

Liberty of Conscience

by **Charles W. Deweese**

*Retired executive director-treasurer
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Baptists . . . have never been a party to oppression of conscience.”¹ So claimed George W. Truett, pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, in his famous address, “Baptists and Religious Liberty,” delivered on May 16, 1920, from the east steps of the U.S. Capitol in Washington during a meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Would Truett be able to make that claim today? No. Intentional suppression of liberty of conscience in recent years in some Baptist convention life has violated this historic principle.

Liberty permeates the Baptist story. And what a story it has been. In defense of liberty, Baptists emerged into history, experienced intense persecution, advanced free decision-making and worship choices for all, and made one of their finest gifts to human civilization.

An equally strong focus on responsibility threads itself throughout the Baptist story. But even meaningful exercise of moral and spiritual duty is possible only within the context of freedom. Unless individuals voluntarily choose to do what is right, then faith and ethics are either coerced or wrongly motivated.

A Christ-centered, Bible-based conviction that originated in the heart of God, liberty of conscience fuels the Baptist engine of freedom. It yells “foul” when church or state attempts to squeeze it. Fully activated, it nurtures the soul.

Efforts to sabotage liberty of conscience have, ironically, usually strengthened it. It has not, does not, will not, and should not go away.

Biblical Foundations

Freedom emphases dominate the core values of Baptist heritage. The reason is clear: Baptists view Christ as their Lord and the Bible as the sole written authority for their faith and practice. And the Bible plainly teaches that Christ came to liberate people from bondage (see Luke 4:18, Gal. 5:1).

Baptists turn to the Bible when discussing liberty of conscience. Two examples show why.

King Darius threatened Daniel with death in a lions’ den if he prayed to any god or man other than Darius himself for thirty days. Liberty of conscience kicked in. Refusing to let the state dictate the nature, content, or timing of his prayer life, Daniel boldly “continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously” (Dan. 6:10, NRSV). Daniel fearlessly fed the spirit of freedom that Baptists later adopted.

Jealous over the fact that “many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles,” the high priest and Sadducees “arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.” Released by an angel of the Lord during the night, the apostles entered the temple courts and began to teach the people. Brought

before the Sanhedrin and given “strict orders not to teach in this name,” Peter and the other apostles responded, “We must obey God rather than any human authority” (Acts 5:12, 18, 28, 29, NRSV). Baptists read this passage on liberty of conscience and say, “Amen.”

Four Centuries of Baptist Support

For 400 years, Baptists have saturated their life and literature with appreciation for liberty of conscience. John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, Baptists’ first two pastors, set the pace in the early 1600s. They wrote bold statements of support for this conviction. In fact, Helwys died in an English prison because King James I, who would not tolerate such liberty, put him there.

Baptists’ first two pastors in America also experienced persecution. Roger Williams, banished from Massachusetts by religious authorities, formed America’s first Baptist church at Providence, Rhode Island, in the late 1630s. And John Clarke, who founded the second Baptist church, at Newport, Rhode Island, was imprisoned in Massachusetts for preaching. Williams and Clarke set in motion a long line of colonial Baptists who suffered jailings, banishments, public whippings, and dismissals from high posts because of their commitments to freedom.

In the late 1700s, Isaac Backus in New England and John Leland in Virginia wrote powerful arguments in favor of liberty of conscience. They boldly advanced their positions in the contexts of the persecution of Baptists by the authorities of church and state.

Leland’s 1791 “The Rights of Conscience Inalienable” put forth a critically important position. He claimed that every person must give an account to God, and therefore should be free to serve God in a way that best reconciles to 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.²

Baptist historian Henry C. Vedder claimed in his important book *Baptists and Liberty of Conscience* (1884) that the “glory of Baptists” was that they were the first to advocate religious liberty for all people. The corollary of this doctrine, he continued, was

the rejection of all human authority and the assertion of the right of all persons to interpret the Scriptures for themselves, as inspired by the Holy Spirit.³

E.Y. Mullins, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1899 to 1923, claimed in 1908 that “the significance of the Baptists in relation to the individual is soul freedom.” Further, “the doctrine of the soul’s competency in religion under God is the distinctive historical significance of the Baptists.”⁴ Mullins then claimed in 1913: “The great principle underlying religious liberty is this: God alone is Lord of the conscience.”⁵

Liberty of conscience has figured prominently in Baptist World Congress meetings since 1905. At the inaugural BWA meeting in London in 1905, J.D. Freeman, pastor of Bloor Street Baptist Church in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, delivered a key sermon in which he advocated liberty of conscience: “We did not stumble upon the doctrine. It inheres in the very essence of our belief.” Continuing, he urged that the conscience is servant only to God, and not to the will of other people. “This truth has indestructible life. Crucify it and the third day it will rise again.”⁶

In 1939, George W. Truett, BWA president in 1934–1939, delivered an unforgettable address titled “The Baptist Message and Mission for the World Today.” Convincingly, he described the soul competency of the individual, under God, as “the keystone truth of the Baptists.” He added, “Out of this cardinal, bed-rock principle, all our Baptist principles emerge.”⁷

In the 1970s–1980s, papers presented at BWA meetings by James E. Wood Jr., church-state professor at Baylor University, focused on liberty of conscience, religious liberty, and human rights. He claimed that “religious liberty is rooted in the inviolable sacredness of the human conscience.” Then he stated that because freedom of conscience is basic to human personhood in the image of God and the ways people respond to God, no person “should be compelled to act contrary to his conscience.”⁸

Affirming the interrelatedness of liberty of conscience and human rights, Wood asserted: “To the degree that Baptists have been sensitive to the rights of conscience and the worth of every individual person,

they have reflected, at least in some manner, a concern for human rights.” Baptist champions of human rights have been many: John Leland, William Carey, William Knibb, Walter Rauschenbusch, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Joseph M. Dawson, and Martin Luther King Jr., to name a few.⁹

In the 1990s, one noted Baptist commentator after another emphasized liberty of conscience. Bill Moyers, astute observer of American politics and religion, set such liberty in the larger Baptist context: “Foremost among Baptist convictions—the reason for so much of the dissent that has marked Baptist history—is the right of the individual to follow the dictates of his or her conscience, free from the oppression of an overarching authority, secular or ecclesiastical.”¹⁰

Walter Shurden expounded at length on soul freedom, which he characterized as a “fragile freedom.” He stated that this freedom “is the historic Baptist affirmation of the inalienable right and responsibility of every person to deal with God without the imposition of creed, the interference of clergy, or the intervention of civil government.”¹¹

Defining liberty of conscience, sometimes called soul liberty, Bill Leonard asserted that “in its most basic sense, that idea rests in the radical notion that the individual can be trusted in matters of interpretation and belief.”¹²

Potential Dangers to Liberty of Conscience

Many factors can work against liberty of conscience: apathy, misuses of authority, violations of the priesthood of all believers, and others. But two dangers stand out in Baptist experience and writings: persecution and creedalism.

Persecution: Baptists have written much about liberty of conscience in the contexts of actual or threatened persecution by the state, the church, or a combination of the two. Persecution and liberty do not mix; they collide.

For centuries, Baptist writings have countered attacks against liberty of conscience. Three Baptist writers in 1612–1615 nailed all efforts to thwart such liberty. Thomas Helwys, the first Baptist pastor on En-

glish soil, wrote in *The Mystery of Iniquity* in 1612 that “mens religion to God, is betwixt God and themselves; the King shall not answer it, neither may the King be judg betwene God and man.”¹³

In 1614, Leonard Busher, one of the earliest Baptists, listed many reasons against persecution in *Religion's Peace: or a Plea for Liberty of Conscience*. Calling persecution by the king for difference in religion “a monstrous and cruel beast,” he pointed out the result of such violation: “persecutions do cause men and women to make shipwreck of faith and good consciences, by forcing a religion upon them even against their minds and consciences.”¹⁴

John Murton, Helwys’ successor as pastor of the first English Baptist church, issued a challenge in 1615 in *Persecution for Religion Judg'd and Condemn'd*: “Oh! That all that are in authority, would but consider by the word of God, which shall judge them at the last day, what they do, when they force men against their souls and consciences to dissemble to believe as they believe, or as the king and state believe: they would withdraw their hearts and hands therefrom.”¹⁵

Baptist confessions of faith in the 1600s addressed the subject because persecution was the order of the day for many Baptists. The English Baptist *Standard Confession* of 1660 affirmed that it was God’s will and mind that all people “should have the free liberty of their own consciences in matters of Religion, or Worship, without the least oppression or persecution.”¹⁶

An important English confession of 1678 observed that since Jesus Christ is the “only Lord of Conscience,” he “would not have the consciences of men in bondage to, or imposed upon, by any usurpation, tyranny, or command whatsoever, contrary to his revealed will in his word” because “the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute blind obedience, destroys liberty of conscience.”¹⁷

In America, Roger Williams never minced words in talking about this subject. Claiming that “forcing of Conscience is a Soule rape,” he noted that “God requireth not an uniformity of Religion to be inacted and inforced in any civill state; which inforced uniformity (sooner or later) is the greatest occasion of civill Warre, ravishing of conscience, persecution of Christ Jesus in

his servants, and of the hypocrisy and destruction of millions of souls.”¹⁸

Culbert G. Rutenber, professor of philosophy of religion at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary for more than two decades, delivered an address to the 1950 Baptist World Congress titled “The Totalitarian State and the Individual Conscience.” He asserted that “the struggle between the Christian faith and the totalitarian state is a struggle for the soul and conscience of man.” He claimed that “totalitarianism is a systematic effort to exterminate the human conscience. A man’s soul must be eviscerated; his humanity stamped out of him.”

Then Rutenber commented on the power of the individual conscience: “Against the terrifying power of suppression and torture which the police state commands, the individual conscience seems pathetically weak. But let us not sell it short... The radical audacity of faith! As long as conscience has that, dictators can never quite trample it into nothingness. For it is by faith that the Christian and his ever-insistent conscience lives... The Christian knows a secret-Jesus Christ is Lord.”¹⁹

Creedalism: Few things probably offend God more, cause more religious conflict, and damage the careers of more good Baptists than for denominational leaders to circumvent liberty of conscience by forcing personal or institutional views on the agendas of other people’s lives through rigidly applied statements of faith.

The *Second London Confession* of English Baptists stated in 1677 that “God alone is Lord of the Conscience, and hath left it free from the Doctrines and Commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his Word, or not contained in it.”²⁰

This important statement appeared, with only insignificant variations, in Baptist confessions of faith spanning more than 300 years:

- the 1742 *Philadelphia Confession*
- the 1858 *Abstract of Principles* of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
- the 1925, 1963, 1998, and 2000 versions of the *Baptist Faith and Message*

E.Y. Mullins asserted in 1923: “Religious liberty excludes the imposition of religious creeds by ecclesiastical authority... When they [confessions of faith] are laid upon men’s consciences by ecclesiastical command, or by a form of human authority, they become a shadow between the soul and God, an intolerable yoke, an impertinence and a tyranny.”²¹

Herbert Gezork, president of Andover-Newton Theological School from 1950 to 1965, told the Baptist World Congress in 1955 that when confessions are forced on people, “then they become instruments of coercion, clubs held over men’s consciences.”²²

William F. Keucher, a long-time American Baptist minister, asserted in 1976 that the concept of a free conscience was eroding in Baptist life. Opposing the “search for conformity to replace diversity and dissent,” he asserted that “no single creed is big enough to exhaust the full meaning of faith.” Therefore, “a free conscience will not hide in false shelters” because it “understands that it is better to help make people safe for ideas, rather than to seek to make ideas safe for people.”²³

H. Leon McBeth, noted Baptist historian, claimed in his 1987 textbook on Baptist history that the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* “has become more creedal than any other in Baptist history.”²⁴ Considering that the preface to that confession stated explicitly that “confessions are only guides in interpretation, having no authority over the conscience,”²⁵ McBeth’s evaluation provided damaging evidence that Baptist leaders had violated a cardinal tenet of Baptist confessional history.

Charles Wade, at the time Baptist General Convention of Texas executive director-elect, claimed in 1999 that the 1998 revision of the *Baptist Faith and Message* “is now being used as a convenient vehicle to take away Baptist freedom of conscience and the God-given right to an uncoerced faith.”²⁶

Later, Wade, then the BGCT executive director, objected to the possibility that Southern Baptist leaders would hold others accountable to the 2000 edition of the *Baptist Faith and Message*. This led him to ask: “Why do Baptists resist creedal faith? Because creeds always are used eventually to coerce conscience. The Scriptures are enough!”²⁷

The bulk of Baptist history asserts forcefully, consistently, and undeniably that liberty of conscience, not creedalism, is a far more accurate principle of Baptists. James Leo Garrett Jr., noted Baptist theologian, observed in 1965 that “the terms ‘religious liberty,’ ‘religious freedom,’ ‘soul liberty,’ and ‘freedom of conscience’ have had an exalted place in the vocabulary of Baptists and other free churchmen.”²⁸

A former Pharisee of Pharisees, the apostle Paul, who had been liberated on the Damascus Road, later asked a pertinent question: “For why should my liberty be subject to the judgment of someone else’s conscience?” (1 Cor. 10:29, NRSV). And why should yours or mine?

Liberty of Conscience Today

What will Baptists do with this conviction in the twenty-first century? A decisive response in its favor is imperative if Baptists intend to stay true to the liberating message and claims of Christ.

Roger Williams claimed in 1644 that “that Christ is King alone over conscience is the sum of all true preaching.”²⁹ Every Baptist minister who occupies a pulpit ought to preach liberty of conscience, under Christ, with vigor and frequency. Advocating liberty of conscience belongs to Baptist laypersons, too.

Liberty of conscience is God’s gift to humanity. God urges individuals to exercise that gift under the leadership of the Holy Spirit and the Lordship of Christ. Applied fully, liberty of conscience brings out the best of what it means to be created in God’s image.

Put simply, every individual is responsible only to God in matters of conscience—not to the state, not to the church, not to creedal statements, not to pastors, not to seminary presidents, not to denominational leaders, not even to one another. True faith is voluntary.

Any person—anywhere, anytime—can choose the spiritual direction the individual’s life will take. God expects no less. God may celebrate or grieve over decisions made, but he refuses to dictate the details and ultimate thrust of a person’s existence.

The Baptist history of liberty urges three key points: (1) Declare Christ as Lord. (2) Approach life with an open Bible and an open mind. (3) Choose liberty of conscience. And the third point means at least the following: worship as you please, study the Bible on your own terms, and defend religious liberty and human rights for all.



Notes & Questions for Discussion

Notes

1. See Truett's address in J.B. Cranfill (ed.), *God's Call to America* (Nashville: Sunday School Board, SBC, 1923), 32.
2. H. Leon McBeth, ed., *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 179.
3. Henry, C. Vedder, *Baptists and Liberty of Conscience* (Cincinnati: J.R. Baumes, 1884), 40.
4. E.Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908), 56-57.
5. E.Y. Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs* (Louisville: Baptist World Publishing Co., 1913), 72-73.
6. As cited in Walter B. Shurden, ed., *The Life of Baptists in the Life of the World: 80 Years of the Baptist World Alliance* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985), 20, 21.
7. *Official Report, Sixth Baptist World Congress* (Atlanta: Baptist World Alliance, 1939), 26.
8. "What Are the Foundations of Religious Liberty?" *Official Report, Twelfth Baptist World Congress* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1971), 364.
9. William H. Brackney, ed., *Faith, Life, and Witness: The Papers of the Study and Research Division of the Baptist World Alliance, 1986-1990* (Birmingham, AL: Samford University Press, 1990), 258.
10. "Foreword," in William R. Estep, *Revolution Within the Revolution: The First Amendment in Historical Context, 1612-1789* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), x.
11. Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1993), 23.
12. Bill J. Leonard, ed., *Dictionary of Baptists in America* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 4.
13. McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, 72.
14. *Tracts on Liberty of Conscience and Persecution, 1614-1661*, edited by Edward B. Underhill (London: J. Haddon, 1846), 36, 38.
15. McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, 76.
16. William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 232.
17. "The Orthodox Creed" in *Ibid.*, 331-32.

18. “The Bloody Tenent of Persecution” in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, edited by Samuel L. Caldwell, vol. 3 (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1963), 3-4, 182.
19. *Official Report, Eighth BWA Congress* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1950), 140, 141.
20. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 279-80.
21. *Record of Proceedings, Third BWA Congress* (Nashville: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1923), 68.
22. *Official Report, Ninth BWA Congress* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1955), 42.
23. “Certain Unalienable Rights,” *Baptists and the American Experience*, edited by James E. Wood Jr. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1976), 87.
24. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 686.
25. *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: Sunday School Board, SBC, 1963), 4.
26. “Texas Baptist Leader Defends Baptist Faith & Message Action,” *Western Recorder*, December 14, 1999, p. 2, citing Associated Baptist Press.
27. “New faith statement contains subtle but basic changes,” *Baptist Standard*, June 19, 2000, 12.
28. *Official Report, Eleventh BWA Congress* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966), 280.
29. “The Bloody Tenent of Persecution,” 77.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is liberty of conscience?
2. What Scriptures support liberty of conscience in addition to those cited in this article?
3. Why should Baptists today take a hard look at the values of liberty of conscience?
4. In what ways can a person’s response to liberty of conscience affect the quality of that person’s life?
5. What steps can Baptists today take to assure that liberty of conscience will remain a viable Baptist ideal?

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