

First Place Winner – 2002

## Standing Firm for Freedom

Galatians 5:1-15

*Steven R. Harmon*

“Freedom” is probably the word we use most frequently to describe the American experience. As Americans we enjoy freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, the freedom to earn a living of our own devising.

But long before “freedom” became a characteristically American word, it was a thoroughly Christian word. The earliest Christians often described their experience of God’s salvation in Christ as a passage from slavery to freedom. Salvation as freedom from slavery is an idea that runs throughout the New Testament, but it’s especially prominent in the letters of Paul, in particular Paul’s letter to the Christians of the region of Galatia in Asia Minor. In fact, the Book of Galatians has sometimes been called the “Magna Charta” of Christian freedom.<sup>1</sup>

I invite you to think with me about the implications of what Paul has to say about *Christian* freedom for how we live as Christian citizens, especially Baptist Christian citizens, in a free country. Hear now the word of the Lord through the apostle Paul in Galatians, chapter 5, verse 1-15.

The word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

We learn from Paul that *freedom is basic to the Christian experience*. It is “*for freedom*” that Christ has set us free, Paul writes in verse 1.<sup>2</sup> That idea was so important for Paul that his language sounds almost redundant: Christ sets us free so that we can be free.

Why does Paul put things quite that way? Why not simply say, “Christ has set us free?” Why the emphasis—“*for freedom* Christ has set us free”?

It may be that Paul understood freedom not only as something characteristically Christian but also as something characteristically human. To be human is to be created in the image of God. To be made in the image of God means many things, but one very important part of what it means to be created in the image of God is to be free.

Freedom is, in the first place, one of God’s own attributes. God is free to create or not to create;

God is free to create any kind of universe God chooses; God is free to save or not to save. The free God created us in God's image as creatures endowed with freedom—freedom to choose good or evil, right or wrong, light or darkness, life or death, heaven or hell.

But the first human beings chose evil rather than good, and every single one of us after them has chosen evil rather than good, with the result that all of us became slaves—slaves to sin, in bondage to the evil we choose.

Apart from Christ, our freedom to choose good is limited—we're still able to do good and beautiful things, but we frequently find it far easier to do what is wrong than to do what is right. What Christ does in setting us free is to restore the freedom of the image of God. We're still capable of doing evil—if we weren't, we wouldn't be truly free. But now through Christ we're free to live as God created us to live, because Christ through the Holy Spirit gives us the power to live righteously, to live a life that reflects the very character of God. It is *for freedom* that Christ has set us free.

Freedom is basic to the Christian experience in general, but *it is basic to the Baptist Christian experience in particular*. The earliest Baptists were people who found themselves spiritually enslaved by a government that required them to worship a certain way. In 1609, a small band of persecuted dissenters from the official state church in England found refuge and freedom in the Netherlands. In Amsterdam, they formed the first Baptist congregation of which we have record. John Smyth, one of the cofounders of that first Baptist church, wrote a confession of faith for his congregation with these words about religious freedom: “[T]he 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 transgressions . . . .”<sup>3</sup>

Some of these Amsterdam Baptists became convinced that despite the risks, they should take their faith back to their homeland, and so in 1612, a group led by Thomas Helwys established the first Baptist church on English soil in Spitalfields. But soon they suffered severe persecution. Helwys himself was thrown into Newgate Prison in 1613 by order of King James I for daring to write this: “The King is a mortall man and not God, therefore hath no power over ye immortall soules of his subjects to make lawes and ordinances for them and to set spirituall Lords over them.”<sup>4</sup> Three years later Helwys died in prison, and for years thereafter the early English Baptists suffered greatly for their faith in a “Christian” nation with a state-supported church.

But eventually some of these Baptists made their way to the American colonies, where they not only found freedom for their faith but also made significant contributions to the American approach to religious freedom. It was pressure from Baptists that led James Madison to push for the amendments to the Constitution known as the Bill of Rights, including the First Amendment mandating that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”<sup>5</sup>

Religious freedom, guaranteed by the separation of church and state, is a distinctively Baptist contribution to the freedoms we enjoy today as American citizens. We of all people ought to understand that freedom is right at the very core of the Christian experience.

We learn from Paul not only that freedom is basic to the Christian experience, but also that *freedom is a precious commodity and must be zealously guarded*. Paul continues in verse 1, “Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Paul was writing to a group of Christians who were tempted to give up their birthright of freedom in Christ. Through Paul’s ministry they had learned that Christ had set them free from having to do certain things or perform certain rituals or follow certain customs in order to be rightly related to God. But now another group of Christians had tried to tell them that simple faith in Christ wasn’t enough; they contended that those who wanted to join the people of God must first become Jews—obey the Jewish law and, if they were male, become circumcised. But Paul used pretty strong language (for a minister!) in opposing this threat to freedom in Christ: “I wish that those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!”

Today, as in Paul’s day, threats to religious freedom abound. I’m not suggesting that we should imitate Paul in telling those who threaten religious liberty what they ought to do to themselves, but I am saying that religious freedom is a precious commodity and is worth every effort it takes to preserve it.

If you saw Stephen Spielberg’s film *Saving Private Ryan*, you were reminded just how costly it was to secure the freedom the Western world enjoys today. It was similarly costly for the early Baptists who endured imprisonment and torture and even died martyr’s deaths for their insistence that people be free to worship according to the dictates of their consciences, or even not to worship at all.

Thomas Helwys died in prison in 1616 partly for insisting, “Let them be heretickes, Turcks [that is, Muslims], Jewes, or whatsoever it apperteynes not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.”<sup>6</sup> Freedom is a precious commodity, and we who are heirs to the Baptist tradition of religious freedom ought to guard it zealously.

Freedom is basic to the Christian experience. Freedom is precious, and ought to be zealously guarded. We also learn from Paul that *freedom is best guarded when we focus on others rather than ourselves*. In verse 13 he wrote, “do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.” The paradox of our freedom is that we are most free when we abandon our slavery to self for a voluntary slavery to others.

Paul went on to support this idea by echoing Jesus’ summary of the whole Old Testament law as loving God and loving neighbor just as much as we care for our own selves. We can look at freedom in one of two ways. We can see freedom as independence *from* others, or we can see freedom as independence *for* others. We can see freedom as freedom for *me*, freedom for me to do whatever *I* want. Or we can see freedom as freedom for *us*. We can see our freedom as inextricably linked to the freedom of others. Gospel freedom is not freedom for self, but rather freedom for self in relation to others.

Let me illustrate the difference between these two understandings of freedom in terms of two different approaches to religious freedom that existed in Colonial New England. One approach was that of the Puritans who founded the Massachusetts Bay colony. In the words of Baptist church historian Leon McBeth, these colonists were militant Puritans, filled with godly zeal and rigid intolerance for any who differed from their theocratic concepts. They succeeded in establishing the Congregational Church as the state-sponsored religion of most of New England. This alliance of church and state called for religious conformity as a prerequisite to good citizenship. This meant the harsh persecution of all who dared to differ from the official religion.<sup>7</sup>

Ironically these Puritan Congregationalists had fled England because they themselves had been persecuted for differing from the official state religion. They wanted freedom for themselves, but they didn’t want to extend that freedom to others.

One of those others was a minister named Roger Williams. In 1636, Roger Williams was banished from the Massachusetts colony for dissenting from the state church and questioning the authority of the state government in religious matters. Williams and several of his friends bought land from native Americans—which I should point out was a remarkable thing: while other colonies were established on land seized from native Americans, Williams believed the land belonged rightfully to them and should be purchased from them. On this land they founded the colony of Providence, which later became the state of Rhode Island. In Providence Williams founded the first Baptist church in America. As one of the

earliest Baptists in America, Roger Williams helped shape the concept of religious liberty for all that is so much a part of our American freedoms today. In Providence he established a secular state, a state separate from church, in which Catholics, Muslims, Jews, and even atheists had the same freedoms as Baptists and other Protestants. Roger Williams understood religious freedom as freedom *for others*.<sup>8</sup>

When we fail to guard religious freedom as freedom *for others*, the result is what Paul suggests in verse 15: we bite and devour one another, and are in danger of consuming one another. When freedom is nothing more than freedom for self, we become a nation of special interest groups at war with one another, with each side trying to win freedom only to do what it wants and sometimes to have others to do what it wants. This is a special temptation for Baptists at the beginning of the twenty-first century. When we were a persecuted minority, we took great pains to secure freedom not only for us but also for others with whom we disagreed. Now that in many parts of the country Baptists comprise a majority of the population, we're tempted to use our freedom selfishly and even to use the authority of the state to impose our faith and morality on others. We need to remind ourselves of Jesus' teaching: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you."<sup>9</sup>

Once upon a time in our part of America, we took it for granted that most people believed as we believe and prayed to God in the name of Jesus just like we do. We routinely solemnized all kinds of public events, including high school football games, by pausing for prayer. It never occurred to us that there might be religious minorities in our midst, religious minorities like we once were, who might feel that prayer at state-sponsored events put the government's stamp of approval on one particular form of religion. But today we live in a multi-cultural society of multiple religious traditions. We need to remember to do unto others as we would have them do unto us if we were in their shoes.

Recently, I shared some of these ideas about Baptists and religious freedom during a Baptist Heritage Sunday service at another church in North Carolina. After the service a woman lingered until most of the congregation had left and introduced herself to me. She began, "I'd like to talk to you about something you said in your sermon." Uh-oh, I thought to myself. "I'm a public school teacher here," she said. Now she's about to let me have it, I thought. But she continued, "For years, we've been starting our parent-teacher association meetings with prayer, and no one thought anything about it. But recently, we've had several families from Asian countries move into our area, and it occurred to me that they might not feel comfortable with Christian prayers; maybe they'd want us to use some prayers from

their own religions, too. I just think the best thing we could do is not to pray at all in our meetings!”

She understood well the traditional Baptist approach to religious freedom as freedom for others.

Freedom is the essence of what it means to be a Christian, especially the essence of what it means to be a Baptist Christian in America. It’s a precious, painfully-costly principle we ought to make every effort to guard. We do that most effectively when we focus on guarding the freedoms of others rather than just our own freedoms. Will you join our Baptist fathers and mothers in the faith in standing firm for religious freedom? May God make that so, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Noted in, e.g., the introduction to Galatians in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, Revised Standard Version*, ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 1410. The remark that Galatians is “the Magna Charta of Christian freedom” or “the Magna Charta of Christian liberty” is frequently repeated in commentaries and published sermons on Galatians, but without attribution. Identification of the original source of this observation would be an interesting but minutial contribution to the history of the interpretation of Galatians.

<sup>2</sup>All quotations of Scripture are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Higher Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

<sup>3</sup>*Propositions and Conclusions Concerning True Christian Religion*, § 84, in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed., ed. William L. Lumpkin (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1969), 140. This confession was actually published by members of Smyth’s party after his death in 1612, but Smyth personally authored the first draft (Lumpkin, 123-24).

<sup>4</sup>W. T. Whitley, *A History of British Baptists* (London: 1923), 33, quoted in Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1963), 489.

<sup>5</sup>See H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 281–83.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (London:1612), 69, quoted in McBeth, 86.

<sup>7</sup>McBeth, 124.

<sup>8</sup>Biographical information on Williams based on McBeth, 124–36.

<sup>9</sup>Matthew 7:12.