

BASIC BAPTIST BELIEFS

"But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required; and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more." Luke 12:48.

It is a well-known fact that Baptists have enjoyed a phenomenal growth through the centuries. But, I hasten to say that they have not become a great people through superior natural abilities. They have not reached their present enviable position because of any monopoly of mind or of method. Other groups have produced men of great minds, remarkable abilities and self-sacrificing devotion also. Others have had their share of sense and sincerity and sentiment. Close observers are aware that some Baptists have substituted doctrine for duty, profession for practice, creed for character, concentration on trivialities for dedication to vitalities. Surely there is one feature that is common to all of us, namely, the sense that there is a gap between what we are and what we ought to be. It should be quite obvious to all that the tremendous accomplishments of our Baptist people have been due largely to the fact that they have believed the teachings set forth in the Holy Scriptures, that God has been with them and that He has wonderfully blessed their concerted efforts.

As we think of the marvelous way in which God has graciously blessed and effectively used Baptists through the centuries, we can say with David, "The lines are fallen unto us in pleasant places; yea, we have a goodly heritage" (Psalm 16:6). We would do well to join Solomon in praying, "The Lord our God be with us, as he was with our fathers: let him not leave us, nor forsake us" (I Kings 8:57). In the light of all that God has done for, in, with and through the people called Baptists, and by virtue of the heritage which is ours, I would remind you of the timeless truth expressed in the words of our Lord in Luke 12:48: "Unto whomsoever much is given, of him much shall be required."

A great and glorious heritage is ours because of the names, the convictions, the doctrines and the deeds of our Baptist forebears. We must not be indifferent to or unappreciative of the heritage of vital principles and distinctive teachings which they have bequeathed to us. These faithful people, who were characterized by genuine Christian experience, thoroughly scriptural convictions and self-sacrificing devotion, labored and we are the beneficiaries of the fruits of their labors. As we think of their vision, handicaps, hardships, devotion and sacrifices, there wells up in our hearts the emotion of gratitude, immeasurable and inexpressible.

Inasmuch as the beliefs of any people determine what they are and what they do, it is very important that we periodically consider the historic Baptist distinctives which have characterized true Baptists through the centuries and made them what they are today. With reference to these distinctives which, under God, have made us what we are and have enabled us to accomplish so many things for His glory and for the benefit of others, I should like to stir your sincere minds with an analysis, an appreciation and an appeal.

I. An Analysis.

1. The authority of the Scriptures.

There must be some standard of authority in religion, even though the tendency of multitudes today is to disregard or reject all authority. There are three sources of authority for the beliefs of people: human reason, a church and the Bible. Baptists have ever insisted upon the supreme authority of the Bible. They have believed and taught that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, the only authoritative and all-sufficient rule of faith and conduct. It has been their conviction that God's will for mankind is expressed fully in the Bible, and to that will we are obligated to conform in all matters pertaining to doctrine, polity, worship, living and Christian

service. To Baptists the one standard by which all creeds and character and conduct must be tested is the Word of God. Our people have believed and preached that God's Word is used as a means to the salvation of men, is an open book to be read, studied, interpreted, believed and obeyed by all alike; that the Scriptures should have the widest possible circulation in the native languages of the people; that they should be preached throughout the world; and that any departure from the teachings recorded therein is fraught with untold evil.

2. The competency of the soul.

The competency of the individual to approach God through Christ and to deal directly with Him without the intervention of parent, priest or sacrament is a New Testament principle which has ever been dear to Baptists. God deals with men as individuals. His Word emphasizes the dignity of human personality and the supreme worth of the individual. Our people have consistently believed and taught that vital religion is essentially the free response of the individual mind, heart and will to the grace of God in Christ Jesus. Others may witness, pray for and encourage a person to receive Christ and be saved, but, as in the matter of death, no human being can be proxy for another person as he comes into a personal encounter with God in Christ. There cannot be any sponsorial performance of religious obligations. It is no more possible for one person to believe or disbelieve for another than it is for one to go to heaven or to hell in his behalf.

Made in the image of God, and therefore possessing intellect, emotion and will, man has the inalienable right to direct access to God, and with that right there must not be any interference whatsoever. "All men have an equal right to direct access to God," said Dr. E. Y. Mullins. Dr. W. R. White said, "The individual not only must act for himself; he is the only one who can. God has made him competent." Dr. J. B. Lawrence said, "Every person who ever lived or ever would live has as much inherent right to deal personally with God as any other person who ever did or ever would live."

We affirm the competency of the individual, not in the sense of human sufficiency, but in the sense of a competency under God, in matters of religion. We believe that every man is competent to make his own choices in religious matters when he has been instructed in the Word of God. It is not competency apart from the Bible, which is the revelation of God to men, but under the guidance of it. In all good conscience Baptists have been compelled to reject and oppose sacerdotalism or the putting of a priest between a soul and Christ, and sacramentarianism or the making of an ordinance an instrument or vehicle of grace, and ecclesiasticism or the putting of a church between a sinner and salvation. Every believer in Christ is a priest and can approach God through the mediation of Christ without help of any man. Christ said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). Paul wrote, "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (I Timothy 2:5).

It is only through a personal repentance toward God and a personal faith in Christ that one comes into possession of salvation. Each must repent for himself, exercise faith for himself, be baptized for himself, worship for himself, pray for himself, give for himself, obey for himself, serve for himself, die for himself and answer to God for himself. Romans 14:12 says, "So then, every one of us shall give account of himself to God." Nobody can assume that responsibility for a single one of his fellows, and no individual can repudiate his responsibility for what he thinks, says and does. For these reasons our people have always emphasized the priesthood of all believers.

3. The Lordship of Christ.

In view of all that Christ has done and is doing for us, He should have His rightful

place in our lives, which is that of Lord. His perfect manhood and divine Saviourhood are climaxed in His Lordship. Aware of it or not, every person has a lord. His master is self, Satan or the Saviour. Christ is the only rightful Lord.

Christ deserves to be the Lord of His people. His miraculous birth, sinless life, vicarious death, triumphant resurrection, loving intercession and visible return gives Him the inherent right to lordship. "And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:8-11). The title of lord belongs to Christ by right of creation, by right of the Father's appointment, by right of preservation and by right of redemption.

Christ desires lordship over the lives of His people. He wants to be trusted implicitly, loved supremely and obeyed faithfully. He desires to be the Lord of their personalities -- all that they are, their possessions -- all that they have, and their plans -- all that they hope to be.

The Lordship of Christ excludes all human authority in religion. Baptists have always believed and taught that all authority has been committed to Christ in heaven and on earth; therefore, He is entitled to absolute pre-eminence in all things. A vivid consciousness of His sovereignty is accompanied by an attempt to secure the consistent recognition of His personal and complete lordship over the souls and lives of men. His will is ever the supreme law of the Christian.

4. Religious liberty for all.

The Baptist position on the matter of religious liberty has always been crystal clear. Believing that religious liberty was an inherent and inalienable right bestowed upon man when he was created in the image of God, it has ever been the consistent, insistent and persistent contention of Baptists everywhere that religion must be forever voluntary and uncoerced, and that it is not the prerogative of any power, whether civil or ecclesiastical, to compel men 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 in whose teachings they do not believe. God desires free worshipers, and no others.

What frightful chapters have been written in history because of the disregard of this glorious principle of religious liberty, and its inevitable corollary, the separation of church and state! John Bunyan was kept in jail for twelve long years, because he utterly rejected the claim of the state to forbid his preaching the Gospel of Christ. Yonder 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, and Obadiah Holmes was publicly whipped on Boston Common; and all this, because they refused to stultify their consciences. In Connecticut, the lands of our Baptist people were confiscated and their goods sold to build a meeting house and support a preacher of another denomination. Fines and imprisonments and persecutions were everywhere in evidence in Virginia, for conscience's sake. On and on our Baptist forebears waged their unyielding battle for religious liberty, in Virginia, in the Carolinas, in Georgia, in Rhode Island, and Connecticut, and Massachusetts, and wherever they lived and labored. They dared to stand alone, to refuse to conform, though it cost them suffering and even life itself. They pleaded, and suffered, and kept on with their protests and remonstrances and memorials, until,

thank God, their contention won the approval of mighty statesmen like Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Patrick Henry and inspired the eloquence of the orators of that day. Finally it was written into our Constitution that church and state must be separate and free in this country, and that neither must ever transgress upon the distinctive functions of the other. People of various religious faiths have paid tribute to the Baptists for their being the chief instrumentality in God's hand in winning the battle for religious liberty in this country. The religious liberty which we enjoy today with so much nonchalance is a rich legacy that was bequeathed to us by our Baptist forefathers after much labor, many hardships, fiery trials and severe persecutions.

The impartial historian will ever agree with Mr. Bancroft, the American historian, who said: "Freedom of conscience, unlimited freedom of mind, was from the first the trophy of the Baptists." And such historians will also agree with the noble champion of human rights, John Locke, who said: "The Baptists were the first propounders of absolute liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty."

Baptists have been the unyielding protagonists of religious liberty, not only for themselves, but for all others. We ask for all the same rights which we claim for ourselves, whether they be believers, agnostics or atheists. Any government which shows any partiality to any religious group violates the principle of justice, transgresses inalienable human rights and defies the will of God.

5. The unending task of evangelism.

By evangelism is meant the proclamation of the good news of God in Christ with a view to winning others to faith in Christ as their personal Saviour and fidelity to Him as their Lord and Master. To this endless task Baptists have been motivated by the command of Christ, the condition of people, the welfare of the churches and the desire for personal blessings.

Christ said "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). Thus He has given us a world verse, a world vision, a world vocation and a world victory. Evangelism is not optional, but it is imperative. "Extension or extinction is the Master's ultimatum" said William Carey.

II. An Appreciation.

As we have thought of the vision, hardships, devotion and sacrifices of our denominational forebears, surely our hearts have been filled with genuine appreciation. They have certainly bequeathed to us a legacy which money cannot buy.

Any Baptist who does not rejoice in the history of his denomination must be pitifully ignorant or he must be hopelessly unappreciative of Christian intelligence and heroic endurance. A glance over the brilliant path which Baptist heroes and martyrs have made through the dark centuries should arouse in us a holy enthusiasm for the loyal adherence of our fathers to the Word of God, and for the heroic faith which made them willing to or die in support of the truths they held. We would be unworthy sons of these noble and sainted sires if we did not thank God for their lives, and if we did not dedicate ourselves afresh to the maintenance of the principles for which they were willing to go to the dungeon and the stake.

III. An Appeal.

Inasmuch as Christ has saved, sustained and supervised our people in such a wonderful manner through these centuries, and since He has entrusted to us the distinctive principles

and doctrines about which we have been thinking, I appeal to you to be faithful to the trust which He has committed unto you. Our world sorely needs the Baptist witness today. I earnestly appeal to you to be ready, by God's grace, to share our distinctive heritage with the peoples of the world. For this glorious privilege, which also carries with it a tremendous responsibility I appeal to you to thank Him with the gratitude of your heart, the praises of your lips and the testimony of your life. As you go your way rejoicing in Christ Jesus let Him smile through your face, love with your heart, speak with your tongue, work with your hands and walk with your feet. I appeal to you to let Him seek sinners through you, inspire believers with you and comfort saints through you. "Unto whomsoever much is given, of him much shall be required."

I appeal to you to do your best for Him Who has done everything for you that you could not do for yourself. Do not prove yourself unworthy of the glorious heritage which you have received from those faithful servants of our Lord who cheerfully witnessed to you in word and deed, as individuals and as a fellowship. You will be required to render an account for every opportunity that is given to you. If you miss this golden opportunity, regardless of the cause, you will never have it again. Illustration -- the purchase of the organ.