

Freedom in Christ!

(By Denton Lotz, on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the Baptist movement, celebrated by the BWA in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, July 30, 2009)

In this historic city and on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin we remember the Reformation and Calvin's emphasis on the sovereignty of God and covenant theology and his use of the Scriptures as written in Jeremiah (31:31), "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." We thank God for the Reformation of John Calvin.

The Lutherans are already making plans to celebrate in the year 2017 the 500th anniversary of the Reformation inaugurated by Martin Luther and the nailing of the 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg. We affirm the Lutheran Reformation and the inspiration of the great scripture of the Apostle Paul, "The just shall live by faith." (Romans 1:17)

We remember also in this great city the name of Jacobus Arminius who died 400 years ago. We recognize his influence on a great number of Baptists, especially his strong emphasis on free will and that Jesus Christ died for all men and not only for the elect.

In briefly enumerating a partial list of great Reformers who influenced Baptist thought how can we forget, in this church, in this place, in this city our debt to Menno Simons and the Mennonites. John Smyth was greatly influenced by them, especially their understanding of the rights of the local congregation and denial of infant baptism and insistence on believer's baptism as the proper New Testament practice. The BWA is in friendly relationship with the World Mennonite Conference with whom we have had conversations which have furthered our understanding and fellowship.

With all the Reformers, we Baptists affirm the threefold emphases of "Sola scriptura. Solus fides, and solus Christus." We affirm that the church of Jesus Christ is one and that we belong to that universal church with all Christ followers throughout the ages. We affirm that the church is "reformata reformanda"...reformed and reforming. We as Baptist also need continuous reforms and must not be satisfied with the situation as things now stand, but must call for another reformation among our own people and the church universal.

I. **Why we are here!** Having expressed our indebtedness to other traditions we must insist, however, that we are here today to celebrate the Baptist Radical Reformation of the Church begun in 1609 in this city by John Smyth, Thomas Helwys and 40 dissidents. The significant scripture and theme that those early Baptists exemplified was "Freedom in Christ!" Not freedom of the king, not freedom of wealth, not freedom of education, not freedom of the Enlightenment, but freedom in Jesus Christ. With the Apostle Paul these early Baptist leaders emphasized freedom: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1)

John Smyth stated this freedom in Christ with regards to civil government in this way: "That the magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force or compel men to this or that form of religion, or doctrine; but to leave Christian religion free, to every man's conscience...for only Christ is the king, and lawgiver of the church and conscience." James Leo Garret with reference to Underwood maintains that this thesis from 100-article Confession was probably "the first Christian

confession of faith to affirm and prescribe religious liberty, or freedom of conscience, vis-à-vis civil government.”¹

Thomas Helwys expressed the same thoughts in his address to King James I of England: “The king is a mortal man, and not God; therefore hath no power over the immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances for them, and to set spiritual Lords over them....for men’s religion to God is between God and themselves; the King shall not answer for it, neither may the King be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.”

In *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution*, Roger Williams, founder of the First Baptist Church in America, continued this strong defense of religious freedom for all peoples and religions. Williams insisted “it is the will and command of God that a permission of the most Pagan, Jewish, Turkish or anti-Christian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries... as the only sure means of procuring a firm and lasting peace.”

Let there be no doubt about it! Freedom in Christ has been the theme of the Baptist movement from our beginning to the present day. Persecuted by mainline Protestantism as well as Catholicism and Orthodoxy, imprisoned by civil governments, burned at the stake, drowned, incarcerated for conscience sake our Baptist history has been one of growth in spite of persecution. Is it not a testimony to God’s grace that those 40 dissidents baptized in 1609 here in Amsterdam, persecuted, reviled, mocked and often enduring legal repression have today grown to be the largest Protestant Christian World Communion.²

II. Religious Freedom as Freedom to PRACTICE:

The state churches of Europe required that every infant be baptized. It was against the law in most countries not to baptize one’s baby. Believer’s baptism therefore became an anti-state movement. It also became an anti-cultural movement. By not conforming to the rules of the State Churches, the small group of dissidents gathered in 1609 in Amsterdam was proclaiming to all state governments and State Churches that religion could not be coerced or forced upon a people. It is an incredible story, therefore, that we celebrate today. How incredible, ridiculous and not a little bit naïve this little group of 40 dissidents must have appeared to society in the 17th century.

Every national Baptist convention/union has a similar story of persecution and growth. German Baptists celebrated this year the 175th anniversary of Johannes Gerhard Oncken. In Hamburg, as Baptists elsewhere he was imprisoned and suffered for his faith. He has inspired generations of Baptists by reminding us that every Baptist is a missionary!

It is not our intent to give a history of the Baptist movement or a history of our defense of religious freedom. Other capable historians have done that well and particularly during these 400 year celebrations there is a plethora of excellent studies that have enriched our historical understanding. What I would like to concentrate on during this brief address and sermon is to ask the question, “After 400 years how has our defense of religious freedom changed and how must it change to be relevant to the cause of Christ in the 21st century?”

I would like to move on to the question of the future. It is not enough to rest on one’s laurels and one’s past achievement. To do so turns a great and relevant tradition into an

irrelevant traditionalism. Jaroslav Pelikan stated the difference between tradition and traditionalism very clearly: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, whereas traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” True religion must always have a dialogue with itself as to whether the tradition is the basis of its faith or whether traditionalism is the basis of faith, whether our faith is alive or dead!

More to the point...humanity has come a long way during these 400 years. Most civilized and democratic governments recognize religious freedom as an inherent right. The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights of 1948 affirms religious freedom and the right to conversion. And yet the “clash of civilizations” about which Samuel Huntington wrote so powerfully is a reality in our world today. One would have thought that in the 21st century that civilizations, the basis of which is religion, would be able to live in peace. On the contrary, the 21st century has already become one of the bloodiest, due in large part to religious conflicts. We wish this were not true. Some may try to explain it away by speaking of unjust social conditions, economic inequities, lack of democratic institutions, etc. But, the fact remains that religion is the basis of many conflicts and still has a powerful influence on the way individuals and nations think and act.

We as Baptists must continue to defend religious freedom for all peoples and all religions. But, at the same time, we would request reciprocity. Mosques dot the skylines now of Rome, Paris and London. Should we not have the freedom for churches to be built in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Iran?

In my years as a missionary in Eastern Europe during the Soviet communist period we fought with many others for religious freedom. During that time I realized that there were two very different understandings of religious freedom. The Soviets allowed “freedom of worship.” That is, various religious groups could practice their religion in their buildings on their holy days, but there could not be an institutional expression of religion beyond their building. Religion was private and therefore freedom of worship was limited to a building. On the other hand, I realized that the Western concept of religious freedom was the institutional expression of religion beyond the buildings: Sunday schools, orphanages, colleges, seminaries, access to media, radio and TV, a public expression of religion over against culture and the state. Communism prevented this public **expression** of religion.

In the world today there are still areas where even religious **practice** as a fundamental right is denied. This is true in many parts of the Middle East, some of the former Soviet republics and Asia. The BWA is indefatigable in the defense of such basic freedoms and we must continue to defend freedom of **practice**.

III. The new paradigm that threatens the EXPRESSION of religious freedom in the secular world:

It is incumbent upon us as people of faith to realize that our concerns today are very different from those of 400 years ago. If we continue merely to defend religious practice then we will have missed the paradigm shift in which we are living. We will be like the manufacturers of horse drawn carts in 1900 defending the horse as the transportation of the future and not realizing that the future belonged to gas powered vehicles!

In *A Theology of Human Hope*, Rubem Alves speaks of the necessity of imagination for us to jump from one paradigm to the next and the dangers of missing that leap: “There are historical situations that could prove that we totally misread and misunderstood the

possibilities of history and consequently that our assessment of the conditions and power for human liberation is totally mistaken.”³ If we fail to take seriously the 21st century and merely continue to defend religious freedom as though we were living under King James I, then we will have become irrelevant and our defense of freedom irrelevant!

The 21st century confronts men and women of faith with a completely different paradigm than that of the Enlightenment, or even the problems of the 20th century. We need today great religious thinkers with religious imagination and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to confront the real challenges to the church of Jesus Christ and religious freedom today. The real enemy I believe, is no longer the state, at least in the Caribbean, Europe, North America, Latin America and parts of Africa and Asia. The real enemy of religious freedom is the religion of secularism which wants, again like the Soviets, to ban religion to its buildings and to prohibit a public expression of faith. Again, Alves said it well: “Secularism is a change of idols: the abandonment of metaphysical, religious, ecclesiastical absolutes, and the election of historical absolutes.”⁴ Leszek Kolakowski expressed it this way: “A rain of gods is falling from the sky on the funeral rites of the one God who has outlived himself. The atheists have their saints, and the blasphemers are erecting chapels.”⁵ Need we mention Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens?

We live in a very violent and evil society. Respect for moral absolutes are not taught, the media blasphemes faith, or even more than that, ignores it. Whereas the past centuries persecuted religion by physically restricting its practice, the media today makes faith irrelevant by ignoring it, or emphasizing the lunatic fringe! In other words there is a decidedly secular mentality in the media, and in the state universities and even those universities founded by the churches, that exclude religious expression.

This is the main threat about which I believe we must be concerned when we speak of religious freedom in the 21st century. That is, the conflict today is not about religious practice... but rather whether or not religion will be granted a fair hearing, or a hearing at all! Will the public **expression** of religion continue to be curtailed or even allowed? Our public and state education has promoted secularism as its own religion and has indoctrinated the younger generation to believe that man can live without God and can explain the universe and history and community without faith.

This exclusion of religious expression in the news and media is of great concern to Professor Gustav Niebuhr of Syracuse University. He states, “It is a terrible irony that religion is so prominent in the world and yet so absent from the news.”⁶ Niebuhr challenges religious journalists with these words: “The coverage of religious news is suffering...I cannot think of a time when your work is more important.... You are going to challenge the dark times.”⁷ That’s the question! Are we entering a new dark ages when ignorance concerning God, creation and morality are absent and humanity descends again into animalistic anarchy, decadence and violence?

Secular religion continues its onslaught against the Christian faith and religion in general. Professor Alvin Plantinga is one of the world’s greatest philosophers. He views the recent advent of books attacking the Christian faith with considerable foreboding. Plantinga asserts, “Some of these books are little more than screeds, long on vituperation but short on reasoning, long on name calling but short on competence, long on righteous indignation but short on good sense; for the most part they are driven by hatred rather than logic.”⁸

It is this hate of Christianity and religion generally that should concern all of us. While most of the world struggles for the rudimentary freedom of religion as the freedom to practice one's religion, we are confronted in much of Western society with the new threat of the marginalization or even hate of faith in academic circles and benign neglect in the media at large, i.e., TV, movies, newspapers, etc.

Let me make it clear that I am not proposing some kind of fundamentalism of the right wing or liberalism of the left wing. Such ideological conflicts do not help bring peace or community. Rather as Baptists committed to freedom and to the freedom that comes alone from Jesus Christ we join with our forefathers and foremothers in celebrating true freedom that comes from Christ.

IV. Freedom in Christ: Let us hear again the words of Scripture: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use our freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another....But if you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another.

It is clear that the Apostle Paul was concerned about the new freedom he had found in Jesus Christ. The law could not save him, but only held him more captive since he could not fulfill it. Jesus Christ means freedom and Paul experienced that freedom as newness of life in Christ. Not to be masters but to be servants, not to consume one another by power struggles but to love. This is the freedom of Christ which we proclaim. The world may not give the church freedom of religious **practice**, or freedom of religious **expression**. We may be banned to our churches and prevented from public expression in the marketplace, but nevertheless in Jesus Christ we are free. That is what Paul meant when he listed the fruit of the Spirit and concluded "against such there is no law." (5:23) Even in the darkest days of persecution 400 years ago or in the dark days of communist oppression there was no law which could prevent the Holy Spirit from empowering His people with love, joy and peace! No government could quench patience, kindness and goodness. No court could prevent our persecuted brothers and sisters from exercising faithfulness, gentleness, or self-control.

A.) The Freedom of the Cross: Freedom in Christ, Paul reminds us, should never be used as an opportunity for the flesh (Gal. 5:14). That is, as Christ followers we are under the authority of God and therefore ultimately justice belongs to God. We confront the enemies of the faith not with a raised fist, but with a cross. I'll never forget when Martin Niemoeller spoke to students at Harvard University. Niemoeller, having been imprisoned under Hitler, told the students: "Jesus on the cross could have raised his fist and said, 'You just wait! My God is going to get you. He is going to wipe you out and curse you!'" But, Niemoeller maintained, he did not do that, but rather prayed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." And because of that he was the Christ! This is what Martin Luther King taught a whole generation of nonviolent students. This power of Christ's freedom enabled him to fight for justice and to have a dream that inspired all of humanity. And therefore, he could preach, "Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, I am free at last!"

B.) Our Freedom in Christ: Mission or Maintenance? Four hundred years after the book of Acts and the driving mission of the early Church, we read the troubling history of the Constantinian captivity of the Church and the beginning of the national or state church supported by government and defended by force of arms. The church in the 5th century

moved from mission to maintenance. The church was lulled to sleep by its success of even having a Christian emperor and the power of the state. Large cathedrals beckoned. Christian laws enforced Christianization. But in the process the goal of the Church became maintenance and not mission to a lost world in need of the Savior!

This is the temptation of every movement for reform. Now after 400 years of that initial Baptist movement, we have to ask ourselves seriously as Baptists in 2009, “Where are we going? Are we on a mission with Christ? Or are we just trying to maintain the status quo? Are we concentrated on Jesus or more interested in maintaining our place in society?” Our goal must not be religious freedom to practice or religious freedom to express our faith! Our goal is to be on mission with Jesus Christ! Of course we shall continue to defend religious freedom and all that that implies, but secular freedom is not our God! Freedom without commitment to the source of freedom is nothing but another ideological weapon with which to hit our enemies on the head! No! It is the compassionate and merciful Savior with outstretched arms on Calvary that we preach!

And that is what we should learn from our history. Only as we have opened ourselves entirely to Christ and His love have we been successful in being his disciples! Therefore, today and in this 400th year we honor all those men and women who by faith followed the footsteps of their master.

I have taken the liberty of re-writing Vachel Lindsay’s poem “An endless line of splendor” and baptized it for Baptists today. Today we confess our gratitude to a long line of faithful followers of Jesus Christ who are part of our Baptist family and yet these Baptist heroes were part of that larger Christian community. With joy we share their lives with the world of faith:

“An endless line of splendor,
 These Baptists with heaven for home,
 With Carey they go from England,
 With Judson and Lyle they go.
 These in the name of Jesus,
 Against the secular gods stand,
 They gird the earth with valor,
 They heed their King’s command.

Onward the line advances,
 Shaking the hills with power,
 Slaying the hidden demons,
 The lions that devour.
 No bloodshed in the wrestling, -
 But souls new-born arise –
 The nations growing kinder,
 The child-hearts growing wise.

Indeed, an endless line of splendor,
 So many we cannot name.
 But these did model the life of Christ for all:
 Smyth and Helwys, Williams and Backus.

Sam Sharpe of Jamaica, reminding us, “I would rather die on yonder gallows a free man, than live a slave.”

Lottie Moon in China dying of starvation to feed those who had no bread,
Spurgeon of England reminding preachers not to compromise but with Holy Spirit power to preach the Word of God.

Dehunsi of Nigeria reminding all of the importance of the Bible being translated into every language. Lucy Poba of Burma, George Truett of America...all defenders of religious freedom.

Long Ri Ao of India working as a peacemaker in Nagaland.

Oncken of Germany calling every Baptist to be a missionary,

Prokhanov and Fetler growing the Church in Russia under persecution.

Timothy Richards in China, Anne Judson in Burma, all faithful missionaries to God’s unfailing love.

Walter Rauschenbusch reminding all of Christendom of the social responsibility of the Gospel.

Jao Soren of Brazil and George Truett of America reminding government of minority rights and the privilege to serve one’s nation.

Martin Luther King, a drum major for justice, Billy Graham calling the church to be faithful evangelists to the end. Jimmy Carter redeeming politics and defending human rights. And the list goes on.... Indeed an endless line of splendor.....millions of saints whose names only God knows and yet are written in the book of life.

Indeed! “This is our faith tremendous, -
Our wild hope, who shall scorn,-
That in the name of Jesus
The world shall be reborn!”⁹

Let us go as Baptist leaders from this place, recommitted to the great task of the evangelization of the world in this generation. Let us go in the power of Holy Spirit in the freedom vouchsafed to us by Jesus Christ the liberator. Let us go united in hearts and minds and spirits so that one day when we meet our Savior face to face we can sing with a great multitude of brothers and sisters, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!” Let us work by the power of the Holy Spirit while we still have breath to proclaim the liberation that comes from Christ until that day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and when He shall reign forever and ever and ever! AMEN!

¹ Quoted in James Leo Garrett, *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study* (Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia), 2009, p.31.

² Baptists do not baptize babies, nor count them as members as do the Catholics, Methodists, Anglicans, Lutherans, Reformed, Orthodox, etc. Statistics of those practicing infant baptism and those practicing believer’s baptism have at times been misunderstood. However, David Barrett, editor of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, maintains that Baptist statistics are more reliable than many other denominations. Within the Baptist World Alliance there is a community of about 110 million. For those Baptists outside of the BWA and who consider themselves part of the historical Baptist tradition

there is probably another community of 40 million, the largest being of course the Southern Baptist Convention with 16 million baptized believers. It is with great regret that the SBC, one of the founding members of the BWA, withdrew from the BWA in 2004. The return of the SBC to the BWA would be a great sign of unity for Christ and His Kingdom!

³ Rubem Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope*, p.166.

⁴ Alves, p.15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.165.

⁶ Gustav Niebuhr quoted in *The Christian Century*, June 16, 2009, p. 15.

⁷ Niebuhr, p.15

⁸ Alvin Plantinga, "Evolution vs. Naturalism," in *Books and Culture*, July/August 2008, p.37.

⁹ Poem by Vachel Lindsay, "*Foreign Missions in Battle Array.*"