freedom*, 43 (noting the commitment of early Baptists to defending the separation of the two kingdoms, complete religious liberty for all faiths, and the denial of the effectiveness of coercion).

[35] Torbet, 488.

[36] *Ibid.*, at 490.

[37] *Ibid.*, at 503.

[38] See A.C. Grayling, *An Age of Genius: The Seventeenth Century and the Birth of the Modern Mind* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

SAVED BY FAITH YOUTH CAMP 2020

After much prayer and consideration regarding the current circumstances with COVID-19, we have decided to cancel SBFYC 2020.

We will all miss this sweet time of fellowship and teaching; however, with many required to travel across state lines to attend, and the inability to social distance once we arrive on campus, we feel it’s best not to gather at this time.

Please pray for the youth and youth leaders during this difficult time. Our own youth are disappointed that they won’t be attending camp this summer. We will be planning a retreat for our Trinity youth locally and I

encourage you to do the same. Perhaps you can join with one of our sister churches in your area.

Lord willing, we will gather together for SBFYC 2021 during the week of June 14-18 at Webster Conference Center in Salina.

If you have any questions, please call me directly at 785-456-3796.

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TBC Pastor & SBAOC Corresponding Secretary

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PRAYER MEETINGS FOR SPIRITUAL AWAKENING AND REVIVAL

- Fellowship Baptist Church in Onaga, Kansas—5:00 pm on Sundays
- Trinity Baptist Church in Wamego, Kansas—8:00 pm on Saturdays

The Spurgeon Baptist Association of Churches is an association of Southern Baptist Churches that are united to manifest the glory of God above all. We set out to do this by seeking spiritual awakening and revival by intense prayer and earnest obedience to Scripture. As an association of churches we are bound in mutual covenant to strengthen and support one another - motivated and guided by the authority and sufficiency of Scripture - by facilitating faithful preaching of the Word of God, proclaiming the gospel of the risen Lord Jesus Christ to all, making and gathering disciples, planting churches and coordinating unified missions efforts.

We are a non-geographic association seeking to include any like-minded body of believers so that together we might better fulfill the great commission of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Our intent is to lean on His instruction and not our imaginations so that He is honored in all that we do. We welcome churches who adhere to the confessions of faith accepted by Southern Baptists throughout their history, including, but not limited to, the Second London Confession (1689) and the Baptist Faith and Message.



Baptist Association of Churches