

First Baptist Church of Augusta
Soul Freedom, Personal Integrity and The Priesthood of All Believers
July 15, 2007
The Baptist Myth Series

1 Peter 2:4-10

“Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and [5] like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. [6] For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." [7] To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," [8] and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. [9] But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. [10] Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

This fall I will be celebrating an unofficial anniversary of sorts. This fall will mark twenty years in the pastorate. Admittedly, that is not a particularly long time when compared to the tenure of some of my colleagues at First Baptist Church Augusta but it gives me an opportunity to reflect all the same. I have served some very special congregations, all of them Baptist, yet all of them unique.

What makes a Baptist church, Baptist? What makes an individual Baptist? Up until I was sixteen, I wasn't even a Baptist, although I was a believer and spent most every Sunday in a Methodist church. At sixteen, I started attending First Baptist Church of Eatonton, Georgia and was introduced to the mysteries and complexities that go along with being a Baptist.

At the time, all I knew about Baptists, was what my father told me: “They carry their Bibles everywhere and they call each other “brother.” “And one more thing,” my father wisely cautioned, “When they baptize, you go all the way under, wet from head to toe.” I like that last description, “You go all the way.”

In these next few weeks, I want to nudge us to “go all the way,” as we understand what it means to be a Baptist, and more importantly, what it means to follow Jesus freely and faithfully. We need to confront some important questions. Why are you here today at a Baptist church? If you are a Baptist – and have been baptized into the faith by immersion, - why? Does it matter to you if you are a Baptist, or not? After all, I will be the first to tell you, that I do not believe God will be checking our denominational I.D.'s when we get to heaven. According to Matthew, God just wants to know how we treated “*the least of these.*” (Matthew 25)

Yet, I think it is important to reflect and consider what it means to be a part of a Baptist community of faith. It matters, because many of you are Baptists. It matters, because you are here. It matters, because you are watching us on television. It matters, because authenticity insists upon it.

For these next few weeks I am going to share with you messages about the Baptist Myth. I am not referring to something that is false or a fairy tale. The Baptist Myth speaks of the Baptist story. These messages will not be history lessons. Rather, they will be entwined with scripture, that has guided Baptists down through the centuries, and I believe guided you here this morning.

Dr. Kirby Godsey, former President and current Chancellor of Mercer University, shared his idea of what it means to be a Baptist at a “Baptist Summit,” attended by Dr. Rodger Murchison and me over a year ago. He said, “The Baptist idea is about the power of freedom and the power of grace...The Baptist idea,” he says, “is about the power of intellectual freedom, the freedom to do church, the freedom to be church, the freedom to worship, the freedom to interpret the Bible. Freedom is the generative spring of the Baptist idea.” (the Baptist Summit, p. 9.)

I like that word, that idea, that thought – “freedom.” In fact, before our own nation declared independence, Baptists were carving out a path of freedom, which leads us to the New Testament text read this morning from 1 Peter. In particular, let’s focus on two verses, five and nine: *[5] like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood...[9] But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.*

Not wishing to trivialize the text, at first glance, Peter appears to be inviting us all to don a clerical collar, each of us, all of us – to the priesthood. You have heard it from the word of God – “*We are a royal priesthood, a holy priesthood.*” In other passages of scripture, believers are described as a priestly kingdom. Sounds pretty impressive doesn’t it? The priesthood of all believers has been central to Baptist thought. This can be summed up with two simple words that distinguish the people called “Baptists”: Soul Freedom, “The freedom and responsibility of every person to relate directly to God without imposition of creed or control of clergy or government.” (Walter Shurden)

In order to fully appreciate “Soul Freedom,” we need to understand that for Christendom, it was not always that way. The Medieval Church had corrupted to the point that it was felt that one only had access to God through an ordained priest and the church’s sacraments. Martin Luther led the troop of other reformers in the early 16th century and challenged this assumption.

But, what does Priesthood of all Believers mean to us today? Has God bestowed upon us an honor and a privilege, and today, God meets us here to bask in our own radiance? No. Brothers and Sisters, God meets us here because Soul Freedom calls for responsibility - God has something for those of us in the priesthood to do.

There are a few things that this soul freedom is not. It is not extreme individualism, for we are baptized into communion. It never exists unto itself. That is, soul freedom is balanced

among the other freedoms. Finally, it is not limited to Baptists. Here are four things we celebrate about Soul Freedom:

(1) We Celebrate Individual Competency.

The gospels tell of a time when Jesus was walking among his disciples and posed a question to them, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is (Mt. 16.13)?” It was a personal question that demanded a personal response. The disciples reaction was fairly typical and even predictable. They began to blurt out what all the experts were saying – here is the prophet’s opinions, here is what the crowds are saying. If he were to ask that question of us today, we might respond, “Here is what the seminaries are saying, here is what the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship says, here is the latest resolution from the Southern Baptist Convention, or this is what Greg has said in one of his sermons.”

But the question is a personal one. Jesus leveled his question directly to the disciples and to us, “But who do you say that I am?” Part of our Baptist identity is affirming that each of us has an individual responsibility concerning our faith. Soul Freedom means that individually, we are competent in matters of faith – with or without a seminary degree!

Walter Shurden notes, “Some people, it seems, will do almost anything to avoid the responsibility for their lives.” C. Brownlow Hastings writes: “...the final choice of belief and practice must be made in the secret of the soul’s naked presence before God alone.” (The Baptist Identity, Walter Shurden, p. 31).

Soul freedom means the right to choose - and also the right to reject: “Choose this day whom you will serve...” (Joshua 24:15). It is our choice to choose or reject Christ, not someone else’s.

In the end, when we face God, what will count is not what others think – Baptists, Catholics, Presbyterians, clergy, mom & dad, etc. What will matter is how we each answer the personal question: “Who do you say that I am?”

(2) We Celebrate Personal Experience. In other words, one’s relationship with God is not just about experiencing God in community, but, it is also a personal one. Your parents cannot do it for you, one’s church cannot do it for you – it is your experience. Sometimes our experiences take on a dramatic tone, like Paul on the road to Damascus, but sometimes it is far more subtle (never knowing a time when Christ was not part of one’s life). But it is to be your own and not someone else’s.

My first “experience” was reciting the Lord’s Prayer as a child, and staring at a portrait of Jesus behind the pulpit in my daddy’s church. The next came watching a Billy Graham Crusade on television, and I subsequently gave my life over to Christ’s keeping. But, my experiences did not stop there. Another came subtly, one morning when I awoke to go to the barn for milking, and knew that God was calling me into full time service to the church. There was the time a few years later that Unity Baptist Church took a chance and called a twenty-one year old to serve as their pastor.

Soul Freedom is acknowledging an experience with the living Jesus. One time, a man who was blind since birth, was questioned by the religious authorities as to who healed him from his blindness. The man did not know all of the doctrines or teachings of scripture, he did not know what the institutions would think or the opinions of the synagogue. The man who was healed, did not even have time to counsel with his preacher. He simply said, *“One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”* (John 9:25)

Baptists readily believe that Soul Freedom means that everyone who calls themselves a Christian, should have an ongoing personal experience with the living Jesus.

(3) We Celebrate That by our Conversion, we are “ordained” into the ministry.

Bill Leonard writes, “All Christians are called to be priests, ministering to one another, and sharing the love of God to the world.” We are all called, not a select, reserved or otherwise special number.

To be honest, many times I find myself wanting a symbol for my office as a “professional minister” - you know, something like a clerical collar. A priest can waltz into a hospital and instantly be recognized as an ordained official of the church, in whom lies all sorts of spiritual secrets and ecclesiastical goodies. I come into a hospital and people assume I work with food services or maybe a grounds keeper who just likes to wear a tie. There are some who think I look ministerial. In one of my former pastorates, the local funeral homes were convinced, that if I would just wear a yarmulke I could pass as a Jewish rabbi – what do they know anyway.

Truth is, as a Baptist, the only symbol for my office is me. I am a priest not because of the kind of clothes I wear, not because I went to seminary, and not because I can put “Reverend” in front of my name. In fact, Baptists believe that every believer serves a priestly role and function.

The great Baptist preacher/theologian, Carlyle Marney, once wrote that we Baptists often interpret the priesthood of all believers, as advocating, we do not need priests. But he reminds us that, yes, we do! “We need people who will listen to us with God’s ears and speak God’s word to us.” The idea is not to get rid of priests, but to spread the responsibility around. [9] *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

So, who are the priests among us? Preachers – yes, they serve this role. But so do deacons, the ladies of WMU, and SOS, nursery workers, sound technicians, custodians and the quiet person on the pew – come to think of it – everyone who calls on Christ as their Lord and Savior serve a priestly role. And you do not even need to wear a clerical collar!

4) We Celebrate that Soul Freedom Calls us to Work for the Freedom of Others.

Dr. Tim Owings, my predecessor as pastor, preached a sermon thirteen years ago this month, about soul freedom, or competency as he described it. He said, “That for Baptists, soul competency meant a privilege, ability, and a responsibility.” That pretty much sums up this final point. We have been set apart, ordained to be priests to others. Yes, the clerical collar fits you too.

In Acts, we read of a day when John and Peter were going up to the temple to pray. There they were “accosted” by a beggar asking for money. “*But Peter said, ‘I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.’*” (Acts 3:6) Soul freedom is giving to others what you have in Christ.

The great Baptist historian, Walter Shurden, aptly put it: “Priests have two purposes: They bring God to people, and they bring people to God.” John Hewett writes, “The task of priests is to connect the heart of God with the hearts of people in ways faithful to both.” (Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: The Priesthood of all Believers, p. 63)

We are to take our priestly role with seriousness. We have to look deeply into the needs around us, as close as our own elbow, and looking is the very thing our society discourages. A couple of weeks ago, I was in Washington D.C. attending the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Assembly. While walking between the hotel and the conference center I found myself going into “urban mode” and refused to make eye contact with people. Keep walking, don’t look. Be careful to whom you share a smile with – they may want something from me after all.

But we – you and me – are called to be God’s priests here on earth. And, if we are going to be faithful to our priestly calling, then we have little choice but to look – look at the empty hands begging for a bit of change, look into the eyes of the elderly man stricken with loneliness, look at the sticky cheeks of a child who needs desperately to hear they are special. Just look – and do not call out for the minister or some specialist to solve the problem. You too, are God’s own priest.