

My Name is Baptist But My Friends Call Me Liberty

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Text: 2 Cor. 3:17; Gal. 5:1, 13

Introduction: Yesterday you celebrated the most important historical event in the establishment of your nation – On July 4th you celebrated independence, you celebrated freedom, you celebrated democracy, you celebrated the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, a historical document penned by Thomas Jefferson and in 1776 affirmed by a group of courageous revolutionaries opposed to British rule. Fireworks exploded loudly and brightly, as they filled the night sky. Your celebrations were so joyous and so loud that one might conclude that you invented liberty. But that is far from the case. So let me share with you a story of liberty that began long before you rebelled against the Brits. I begin by introducing myself.

MY NAME IS BAPTIST – BUT MY FRIENDS CALL ME LIBERTY!

Some four hundred years ago in late 1608 or early 1609, we Baptists originated because of intolerance and persecution resulting from a union of church and state. The establishment was the Church of England., and the state was the nation of England. The King at the time was James I, you know, the one whose name is identified with that long-standing translation of the Bible, the King James Version, which appeared just a few years after the beginning of the people called Baptist.

King James had promised to “harry out of the land” those who dissented against his church. This was no idle threat. He carried out his promise. A group of English Separatists fled by ship to Amsterdam, Holland. The Dutch had suffered greatly during the Inquisition, so they were sensitive to those facing religious persecution. The leaders of this group of exiles were John Smyth, the pastor, and Thomas Helwys, a wealthy businessman who financed the journey.

Examples of Baptists and Freedom: Now, allow me to present to you several excellent examples of Baptists and Freedom, persons who understood the importance of liberty like few others during their times. Here comes the first one now.

1. ***My name is John Smyth, but my friends call me Liberty*** – I was born in the 1500's. I was raised in the Church of England but became an English Separatist. We believed that the local congregation was given all authority under Christ, rather than a group of high-minded, high-ranking bishops. After being driven into exile to Amsterdam, I concluded after a thorough search of the Scriptures that a church should be comprised of baptized believers, so I baptized myself – by affusion, or pouring. Then I baptized all of the rest of the church members and thus we formed the very first “Baptist” church, a nickname given to us by our enemies or opponents, I might add.

Because I and my fellow believers had faced religious intolerance, in 1609, I became one of the first Englishmen to call for toleration of all Christians! Other English dissenters wanted toleration by the Church of England and by the state, but they wanted it for themselves and not others. I went a step further, a rather large step I might add, and insisted that all Christians should be tolerated and not persecuted because of their Christian beliefs. I actually was calling

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for religious freedom for all Christians. But I came up short of demanding universal liberty of conscience – that would come from another. Let him tell you his story.

2. **My name is Thomas Helwys, but my friends know me as Liberty** – I was one of those first Baptists in Amsterdam. Our church split shortly after organizing – proving beyond a shadow of doubt that we were true Baptists. I became pastor of the group that did not follow John Smyth, who was trying to unite with a Mennonite group. We considered ourselves the true church following the division.

In 1612 I published a book entitled *The Mystery of Iniquity*. In it, I proved that I was a radical, a revolutionary for my day – and perhaps your day as well! I called for much more than toleration. I called for complete liberty of conscience for all on matters of religion. And I do mean “all.” I wrote that “whether a person be heretike, Turke, Jewe, or whatsoever” it was no business of the civil magistrates or representatives of the King, to punish anyone for his or her religious convictions. Did you hear what I said? No civil official should punish anyone, no matter who they are or what they believe on religious issues – Heretike! Turke (Muslim)! Jewe! Did I leave anyone out? – then add “Whatsoever!” That should cover everyone! Many credit me with being the first voice in the English language to call for complete freedom of religion, universal liberty of conscience on matters of religion! They are right!

Do you think that I was wishy-washy, that I was too weak, too compromising, too tolerant? Of course not! I simply believed that everyone must stand before his or her maker and answer to their God alone. Religion should not need the support of the state to enforce its beliefs and practices. Nor should it have to face a hostile state in opposition to its beliefs. God, and God alone, will determine the validity of your faith. Never forget that!

And lest you think that I was shallow in my beliefs, I sent a copy of my book to the King. I wonder if James ever read it? Probably not? And, in 1612, I took my church back to England. This was an illegal act. We settled at a place called Spitalfield across the Thames from London. We were the very first Baptist church on English soil. I say to you with the greatest conviction possible that every person should be able to practice his faith in his own country without fear or hostility from the state. Everyone! Everyone!

Do you understand how radical, how revolutionary, my views were in the early 17th century? No one believed that a church could survive without a union of church and state. But my message is relevant everywhere in the 21st century, everywhere. Let me state this clearly: ***true religion must be free religion.***

And what were the consequences of my actions? I was arrested because of my non-conformity, thrown into the Newgate prison in London. There by 1616 I had died. Why, because I not only believed in liberty but I chose to practice liberty, even if it cost me my life! And even though I died for my beliefs, my witness lives on, especially on this day when you remember your freedoms! Remember that your freedoms came at great price for many, such as myself. Well, it is time for me to step aside for another voice from the past.

3. **My name is Roger Williams, but my friends call me Liberty** – I came from England, made my way to Boston, and settled in Salem, where I became the minister at the Congregationalist church in the early 1630s. I soon got into trouble – you knew that I had Baptist blood in me! I criticized the state church, as well as the claim of the king to ownership of the land of the Indians. I was brought before the civil authorities, tried, convicted, and sentenced to exile. However, the governor, John Winthrop, warned me before the sentencing, so I fled in the dead of

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winter to a place that I would call Providence Plantations. There the Indians befriended me, and cared for me while I was sick during that first winter.

In 1639 I met a group of Baptists who were also seeking refuge from the Boston authorities. These Puritans did not come to the New World to establish religious freedom for all, that's for certain. We organized the very first Baptist church on American soil that year, which is known today as First Baptist Church of Providence, R.I.

I didn't remain a Baptist very long, only a few months. I became a "Seeker," and remained such for the rest of my life. But you Baptists still claim me today. The primary reason for this was my insistence upon complete religious freedom for everyone, even those for whom I did not particularly care. For example, I did not like the Quakers. They were too emotional, too enthusiastic. But I defended their right to believe and practice their faith. True freedom is when you can respect and defend others, even when you vehemently disagree with them. Well, so many dissenting groups came from the other New England colonies that Gov. Winthrop of Massachusetts referred to Rhode Island as "the sewer of New England!" Not exactly a compliment!

I worked hard at obtaining a charter for Rhode Island Colony, which was granted in 1662. I am very proud of that charter. It guaranteed religious liberty for all. Period, no exceptions, none whatsoever. And the charter guaranteed the right to vote for all, including women. We were way ahead of others when it came to freedom. Henry C. Veddar, a prominent 20th century historian of Baptists, concluded that Rhode Island was the first state ever established on the principle of religious liberty!

So when you think of Jefferson, Madison, and so many others of the Founding Fathers, just remember that I was a century ahead of their time. They get most of the credit, but I laid the foundation! And I not only believed in freedom, I practiced it! Well, there is one other Baptist who wants to speak to you, so I yield the floor.

4. **My name is John Leland, Elder John Leland, but my friends call me Liberty** – I was a Separate Baptist who spent many years in Virginia in Orange County. Those were interesting days, the years leading up to the American Revolution and the time when we were debating a new Constitution for the country. The War had been won, but establishing a national government was a real challenge!

These were dangerous times. We Separate Baptists were quite evangelistic and on one occasion when I was preparing to baptize a woman convert, her husband came looking for me. He carried a gun and was planning to shoot me! I sent out a detachment of men, who detained him while I baptized the woman!

You may not know this, but I and my fellow Baptists made a very important contribution to the Constitution, especially in terms of the Bill of Rights. A convention had been called in Philadelphia to consider adoption of the Constitution of the United States of America! States and counties were holding elections to select delegates to the convention. We Baptists in Orange County, VA, were promoting our own candidate. We wanted to send that person to Philadelphia to vote **against** the proposed Constitution!

Why would we do such a thing? Because the proposed Constitution had no guarantees of the basic freedoms for which so many of us had fought. For example, there was no guarantee of religious freedom! In fact, the only place in the Constitution that mentions religion is Article 6, and it states that there will be no religious test to hold federal office. That's all. And at the time it didn't even apply to the states, just the federal government. But there were also other freedoms

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that we insisted upon – speech, press, assembly, the right to take our grievances to the government. We loved freedom and we demanded that our freedoms be written into the law of the land.

Well, we Baptists weren't going to stand for this. We had a candidate out there and we intended to elect him to go and lead the way in *rejecting* the Constitution. This was not because we were anti-patriotic. Just the opposite. We fought for basic freedoms and we wanted those freedoms guaranteed!

As things happened there was another candidate. His name was James Madison. I am sure you have heard of him. He would become the fourth president of the United States. We held a meeting with Madison. He initially was not concerned with the lack of constitutional guarantees for our basic freedoms. He believed that they were implied in the proposed Constitution. Well, we met with him for several hours and convinced him that such guarantees were essential to our desires and our support. When you get surrounded by a bunch of belligerent Baptists, you can have a change of heart and mind. We made our case with great passion and when the meeting was over, Madison agreed that he would support constitutional amendments to guarantee our important rights, if we would support him.

We agreed, withdrew our candidate, and supported Madison. He was elected a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, and the Constitution was adopted in 1787. At the very first meeting of Congress Madison introduced what you know as the “Bill of Rights” or the First Ten Amendments to the Constitution. The First Amendment has several basic rights. Can you name them? Freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom of assembly, freedom to redress our grievances to our government. But to me the most important freedom was freedom of religion, and Madison listed it first.

The First Amendment begins “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment or religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Every Baptist, every Christian, every person of faith, every citizen, even non-believers, should thank the Baptists for our contribution to the Constitution of the United States. The Bill of Rights became law in December of 1791. I encourage you to believe these amendments, to defend them, and to practice them. If you don't, you just might lose them!

Now repeat after me – “Congress shall make no law respecting and establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . .” Doesn't that sound good? If it does, thank me and my fellow Baptists in Orange County, Virginia!

Before I step aside, let me tell you an interesting story about your minister here today. In fact, he may have told you this story. But it is worth repeating in light of today's theme. When he was teaching in Oklahoma, a friend who had worked in a library at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkansas, showed him a box of books that he had purchased for practically nothing. One book was vol. 1 of David Benedict's *A General History of the Baptists in America: An Overview from 1492-1812*, which was published in 1813. Inside the cover was a penciled note, which stated “Saved from the burning of the White House in 1814 by Dolly Madison.” That was the British that did the burning, you know. But the book shows that President Madison continued to think highly of the people called Baptists and their contributions to the nation, as he had a copy of the first history of Baptists in the nation in his personal library. I might add that Slayden convinced the owner to donate the volume to the Baptist History and Heritage Society.

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Final Thoughts: Well, you have heard from my fellow Baptists, so let me draw all of this together. My name is Baptist! But you can call me “Liberty!” In the history of England and the United States, we people called Baptists have been one of the most vocal and aggressive groups to demand liberty for all people, freedom for all groups and individuals, freedom to worship included. We celebrate our liberties every Fourth of July, when we remember the writing and adoption of the Declaration of Independence.

One of the great ironies of history is the fact that Thomas Jefferson and his good friend, yet political rival, John Adams both passed away on July 4th, 1826, fifty years to the day of the adoption of this foundational document. Today, you are reminded anew of your Declaration of Independence, which provided the foundation for your Constitution, and for the Bill of Rights that guarantees your precious freedoms.

Today, you are experiencing an erosion of freedom by those who *should* love it, defend it, and practice it. Freedom is nothing more than a slogan if you don’t respect it, encourage it, and practice it. These are the best ways to defend your freedoms!

So whenever you celebrate the 4th of July, probably the most important date in the history of your nation, do remember what I have said. Remember that with courage your Founding Fathers *demand*ed freedom, *sought* freedom, *fought for and obtained* freedom, and *preserved* freedom by declaring independence in 1776, in the adoption of the Constitution of the United States in 1787, and with the addition of the Bill of Rights in 1791.

When people ask “Who are you?” tell them your name, tell them you are Baptist or tell them you are Christian, or tell them that you are simply a citizen of the United States of America, and tell them that your friends know you as Liberty!

When people want to know to which church do you belong, tell them “Baptist,” and tell them that those who know you call you Liberty!

Or, if you are not Baptist but a believer, tell them you are “Christian,” that through faith Jesus has set you free and that he has set everyone free who will accept him. And tell them that your friends call you “Liberty.”

Do not be ashamed to tell the world simply that “I am “Citizen” but my friends call me “Liberty.”

Tell them “I am a citizen through faith in God’s kingdom; and I am a Christian or a Baptist – but my friends, those who really know me, they call me “Liberty!”

So, on this Fourth of July weekend – My name is “Baptist,” but my friends, they call me “Liberty.” And, who are you?

FYI - {Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.}