

What's in a Name: Baptist

Galatians 5:1, 13-15

Farmville Baptist Church

July 3, 2022

A few years ago, I discovered podcasts. Is anyone else here someone who listens to podcasts? Now, I was far from an early adopter – they'd been around for a few years before I began listening on a regular basis – but they have become a fixture in my life. As a pastor, I spend a lot of time in the car, and it's nice to have a podcast or two downloaded to listen to as the trees and miles roll past.

Early in my experience of podcasts, I came across one that wasn't my usual fare, but that sounded interesting. It was an interview with a surgeon, Atul Gawande, about a new book he was releasing. The book was called *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*. In the podcast, and

in more detail in the book, Dr. Gawande explores how our healthcare system handles end-of-life care. It's packed with real-life stories, and many of the situations reflect struggles that I've seen in the lives of church members and friends.

Perhaps the most fascinating insight I found in the book, which he also mentioned in the interview, was a conversation Dr. Gawande had with Dr. Keren Brown Wilson, an innovator in the design of assisted living facilities. She pioneered ways to make assisted living facilities effective and life-nurturing, two words rarely associated with elder-care and nursing facilities in the popular imagination. Dr. Wilson's goal was to create spaces where folks "could live with freedom and autonomy no matter how physically limited they became. She thought that just because you are old and frail, you shouldn't have to submit to life in an

asylum.”¹ Her pilot of the idea, a 112-unit facility in Oregon, was revolutionary, creating space for those needing care without unduly limiting their freedom. Many residents found increased satisfaction with their lives while their health was maintained; indeed, some residents found their physical and cognitive abilities improve. The idea was highly successful.

Yet over time, the average assisted care facility became less and less successful at encouraging the flourishing of life. Many assisted living facilities in more recent years have poor reputations, and residents often fail to find life there satisfying. Dr. Gawande asked Dr. Wilson why this was the case. She identified what she considered the most frustrating and important factor: assisted living wasn't built for those in its care, usually older adults, but for the sake of

¹ Gawande, *Being Mortal*, 87.

their children. “Above all, they sell themselves as safe places. They almost never sell themselves as places that put a person’s choices about how he or she wants to live first and foremost.”² Adult children are often making the decision about where mom or dad are going to stay at that stage of life, and they have different priorities. As Dr. Wilson relates, “We want autonomy for ourselves and safety for those we love.”³ Many assisted care facilities in today’s world are designed with safety in mind, not freedom – but the vast majority of people want freedom.

Now, you may be wondering, what does that have to do with our sermon today, our concluding message about “What’s in a Name”? Well, it has everything to do with it, because we find out in our Scripture today that freedom is at the heart of what God is trying to do through Christ in us.

² Gawande, 106.

³ Gawande,106.

Paul was writing to the Galatian churches. Galatians is one of the earliest writings from the New Testament that we have, only 15 or so years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the church was still figuring things out. Jesus had been a Jew, and all of his first followers were Jews. But as the church began spreading, Gentiles began to come to a saving faith in Jesus, too, connecting with God through the message that was preached to them. And that created a problem for the church. Did new Gentile converts have to become Jewish, too? Did they have to obey the covenant commands of God that were specifically for the Jewish people?

Throughout the letter to the Galatians, Paul makes the forceful case that, no, a strictly law-based approach to faith is not at the heart of Christianity. Though Paul remained a Jew and encouraged Jewish Christians to maintain their

faithfulness to their Jewish identity if they felt led by God to do so, he consistently taught and insisted that such strictures were not essential for faith in Christ, and should not be imposed upon others who were coming to faith. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free,” he said – freedom from the power of sin, freedom from the influence of evil, freedom from the oppression of life in this fallen world. “Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” In other words, “You are free in Christ. Don’t place yourselves under an artificial restriction that you don’t need. Embrace your freedom!”

But unlimited freedom could get new converts, or even mature Christians, in trouble. Indeed, excessive license among the community of faith – license to live in whatever way they wished – largely motivated Paul’s letter of concern to the Corinthian church. And in this passage from

Galatians, he calls for freedom – and then almost immediately urges the brothers and sisters in Galatia to freedom with responsibility, to freely choose some guardrails and guidelines for living. “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” The entire law – the thing that Paul said they didn’t need to insist upon as a yoke or controlling force in their lives – that entire law was fulfilled in this one ethical idea, to love your neighbor as yourself. And that ethical idea, that choice on how to live, was exactly what Christians in Galatia should freely choose as a self-limit on their own lives.

Living freely, but with responsibility freely chosen. That is the summation of how Christians should live in

community and in the world, according to Paul. And that is what is embodied by the middle word in our name, Farmville **Baptist** Church. Such responsible freedom is what is meant, historically, by that word, Baptist.

Not everyone agrees with that, of course. In today's world, there are all sorts of people calling themselves Baptist. There are whole conventions of Christians who claim the word "Baptist" who have abandoned or altered this core commitment to freedom in Christ. And those shifts in the meaning of Baptist have affected how the wider world may understand what that center element of our name means. But these flawed representations of "Baptist" do not change what the word means when we use it in our name, because we use it in the historically-grounded sense: we are a Baptist church, because Baptist means freedom, and that's what sort of church we are. And though that plays out in a great

variety of ways in how we live and serve and operate as a church, there are four core principles of what it means to be Baptist that come from our understanding of freedom.

Premiere Baptist historian Walter Shurden, in his landmark book *The Baptist Identity*, calls these core, foundational elements the Four Fragile Freedoms.

The first of these freedoms involves the book we study each week and, hopefully, on a daily basis – the Bible. Dr. Shurden says that Bible Freedom “is the historic Baptist affirmation that the Bible, under the Lordship of Christ, must be central in the life of the individual and church and that Christians, with the best and most scholarly tools of inquiry, are both free and obligated to study and obey the Scripture.”⁴ The Bible, in other words, is pretty important to us as followers of Jesus. Because it is, we as Jesus people are

⁴ Walter Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms*, 9.

to study it, read it, talk about it, and learn from it. Each of us is free and able to read it and understand it, we think as Baptists, and we believe that God can reveal himself to each of us through the words of Scripture regardless of our title, training, or position of authority within the church. You can read the Scripture and wrestle with its meaning for yourselves, just as I can, and though some of us may have extra training or gifting to interpret the Scriptures for the church body, that doesn't mean that others cannot also read and understand the Bible for themselves.

Yet, as Paul taught, there is another side to that freedom: responsibility. Bible Freedom means that each one of us is free to read the Bible for ourselves – but that also means that none of us can avoid the responsibility to read and study the Scriptures for ourselves. And the second word there is as important as the first; while we, as beneficiaries of an

education that has produced widespread literacy, may easily read the Bible, just reading the Bible is not what Bible Freedom is about. We also need to ponder it, study it, learn from it – and that means digging into it. Reading the Bible freely is about more than Googling a verse that speaks to our situation. It also means, as Dr. Shurden says, using scholarly tools that we have access to so we can understand the Bible better. It means learning something about the world in which the Bible took shape. It means conversing with other Christians about what they are learning from the Scriptures, too, so that we can get a variety of perspectives. It means using our God-given critical thinking to wrestle with what we read, compare it to the person and teaching of Jesus, and let that inform what lessons we take from it. Bible Freedom is about both our freedom to read the Scriptures and our responsibility to read them carefully and well.

The second of the core freedoms of Baptists is what Shurden calls Soul Freedom. It is “the historic Baptist affirmation of the inalienable right and responsibility of every person to deal with God without the imposition of creed, the interference of clergy, or the intervention of civil government.”⁵ This is the principle, found from the start in Scripture, that each of us is made in the image of God, and as image-bearers, we are to connect with God personally. That is a core piece of who we were created to be, central to the human makeup, and this means that no one – not a pastor, not a deacon, not a Sunday School teacher, not a parent, not a senator or president – can put us in relationship with God. We are free to pray, praise, and ponder the mysteries of the faith ourselves, as autonomous creatures of the Creator, and our choices of faith are ours alone, with no outside coercion

⁵ Shurden, 23.

or imposition. We are free to offer the prayers we want to God, we are free to interpret the Scriptures ourselves, we are free to make the choice to become a follower of Jesus in the first place, to undergo baptism and take Christ's way of life on ourselves.

Of course, the freedom is balanced with responsibility. We are not a creedal people – creeds are statements of belief that are binding on those who make them – so we have to each wrestle with what we believe about God and Jesus, church and world. We may have similar or even identical understandings of faith as the people around us in the pews, but we each have to embrace those understandings ourselves and integrate them into our lives and worldviews. Baptists believe that no one can impose them on us – we are responsible for them ourselves. Each of us, when it comes to matters of faith, has to make up our own mind – and we

can't expect anyone else to do it for us. We have that responsibility, and that freedom, ourselves.

This freedom of the individual soul, though, is not promoting “spiritual lone rangerism” – the idea that we are alone in our faith and without connection to others. Baptists instead believe and teach that we exist as individual people of faith within community – a community called “church.” This is the third of the four freedoms: Church Freedom, “the historic Baptist affirmation that local churches are free, under the Lordship of Christ, to determine their membership and leadership, to order their worship and work, to ordain whom they perceive as gifted for ministry, male or female, and to participate in the larger Body of Christ, of whose unity and mission Baptists are proudly a part.”⁶ Churches like Farmville Baptist operate as a fellowship or gathering of

⁶ Shurden, 33.

individual followers of Jesus who join together in mission and ministry, caring for one another and serving their community as they together see where God is leading the church.

This freedom, of course, depends upon responsibility, for a church gathered by those who freely choose to be part of it – by volunteers, in other words – can only have an impact if those free volunteers choose to act as parts of the whole.

Decisions are made by those who are involved, ministry is carried out by those who are involved, mission is funded by those who are involved – all freely decided by the body and freely supported by each member – but it only works if everyone chooses to live up to their freely-chosen responsibility. Church Freedom is a tremendous kingdom privilege – but with that privilege, we have an obligation to one another and to the kingdom work of God. This

autonomous church only works if everyone who is part of it is contributing to the work of the whole.

The last of the four freedoms that are at the core of the “Baptist” part of our name is Religious Freedom. If Bible Freedom and Soul Freedom are about the individual, and Church Freedom is about individuals within the community of faith, then Religious Freedom is about individuals within the larger society. Dr. Shurden says, “Religious Freedom is the historic Baptist affirmation of freedom *OF* religion, freedom *FOR* religion, and freedom *FROM* religion, insisting that Caesar is not Christ and Christ is not Caesar.”⁷ Perhaps more than any other freedom we’ve considered today, this one is most identified with Baptists, especially in America – and this one is the most misunderstood and, often, misstated.

⁷ Shurden, 45.

From the start, Baptists have been championed the idea that everyone should be able to seek God and discover God's call on them free from external compulsion or force. For much of Baptist history, and in some parts of today's world, religion is controlled by external forces, including governments. The first Baptist church formed was pastored by John Smyth and Thomas Helwys. It included dissident English Christians, but it formed in Holland, because back home, the church was established by the government and enforced by the king. Smyth, Helwys, and their congregation acknowledged the legitimacy of government, but they insisted that government had no role to play in matters of the conscience. Indeed, the first Baptist statement of faith demanded "freedom of conscience and separation of church

and state.”⁸ From the start, the Baptists were concerned with matters of religious freedom.

Perhaps it shouldn't surprise us, then, that Baptists helped develop religious freedom and the separation of church and state here in the United States. During the era of the Revolution and the founding of this country, Baptist preachers – many of whom were being persecuted, jailed, and even killed in places with established churches, including Virginia – these Baptist preachers were advocating for the new nation because they were dedicated to liberty, including religious liberty; some of those Baptist preachers, like John Leland, were influential with such luminaries as James Madison. Their guidance helped convince Madison and many others involved in American government that the country needed a Bill of Rights, and first among the

⁸ Lumpkin, quoted in Shurden, 47.

enumerated rights should be a protection of conscience. The very first freedom articulated in the First Amendment is a guarantee that government will neither establish a religion, giving it preferential treatment or promoting it in the public square, nor shall the government prohibit the free exercise of religion, limiting the legitimate faith-practices of any or all American citizens. This met the approval of Leland and his Baptist family, our spiritual ancestors, leading him to say in support of the campaign for religious liberty,

“The notion of a Christian commonwealth should be exploded forever....Government should protect every man in thinking and speaking freely, and see that one does not abuse another. The liberty I contend for is more than toleration. The very idea of toleration is despicable; it supposes that some have a pre-eminence above the rest to grant indulgence, whereas all should be

equally free, Jews, Turks, Pagans and Christians.”⁹

Today, Baptists continue to lead the way on promoting religious freedom and encouraging the separation of church and state. Why? Because the name “Baptist” is about freedom – and freedom of conscience cannot and should not be coerced. If we are people who believe in the freedom of each of us to choose to follow Christ, we also have to use that freedom responsibly, namely, not to impose or coerce that choice on others. The responsibility of the Baptist vision of religious freedom is offering, and defending, that freedom for others, whether or not they believe like us and worship like us, or believe and worship any God at all.

So four freedoms encapsulate the Galatians-style freedom we mean when we choose to identify ourselves as

⁹ John Leland, quoted in Forrest Church, *The Separation of Church and State: Writings on a Fundamental Freedom by America's Founders*, 92.

Baptist: Bible Freedom (the freedom of each person to engage the revelation of Christ in Scripture for themselves); Soul Freedom (the freedom of each follower of Jesus to seek God for themselves); Church Freedom (the freedom of each church as a community of Jesus-followers to seek God's will for themselves); and Religious Freedom (the freedom of each person to wrestle with matters of conscience and faith for themselves without the intervention or privileging of government power). For over 400 years, these four freedoms have been distinctives of Baptists; they do not belong to us alone, but they are what we have historically meant when we use that word, "Baptist." Yet, as Dr. Shurden reminds us, these four freedoms are fragile. Near the end of his book he says, "[these freedoms] are too readily

relinquished from within and too easily pirated from without.”¹⁰

He then states, “Freedom is often undermined by irresponsibility” – something Paul grasped well. As he told the Galatian Christians, “But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh.”¹¹ When we declare our faith in Christ, we are pledging ourselves to the benefits of that relationship, and its responsibilities. We have the freedom to read the Bible – and the responsible thing to do is to study it well. We have the freedom to pray and worship and serve as God leads us to – and the responsible thing to do is to not neglect prayer and worship and service. We have the freedom to gather as a community of faith and determine together God’s will for us as a body – and the responsible thing to do is to be engaged in the life of the church. And we have the freedom

¹⁰ Shurden, 56.

¹¹ Galatians 5:13

to wrestle with matters of faith free from any outside influence – and the responsible thing to do is to make sure others have that same freedom, too.

For the past three weeks, we've been thinking about "what's in a name" – our name, Farmville Baptist Church. We've pondered how we, as a church, are to live as a colony of heaven. We've reminded ourselves how we are to be a church *in* Farmville and *for* Farmville, but not *of* Farmville, because we are to be a church of God. And today, we've celebrated our freedom – for as Baptists, we are freedom-people, recognizing the freedom we have in Christ and remembering the responsibility we have to use our freedom well. So when we think about what's in a name – our name – let us not forget these things, because our name reminds us and tells the world who we are. We are Farmville. Baptist. Church.