

When Baptists Were Not Free

Exodus 13:1-10

June 26, 2005

First Baptist Church, Wilson, NC

This past Monday, the Supreme Court handed down two rulings on displays of the Ten Commandments on public property. In the first ruling, a 5-4 decision, the Court said that displays of the Ten Commandments inside two Kentucky courthouses crossed the line between separation of church and state because their motive and purpose was to use the power of the state to promote a religious message.

In the second ruling, also a 5-4 decision, the Court said that a display of the Ten Commandments on the grounds of a courthouse in Texas was constitutional. The Court judged that this was a neutral display, meant not to encourage religion, but to honor the nation's legal heritage.

So the Court chose not to make one general ruling that would apply to all cases. Instead it judged the cases individually depending on the intent and the context of each case. This is the latest chapter of our nation's ongoing quest to remain true to the wisdom of our founders in both clauses of the First Amendment, that:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, *OR* prohibiting the free exercise thereof... (emphasis mine)

So how do we Americans who are Baptists make sense of this? The answer: we remember where we came from. We Baptists need to remember that we were not always free in America. The scripture I have been led to today is the story of how an oppressed people became free and remembered where they came from: Exodus 13:1-10 (read).

THE PASSOVER: REMEMBER YOU WERE ONCE SLAVES

The formative event for the Hebrew people was the Exodus. Once they were slaves under the harsh whip of Pharaoh, but then they became free by the mighty hand of God. When they were set free, Moses said to the people, "Remember this day..." That day changed everything for them, everything about who they were ...everything about what they were to do. From then on, the central truth about that people was this: they used to be slaves, but now they were free. From then on, the central ethic for that people was this: from now on, you will never, never oppress anyone who is less powerful than you. From now on, you will always stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves: the widows, the orphans, the slaves. So "Remember this day..."

Ever since then, the Hebrew people have remembered the Exodus as their liberation day. The annual Jewish Passover meal is a ritual in which every part of the meal declares the themes of liberation and religious freedom. They eat bitter herbs to remind them of the bitterness of their slavery. They tell the story of God's rescue and liberation. And on Passover they recommit themselves to spread that same freedom to all who yearn for liberty. Of all people, they should be the last to oppress anyone and the first to extend liberty to anyone, for they remember that they were once slaves themselves.

So Passover is when the Hebrew people remember their liberation from Egypt. The Fourth of July is when we remember that we were once a persecuted minority. The Fourth of July is when we Baptists remember

our liberation from religious tyranny. The Fourth of July is when we remember where we came from.

THE PILGRIMS: FORGETTING WHERE THEY CAME FROM

But a sad part of human history is how often people forget where they came from. One sad example comes from early American history: the Pilgrims. We all remember the Thanksgiving stories of the Pilgrims. In elementary school, we took black construction paper and cut out Pilgrim hats, and we took pine cones and added turkey heads and feathers, as our teachers told us how the Pilgrims left England because of religious persecution, and sailed across the ocean, and landed at Plymouth Rock.

But our teachers didn't tell us the rest of the story: the descendants of those pilgrims forgot where they came from. They became the Puritans and Congregationalists of New England, the majority people in their new land. So they had the political power to make their religion the law of the land, and they did so. And when other minority religious groups like Quakers and Baptists came to New England, the Puritans, who once had been persecuted themselves, began to persecute.

Quakers, Baptists, and other small groups began to feel the business end of the lash, and the numbing cold of the county jail. For example, in the mid-1600s, three Baptists went to visit a friend near Boston named William Witter, who was sick. There in the home they had a prayer meeting together. Suddenly the authorities broke in and arrested them. There was a big trial: all were sentenced to public whippings unless they paid a fine. They had the money, but they refused to pay. Some concerned friends came forward and offered to pay. So John Crandall's fee was paid, and Dr. John Clarke's fee was paid. But the fee of Obadiah Holmes, a glassmaker, was not paid. I assume Mr. Holmes would not let anyone pay. So he was publicly whipped for the offense of having a Baptist prayer meeting...in Boston.

That wasn't the only time a Baptist got in trouble in Boston. Roger Williams was a pastor who refused to stop preaching his convictions about spiritual conversion and believer's baptism and soul liberty. He was banned from the Massachusetts Colony. In the dead of the winter in 1636 Williams fled to the wilderness. He purchased some land from two friends of the Narragansett tribe, and called the place ... Providence. Roger Williams founded a new colony there, and called it Rhode Island, and declared that it would enjoy complete religious liberty. A handful of families joined him, and agreed to govern themselves by majority vote, but only in civil matters. Matters of religion and conscience were to be left strictly to the individual. In 1639 Roger Williams founded the first Baptist church in the New World, in Providence. Quakers came to Rhode Island for relief from their persecution. Williams did not at all agree with their religious views. But he let them come, for Roger Williams remembered where he had come from.

"TOLERATION" OF BAPTISTS IN VIRGINIA

Just as Williams got in trouble in Boston, other Baptists got in trouble in Virginia. In Virginia there were not a lot of Puritans but there were a lot of Anglicans. The Anglicans used their majority political power to make their church the state church. They used their political power to get tax money to support their churches. They even reserved state property for the use of their clergy.

Now this was a kinder, gentler form of religious persecution called toleration. You could be a Baptist in colonial Virginia, but since you were not part of the state church, you were just tolerated. Your pastor had to be licensed by the magistrate, but he could never perform marriages. You could build a sanctuary, but only if you got permission from the state church. In short, you could be Baptist in Virginia as long as you kept quiet about it.

But Baptists are not a quiet people, so in Virginia they were in trouble. Historian Garnett Ryland has compiled lists of Baptist names, county by county, who were persecuted and imprisoned. (Baptists of Virginia 1699-1726) There is the name of John Waller, whipped so hard by a sheriff that he carried the scars to his grave. There is the name of James Ireland, stuck in Culpeper County's one room jail, from which he wrote letters to his friends with the opening: "From my Palace in Culpeper." After six months there, his health was permanently impaired.

BAPTISTS IN THE CAROLINAS

The Carolinas were a different story, thanks be to God and the eight Lords Proprietors who received the land from Charles II. They promised religious liberty to anyone who would come, and anybody did come: Baptists, Quakers, Moravians, Lutherans, Deists, atheists. But even in North Carolina you had to be careful, especially if you happened to be close to Virginia. Before I came to Wilson, I served at First Baptist Church in Elizabeth City, founded in 1786 just south of the Old Dominion. The first pastor of that church was Thomas Etheridge. His biography describes a man of evangelical zeal:

His soul was so much in the spirit of preaching, that he, often leaving his family and all behind, would start right off for six or seven weeks together, preaching often three times a day.

Amidst these his first exercises he was frequently attacked in the pulpit; and in the upper part of Camden County, his life was once endangered, under the hands of the old Church-men; from these he underwent great and severe trials; In Princess Ann County, Virginia, he was once attacked by a mob, and threatened to be pulled down from the trunk of a tree on which he stood, and beaten, for the offense of being a Baptist preacher. (*1810 minutes of the Chowan Baptist Association*)

Baptists yearned for the day when they could be free to follow their conscience in matters of religion with no interference from any state or any church. They yearned for a free state and a free church. In Halifax, North Carolina in 1776, a Baptist pastor named Henry Abbott from Camden County proposed these words in the state's constitution (Article 19 of the Bill of Rights):

That all men have a natural and inevitable right to worship Almighty God according to the dictates of their own conscience.

BAPTISTS, THE REVOLUTION, AND THE CONSTITUTION

When the Revolution began, Baptists went to fight for liberty, and served so well that they gained a new standing in the eyes of the nation. John Gano, pastor of Jersey Baptist Church in central North Carolina, became chaplain of Washington's Army.

After the Revolution, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson were influenced by Baptists to push for a Bill of Rights in the new Constitution that would guarantee religious freedom. Jefferson was close friends with one Baptist pastor named John Leland. Jefferson was not a Christian, but a Deist. Nevertheless he found himself drawn to Leland's message, and attended his services occasionally. Some say that Jefferson did experience a turning to Christ in his latter days. If so, it was partly through the words of John Leland.

Leland was a fiery evangelist in Culpeper County who stressed the religion of the heart and the immediacy of the Holy Spirit in personal experience. In one eighteen month period during a revival that spread along the James River, he baptized 400 people. Leland knew that separation of church and state was good for the country and good for evangelism. Some people asked, "What is the harm in government encouraging just a little religion in general?" Leland answered:

If a creed of faith established by law, was ever so short, and ever so true; if I believed in the whole of it with all my heart, should I subscribe to it before a magistrate, in order to get indulgence, preferment, or even protection – I should be guilty of a species of idolatry, by acknowledging a power that the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ, has never appointed.

(M. A. Huggins, A History of North Carolina Baptists, p. 96)

And other people asked, “What is the harm in government preferring people of faith in public office?” Leland answered:

If a man merits the confidence of his neighbors, in Virginia, -- let him worship one God, twenty Gods, or no God – be he Jew, Turk, Pagan, or Infidel, he is eligible to any office in the state.

Why was John Leland so radical about separation of church and state? Because Leland knew that if other faiths or atheists were not free to be in government, then he was not free. Because Leland knew what it was like to be in the minority and he would never forget where he had come from. Therefore, matters of faith must not be governed by majority vote. Roger Williams had it right in Rhode Island: majority vote in civil matters, but no vote in matters of religion, so that the rights of religious minorities, like the Baptists, would be protected. That was the goal of Leland and Jefferson and Madison in the First Amendment:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..

WILL WE REMEMBER?

I do not exaggerate much in saying that it was Baptists who gave to the world this revolutionary idea of religious liberty. We have been champions of that liberty, because we remember when we were a religiously oppressed minority. But lately we have begun to forget.

Recently the Knight Foundation surveyed 100,000 high school students, and found that “One in three high-school students in this republic says that the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States goes too far in the rights it guarantees to you as a citizen.” *(Baptists Today, June 2005, p. 32)* Many Baptists are saying the same thing. It is not surprising. It is easy to forget where we have come from. Baptists and other evangelicals are no longer on the outside. We have the votes. We have the ear of powerful people. It is very tempting to use that political power. Think of how much good we can accomplish with it! But in the process, think what evil we would also do to anyone who felt that we were using the power of the state as a short cut to make him to come to Christ.

Think of the other unintended side effects of religion by majority rule:

- 1 In Utah, where Mormons are the majority, the courts and the public schools would display the Book of Mormon.
- 2 In Dearborn, Michigan, where Arab Americans are the majority, the courts and the public schools would display the Koran.
- 3 In communities where Jews are the majority, the courts and the public schools would display the Menorah and the Star of David.

Where would it end? Religious groups would forever be trying to elbow each other out of the way in the courthouse and in the classroom. Separation of church and state is good for the nation.

And separation of church and state is good for evangelism. Go visit any country where a church was favored with official status, and you will find nearly empty sanctuaries. But in countries where there was religious liberty for all – Christians, Buddhists, atheists -- the churches have flourished. Why is it that when Christians are placed on a level playing field with other religions, we whine that we are being persecuted? Do we not believe that the power of the gospel is equal to such a challenge? Great evangelists have no fear of such an opportunity.

Like John Leland, the fiery evangelist George W. Truett, Pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas knew that maximum evangelism happens where there is maximum liberty. On a great day in May 1920 he stood on the steps of the U.S. Capitol before a throng of believers, curiosity seekers, congressmen and foreign ambassadors and declared:

Every one must give an account of himself to God. Each one must repent for himself, and believe for himself, and be baptized for himself, and answer to God for himself, both in time and in eternity. There can be no sponsors or deputies or proxies in such vital matters. Let the state and the church ... stand aside, and let the individual soul make its own direct and immediate response to God.

(Powhatan James, Biography of George W. Truett, First Chapter)

Remember, good Baptist, where you came from. Remember the wisdom of our nation's Founders and the all Baptists before us who sacrificed themselves for the sake of religion liberty. Remember that once you were a persecuted minority. Remember the hand of God that set you free. Remember that you are free only when all are free. For when all are free, then God will bless America.

-- Douglas E. Murray