

'I Will Open Your Graves': Freedom Speech in the Land of Dry Bones

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Ezekiel 37:1-14, Galatians 5 (selections)

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A teacher in an urban school with a religiously diverse student population asked the kids to bring something to class related to each family's faith tradition. One by one, the students came before the class for a show-and-tell.

The first child said, "I am Catholic and this is my rosary."

The second child said, "I am Jewish and this is my Star of David."

The third child said, "I am Muslim and this is my prayer rug."

The fourth child said, "I am Baptist and this is my casserole dish."

It's a funny story. But maybe more significant than it first appears, since every war is ultimately a war over bread.

Some of you know I recently traveled to Santiago, Chile, to speak at the annual meeting of the Baptist World Alliance Division of Justice and Freedom. The theme for this year's gathering was the 400th anniversary of the writing of an historic document. In 1612 Thomas Helwys, a trained lawyer and co-founder of the very first Christian congregation with the word *Baptist* in its name, wrote a polemical essay critiquing the Church of England entitled "A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity." Near the close of that essay was language now considered to be the first published demand for universal religious freedom written in English.

"Let them be heretics, Jews or whatever," Helwys wrote, "it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure." [i] Though we now take such convictions for granted, at the time this was an incendiary political demand. Not only did Helwys publish the essay, he actually sent a copy to the English King James I with a personal inscription on the title page.

In response, King James tossed Helwys in the Newcastle prison, where he would die a few years later.

Some three decades later Roger Williams, the Puritan pastor and colonial immigrant to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, provoked a similar controversy with his outspoken support of religious liberty: "It is the will and command of God that . . . a permission of the most paganish, Jewish, Turkish [meaning Muslim] or antichristian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries." [ii]

We often forget that the "illegal aliens" we know as the Puritans did not come to the "New World" to practice universal religious liberty. They only wanted religious liberty for themselves.

Williams would eventually be forced into exile, into the wilderness now known as the state of Rhode Island, where he would found the very first self-named Baptist Church in the American hemisphere.

By the way, when Williams was expelled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the first of four charges of which he was convicted was his claim "that we have not our land by patent from the king, but that the natives are the true owners of it, and that we ought to repent of such a receiving of it by patent." [iii] First Baptist Church of Providence, Rhode Island, still stands as a witness to one of the first European voices advocating for the rights of indigenous Americans. More than a century later, when U.S. revolutionary leaders were hammering out a constitution for the new republic, Connecticut Baptist pastor John Leland would assert: "The Gospel is not to be supported by law. . . . Each individual having a right to differ from all others in opinion if he is so persuaded," and these would include "Jews, Turks [Muslims], heathens, papists and deists." [iv]

We tend to forget that at the time the Congregational Church of New England, and the Anglican Church in the Mid-Atlantic states, were established by law. All other Christian bodies were seen as heretical and, in the language of one Massachusetts court case, considered "incendiaries of the commonwealth." [v]

Don't you like that phrase—incendiaries of the commonwealth? Literally, "incendiary" means to torch or to burn or to send up in flames. More figuratively, it means to undermine or call into question. I happen to think the church should be such a figurative "incendiary of the commonwealth" because, in fact, the wealth now possessed is not at all common. I think there's a good chance that, if we are faithful to our

calling as followers of Jesus, we will be considered a threat to the present arrangements, to the political consensus and current economic patterns. But that's another sermon.

Most of you will know immediately what I mean when I say it's sometimes embarrassing to be a Baptist—given the dominant image in the media about who Baptists are and what Baptists stand for. When I was midway through my college studies and transferred from Baylor University in Texas to New York University, I did so in part because I was embarrassed to be a Southerner, I was embarrassed to be a Baptist, and I wasn't entirely sure if I was a Christian. Thankfully, I came to learn that New Yorkers can be just as parochial as Southerners (just in different ways) and that there was a generous history of Baptist-flavored folk I knew nothing about.

I uncovered a legacy of Baptist and Anabaptist history I could be proud of, representatives not so much of a particular set of distinctive doctrines as a way of being in the world, expressive of certain impulses and angles of vision. And soon I took the lead of one of my teachers and friends, the Baptist theologian James McClendon, who referred to himself as a "small-b baptist."

Some of those highly controversial early Baptist and Anabaptist impulses are things like "soul freedom," meaning freedom of conscience, particularly each individual's authority to read and interpret Scripture; and congregational polity, meaning each congregation decides its own common life without oversight of bishops or other hierarchy; and separation of church and state, which in this country was guaranteed by the First Amendment to the U.S. constitution and for which colonial Baptist leaders' lobbying efforts deserve the principal credit.

If I were to reword the impulses considered essential to early Baptist and Anabaptist identity, here's how it would look:

- First up: The principal small-b baptist impulse is that of democratizing access to the Holy. The Spirit and Word of God need not be filtered through the authority of any hierarchy. That is to say, baptism is the first and foremost authority to understanding and following Jesus. Participating in *the Way of Jesus* is the key to discerning the believer's calling in the world.

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- Second: The denial that membership in the state and membership in the church are coterminous. That's a fancy way of saying that being a citizen does not make you a believer. The former is a given; the latter must be a conscientious choice. Or to say it another way, the interests of the state and the interests of the believing community are not always parallel and harmonious. Fact is, they're often in conflict. It was King James I, who left Helwys to rot in prison, who said, "It would be only half a king who controlled his subject's bodies but not their souls."^[vii]

Most often, the state's abiding and dominating interest is survival. Not so for the ana/baptist revolution, for which they paid dearly in Europe, England, and in colonial America.

- My rendition of the third small-b baptist distinctive is this: Delegitimizing coercion, violence, and war in the name of God. As Roger Williams wrote in his book *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, people of other faith—or of no faith whatsoever—"are only to be fought against with that sword which is only, in soul matters, the Word of God."^[viii]

Steel swords are forbidden. God is not and will not be the sponsor of our wars. Indeed, Williams insisted that it is "directly contrary to the nature of Christ Jesus . . . that throats of men should be torne out for his sake."^[viii] Advocating for religious liberty is one of many forms of practicing nonviolence.

To sum it up: Freedom is the small-b baptist contribution to modern political life, though you wouldn't know it now, given the repressive nature of much of what goes by the name *Baptist*. Most other Christian bodies have now integrated these virtues into their own public lives. It's what the highly respected American church historian Martin Marty calls the "baptistification" of denominational life in the U.S.^[ix] By which this Lutheran historian meant to say that key Baptist impulses about freedom have come to saturate all confessional traditions.

"Freedom" was the watchword in the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Galatia. Or, to say it more accurately, the abandonment of freedom was the accusation he lodged against this young Christian community. "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1). The argument in that community was whether new Gentile members of the

congregation were expected to conform to traditional Jewish purity requirements, particularly the requirement of male circumcision.

I mean, it's right there in the Bible! God said it. I believe it. That means it's true!!

Given current realities, I have to confess I'm deeply ambivalent about "freedom" language. There are times I think we should stop using that word altogether. But, at the very least, I think we must always be suspicious about its use and ask "Just exactly what do you mean when you advocate freedom?"

Barely two years ago the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that large corporations are legally considered to be "persons"—that's right, Exxon-Mobil and Citibank are now human beings—and as such their constitutionally protected "freedom of speech" cannot be limited. Which means there is no limit on the amount of money they can contribute to political candidates. We are well on our way to having literally the best politicians money can buy. This is not the freedom our Baptist forebears and the Apostle Paul had in mind.

Freedom has also come to mean the sanction of market forces penetrating the economy of every country in service to what is considered a "neutral" moral vision governed purely by the "invisible hand of the market." I can assure you, corporate capitalism's moral vision is not neutral, and the "invisible hand" that guides it is not disinterested. This is not the freedom we proclaim.

Freedom has also come to mean legal sanction of pre-emptive war. That authority is now enshrined in the official U.S. National Security Strategy Paper of 2002. This is not the freedom we proclaim.

So what kind of freedom can we proclaim—in good conscience, without reservation and wholeheartedly?

"In the language of the Bible," German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "freedom is not something you have for yourself but something you have for others." At its deepest level, freedom is not something someone gives you. Freedom is what you assume. Then, when someone comes to take it away, the amount of resistance you offer is the degree to which you are free.

The freedom we declare takes shape in a spirituality that has something to say to Ezekiel as that shell-shocked prophet stands before the valley of dry bones. Much of the time we stand with him, similarly dazed, not knowing what to say when the Voice of Heaven demands to know, "Can these bones live?" Much of the time, the best we can say is "Oh, Lord God, only you know." With that confession, with the acknowledgement that our assets and abilities are in no way equal to the calling we have been given—only then are we in a position to live into the Gospel profession.

We gather here, week after week, to ask these urgent questions:

- Does the Gospel we proclaim have the power to gather up those dry bones, to breathe over them, to restore the blood flow?
- Does our witness in the name of the Abba of Jesus know how to re-sinew those bones?
- Is our Holy Spirit-inspired living sufficient to grow flesh over these bones, to cause these reconstituted, resurrected bodies to stand, then to walk, then to run and not be weary . . . waiting, ever waiting on the Lord, strength renewed day by day, ready at any moment, as the Spirit prompts, to move into the abandoned places, travel into the abused places, journey into the afflicted places to announce the disarming power of the Commonwealth of God, to organize around a politics of mercy and an economy of manna, of sufficiency, to proclaim the coming Year of the Lord's favor, when debts are to be cancelled, ancestral land reclaimed, when sex-trafficked slaves are freed, when knowledge of the Lord will be like the sea covering the earth?

Only then can we hear what Ezekiel hears: "Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and I will bring you back to the land of Promise. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken **AND I WILL ACT**, says the Lord" (Ezekiel 37:12-14).

Freedom, oh freedom, freedom is coming, oh yes I know!

[i] *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, Thomas Helwys (ca. 1550-ca. 1616), edited and introduced by Richard Groves, Mercer University Press, 1998, p. 53

[ii] Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, ed. Edward Bean Underhill (Long: J. Haddon, 1848), p. 2.

[iii] Records of the 1635 General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Document E/MS II-4, online at <http://massmoments.org/teachers/primedoc.cfm?pid=23>

[iv] John Leland, *The Rights of Conscience Inalienable*, reprinted in *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland* 179 (L.F. Greene ed., 1845), pp. 188-189

[v] 1644 Massachusetts Bay Colony statute, quoted at http://www.pbministries.org/History/J. R. Graves/Old Landmarkism/old_landmarkism_15.htm

[vi] Quoted in James R. Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence, and the Elect Nation*, Waterloo, Ont., Herald Press 1991, p. 130.

[vii] *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience* (1644), quoted at http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Roger_Williams_%28theologian%29

[viii] *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience*, p. 261

[ix] Martin E. Marty, "Baptistification Takes Over," *Christianity Today* (September 2, 1983): 33-36