

First Place Sermon – 2003

Dissenting Baptists: The Glory of a Hated People
Matthew 10:22

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Baptists suffer, or find glory in, a long tradition of dissenting and being hated for dissenting. Most typically, this dissent has been from an established church and often a prevailing culture or oppressive governments. At times, dissent has even come from other Baptists who have not lived up to the expectations of the New Testament.

The first volume of the *History of Beaufort County, South Carolina* ends at 1861 with a description of one of the state's well-known Baptist pastors, William Henry Brisbane: "He became, to the white population, the most hated man in the Beaufort District."¹

The New Testament warns that active Christian witnesses should expect hatred, and Baptists have sought to be distinctly and intensely New Testament. Most straightforward is Jesus' assertion to the Twelve: "and you will be hated by all for my name's sake" (Matt. 10:22; Mark 13:13; Luke 21:17).² The critical qualifier, of course, is "for my name's sake," and it was for this that Pastor Brisbane was hated. To the beatitudes Jesus added: "Woe to you, when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets" (Luke 6:26). Few, if any, spoke well of this Baptist preacher.

Why should an ordinary Baptist preacher be most hated "by all" in a district of the low country and sea islands heavily populated by Baptists? Why, specifically, by whites and, moreover, all the whites? The answer dramatizes the glory of a hated man, the glory of a man hated for Christ's sake—a Baptist in the long tradition of dissenting preachers and hated men.

Jesus warned us to anticipate being hated. How can we apply this text to our own experience? Just this: If we are to be hated, let's do the gospel in such a way that any hatred, even "by all," is unmistakably "for my name's sake." If we accomplish this much, we shall be in a goodly company of Baptists. Baptists—if not necessarily by theological definition, then at least by historical description—are dissenters, and being hated has been part of our glorious heritage.

The Brisbane family were classical South Carolina aristocrats—wealthy, socially prominent, politically connected, and religiously respectable slaveholding planters. William Henry was born in 1806 at

Black Swamp in Upper Saint Peter's Parish. Though much of the Brisbane family was Baptist, William was adopted at age six by a wealthy, childless uncle who was a warden of a Charleston Anglican church. His adopted father reared him in the Anglican Church and gave him the classical New England education of a southern gentleman. Yet, at Baptist service in New Haven, Connecticut, Brisbane heard the preaching of Benjamin H. Hill, "the first preacher who made any sense to me," and Brisbane became a Christian believer.³

Upon his return to the South, he was baptized by the Pipe Creek Baptist Church, married into the well-known Baptist family of Lawtons, and studied at the Furman Academy and Theological Institution in Edgefield. His church (now Lawtonville Church in Estill) ordained him, and he became its pastor and, successively, pastor of several planter churches in the low country. He earnestly received his slaves ("property of Bro. Brisbane," the Beech Branch church records have it) as balcony-only members.⁴ Brisbane also received a Doctor of Medicine degree from the Medical College of South Carolina and published the first Baptist periodical outside Philadelphia, *The Southern Baptist and General Intelligencer*, the stated mission of which was to support slavery as a biblically mandated social and economic institution.

While attempting to refute the antislavery writings of Francis Wayland, Brisbane's own argument made no sense to him. (You don't know what you think until you read what you write.) He modified his views to the point of claiming that although the Bible does not specifically teach slaveholding, its language does allow it, and, surely, God understood it to be an economic necessity in South Carolina. Besides, "Negroes" were childlike and dependent on whites to protect them. Slavery was an evil, to be sure, but it seemed to Brisbane to be a necessary evil. If not necessary, then at least slavery was inescapable. Even this weaker position, however, was intolerable to his Baptist readers, and they reacted by canceling subscriptions to his paper, which eventually failed.

What troubled Brisbane most deeply and profoundly was the consideration that blacks were undeniably human beings. While some whites rationalized that blacks must be subhuman, I have not found this to have been the prevailing view among slaveholding Baptists. What distinguished Brisbane from his contemporaries was his willingness to carry the argument to its logical conclusion. If human, blacks were to be accorded all rights.

Brisbane remembered the apostle Paul: "For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, . . . There is neither . . . slave nor free" (Gal. 3:26-29). "Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, . . . slave, free man,

but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:9-11, Rom. 10:12). Brisbane eventually sold his field hands as an act of divestiture for the sake of conscience, which only exacerbated animosity as it pricked the consciences of other slaveholders. Concern for safety led him to flee the South, and in 1837, he moved his household (family and domestic slaves) to Cincinnati and became pastor of its First Baptist Church.

Brisbane’s call to the Cincinnati church was conditioned on his not mentioning slavery. The Baptists there were not for slavery; they were simply for church harmony and good public relations. The congregation—like the town—was in tension on this issue, and the city was becoming a hotbed of abolitionists. The abolitionists persuaded Brisbane to talk to the Female Antislavery Society in 1840, and he let loose in a way that surprised even himself. This was too much for the deacons of his church, and he lost his pulpit. Baptists again were driving him out—but this time it was Baptists in the North!

Now more determined to be a preacher of soul liberty and the priesthood of believers, Brisbane founded the Sixth Baptist Church to accommodate antislavery people and to have the freedom to preach the whole counsel of God as he was beginning to recognize it.

In 1841, his conscience led him to free the domestic slaves he had brought with him from South Carolina. He turned to a close friend, a local lawyer, Salmon Portland Chase, to execute the papers of manumission. The now-freed slaves elected to stay with the family as unpaid but cared-for servants and live out their lives in his employ. Not only had he preached abolition of slavery, he had now practiced it.

Yet his conscience drove him further. Brisbane returned south, repurchased his field slaves, and freed them. Both his earlier sale, at a deflated price, and the subsequent repurchase, at an inflated cost, without recovery of his capital investment were fiscal disasters. Although his wife complained bitterly about their financial condition, he spoke of the example of his Lord, “For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life?” (Mark 8:34-37). In quoting these verses to his wife, he was but following the example of the apostle Paul: “As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way . . . as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor. 6:3f; 10; 8:8-9).

Brisbane brought the slaves to Baltimore to free and released his frustration by writing a column for his abolitionist newspaper, *Saturday Visitor*. In his column, he stated that he had freed his slaves so they would be free, to be sure, but he also freed them so he would be free. If he could not as much as raise a

question about slavery in his pulpits or his newspaper, he was not free to preach God's unconditional and boundary-less love where there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free. With the apostle again, Brisbane asked: "Am I not free?" (1 Co. 9:1). He had preached: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1, 13,14). Could there ever have been a servant of God who had more come to grips with the truth of his Lord: "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32).

Brisbane then began writing abolitionist tracts, including "A Letter from William Henry Brisbane to the Baptist Denomination in South Carolina." He then smuggled the tracts into the South. He gave speeches on behalf of abolitionist candidates for congress, worked with Levi Coffin in the Underground Railroad, raised money to defend fugitives slave, and testified in court on their behalf. His abolitionist newspaper attacked slavery as much as his Charleston paper had promoted it. He published antislavery novels and an exposition, *Slavery Examined in the Light of the Bible* (1847).

Distress came from within his family. His wife Anna never became convinced of the evils of slavery and deeply resented his having taken her from their beloved South Carolina. For months at a time, she refused to allow him into her bed. He worked out his agony in his journals, but he never wavered in his convictions.

Brisbane understood—by experience—Jesus' assertions: "'Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother. . . . If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple'" (Matt. 10:34-39; Lk. 14:25-28, 33-35).

In 1848, Brisbane did agree, however, to take Anna back to South Carolina for a visit and promised not to engage in abolitionist activities or speak of slavery while there. Yet, after she retired at night, he would sit up for hours arguing with his friends about slavery. In the middle of one night, a worried relative awoke the family to warn that an angry mob was on its way to tar-and-feather the traitor, and the Brisbanes fled hastily.

Brisbane was not a first-rank abolitionist, mind you, but he knew them all. And he stood head and shoulders above those better known because he not only opposed slavery and fought against it, but he had actually freed his slaves. He spoke with a conviction few could share.

In 1853, he “removed” to Wisconsin, founded the town of Arena, and became chief clerk of the state senate and vice president of the American Medical Association. From his pulpit of Madison’s First Baptist Church, he preached to regiments being mustered for the Civil War. One sermon, “Duty of the Northern States in Relation to the Future of Slavery,” cost him yet one more pulpit.

During the war, C. C. Washburn formed the 2nd Wisconsin Cavalry and appointed Brisbane as regimental chaplain. Then his Cincinnati friend S. P. Chase, now Lincoln’s treasury secretary, appointed Brisbane chairman of the U. S. Direct Tax Commission for South Carolina. His assignment was to confiscate the abandoned plantations in the Port Royal area, now occupied by the union army, sell them for taxes owed, and put the abandoned slaves to working small farms. His family, friends, and former neighbors, of course, had owned these plantations and the slaves.

For turning from a proslavery position to antislavery activities, for selling and then freeing his own field slaves, for freeing his domestic slaves, for becoming a nationally known and strongly influential abolitionist, and for aiding fugitive slaves to escape the country through the Underground Railroad—for all this, Brisbane was hated as a traitor to the South. This final offense—this actual “stealing” of their personal “property” in both real estate and humans—was treason beyond words to describe, but the people of the South found such words.

In researching Brisbane’s inherited plantation north of Charleston, I found this 1918 assessment in an otherwise fine piece of historical writing:

After selling the property [he] removed to Wisconsin, whence he returned to his native State in 1864 in the pay of the enemy as one of that confiscatory body created by the conqueror and dressed with a little brief authority used it to oppress and humiliate his former fellow countrymen.

Whilst time has dulled the memory of much of the bitter pangs of that terrible period yet his name must recall it to all who had to endure the arbitrary insolence of those who then abused the places of authority, and it is with no pleasure the chronicler records him among the South Carolinians who possessed a home upon the Ashley river.⁵

Strange, how such bitter and hostile words can fall so agreeably upon the ear. Brisbane was willing to bear such shame and humiliation from those whom he had never stopped loving in a community from

which he had fled with his body without ever having abandoned it in his heart. He was willing, in a word, to “be hated by all for my name’s sake.”

On New Year’s Day 1863, Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation became effective, but only those at Port Royal were able to claim their freedom. When Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson introduced Brisbane to read the proclamation, he commented it was “an infinitely appropriate thing” for Brisbane to be the reader.

How very much in the spirit of Christ: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives . . . to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19, Isa. 61:1-2).

On New Year’s Day 1997, I was invited to a reenactment and read the proclamation in place of my great, great grandfather. An African American choir sang, “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder,” with haunting voices telling me something I felt without understanding. What I did understand was being hugged to black breasts. I had come to a home I had never before known.

That evening, I dined with a white Episcopal priest who is a direct descendent of my grandfather’s overseer and my cousin. This was the first person from that side of the family any of us had met in over 134 years, but he was the very soul of the southern gentleman. He said, ironically: “We will forgive you, but we will never, ever forgive your grandfather.”

By this time, it didn’t matter. I had basked in the glory of a hatred man, a glorious man who had been hatred for the sake of Christ’s name, a Baptist in every New Testament sense.

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¹Lawrence S. Rowland, Alexander Moore, and George C. Rogers Jr., *The History of Beaufort County, South Carolina, vol. 1, 1514–1861* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 417.

²Bible quotations are Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted. Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

³William Henry Brisbane, *Journal*, 3 September 1857, Archives, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

⁴Minutes of the Beech Branch Baptist Church, Luray, SC, 10 January 1831. Microfiche.

⁵Henry A. M. Smith, “Charleston and Charleston Neck,” *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, 19/1 (January 1918), 49-50.