

THE BLESSINGS OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

"Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all the inhabitants" (Lev. 25:10).

"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1).

"For you were called to freedom, brethren" (vs. 13).

Religious Freedom Sunday in the S.B.C.

The 200th anniversary of our constitution.

The Year of Jubilee among the Hebrews of the O.T.

I. The Definition of Religious Liberty: the freedom of every person to choose voluntarily what kind of religion he or she wishes to follow or not follow, including both beliefs and practices, without any interference from governmental pressure or from religious bodies.

II. Distinctive contribution of the United States of America and of Baptists in particular.

A. Mr. Bancroft, the American historian, says: "Freedom of conscience, unlimited freedom of mind, was from the first the trophy of the Baptists."

B. John Locke, the great 18th cent. philosopher, said: "The Baptists were the first propounders of absolute liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty."

C. This is not merely the concession of Toleration, but the right of religious liberty, the natural and fundamental right of every human being to worship God or not, according to the dictates of his conscience.

There is a wide difference between toleration and liberty.

We believe that religion must be forever voluntary and uncoerced, and that it is not within the power of any civil or ecclesiastical body to compel men or women to conform to any religious creed or form of worship, or to pay taxes for the support of a religious organization to which they do not belong and whose creed they do not believe.

(see over)

As early as 1612, English Baptist John Smyth drew the line between church and state when he penned that "the magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force or compel men to this or that form of religion, or doctrine; but to leave Christian religion free, to every man's conscience, and to handle only civil transgression (Romans 13), injuries and wrongs of man against man, in murder, adultery, theft, etc., for Christ only is the king, the lawgiver of the church and conscience" (James 4:12).

The next year one of his contemporaries, Thomas Helwys, a Baptist leader and pastor in England, was thrown into Newgate Prison by order of King James I for writing, "The King is a mortal man and not God, therefore hath no power over the immortal souls of his subjects to make laws and ordinances for them and to set spiritual Lords over them."

III. Baptists and some other evangelical Christians believe the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century was incomplete in some respects, particularly in respect to religious liberty.

A. Martin Luther and the other Reformers were courageous in fighting for the scriptural principle of justification by faith alone, yet they mistakenly retained the doctrines of infant baptism and a state church.

Luther used the civil power of the German princes to crush the Peasants rebellion and the Anabaptist struggles for freedom of conscience.

Zwingli used the power of the sword to unite church and state in Switzerland.

Calvin burned Servetus, and Melancthon approved.

John Knox and his associates united church and state in Scotland, and Henry VIII did the same thing in England, while marching with heavy civil power over all semblances of religious liberty.

Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, which attempted to grant some measure of toleration (not genuine religious liberty) to the Protestants; he outlawed the Protestant Huguenots and killed the mighty Baptist leader, Balthasar Hubmaier.

Holland killed her noblest statesman of that time, John of Barneveldt, and condemned to life imprisonment her ablest historian, writer, poet, and thinker, Hugo Grotius, for conscience' sake.

In England, John Bunyan and other Baptists and dissenters were kept in jail for years and cruelly persecuted because of their religious beliefs and preferences.

B. Even in the American colonies in the New World the early pages of our history were crimsoned with the undeniable accounts of religious persecutions.

In Massachusetts, Henry Dunster, the first president of Harvard, was removed from the presidency because he objected to infant baptism.

Roger Williams was banished.

John Clarke was put in prison.

Enemies of religious liberty publicly whipped Obadiah Holmes on Boston Common.

In Connecticut the lands of our Baptist ancestors were confiscated and their goods sold to build a meeting house and support a preacher of another denomination.

Throughout Virginia people were fined and put in prison and persecuted everywhere for the sake of conscience.

C. Baptists were joined by some Presbyterians and other Christians in their cause for religious liberty, and eventually political leaders like Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Patrick Henry, and others, joined them, and it was finally written into our country's constitution that church and state in this land must be forever free, that neither must ever trespass upon the distinctive functions of the other.

And it was mainly a Baptist achievement, as all who know their early American history well understand. This does not mean, as the Baptist Joint Committee states, that religious liberty is the sole possession of Baptists; it belongs by God's decree to all humanity, even to the unredeemed."

IV. What are the Sources of these Blessings associated with Religious Liberty in our country?

A. Respect for the beliefs of others, and the recognition of the SPIRITUAL unity of all true believers in Christ, regardless of which church they are members of, or of no church at all. However, this does not at all imply ORGANIZATIONAL unity.

B. Acceptance of the doctrine of the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ.

There is only one High Priest for sinful humanity, who has entered into the holy place for all; the veil is forever rent in twain, and the mercy seat is uncovered and open to all, and the humblest soul in all the world, if only he is penitent and believing, may enter with all boldness and cast himself upon God.

C. Acceptance of the Bible as our only rule of faith and practice, and of the competency of each child of God, led by the Holy Spirit, to interpret this Word of God for himself or herself.

D. Freedom of conscience of the individual Christian. No church or ecclesiastical organization controls the channels of God's grace or can lord it over the conscience enlightened by the Holy Spirit. Everyone has the right of private judgment.

E. Importance of the individual as against state, church, or society. Every one must repent, believe, and be saved for himself, be baptized for himself, and give account of himself to God.

Neither other persons nor institutions may dare to come between the individual soul and God.

"There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."

Our understanding of Religious Liberty grows out of our acceptance of the above principles.

We believe if other Christians, or religious people of other religious faiths, held to similar beliefs, there would be no state churches and no religious states where church and state are united as they are in some other countries of the world in our day.

People would then "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's," but they would not confuse the two.

We would have a happier world if everywhere we had a truly free church in a truly free state.

V. What is then the Outgrowth of our discussion of these blessings of Religious Freedom?

A. We need to thank God for, and treasure highly, these blessings, and resolve that the principle of religious liberty is carefully preserved through all our days and the days of those who come after us.

B. We must see that this liberty is not abused.

C. We need to determine that we will by the grace of God be the right kind of Christians God wants us to be -- well-informed, sensitive, aware, prayerful, spiritual, and committed to Christ.

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