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# WHAT'S IN YOUR TEACHING GUIDE

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:

- to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
- to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
- to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

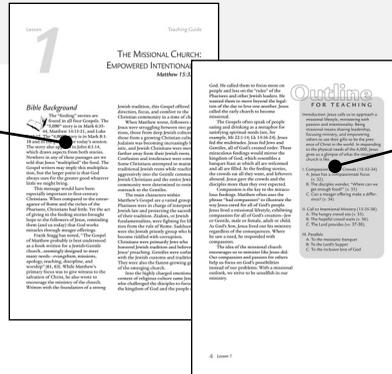
The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

## Teacher Helps

### Bible Background

The Study Guide is your main source of Bible study material.

This section helps you more fully understand and interpret the Scripture text.



### Teaching Outline

provides you with an outline of the main themes in the Study Guide.

## Teacher Options

The next three sections provide a beginning, middle, and end for the session, with focus paragraphs in between.

### Focus Paragraphs

are printed in italics at or near the top of the page because they are the most important part of the Teaching Guide. These paragraphs will help you move your class from “what the text meant” to “what the text means.”

## You Can Choose!

There is more material in each session than you can use, so choose the options from each section to tailor the session to the needs of your group.

### Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the Study Guide. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.

# BAPTISTS AND THEIR FREEDOMS

*Acts 5:27-32*

## *Bible Background*



### **Bold Witness**

The story in Acts 5:27-32 is told in the context of the growth of the Christian mission (Acts 5:14) and how religious and state authorities opposed that mission. In Acts 4:1-21 Peter and John are arrested. Before the Jewish Council (the Sanhedrin), they boldly testified to their faith, saying, “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (v. 19). (The boldness of the early church is also seen in Acts 4:31 and 26:19-21.) The religious leaders reacted harshly because the apostolic preaching threatened the status quo. The freedom of dissent had to be silenced (Stagg, 78).

In Acts 5:27-32, the apostles have been arrested a second time and stand once more before the Sanhedrin. Again, with boldness they declare, “We must obey God rather than any human authority” (v. 29). When human authority is in conflict with divine authority, believers must trust the divine authority.

The apostles are arrested, but an angel releases them, leaving the prison doors locked, and the human authorities find them preaching in the temple (Acts 5:19-25). The apostles are flogged, suffering with joy the consequences of their obedience to God. Despite their mistreat-

ment, they are spiritually free and continue preaching as an act of bold faithful dissent (Acts 5:40-41). Opponents of religious dissent would do well to hear the words of the Pharisee Gamaliel, who said if their dissent was of human origin it would fail, but if it were of God it could not be defeated, so the Sanhedrin should proceed cautiously (Talbert, 26-29).

### **Civil Disobedience**

The topic of civil disobedience, or calmly standing for freedom in the face of political restrictions, is controversial. Some Christians cite Romans 13:1, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God,” to deny the possibility of Christian civil disobedience. The fact that neither Jesus nor Paul—who appealed to Rome for a trial to decide his fate (Acts 22ff)—attempted to overturn the Roman authorities is also a factor in this argument.

On the other hand, one can appeal to several biblical passages to affirm civil disobedience when human loyalties to the state attempt to usurp obedience to God (Acts 5:29). Old Testament passages include the story of Moses and the Hebrews working “within the system” to request their freedom but then ultimately defying Pharaoh in the exodus (Exod 5-14); the story of the resistance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who,

despite their favored positions in the Babylonian government, defied the decree to worship pagan gods and were thrown into a fiery furnace (Dan 3).

In the New Testament, the earliest days of the church's existence involve encounters with the Sanhedrin, the religious ruling authority in Jerusalem. Two passages, Acts 4:19-20 and Acts 5:27-32, reveal that loyalty to God in the face of religious and political opposition was a sign of faith, but also a sign of the divine backing of the Christian movement.

### The Fine Print

In biblical stories, the faithful heroes usually prevail. (A notable exception is the persecution of Christians in the book of Revelation.) In subsequent Christian history, Christians who have cited Acts 5:29 to defy legal authority have based their behavior on the religious reason of freedom of conscience before God rather than on political motivation. Christian martyrs throughout the centuries have paid the price of their lives in order to obey God rather than human beings.

The arrests of Baptists John Clarke and Obadiah Holmes alluded to in the Study Guide are classic examples of adhering to this reading of Scripture. When Clarke, Holmes, and another colleague left their homes in Rhode Island and entered the Massachusetts Bay Colony to preach (which was illegal), they willingly and boldly affirmed their freedom of conscience and the right to dissent by provoking a confrontation with a state-sponsored religious culture (see Acts 4:12). After their arrests, they were forced to attend a worship service of the state church. With defiant boldness, they refused to take off their hats during the service, and Clarke read a book while the minister spoke. After receiving thirty lashes across his back, Holmes declared, "You have struck me as with roses."

Does Acts 5:27-32 give license for any Christian to defy authority whenever he or she senses a violation of freedom to worship God according to the dictates of

conscience? That is certainly one way to apply the story, and Baptists have often done that. On the other hand, the

## Outline

### FOR TEACHING

- I. Introduction: An Example of Dissent
  - A. Henry Dunster
  - B. Dissent Can Be Costly
- II. Baptist Origins
  - A. Landmarkism and the Desire for Baptist Successionism
  - B. Baptist Founder: John Smyth
    1. Biography: From Anglican to Puritan to Separatist to Baptist (to Mennonite)
    2. Smyth as a Separatist
      - a. He formed his church on basis of covenant.
      - b. His church practiced infant baptism.
    3. Smyth formed the first Baptist church in Amsterdam.
      - a. Dissent: Smyth baptized himself.
      - b. He formed a church on basis of confession of faith and believer's baptism.
      - c. The church split over issue of "succession."
  - C. Thomas Helwys
    1. He established first Baptist church in England.
    2. He taught and practiced Baptist freedoms.
- III. The Apostolic Example (Acts 5:27-32)
  - A. The Text
    1. Peter and the apostles are brought before the Sanhedrin (v. 27).
    2. Apostles boldly declare allegiance and obedience to God rather than any human authority (v. 29) (see Acts 4:13, 20).
    3. Dissent is grounded in following the Holy Spirit (v. 32).
  - B. Civil Disobedience as an Expression of Faithful Dissent

Puritans didn't believe that the colonial Baptists were applying Scripture correctly but rather were using God's name to justify their defiance to authority.

Applying Acts 5:27-32 to specific modern situations requires caution. One commentator said that verse 29 "is a dangerous saying, subject to abuse and misappropriation; and one should be as clear as Peter was about what God's purposes really are before ever using it" (Polhill, 169). Most readers can identify people or groups that they believe have hidden behind the Bible or appealed to the "leading of the Spirit" for selfish reasons.

Acts 5:27-32 is a fascinating biblical story. It clearly can be abused, but it also points to bold witness and the cry for freedom and dissent that desires ultimate obedience to the lordship of Christ.

## A Way to Begin

**A** *Baptist origins are rooted in several biblically based freedoms. Baptists have believed that these freedoms are indispensable for vital spiritual life. Freedom is a concept rooted in Scripture, from Jesus' words, "the truth will make you free" (Jn 8:32) to the apostles' bold declaration, "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29). We must be free to respond to the truth—Jesus—and sometimes that calls for dissent as an act of faith. Dissenting freedom responds to God according to the dictates of conscience in obedience to the lordship of Christ and to Scripture. The story of Baptist origins is a defining illustration of the role of freedom and dissent in the Christian faith journey.*

### ○ Baptist Origins

What do we know about John Smyth and Thomas Helwys? Distribute copies of page 28, titled "Baptist Origins." Ask the following questions.

#### Questions

- What—if anything—have you been taught previously about Baptist history? Was this training sufficient?
- Why do you think the publisher of our Bible study curriculum is named after Smyth and Helwys?

Many Baptists say, "We just go straight back to the Bible." Affirm that the Bible has been Baptists' sole authority for religious faith and practice. Even so, the study of Baptist origins can shed light on how Baptists have traditionally read the Scripture.

### ○ Freedom to Dissent

Discuss the following questions.

#### Questions

- What is the difference between questioning authority and merely complaining?
- What are some current examples of religious dissent?
- In light of the Henry Dunster story in the Study Guide, what risks does dissent sometimes entail?

John Smyth and Thomas Helwys were part of a dissenting minority. Notice that the apostles in Acts 5:27-32 were a dissenting minority from the Jerusalem status quo.

# **B** A Way to Explore Scripture

*The arrest of the apostles in Acts 5:27-32 follows an earlier arrest in Acts 4:1-21. Boldness before opponents of the faith and the necessity of obeying God rather than human authority characterizes both stories. Legal authority is seen as attempting to draw boundaries for acceptable worship and religious practice. **However, the apostles demonstrate that the Christian faith gives ultimate allegiance to God. Human authority must not attempt to play God by defining or restricting religious belief. When authorities restrict the freedom to worship or act in idolatrous fashion, dissent is an act of faithfulness to God.***

## ○ **Boldness to Dissent**

Discuss how “uneducated and ordinary men” (Acts 4:13) had the boldness to defy human authority and give their allegiance to God, especially when persecution and imprisonment was the known likely result.

### **Questions**

- If you were Peter or one of the other apostles, could you express your faith with this degree of boldness?
- What is the role of the Holy Spirit in faithful dissent?
- What are the negative consequences of dissent? Why do those in the majority resist the witness of dissenters?

## ○ **Biblical Heroes**

Draw on some of the other biblical accounts of dissent or civil disobedience, such as Daniel and the lion’s den (Dan 6) or Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Dan 3).

### **Questions**

- Have you ever listened to these stories in light of the biblical theme of faithful dissent? If not, do they take on new meaning for you if you do so?
- What did these believers risk in insisting that they must be free to worship God?
- What practical lessons can we learn from these biblical heroes about the connection between freedom and dissent?

## ○ **Dissenting Minorities**

Read Acts 5:27-32. Remind the class that the early church was a dissenting minority in Jerusalem society.

### **Questions**

- What are some of the religious minorities in our community? (Note: In most of the United States, the majority is at least nominally Christian.)
- If we were to put ourselves in their shoes, what might be our perception of the attitudes and behaviors of those in the majority?
- What are the challenges of living faithfully as a member of a religious minority?
- If our group were in the minority, how would we want to be treated?

# C A Way to End

*We live in an era in which denominational loyalty is remarkably low. Much of this has to do with dissatisfaction with denominational structures, but being a Baptist Christian is not fundamentally about being tied to a particular structure. Nor is it about claiming to be the “best” church (whatever that means). Rather, to be a Baptist Christian is one way of being a free and faithful Christian. It is a way of practicing personal faith and doing church. To be a Baptist Christian is to affirm a personal and congregational journey rooted in freedom.*

## ○ Does Being Baptist Matter?

In this age, which many are calling “post-denominational,” it is perhaps even more important to ask and answer key questions about denominational identity.

### Questions

- How does the story of Baptist origins help us to see the fundamental role of freedom and dissent in our spiritual understanding?
- Has your past instruction in Baptist identity highlighted freedom and dissent? If not, what *was* the focus?
- What insights does our tradition have to share with the wider church and with society as a whole?
- What lessons could we learn from Christians outside our tradition?
- How can we avoid undue boastfulness about our denominational distinctives?
- How can believers remain true to the core convictions of their traditions while welcoming those who believe differently as Christian brothers and sisters?

## ○ How Important Is the Concept of Freedom?

Discuss the following questions about freedom of conscience.

### Questions

- In your Christian experience, how important is the concept of freedom?
- How have you expressed dissent in an attempt to be faithful to God?
- What does “freedom of conscience” mean to you?
- What are your fears with respect to freedom and dissent?
- Are you as an individual practicing the freedom to respond to God’s call in your life?
- Are we as a church (not just a few people) exercising freedom to respond to God in the way we make decisions or do ministry?

### Resources

Charles H. Talbert, *Acts*, Knox Preaching Guides (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984).

John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992).

Frank Stagg, *The Book of Acts: The Early Struggle for an Unhindered Gospel* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1955).

BIBLE  
FREEDOM*Hebrews 1:1-2; 4:12-13**Bible Background***Freedom “Under”**

Christians stand with an open Bible “under” the lordship of Jesus Christ. When they began in the early 1600s in England, Baptists insisted on Jesus as the center of the biblical revelation. Everything in the Hebrew Scriptures reached its climax in him. Everything in the church subsequent to his life, death, and resurrection looked back to him. For Baptists, Jesus constitutes the norm by which the Bible is to be interpreted because “Jesus is Lord” was the earliest New Testament confession (Rom 10:9). Jesus is the ultimate source of Christian authority and the foundation of truth upon which we attempt to build our lives and our churches.

Baptists insist on freedom of access to the Bible and freedom in its interpretation precisely because the Bible is the only means of arriving at the mind of Christ. Jesus is far more than a mere historical person of the first century. He is the living Lord who still directs God’s people. The Bible, interpreted under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, continues to make the will of Christ known.

**Freedom “For”**

Scripture is alive. As people read and interpret Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, their lives are transformed. God’s word is not limited to

Scripture, yet one can hear the “living and active” word of God through Scripture. In order for Christians to live obediently under the lordship of Christ, they must be free to respond to the living word of God.

For Baptists, the Bible is completely authoritative in moral responsibility, theological beliefs, and human relationships. Additionally, our understanding of the Bible is never complete or finished. As the great English Baptist historian Ernest A. Payne said, this dynamic understanding of Scripture “is of fundamental importance for an understanding of Baptist life at its best” (Payne, 19).

Baptists did not begin and apparently did not intend to live out their faith as a static, rigidly fixed, and inflexible group of disciples. They did not arrive at *the* truth and then determine to pass it on in every area of life. Instead, they cultivated an attitude of openness to the ongoing study of the Bible under the guidance of the living Lord of the church. They pledged themselves to continue in that frame of mind no matter the cost. This approach not only allows but encourages diversity.

Some may ask, “Is this approach not fraught with danger?” The answer is a candid “Of course!” The alternative, however, is fraught with more than danger; it is fraught with unbending dogmatism.

Our interpretations of the Bible change; the Bible, however, remains the word of the living God. With this birthright of freedom and loyalty to the Bible as the word of God, a Christian community is better able to meet the changing challenges of the contemporary world.

### **Freedom “From”**

If Baptists are to confront these challenges, it is necessary for them to accept that before God, “no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account” (Heb 4:13). There is a temptation today to hide behind doctrinal statements, creeds, covenant signatures, and ecclesiastical bodies. Yet, all attempts to hide prove futile. Baptists must accept their vulnerability before God and claim it as a gift for honest ministry.

Early Baptists echoed Martin Luther’s conviction-filled affirmation of “Scripture alone,” for they wanted to be free “from” all other religious authorities. Baptists began by saying, “This Lord and no more!” No pope, king, or bishop could usurp the lordship of Christ. Baptists also said, “This book and no more!” No creed, confession, doctrinal statement, or ecclesiastical body could usurp the authority of the Bible. Historically, Baptists have resisted any and all creeds for two good reasons. First, no doctrinal statement can adequately summarize the biblical mandate for behavior and belief. It is better, therefore, to stay with the Bible alone. Second, Baptists have feared creeds because of the seemingly inevitable tendency to make the creed the norm and then force compliance to it. When this happens, we lose both the Bible and the freedom of approach to the Bible.

Certainly, Baptists have periodically adopted statements of faith. But they have carefully named them to avoid giving them too much authority. For example, what is popularly known among Southern Baptists as “The Baptist Faith and Message” is more correctly titled “A

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

- I. Freedom “Under” (Heb 1:1-2)
  - A. We read the Bible under the lordship of Christ.
  - B. Christ still guides and directs the people of God.
- II. Freedom “For” (Heb 4:12)
  - A. The Bible is intended to transform us.
  - B. Our understanding of the Bible is never complete; therefore we live out our faith dynamically, not statically.
- III. Freedom “From” (Heb 4:13)
  - A. We cannot hide behind lesser sources of authority.
  - B. God sees us as we truly are.
- IV. Freedom “Of”
  - A. The Bible is open to all believers.
  - B. Freedom to interpret the Bible is both a privilege and a responsibility.

Statement of the Baptist Faith and Message.” It is “a statement.” It is not “the creed.”

### **Freedom “Of”**

God has spoken to humanity “in many and various ways” (Heb 1:1). In Jesus Christ, God spoke with clarity. Yet, God has never dictated that each individual should agree on what God has said. Even the Gospels express four distinct views of Jesus. Each Gospel writer agrees that Jesus was the Son of God, although each interprets his life and ministry from his own perspective.

Baptists have no formal teaching office that hands down correct biblical interpretation. Freedom of interpretation by each individual believer is fundamental to Baptist thought. If believers are to be guided by Holy Scripture, all believers must be free to interpret the Bible.

The Bible is the believer’s book, but the believer’s right to interpret the Bible

carries with it the responsibility to study and seek to understand the Bible. This demands the best of biblical scholarship as an aid to interpretation. The right of interpretation does not mean that any or every interpretation is correct. It does not mean that the Bible means anything or everything or nothing.

The privilege of personal interpretation of the Bible is hard work! What did this biblical statement mean in its original setting? When was it written? Under what circumstances? What thought patterns dominated the world of the writer? To understand the Bible, one should know something about the history of the Bible, the history *within* the Bible, and good principles for interpreting the Bible today. Some Baptists want the privilege of personal interpretation of the Bible, but they do not want to go to the trouble of being good interpreters. We must distinguish between the noble privilege of interpreting the Bible for ourselves and the responsibility of working hard at determining what its authors intended it to mean.

## A Way to Begin

**A** *How does the Bible guide us in making spiritual decisions? All Christians would affirm the centrality of Scripture in determining how we should live, how we should worship, or how our churches should be organized. At the same time, Christians vary widely in how they handle the Bible itself and what they believe it teaches. What does it mean to approach the Bible with an attitude of freedom?*

### ○ **My Faith Has Found a Resting Place**

Sing the hymn, “My Faith Has Found a Resting Place.” Discuss what it means to the participants to have a faith established “not in device nor creed.”

#### **Questions**

- What does the hymn writer say about where his faith rests?
- In times of crisis we often discover the true core of our faith. When has your faith been shaken? What did this experience teach you about where your faith rests?
- How does what we say or believe about the Bible intersect with faith in Christ and his saving work? Is it possible to trust in Christ apart from the Bible? Is it possible to trust in the Bible apart from a saving relationship with Christ?

### ○ **The Truth Shall Make You Free**

Ask a volunteer to read John 8:31-32 aloud. Jesus promised freedom to those who “know the truth.”

#### **Questions**

- What is the truth? Can we all agree on it?
- How does knowledge of the truth lead to freedom? What kind of freedom? Freedom from what? Freedom *for* what?
- How does the Bible teach us the truth?

# **B** A Way to Explore Scripture

*How are we to approach Scripture as a guide to life in Christ? We must begin by affirming what the Bible is and what it is not. According to the book of Hebrews, the Bible is a living and powerful gift of God (Heb 4). At the same time, the Bible is not God's final, definitive revelation to humankind. That honor belongs to Jesus alone (Heb 1).*

## ○ **The Ultimate Source of Authority**

Read Hebrews 1:1-2. This passage clearly demonstrates the preeminence of the living Christ *over* Scripture. Read the following statement from the Study Guide: "Jesus is the ultimate source of Christian authority and the foundation of truth upon which we attempt to build our lives and our churches." What does this mean to you?

## ○ **Biblical Authority**

Read Hebrews 4:12. In order for Christians to live obediently under the lordship of Christ, they must be free to respond to the living, active word of God.

Discuss two types of response to biblical authority as described in the Study Guide: the static, fixed approach and the dynamic, open approach. Ask the following questions.

### **Questions**

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of a static approach to biblical authority?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of a dynamic approach to biblical authority?
- Which approach is most consistent with the historical Baptist understanding of biblical authority?

## ○ **Freedom From...**

Read Hebrews 4:13. Discuss the tendency to hide behind other sources of religious authority in order to escape the fact that we are totally responsible to God. Why do Christians sometimes do this?

On the board, write "Bible Freedom means freedom from..." As a class, finish the sentence in as many ways as possible, writing the responses on the board. Discuss how these other sources of authority have been abused in the past and continue to be abused today.

## ○ **The Clear Teaching of Scripture**

Note some of the "teachings" of the Bible that Christians as a rule do not observe today. For example, do we "greet one another with a holy kiss" (Rom 16:16)? Do we require women to be veiled in worship (1 Cor 11:5)? Do the men lift their hands in prayer (1 Tim 2:8)? Do the women refrain from wearing fancy clothing and hairdos (1 Tim 2:9)?

### **Questions**

- Why do we feel at liberty to dispense with some biblical instructions but not others?
- What would you say to someone who believed these instructions were still binding on Christians today?
- What "clear teachings of Scripture" create conflicts among Christians? What is your comfort level with the fact that other believers handle these issues differently?

# C A Way to End

Freedom can be unsettling. Many people would prefer a little less freedom if it brought them a greater sense of security. This seems especially so with respect to spiritual matters. **Bible Freedom carries with it the responsibility to treat the Bible with maturity and to extend that freedom to others.**

## ○ Jesus' Bible

Distribute copies of page 29, titled "Jesus' Bible." Divide the class into five groups and assign each group one of the passages listed. Have the groups answer the study questions provided. Let each group share its responses with the class.

### Questions

- How did Jesus affirm his trust in the Bible as the *written* word of God?
- How did Jesus assert his authority over the Bible as the *living* Word of God?
- Have you ever been caught in a moral dilemma between "What does the Bible say?" and "What would Jesus do?" (For example, deciding whether to follow the religious "rules" or to break them in order to help someone in need.) How should Christians resolve these issues?
- What is the purpose of Scripture in your spiritual life? What do you hope to gain by reading it? How is this like or unlike the ways Jesus handled the Bible?

## ○ Review

Summarize the four main themes of the lesson as found in the Outline for Teaching.

### Question

- Which of these four aspects of Bible Freedom is most precious to you?
- Which of these aspects is most difficult for you to embrace?
- Which of these aspects is most difficult for you to extend to others?

Close in a prayer thanking God for the lordship of Christ and for the freedom this lordship brings in the lives of believers.

### Resource

Ernest A. Payne, *The Fellowship of Believers: Baptist Thought and Practice Yesterday and Today* (London: Carey Kingsgate, 1952).

SOUL  
FREEDOM*Matthew 16:13-18**Bible Background***The Centrality of the Individual**

When Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (v. 13), he was lifting up the centrality of the individual. Jesus valued diverse personal perspectives. This desire for individuality regarding responses to Christ is due to Soul Freedom.

Soul Freedom affirms the sacredness of the individual, based on the biblical affirmation that every human being is created in the image of God. Biblical interpreters and theologians have debated for years the precise meaning of Genesis 1:26, “Let us make humankind in our image.” Whatever else this passage means, it speaks clearly about the infinite worth and dignity of each individual (see also Ps 8). Baptists assert that each individual is created in the image of God. Therefore, each individual is competent under God to make moral, spiritual, and religious decisions. More importantly, the individual alone is responsible for making those decisions.

**The Primacy of the Personal**

Jesus understood diverse perspectives (v. 14), but he was most interested in what the disciples thought individually. His question, “But who do you say that I am?” (v. 15), encouraged a personal response. Jesus did not ask, “What do the prophets

say about me?” Jesus did not inquire as to the official position of the Hebrew Scriptures regarding his identity. Rather, he invited a personal response that depended on a spiritual experience.

In the Baptist faith tradition, individualism manifests itself at the beginning of the Christian life. Baptists insist that saving faith is personal, not impersonal. It is relational, not ritualistic. Saving faith is direct, not indirect. It involves a lonely, frightened, sinful individual believing and trusting in an almighty, loving, gracious God.

Six hundred years before Jesus said, “follow me,” the prophet Jeremiah preached the primacy of the personal in matters of faith. In what has been called “the gospel before the gospel,” Jeremiah announced God’s new covenant: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts” (Jer 31:33). Jeremiah envisioned God writing not on stone but on the inner being of the individual. Why? Because knowledge of God is direct, dynamic, and personal. Fellowship with God comes by way of individual relationship and not through creed and ceremony. Jeremiah’s prophecy of the divine-human relationship was so important for early Christians that the writer of Hebrews quotes it twice in a space of two chapters (Heb 8:8-12; 10:16-17).

Soul Freedom has never meant human self-sufficiency. Individuals are not capable or competent to save them-

selves. Basic to the Baptist understanding of the gospel is the grace of God (Eph 2:8-9; Titus 3:5-6). But God's grace is always appropriated personally. No proxy can fetch grace for another person. People are saved one by one, person by person.

### Conversion by Conviction

Peter's spontaneous response to Jesus was confessional: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (v. 16). There was no external pressure on him to respond in this manner. Jesus celebrated Peter's response as being motivated by spiritual conviction: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven" (v. 17). Peter's confession was a free-choice response to divine initiative and was stated in his own words. This inaugural confessional through conviction was founded upon Soul Freedom.

Faith is voluntary. No one is forced to believe because no one can be forced to believe. Some words cannot be put together. There is no such thing as "forced love." You can force labor. You can force slavery. But you cannot force someone to love. The voluntary nature of faith is crucial to the Baptist identity. Trying to make someone believe what they honestly cannot believe exploits both the individual and the biblical meaning of faith.

Soul Freedom, like all other Baptist freedoms, has a goal in view. Freedom is such an important ingredient in the human enterprise that one can justify freedom for freedom's sake alone. However, early Baptists had more in mind than simply breaking free from chains that held them back. They wanted freedom from a state-enforced religion because they thought that the freedom of the human spirit was worth saving.

Running through the Dallas Ft. Worth airport to catch a commuter flight, I could not help reading a slogan printed on a woman's sweatshirt. "Make up your own mind!" it screamed. "Choose this day

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

- I. The Centrality of the Individual (Mt 16:13)
  - A. God honors our individuality.
  - B. Individuals are responsible for their choices.
  - C. Individuality must be lived out in community.
  
- II. The Primacy of the Personal (Mt 16:14-15)
  - A. Christ encouraged a personal response.
  - B. Faith is meant to be personal and relational.
  - C. Soul Freedom does not imply self-sufficiency; we are saved by grace.
  
- III. Conversion by Conviction (Mt 16:16-17)
  - A. Faith is a freely chosen response to divine initiative.
  - B. We should be free from enforced religion.
  
- IV. Baptism for Believers (Mt 16:18)
  - A. Baptism is a public declaration of personal faith.
  - B. The earliest Baptists were more concerned with the "who" than the "how" of baptism.

whom you will serve" (Josh 24:15) is the ancient Hebrew version of that slogan. Both exhortations imply the freedom of choice. More specifically, however, they highlight the responsibility for personal decision. Because every person is accountable to God (Rom 14:12), each individual is responsible for his or her spiritual and religious choices.

It seems some people will do almost anything to avoid responsibility for their lives. They quote other people, talk like other people, and let other people talk for them or even choose for them. Sooner or later, however, each individual needs to

answer that question from Jesus: “But who do *you* say that I am?” The Baptist word for the world is that each individual is free to answer and is *responsible* for answering.

## Baptism for Believers

Christ’s church is built on the foundation of individual souls freely responding to the incarnate Son of the living God (v. 18). Through personal declarations of faith, lives are changed and the “gates of Hell” are razed.

In Baptist life, these followers of Christ then make a public statement of their faith through baptism. Ask the average person, “What is the distinguishing characteristic of Baptists?” Their answer will probably have something to do with the way Baptists baptize. It is true today that Baptists universally practice baptism by immersion. But the earliest concern of Baptists regarding baptism was not the *mode* of baptism (*how* one should be baptized) but the *subject* of baptism: *who* was being baptized. Baptists believe baptism is a sign that one has made a pledge to a new purpose. It is a dramatic statement that Christ is Lord.

## A Way to Begin

*Begin by exploring the nature of human beings as created in God’s image and endowed with freedom to embrace or reject God’s invitation to a spiritual relationship. Because of our freedom before God, no one can answer for us in matters of faith. This is both a privilege and a tremendous responsibility.*

### ○ Mindful of Us

Distribute copies of page 30, titled “Mindful of Us.” Enlist three volunteers to be “Reader 1,” “Reader 2,” and “Reader 3,” and then lead the class in reading the printed psalm responsively.

The principle of Soul Freedom grows out of an understanding of the nature of humanity as the crowning point of God’s creation. Discuss how Psalm 8 affirms the “glory and honor” of humankind and, by implication, the importance of the individual.

### Questions

- What words or imagery does the psalmist use to convey the idea that humanity holds a special place in God’s creation?
- What other passages of Scripture speak of humanity’s exalted status?
- What attitudes or actions show that we believe our fellow human beings are “a little lower than God”? What attitudes

or actions show that we deny this truth?

### ○ In Other Words

Write on the board the alternate terms used for the principle of Soul Freedom as noted in the Study Guide. Invite class members to suggest other terms they have heard to express this idea.

### Questions

- What—if anything—do you remember learning about Soul Freedom in your religious upbringing?
- Which of these terms is most commonly used in your church? Which of them speaks most powerfully to you?
- What is your personal definition of “Soul Freedom”?

The purpose of this lesson is to explore the centrality of the individual’s response to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

# B A Way to Explore Scripture

Of the many things Jesus demands of his followers, we sometimes overlook his call to make up our own minds about whether he is worth following. **This fundamental demand lies behind all the rest.** It was at the heart of many exchanges Jesus had with would-be disciples who had not considered the cost of leaving everything to follow him.

## ○ **The Foundational Question**

Read Matthew 16:13-18. By asking, “Who do people say that I am?” Jesus demonstrated his interest in the personal perspectives of the people.

Jesus’ key question, however, was “Who do *you* say that I am?” This question continues to be foundational for Christian discipleship. Brainstorm possible responses to Jesus’ question, both good and bad.

In Matthew 16:16, Peter gives the model response: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Point out that this statement is a freely chosen response to divine initiative, stated in Peter’s own words.

Personal conviction leads us to individual confession. It is upon this kind of conviction and confession that Christ builds a community of faith.

## ○ **Living Out Our Convictions**

Ask a volunteer to read Matthew 16:13-18. How does this passage demonstrate Jesus’ concern for individual perspectives and convictions? How does it demonstrate his concern for individual responses to these convictions?

Discuss the relationship between personal, heart-felt convictions and convictions that we merely parrot because we have learned them from other sources (parents, childhood Sunday school teachers, pastors, etc.). What is the nature and quality of the responses we make to each sort of conviction?

## **Questions**

- Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” What is your answer?
- Do your current attitudes and behaviors confirm that this is an accurate answer?

## ○ **Believer’s Baptism**

Read the following quotation from Tertullian (2nd century):

The delay of baptism is preferable; principally, however, in the case of little children.... The Lord does indeed say, “Forbid them not to come unto me.” Let them “come,” then, while they are growing up; let them “come” while they are learning, while they are learning whither to come; let them become Christians when they have become able to know Christ. (*On Baptism* 18)

Tertullian’s view was in the minority even in his own day, but it strongly resonates with those who believe that conviction and confession must precede baptism. For people such as this, baptism is a radical, dramatic profession of personal faith.

## **Questions**

- Is believer’s baptism still considered a radical profession of faith? Why or why not?
- How young is too young to undergo *believer’s* baptism?

# C A Way to End

*In a sense, no one's faith is truly personal. We have all been shaped by our church, respected teachers and pastors, childhood religious traditions, and countless shared experiences. Nevertheless, our faith must be our own; we cannot enter God's presence on the coattails of others. Conclude by exploring the relationship between personal and communal aspects of the Christian faith.*

## ○ **Confessions of Faith**

Distribute paper and pens or pencils to each participant. Ask them to write a personal confession of faith as a response to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?"

Ask as many as are willing to share their confessions. Note any points of similarity, but make a special point of celebrating the diversity among them.

## **Questions**

- Did you rely on others' expressions of faith in composing your confession (creeds, Bible verses, memorable quotations, etc.)? Why or why not?
- What is the proper role of the community's formal confessions of faith? How are these confessions like or unlike our personal confessions?

## ○ **The Choice Is Ours**

Read the following quotation:

It is easy for us to yield our integrity and responsibility to some accepted authority: beloved pastor, honored teacher, influential book—even an edition of the Bible—respected parent or dynamic church. These all have their proper roles of influence. But the final choice of belief and practice must be made in the secret of the soul's naked presence before God alone. I may pray in corporate prayer or use a devotional prayer book, but unless their words are truly my words, I have not engaged God for myself. I have only said my prayers. I may study the Bible under great teachers and share with devoted Christian friends, but I must finally judge what is truth, not because I find it agreeable to me, but because the inner witness of the Spirit convinces me. I may profit by the testimony of another's experience in the Lord, but I do not need and cannot repeat his experience. I need my own. (Hastings, 24)

Close with prayer, asking God's guidance as the members of the class outwardly confess their faith in the coming week.

## **Resource**

C. Brownlow Hastings, *Introducing Southern Baptists: Their Faith and Their Life* (New York: Paulist, 1981).

# CHURCH FREEDOM

*Romans 12:1-21*

## Bible Background



### Free to Follow Voluntarily

One of Baptists' earliest concerns was the nature of the church. They came out of a culture where one was "born" into the church. To become a member, one did not make a conscious choice to follow Jesus as Lord. Rather, one was baptized in infancy and accepted into the church within the geographical parish of one's birth. In contrast to this concept of a parish church, built on the ideas of infant baptism and the union of church and state, Baptists insisted on a "gathered church." A gathered church consists of those who make self-conscious and voluntary decisions to present themselves to God and be "transformed" (Rom 12:1-2). Because authentic faith is a matter of personal choice, the church should only include those who have deliberately committed themselves to the way of Christ.

Baptists have spoken of the church as both local and universal. The universal church is the body of Christ that includes all the redeemed of all the ages. Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Mt 16:18). His reference is clearly to his one people. The sublime theme of the book of Ephesians is God's eternal purpose in establishing and completing the universal church (Eph 2). Baptists have a theology of the church that encourages relationships with

non-Baptist Christians. At their best, Baptists have acknowledged that the one body of Christ does not begin or end with their denomination or with a local congregation.

Baptists have spent most of their time, however, speaking of the church in a local sense. The New Testament is replete with this emphasis on the local church (1 Cor 1:2; Rom 1:7; 1 Thess 1:1). In terms of the local church, Baptists have argued for the freedom of self-government, the freedom of worship style, and the freedom to carry out its ministry to Jesus Christ.

### Free to Govern Obediently

In an era of self-appointed Christian superstars, Paul's exhortation toward humility (v. 3) deserves a fresh look. The unity in diversity of the Christian church is evidenced through Baptist ministry. A variety of functional ministries join efforts to enable the church to reflect Christ (vv. 4-5). In Baptist polity, each local church is free and responsible to express this diversely unified ministry according to its own humble vision.

For Baptists, Church Freedom means that a local church has the right and responsibility to run its own affairs under the lordship of Jesus Christ. No bishop or pastor, no civil leader or magistrate, no religious body or convention of churches can dictate to the local church. Idealistically, Baptists want the local church to be

a “Christocracy,” obedient to the will and mind of Christ. Practically, Baptists settle for a democracy, hoping to facilitate the mind of Christ through the mechanism of a fully participative congregation.

Congregational church government means that a local church determines its own membership, decides its own pattern of worship, maps its own mission strategy, and elects its own officers. A congregation may call whomever it wishes to serve as ministers or deacons.

Threats always exist to congregational church government. Maybe the most perennial threat is the passivity of believers themselves. Local churches can simply “go along” with what other churches are doing or saying and refuse to take responsibility for their life together. Congregationalism is also endangered by the activity of authoritarians. A hierarchy in the church destroys congregationalism and the historic Baptist idea of the equality of believers in the local church.

### **Free to Worship Creatively**

No two Baptist churches are exactly alike. Although they have similar programs, schedules, staff, facilities, and polity, the uniqueness of each congregation is striking. These differences engender potential for creative ministries (see vv. 6-8). This distinctive expression of congregational faith shows up clearly in worship.

The Baptist attitude toward worship is often incorrectly understood to be anti-liturgical. But if liturgy means “the work of the people”—the original meaning of the word—Baptists are not anti-liturgical at all. However, if liturgy means prescribed and imposed forms, Baptists are most certainly anti-liturgical.

Free-church worship aims to present an authentic spiritual offering to God, but Baptist worship does not dictate *how* worship should be structured. Indeed, just as Bible Freedom offers individuals the right of private interpretation of the Bible and Soul Freedom allows for varieties of spiritual experience, Church

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

- I. Free to Follow Voluntarily (vv. 1-2)
  - A. A “Gathered” Church
  - B. The Church: Both Universal and Local
- II. Free to Govern Obediently (vv. 3-5)
  - A. An Exhortation toward Humility
  - B. A Variety of Gifts
  - C. A Congregational Emphasis
- III. Free to Worship Creatively (vv. 6-8)
  - A. The Potential for Creative Ministry
  - B. An Authentic Spiritual Offering
- IV. Free to Minister Responsibly (vv. 9-21)
  - A. Attentiveness to Positive Virtues
  - B. An Inclusive, Forgiving, and Non-judgmental Spirit
  - C. The Ministry of the Laity
  - D. Freedom to Reach Out to the World

Freedom results in different forms of worship, some formal and others informal.

The doctrine of the priesthood of believers needs to be incorporated into the life of worship. This calls for extensive congregational participation. The use of calls to worship, congregational prayers, responsive readings, and singing are ways to accomplish this participation.

### **Free to Minister Responsibly**

Responsible ministry requires Christians to be attentive to love, zeal, hope, patience, prayer, contributions, and hospitality (vv. 9-13). Yet, it also demands an inclusive, forgiving, and non-judgmental spirit (vv. 14-21). In Baptist polity, this freedom to minister responsibly is extended to each individual believer, and each local church is free and responsible to express the spirit of Christ according to its own perspective.

Baptists have historically stood solidly for the concept that the ministry belongs

to the laity. Every believer is on equal footing with every other believer. No pastor has official or constituted authority to “rule over” anybody in a Baptist congregation. Why? Because all Christians are priests before God. As such, all Christians have the freedom and responsibility to minister in the name of Christ.

Likewise, believers in a local Baptist church have the freedom and responsibility to decide how the church will witness for Christ in their community and beyond. Church Freedom was never intended as an exercise in selfishness. Early Baptists did not insist on freedom so their faith could be a private possession. The gospel drives Christians outside themselves and the fellowship of the church into a world God loves. Christians are not catch basins but conduits of God’s grace and compassion.

## A Way to Begin

*Last week, we sought a deeper understanding of the importance of personal response to the lordship of Jesus Christ. **But the individual cannot live in isolation.** In this session, we will strive to understand the individual in covenant with God and in community with other Christians. Begin by exploring participants’ thoughts and memories about the nature of the church.*

### ○ **Learning about the Church**

Sing together a hymn about the church such as “The Church’s One Foundation” or “Stir Thy Church, O God, Our Father.” Discuss what class members have been taught about the church: its organization, history, etc. It may be that most participants have received little formal instruction about these matters. If so, encourage their thoughts on why this is.

### ○ **Precious Memories**

Refer to the story of Penrose St. Amant in the “Reflecting” section of the Study Guide. Dr. St. Amant wrote of his earliest recollections of church, and how those recollections informed his understanding of what it means to be community with other Christians. Read the quotation from Dr. St. Amant aloud. Then ask the following questions.

### **Questions**

- What are your earliest recollections of church? What action verbs or visual images come to mind as you recall your earliest church experiences?
- How have these recollections informed your understanding of what it means to be church?

Based on their understanding of the lordship of Christ, Baptists have historically proposed unique answers to the question, “What does it mean to be church?”

# **B** A Way to Explore Scripture

*In this passage, Paul describes how individual disciples should live in community with other Christians. Community begins only when individuals are transformed through obedience to the will of God (vv. 1-2). **Voluntary obedience to the will of God is the only appropriate foundation for Christian community.***

## ○ **The Gathered Church**

Lead the class in a discussion of the term “the gathered church.” Refer to the Study Guide for background information.

### **Questions**

- What are the characteristics of a “gathered church”?
- What other terms are synonymous with the term “gathered church”?
- How does the “gathered church” relate to the universal church?
- How does it relate to your local congregation?

If your church has a covenant or similar statement of its vision and values, read it to the class. Have participants listen for phrases or images that convey the idea of a “gathered church.”

Read Romans 12:1-21. As a class, identify as many details as possible that reveal Paul’s vision of a “gathered church.”

## ○ **Congregational Governance**

Read Romans 12:1-21, drawing special attention to verses 3-5.

### **Questions**

- In what ways is the congregational approach to church governance consistent with the principle of Soul Freedom?
- What are some unique advantages of a congregational approach to church governance?
- What are some of the dangers associated with a congregational approach to church governance?

## ○ **Ministries and Ministers**

Read Romans 12:9-21. Baptists have understood this passage to mean that each local congregation has the freedom to minister responsibly under the lordship of Christ. Furthermore, each member of the congregation is uniquely equipped to participate in some aspect of the ministry of the church. Discuss your church’s approach to ministry.

### **Questions**

- What specific programs, projects, or activities are a part of how our church chooses to minister?
- How many of these ministries are designed specifically for members of the church?
- How many of these ministries address needs outside the church?
- How does our church identify new ministry opportunities? Who is the initiator in this process?
- Who are “the ministers” in our church?

# C A Way to End

*The privilege of Church Freedom comes with the responsibility of every member to contribute to the spiritual vitality of the church. Help participants understand better their role in making their church a success.*

## ○ **Taking the Church's Pulse**

Church Freedom under the lordship of Christ means that individuals choose to be in covenant with God and with others who freely participate in the gathered church. In the Baptist context, the local church is free to govern obediently, to worship creatively, and to minister responsibly.

### **Questions**

- How does our church's approach to leadership reflect humility and awareness that God speaks to every believer through the Spirit?
- How does our church's approach to worship reflect creativity and appreciation for the gifts and talents of every member?
- How does our church's approach to ministry reflect biblical teachings about spiritual gifts and compassion for all people?

## ○ **Priesthood and Ministry**

Distribute copies of page 31, titled "Priesthood and Ministry." Discuss the following questions.

### **Questions**

- What evidence do you see that our church looks upon "ministry" either as the responsibility of all or as a privilege of the few?
- What evidence do you see that our church understands the pastor and other ministry staff members either as equippers and facilitators or as the "hired help" who are supposed to do all the work?
- What can we do to support the ministry of our church?

### **Resources**

Victor L. Hunter and Phillip Johnson, *The Human Church in the Presence of Christ* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1985).

Stewart A. Newman, *A Free Church Perspective: A Study in Ecclesiology* (Wake Forest NC: Stevens, 1986).

## 5

RELIGIOUS  
FREEDOM

*Matthew 22:15-22; Romans 13:1; Revelation 13:9-10*

## Bible Background



### The Witness to Religious Freedom

Baptists did not stumble upon the idea of religious liberty. John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, trailblazers of the Baptist tradition, launched the Baptist denomination with no uncertainty about issues of liberty. Smyth drew up “the first confession of faith of modern times to demand freedom of conscience and separation of church and state” (Lumpkin, 124). In 1612, Helwys wrote *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*. Many historians say it is the first plea for complete religious freedom in the English language. Brashly, he inscribed a handwritten note and sent a copy to King James I to remind him that “the king is a mortal man and not God” and “therefore has no power over the immortal souls of his subjects.”

Also in the seventeenth century, Roger Williams, John Clarke, and Obadiah Holmes clamored in the American colonies for unrestricted religious liberty. Isaac Backus and John Leland took up the chorus in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By the 1830s, the last state church had ceased to exist in America. No religious denomination did more to accomplish that reality than the Baptists.

### The Foundations of Religious Freedom

Throughout Christian history, the Bible has been used in contradictory ways to support both religious liberty and persecution. For example, some have used the parable of the Great Banquet (Lk 14:15-24) as a justification for forced conversions. After all, didn’t the master say to the servants, “Go out into the roads and lanes, and *compel them to come in*, so that my house may be filled”? After the wedding of Christianity to the Roman Empire in the fourth century, some discovered that the use of force would increase the size of the church. Others, however, used the parable of the Tares and the Wheat (Mt 13:24-30) to defend religious liberty: “Let both of them grow together until the harvest” is the counter text to “compel them to come in.”

Rather than basing their beliefs about religious liberty on specific texts, Baptists have been more inclined to build on biblical principles. They have anchored their passion for religious liberty to the nature of God, the nature of humanity, and the nature of faith.

First, religious freedom is rooted in the very nature of God. The Bible portrays God as creating humanity to be free. Throughout the Old Testament, God is set against people and institutions that restrict the freedom of people. The thrust of Jesus’ ministry was to free people from all that hindered the fulfillment of their potential under God. Freedom is more

than a constitutional right or a governmental gift. God, not nations, courts, or human law, is the ultimate source of liberty. That is the theological pillar on which Baptists set their love of freedom.

Religious freedom is also based on the biblical view of human beings. Created in the image of God, humanity is the crowning work of God's creation (Ps 8). Human personality is sacred; it is life's highest value. To deny freedom of conscience to anyone is to debase God's creation. Baptists have also argued for religious freedom from the biblical nature of faith. To be authentic, faith must be free. The state can neither force nor deny genuine faith.

### **The Meaning of Religious Freedom**

In the Baptist heritage, religious freedom has several dimensions. First, religious freedom represents a commitment to full religious liberty and not simply religious toleration. Religious toleration is a concession; religious liberty is a right. Religious toleration is a measure of expediency; religious liberty is a matter of principle.

Second, Baptists have historically been clear that religious liberty is for all people. It is not for a selected few—nor even for an overwhelming majority. It is for all. The Baptist insistence on freedom *of* religion includes, therefore, freedom *from* religion. The right not to believe is as sacred as the right to believe. Baptists today would do well to read what John Leland wrote in 1791: "Let every man speak freely without fear, maintain the principles that he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods; and let government protect him in so doing" (Greene, 184). Leland's position was not unusual among Baptists.

Third, religious freedom means separation of church and state, not accommodation of church with state. This is the American model of church-state relations. The model is better expressed as "a free church in a free state"

or church and state *side by side*. Baptists, not only in America but around the world, have been solidly on the side of the separation of church and state.

### **Threats to Religious Freedom**

A major threat to religious freedom is that Baptists will assume there is no danger or that the danger is too slight to matter (Hinson, 122). Baptists today are not whipped on the streets, as was Obadiah Holmes in seventeenth-century Boston, nor jailed, as were preachers in colonial America.

The danger of undermining the historic principle of religious liberty is real even within Baptist life. During a television interview in 1984, Dr. W. A. Criswell, then pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas—the largest church in the Southern Baptist Convention—understandably alarmed many of his viewers when he said, "I believe this notion of the separation of

## Outline FOR TEACHING

- I. The Witness to Religious Freedom
  - A. The Witness in England
  - B. The Witness in the American Colonies
  - C. The Witness Today
- II. The Foundations of Religious Freedom
  - A. The Nature of God
  - B. The Nature of Humanity
  - C. The Nature of Faith
- III. The Meaning of Religious Freedom
  - A. Liberty, Not Mere Toleration
  - B. For All People, Not Just a Few
  - C. Separation, Not Accommodation
- IV. Threats to Religious Freedom
  - A. From Complacency
  - B. From Baptists
  - C. From the Reconstruction Movement
  - D. From "Civil Religion"

church and state was the figment of some infidel’s imagination.” Criswell’s statement deviated vastly from that of his predecessor, Dr. George W. Truett, who said that Jesus’ comment about rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s “once for all, marked the divorcement of church and state.” He spoke of the need for the doctrine of “a free church in a free state” to have universal acceptance (McBeth, 471).

Another threat to religious freedom is the theocratic mindset of some Christians involved in what is known as the Reconstruction Movement. This group seeks to restructure American society on the basis of the Old Testament. This movement would replace American democracy with a Christian theocracy.

Another danger, more popular and subtle, is the confusion of citizenship and discipleship. Sometimes referred to as “civil religion,” this attitude calls for, among other things, prayer in public schools, the channeling of public tax dollars to support private religious programs, and the presence of religious symbols in civil contexts. Christians have to work hard at distinguishing between pietism and patriotism, assessing critically where one begins and the other ends. When the cross of Jesus is wrapped in the flag of any nation, danger—if not downright heresy—is close by.

## A Way to Begin

*Religious Freedom is a contentious issue. The claims on one side of a thorny church-state issue often challenge or threaten the beliefs and values of those who see things differently. Begin the lesson by admitting that well-intentioned Christians disagree about how to resolve some of these issues.*

### ○ **Conflicting Voices**

Christians today struggle with the question of what it means to live under the lordship of Jesus Christ in a nation founded upon principles of religious freedom. Distribute copies of page 32, titled “Conflicting Voices.” Discuss the quotations provided.

#### **Questions**

- Which of these quotations sounds most like the messages you heard about religious liberty growing up?
- Which of these quotations sounds most like something you would say today?
- What does it mean to live under the lordship of Christ in a nation like the United States of America?

### ○ **Current Events**

Brainstorm specific examples of current issues associated with religious freedom. Allow time for reflection and sharing of responses.

List the examples on the board. When all class members have had an opportunity to contribute, observe the irony that committed and informed Baptists can be found in support of both sides in many of these issues.

# B A Way to Explore Scripture

Despite the controversy that often swirls around issues of Religious Freedom, it is possible to highlight certain principles and biblical texts that have shaped traditional Baptist responses. Explore some of these selected scriptural perspectives with your class.

## ○ **The New Testament Witness**

Write the three assigned passages on the board in three columns (Mt 22:15-22; Rom 13:1-7; Rev 13:1-18). Have volunteers read each passage. After the passage is read, discuss what it says about the relationship between religious practice and civil authority. Write the class's responses under each citation.

### **Questions**

- How do these three passages differ in their interpretation of this relationship? Speculate on the reasons for these differences.
- To which passage do Christians most often refer when speaking of church-state relations?

## ○ **The Baptist Witness**

Read these words from the First Amendment to Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Note that the amendment includes two clauses:

- (1) the Establishment Clause, which guarantees freedom *from* religion, and
- (2) the Free Exercise Clause, which guarantees freedom *of* religion.

Baptists in the colonial period, a weak religious minority, fought desperately for the ratification of this amendment. Baptists in later eras have struggled to maintain a "wall of separation" (in the words of Thomas Jefferson) between church and state.

Read Matthew 22:15-22; Romans 13:1-7; and Revelation 13:1-18. How do these passages speak to matters of Religious Freedom?

## ○ **Threats to Religious Freedom**

Discuss modern threats to Religious Freedom as outlined in the Study Guide and Teaching Guide:

- (1) The threat of assuming there is no danger to religious freedom in modern America
- (2) The threat of an authoritarian redefinition of Religious Freedom among Baptists
- (3) The threat of the Reconstruction Movement
- (4) The threat of civil religion

Name two or three current issues associated with Religious Freedom. If you did the "Current Events" activity at the beginning of the lesson, refer to some of the issues previously noted.

### **Question**

- What position would our Baptist forbears take with regard to this issue? Why?

# C A Way to End

Conclude the lesson by leading the participants to take stock of their personal commitments to Religious Freedom. **What do we need to learn from this lesson—and this study—about the nature of our freedom under Christ?**

## ○ Review

Review the four freedoms discussed in this study:

- (1) Bible Freedom
- (2) Soul Freedom
- (3) Church Freedom
- (4) Religious Freedom

How have class members come to see these freedoms in a new way? What points do they still feel the need to address through further reflection and study?

Conclude with the following quotation from John D. Freeman:

The world has not outgrown the need of Baptist principles. It was never in greater need of them than it is today. Our principles have not yet manifested the full force in them. New Light and power are to break forth from them in the days to come. Loose them and let them go.

## ○ Freedom From, Freedom Of

If you used the “Current Events” activity at the beginning of the lesson, refer to the list of church-state issues the class compiled. Ask class members to classify each issue as to whether it is a matter of freedom *from* religion or freedom *of* religion.

## Questions

- Which of these two types of issues tends to be the most volatile? Why?
- How can we cultivate a greater respect for the Religious Freedom of all people?
- How is our Religious Freedom to follow Christ in radical discipleship challenged?
- What can we do to follow Christ more boldly in our culture?

## Resources

L. F. Greene, *The Writings of John Leland* (1845; repr., New York: Arno, 1969).

William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge PA: Judson, 1959).

H. Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman, 1990).

# BAPTIST ORIGINS

1. **Who were the founders of the Baptist movement?**
  - a. John Smyth and Thomas Helwys
  - b. Thomas Smyth and John Helwys
  - c. John the Baptist and the Apostle Peter
  - d. John Smyth and Thomas Jones
2. **Which of the leaders in the answer to question 1 was an ordained minister and which was a layperson?**
3. **How old is the Baptist movement?**
  - a. 2,000 years old
  - b. 1,500 years old
  - c. 400 years old
  - d. 150 years old
4. **What is the oldest Baptist group?**
  - a. Southern Baptists
  - b. American Baptists
  - c. French Baptists
  - d. English Baptists
5. **The earliest Baptists were originally members of the**
  - a. Roman Catholic Church.
  - b. Greek Orthodox Church.
  - c. Church of England.
  - d. German Lutheran Church.
6. **The earliest Baptists practiced**
  - a. episcopal church governance.
  - b. presbyterian church governance.
  - c. congregational church governance.
7. **The earliest Baptists argued for**
  - a. government support of the Baptist movement.
  - b. religious freedom for all people, including atheists.
  - c. religious freedom for all Protestant Christians.
8. **The first Baptist church was formed on the basis of**
  - a. believer's baptism by pouring.
  - b. believer's baptism by immersion.
  - c. infant baptism.
  - d. footwashing.
9. **The earliest Baptists asserted that**
  - a. the local church answered only to its regional association.
  - b. the local church was responsible for handling its own affairs.
  - c. the local church should refuse to cooperate with other religious bodies.
  - d. the local church should submit to all state laws.
10. **Which early leader of colonial American Baptists was whipped for preaching illegally?**
  - a. Roger Williams
  - b. Charles Spurgeon
  - c. Richard Furman
  - d. Obadiah Holmes

## Bonus Question

True or False? The earliest Baptists believed in the freedom for each person to interpret Scripture.



ANSWERS: 1. a., 2. Smyth was a minister; Helwys was a lawyer, 3. c., 4. d., 5. c., 6. c., 7. b., 8. a., 9. b., 10. d., Bonus: True

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# JESUS' BIBLE

*For each Scripture passage,*

- What is the context, or setting, of the passage?
- To what Old Testament Scripture passage(s) is Jesus referring?
- What does the passage say about how Jesus handled the Bible?



Matthew 4:1-11.

Matthew 5:17-20

Matthew 5:21-26

Mark 7:14-23

John 5:37-40

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# CONFLICTING VOICES

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

—*The First Amendment to the United States Constitution (1789)*

Believing with you [the Danbury Baptist Association] that religion is a matter which lies solely between man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, thus building a wall of separation between church and state.

—*Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), President, United States of America*

Let every man speak freely without fear, maintain the principles that he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods; and let government protect him in so doing.

—*John Leland (1754–1841), Baptist minister in Massachusetts and Virginia*

The utterance of Jesus, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s,” is one of the most revolutionary and history-making utterances that ever fell from those lips divine. That utterance, once for all, marked the divorcement of church and state.”

—*George W. Truett (1867–1944), Pastor, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas*

I believe that the separation of church and state was the figment of some infidel’s imagination.

—*W. A. Criswell (1909–2002),  
Pastor, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas*

The wall of separation between church and state is a metaphor based on bad history, a metaphor which has proved useless as a guide to judging. It should be frankly and explicitly abandoned.

—*William Rehnquist (1924–2005),  
Chief Justice, Supreme Court  
of the United States of America*



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# PRIESTHOOD AND MINISTRY

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In keeping with the Old Testament imagery, God's people are the spiritual house where God's Spirit lives, and they are also the priests who serve within it. Like the ancient priests, their task is to offer "sacrifices acceptable to God" (1 Peter 2:5). But the sacrifices offered now by God's people are not animals slaughtered over an altar, as in the old covenant temple. They are infinitely more valuable and useful. Even more importantly, they also have the advantage of being offered by all of God's people—not just by a few privileged men among them—because now all believers have become priests unto God (Rom. 12:1). In actual practice, these sacrifices are of two



kinds: worship (Heb. 13:15) and good deeds, especially sharing with the needy (v. 16). Such priestly service and such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

This expansion of the concept of priesthood into one that includes all Christians rather than a small coterie of privileged professionals transforms every believer into a minister. A minister is someone who does ministry. According to the New Testament, every believer is a minister (cf. Eph. 4:12). This concept should come as no surprise since all believers share a common oneness at the center of the cross and, therefore, have an equal stake in the outworking of that oneness (1 Cor. 12:14-20).

Source: Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 70.

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# MINDFUL OF US

**All:** O LORD, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

**Leader:** You have set your glory above the heavens.

**All:** Out of the mouths of babes and infants  
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,  
to silence the enemy and the avenger.

**Reader 1:** When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;

**All:** What are human beings that you are mindful of us,  
mortals that you care for us?

**Reader 2:** Yet you have made them a little lower than God,  
and crowned them with glory and honor.

**Reader 3:** You have given them dominion over the works of your hands.

**Leader:** You have put all things under their feet,  
all sheep and oxen,  
and also the beasts of the field,  
the birds of the air, and the fish of the seas,  
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

**All:** O LORD, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Source: Psalm 8

