

Augusta First Baptist Church  
Hebrews 4:12-16

The Baptist Myth: Bible Freedom and the Authority of Scripture

*NRS Hebrews 4:12 Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. 14 Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

When I began this series of messages of the Baptist Myth, that is the Baptist Story, I shared with you the words from my Church History professor, Bill Leonard. Dr. Leonard was fond of saying, “that being Baptist is messy business.”

Why is it so messy? It is messy because of the one word we have used to connect Baptist distinctives – freedom. Freedom comes not by force or coercion or manipulation. Freedom comes by grace. It is God’s gift.

Today, let us speak about another gift or grace, given to us by God, that Baptist’s have historically cherished: Bible Freedom.

On my ninth birthday, my grandparents gave me a Bible. Inside the cover, in my grandmother’s beautiful handwriting are the words, “To Greg on his ninth birthday! We love you Nan Nan and Papa.” It is a paraphrased Bible, The Living Bible. I remember reading through those pages soon after I received the gift. I was no child prodigy of the religious kind, and scripture was just as confusing then as it is to me now. I remember reading from Leviticus and Numbers and thinking to myself, “huh?” Yet, I also remember reading from the Gospels those stories of Jesus, that my Sunday School teacher talked about. These same stories would be the subject of the preacher’s sermons, and somehow I felt as though I was being let in on an ancient secret.

My first Bible has given way to many other Bibles. I imagine you expect a minister to have a fine collection of Bibles, weighing down the shelves with their cracked leather and dusty leaves, and I suppose I have my fair share – a couple of shelves at least. Added to my Bibles, are the many translations I have on computer: about twenty English translations and eighty foreign language translations.

It doesn’t matter how many Bibles I own or you own. The lesson that slowly made its way into my nine-year-old mind, is that the Bible and its stories did not belong exclusively to my preacher, Sunday School teacher, the learned class, or anyone else for that matter. They are stories of God, and God’s people freely shared for all to hear.

Hear me carefully and confessionally, the Bible is a difficult book. The entire collection we call the Bible, covers over a thousand years of history from different cultures, languages, places (as far away as Babylonia and Rome), authors and theology. George Balentine describes the collection of writings as a mountain-scape, with some peaks reaching closer to heaven than others.

Many want the Bible to be something it is not – one harmonious book, penned by one author at one time, with a tidy beginning and a conclusive end. It is better, however, to look at the Bible as a collection. It is divided into 1189 chapters, 66 books with no systemic chronology. Genesis was written centuries after some other Old Testament books. Paul's letters came years before any of the gospels were written, and Matthew is not even the first gospel written. That distinction goes to Mark.

Yet, the expansiveness and diversity of scripture need not be an excuse to trust its contents over to others. Bible freedom is a freedom granted not only to the ordained clergy, professors of theology, or scripture, or any other group of individuals. Bible freedom for Baptists, is a responsibility for every believer to read and learn from scripture, that has formed and shaped our faith down through the millennia.

What are the responsibilities of Bible freedom?

1) The Bible is held in trust within the Community. 1 Timothy 4:13: *“Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching.”*

Historically, Baptists have long maintained that the Bible is something to be read and studied regularly and routinely by the individual and the church. Through the Middle Ages, the Bible was pretty much inaccessible to the common folks, and even many churches. Two things stood in the way: inability to mass produce the Bible, and secondly, the distrust of the individual's ability to interpret for themselves. If you can keep the people ignorant, then you can control them.

Then along came the printing press in the fifteenth century and the Protestant Reformation soon after. And now, according to one survey, ninety-three percent of all Americans own at least one Bible. Baptists believe, once again, that the people can be trusted with the reading and interpreting of scripture. W.B. Johnson, the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, listed five fundamentals that characterized Baptists. One of them was “the right of each individual to judge for himself, in his views of truth, as taught in the scriptures.” Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, phrased it this way: sola scriptura – scripture alone.

It is radical, when you think about access to the Bible, because sometimes we come to different interpretations over the same text. Over the years, Christians have divided over a variety of issues: slavery, racism, the role of women, the role of ministers, the Lord's Supper, Baptism, denominations, missionaries, divorce - even facial hair!

Baptists must guard against extreme or excessive individualism. We need the context of community and tradition, to guide us under the Holy Spirit, as we read and interpret scripture. The Bible should never be read in a vacuum. That is why I have shelves full of commentaries. That is why I like to discuss with fellow believers, what they think the scriptures mean on certain topics. That is why we are a church. The Bible tells us that where two or more are gathered, there, the presence of Christ will be also. We believe that Presence to be the Holy Spirit. It is essential that the Holy Spirit guide us all the way, in reading and interpreting the Scriptures.

## 2) The Bible is a book of faith (not science, history, or geology)

It is inappropriate to contort the scriptures into something that it was never intended to be. I seriously doubt any of us turn to the scripture to learn English grammar. The Bible is not an authority on how to structure a sentence or the proper use of personal possessive pronouns, and so on. Yet, some expect the Bible to be the authority in other equally disparate subjects. Is it any wonder that a few of us grow confused, when we cannot resolve where dinosaurs came from, the age of the earth or universe, or for that matter, the evolution of plants and animals when we turn to the Bible? The Bible is a book of faith. Its authority is in matters of faith and belief.

## 3) The Bible is a Generative Word of God (not the static lines of an ancient past)

Jesus once said: *And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. 38 But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.* (Luke 5:37-38)

The Bible is a place for imaginative speech calling for alternative changes. Not every answer is provided to all of our questions – at least not directly. The Bible is somewhat silent or confusing in matters of slavery, sexual abuse, just war, sexism, nuclear waste or pollution. The Word of God is living, not static, capable of continuing to speak, challenge and commissioning hearers to obey new understandings and application of timeless truths.

Many who read, study, and even devote their lives to the Bible refuse to change. One writer phrased it this way: “As adults, many of us begin to learn the sad art of using the Bible.” (Chuck Poole, *Proclaiming the Vision: The Bible*; Walter Surden, editor, p. 80). You know what he means: coming to the Bible to reinforce one’s own ideas and opinions. As such, the Bible becomes a tool of defending against having to change. The Bible, however, is a word for change.

In all of the ways we may disagree over the Bible, and in all of the ways it has been misused and disused, the Bible is still the normative source for every believer. My theology professor in seminary – Dr. Molly Marshall – once remarked in class, “I do not look at my watch to check my weight.” If we wish to check our discipleship, our behavior, our actions, then we must turn to the standard God has given to us.

Bob Setzer tells a story of a clergyman traveling in a dining car along the Hudson River. Opposite him sat a passenger who prided himself on being a card carrying atheist. When the gentleman noticed the minister’s clerical collar, his pulse quickened in anticipation of a feisty

philosophical fight. After a few pleasantries were exchanged and lunch was served, the atheist mounted his attack: "I see you are a minister." "Yes," said the clergyman, "I am a minister of the gospel." "And I suppose you believe the Bible?" "Well, yes, I believe God speaks to us through the scripture," the minister answered. "Well, I certainly do not," the man shot back. "The Bible is too full of holes for any thinking person to take seriously," whereupon, he launched into a withering attack on Scripture.

The minister listened patiently as the gentleman cited a number of supposed contradictions and critical problems within the Bible. While the atheist continued his tirade, the minister simply nodded in acknowledgement and went on eating his dinner. He happened to be dining on Hudson shad, a tasty fish, but one noted for its bony structure. "So tell me," said the atheist, not willing to let the matter drop, "How can you possibly take the Bible seriously, when it is so riddled with problems?"

The clergyman paused to wipe his mouth. "Well, sir, for me, reading the Bible is a lot like dining on this delicious shad. When I come to the bones, I just put them to the side of the plate and go on enjoying my lunch. I leave the bones for some fool to choke on."

4) The Bible is a "Book of Meeting," where through the written word, we are invited into the heart and speech of God. Do you recall the "tent of meeting?" We read about it primarily in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. As the children of Israel were journeying through the Wilderness, the Tent of Meeting was the place where Moses would go to meet God. It was a place of encounter.

Job is an interesting example of the Bible, as a Book of Meeting, not because he had a Bible per se, he did not. But Job sought to encounter God. Remember his friends? How they tried to help Job with his pain and suffering by talking about God? But Job, even in his anger, sought to encounter God. "*Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! 4 I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. 5 I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me.*" (Job 23:3-5)

If we come to the Bible in search of answers, propositions, or descriptions to certain problems or dilemmas in life, very often, we may walk away lacking or hungry. In fact, I will suggest it is a mistake to turn to the scriptures for only those reasons. "We are to come in search of a relationship...Propositions and descriptions may instruct or inform us. Relationships, if we let them, transform us." (Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense*)

The Bible can be trusted and is authoritative, because it is a place of meeting God, where our narratives find a hearing and new realities are opened up and generative possibilities abound.

5) The Bible is a Book of Memories, which point to a future. The Bible is an open book pointing the reader to the intersection of memories and hope.

One needs both memory and hope, to keep the balance. Memory without hope becomes lifeless and useless. It becomes flat prose, two-dimensional history. It becomes quaint, but

irrelevant. Hope, detached from memory, can become an exaggerated quest for the aggrandizement of self.

The Bible is future in its outlook, there is “more to come.”

In Hebrews 4:16 we read: *Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

When Christ ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God, he did not leave us without a witness. The scripture from Genesis to Revelation points to our hope.

The first verse I memorized in the Bible was not John 3:16. That came later. No, my first “memory verse,” was Philippians 4:13, “*I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.*”

Within these pages are words of hope for a hopeless world. Time and again we are reminded that God seeks us out, when we are lost, desiring a relationship with us.