

In the early sixties there was a Jewish rabbi named Norman Gerstendfeld who lived in Washington, DC. He had a son named Roger Williams Gerstendfeld. When you think about it that is a rather strange name for a Jew to have B especially the son of a rabbi. But Rabbi Gerstendfeld stated why he named his son after Roger Williams, the colonial preacher and statesman of 17<sup>th</sup> century New England who was responsible for the founding of the very First Baptist Church in America at Providence, Rhode Island in 1638. The church still remains, by the way, and is called the First Baptist Church in America.

Roger Williams came to America in 1630 from England. A Puritan, he broke with the Puritan approach to faith. The Pilgrims had come to New England a decade earlier in 1620 in search of religious liberty – for themselves, that is, and no one else. Anybody who showed up in Massachusetts had to worship the way they worshipped or face stiff fines, banishment, or imprisonment. Williams dared to criticize the Puritan establishment for their seeking to impose the first four commandments on everyone.

He had the audacity to suggest they were hypocrites and encouraged them to ask for forgiveness since they had broken the Eighth Commandment, “Thou shall not steal.” They had stolen land from the Indians without paying them. Williams told them to evidence their repentance by paying the Indians for the land. Shortly thereafter the Massachusetts Bay Colony voted to banish Williams from New England and send him back to England. He migrated south to a small piece of real estate called Rhode Island, where he founded a town called Providence. Shortly thereafter, he became a Baptist, although, he did not remain a Baptist long.

Rabbi Gerstendfeld said Jews in America owe a great debt to Williams. Under the leadership of the Baptist Roger Williams, Rhode Island Colony offered refuge to the persecuted Jews in the beginning days of the United States. Jews, Catholics, and Quakers were welcomed at Providence Plantation along with all others whose consciences cried out for freedom to worship contrary to the established practices of the colonies. In Providence, they were guaranteed freedom of worship and freedom of conscience.<sup>1</sup>

Christian people are a people of freedom – especially those who express their Christian faith with a vision that is Baptist. The freest place there is on Earth is a Baptist church. I don't know if you realize that or not, but it is. Sure we are free in America. I am grateful for that freedom that is bestowed upon us in America. But we are freer in a Baptist Church. You see we aren't as free as we like to think we are in the good ole USA. Think about this for a moment.

How many of you paid your income taxes this year? Did anybody not pay your income taxes? How many of you said, “I'm free so I'm not going to pay Uncle Sam this year?” Now, how many of you designated how you wanted your income taxes used? Who designated their taxes for retirement? Who designated their taxes for education? How about military spending? Come on! Surely some among us designated our incomes for our own interests. We're free, aren't we?

Now think about this. How many of you who are members of Tabernacle Baptist Church tithed your income this past year? If you did, did you designate it? If so, to what did you designate it? You can be a member of a Baptist church, like Tabernacle, and never give a dime and if you give a dime you can designate for whatever cause you so desire – say, the Pastor's salary! That's freedom, isn't it? You can't do that in America. You have to pay income taxes. You can't designate your income taxes. That's not freedom, is it? But membership in a Baptist church, that's freedom. The freest place there is a Baptist church.

Believers in the “free church” tradition have, historically, taken seriously Paul's declaration to the Galatian congregation: **“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and submit not again to a yoke of slavery” (5:1).** Galatians 5:1 just may signal the greatest contribution Baptist believers have made to the church of the Lord Jesus and even to the secular world.

That contribution is religious liberty or freedom. Being a people of freedom has always been an obsession with Baptist folk. Baptists have fought for this freedom for anybody and everybody. Baptists have even been called the “watchdogs” of freedom. Baptists have never been content with mere religious tolerance, but have struggled for the freedom to think, to worship, and to evangelize.

Our heritage reveals a staunch defense of the rights of other groups such as the Mormons to spread their faith, even though we are absolutely opposed to their beliefs and consider those beliefs to be heretical and Mormonism itself to be a cult. Yet Mormons are guaranteed the freedom to spread their faith.

Justice C. Anderson was an international missionary for Southern Baptists and a professor of world missions at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He noted that, as painful as it may be, Baptists have defended the rights of even some atheists.<sup>2</sup> As I have pondered Dr. Anderson’s observation, it dawned on me that there is a Baptist affirmation in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States that we shall say together this evening: “liberty and justice for all.”

In my estimation the two greatest sermons preached in the twentieth century were both proclaimed in Washington, DC and Baptists preached both sermons. Both sermons stressed, indirectly, “liberty and justice for all.” On Wednesday, August 28, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a most powerful message at the Lincoln Memorial before a crowd of 200,000 persons. The sermon was entitled “I Have a Dream.” Many of you heard it. I was just shy of turning 7, but I have heard it many times since. Remember how he ended it? “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty I’m free at last.” Christians are a people of responsible freedom, who, in Jesus Christ, are presently “free at last.” It really was one of those “liberty and justice for all” moments.

The second sermon was proclaimed from the steps of the United States Capital in Washington, DC on Sunday, May 16, 1920. Dr. George W. Truett, Pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, TX, preached it. The sermon was entitled “Baptists and Religious Liberty.” When it was first preached, the anti-Catholic sentiment was high in the nation. Dr. Truett carefully delineated the differences between Baptists and Roman Catholics, but with great enthusiasm declared that Roman Catholics are entitled to religious liberty as well. More than 84 years after it was first preached, it is a powerful word about freedom for anybody and everybody.

Truett’s sermon demonstrates that one can hold convictions firmly while, at the same time, granting to others the same liberties one desires for oneself. “Liberty and justice for all!” Regrettably, some Christians, and I believe they are sincere, but are terribly misguided, interpret that to mean “liberty for all as long as all agree with them.” If I learned anything on Normandy Beach it was that those men who died there died for freedom – not their interpretation of freedom – but freedom, even for those who disagree. Many sincere Christians are being influenced by an anti-Christian spirit under guise of Christian to violate this principle on the basis of their opposition to false doctrines.

I’m opposed to Mormonism. It’s heresy. I’m opposed to Atheism. It’s heresy. I’m opposed to New Ageism. It’s heresy. I’m opposed to Islam. It’s heresy. I’m going to go a step farther. I’m opposed to Judaism. It’s heresy. But I’m not opposed to Mormons, atheists, New Agers, Muslims, and Jews having the freedom to propagate their teachings. As a Christian and as an American, and they aren’t the same remember, I would defend their right to do so. Otherwise, I am un-American, let alone un-Baptist, let alone un-Christian. If there is anything you and I are to affirm it is the fact that the United States of America is founded on the principle of religious liberty for all human beings, a principle that is guaranteed in the Word of God.

So what’s the problem? This whole issue of freedom really does get messy at times. We Americans are one of the most religious peoples in the world. We tolerate or are suppose to tolerate and respect the rights of atheists and nonbelievers. Tonight, we’ll gather for our patriotic concert and we’ll present the colors and sing the national anthem. Last year, we failed to stand when we sang. That was my fault. After welcoming everyone, I prayed and sat down on the front pew where I normally sit during such celebrations. The Men’s

Ensemble began singing “The Star Spangled Banner.” I sat with my eyes closed and became so enraptured with their words that about half-way through I thought, “Oh, my I’m not standing!” It was one of those “bombs going off in my stomach” moments. I discovered that most everybody else didn’t stand, either.

Don’t worry. This year we’ve put it in the script to stand so we don’t forget. I wasn’t meaning to be disrespectful. It just happened. I always stand when the anthem is sung. I think that is important. But if someone chooses not to stand, that person is free to do so. There is nothing that says one has to stand when the National Anthem is sung. There is no law requiring such a posture. That’s one’s choice. That’s freedom. Gets messy, doesn’t it?

We’ll say the pledge to the Flag of the United States this evening. There are some believers, the Quakers and Mennonites, for example, who will not recite the pledge to the American Flag because they believe their only pledge of allegiance is to the Lord Jesus Christ. There are some nonbelievers who will not recite it because it contains the words “under God” and, thank God and the Supreme Court, those words are still there. There may be some folk tonight who will not want to say the pledge to the American Flag for whatever reason. That’s one’s choice. That’s freedom. Gets messy, doesn’t it?

We’ll also say the pledge to the Christian Flag this evening. I received an anonymous letter some time ago suggesting there was no need to say the pledge to the Christian Flag, especially at the patriotic concert. “What does the Christian Flag have to do with this anyway?”, the letter concluded. It is unconscionable, even sinful, for a group of Christians to gather in a church house like this and say the pledge to a national flag and not say the pledge to the Christian Flag. When I go to the Rotary Club or some other civic function, I don’t expect to say the pledge the Christian Flag, but I do when I’m in a church. As long as I am pastor of Tabernacle anytime we say the pledge to the American Flag we will also say the pledge to the Christian Flag or we won’t say the pledge to the American Flag.

Some people, who gather with us tonight, may not say the pledge to the Christian Flag. They may not be Christians. They may be Christians but choose not to recite the pledge for whatever reason. That’s one’s choice. That’s freedom. Gets messy, doesn’t it?

Those of us who’ve read and studied history with integrity know that there is a religious heritage in this nation. I say with “integrity” because there are many folks who do not read and study it that way. There is much out there, especially on the Internet, that attributes many things said by the founding fathers and mothers that they actually did not say. As a person who minored in history during college and has a passion for history, I am disturbed by the reality that some people are attempting to rewrite history. Some of those people are succeeding, too.

History reveals a religious heritage in the United States. It is inappropriate to deny that. It is also irresponsible. This is why unbelievers do not have the right to impose their disbelief or atheism on all those Americans whose beliefs now, and historically, have helped define America as a religious nation. Moses is depicted at the US Supreme Court along with other ancient lawgivers. Throughout Washington, DC there are many scripture references on some buildings – as there should be – to the contributions of the biblical tradition to our nation’s history. “In God We Trust” is an appropriate national motto. Historical displays that include religion are constitutional and appropriate ways to depict the American story.

By the same token, those of us who’ve read and studied history with integrity realize we are to be wise and prudent, dare I say humble, in the public display of any religion. I’ll use the Ten Commandments as an example. I’m not against the Ten Commandments being displayed publicly. It doesn’t bother me if they are hanging on the wall in the courthouse, statehouse, nation’s capital, or some other public building. If they are up let’s not take them down. This is where my non-believing friends need to work with me.

I’m also not in favor of hanging them on the walls in public places if they aren’t currently there. Think of the expense that would be involved in doing that. That money could be used to feed the hungry, clothe the unclothed, or build a house for Habitat for Humanity. My piety is not rooted in being a cheerleader

for hanging the Ten Commandments on public property. I'm not going to preach or teach that they should be. If that is somebody else's passion, I respect it, even though I don't agree with it.

Keep something in mind. The Ten Commandments are covenant words. They are words for people who have a relationship with God through His Son, Jesus Christ. This is why I'm more interested in each of us living the Ten Commandments each day for the nation and the world to see. There is much talk about the Ten Commandments these days. As a Christian leader and pastor, I find it fascinating that no one in the Christian community is talking about The Beatitudes. I've not heard anyone calling for the public display of the Beatitudes – especially Judge Roy Moore in Alabama. Have you? The Beatitudes are to the New Testament what the Ten Commandments are to the Old Testament. Remember The Beatitudes from Matthew 5?

***“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (vv. 3-12).***

How about displaying both The Commandments and The Beatitudes in our lives? We are granted the freedom to do that and responsible Christians display them in their lives. Perhaps one of the reasons many of us are more comfortable with “hanging the Ten Commandments up in a public building” is because that is much easier to do than to actually live them out. Perhaps one of the reasons why nobody is saying anything about The Beatitudes is because The Beatitudes are from the lips and heart of Jesus and they are harder to follow than the ten words of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. Truth be known, the whole Bible is a commentary on the Ten Commandments and the Eight Beatitudes. Could it be that we are much more comfortable with “displaying” our faith than actually “living” our faith?

So someone may say, “OK, Jimmy, you have a point. I've not thought about it that way and I tend to agree with you. But Jimmy, how do we deal with all this godlessness in our society?” Good question. How do we engage this “pagan idolatry,” to borrow a line from the movie, “Apocalypse Now”? How do we confound the false teaching of Mormonism, Atheism, New Ageism, Islam, Judaism, and the like? I have the answer. Being more evangelistic than we are. A people of responsible freedom are a people who commit to a passion – a passion to see people come to know Jesus Christ. A people of responsible freedom, Christians that is, work, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to fulfill that passion. Christians seek to lead non-Christians to be Christians. We are free to do that.

Now let me bring some more confusion. What does it mean to be Christian? Last Sunday's Atlanta Journal-Constitution had a story entitled, “One Nation Under God? Numbers Say Yes.” Its author, Samuel P. Huntington, a professor at Harvard, notes that statistics say the United States is not only a religious nation, but also a Christian one at that. Up to 85% of Americans identify themselves as Christians.<sup>3</sup> But what does that mean? I honestly don't know.

On the other hand, our North American Baptist Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention notes that out of a US population of just over 288 million, up to 197 million people are not Christians. That is roughly 68% of the population. The Georgia Baptist Convention observes that out of a Georgia population of 8.5 million souls, over 60% are un-churched. I take that to mean “not Christian.”

So who's right? Stats provided by a Harvard professor or the denomination? For political reasons we say the professor is right and that the 15% who aren't Christian can leave if they don't like what the Christian majority does and wants. Such an attitude, by the way, is un-American, let alone un-Christian. For religious reasons we say the Baptists are right and that we who are Christians are to be about the task of reaching the 197 million, over four million of them here in Georgia, with the Good News.

Truth be known, the professor is wrong and the Baptists are right. 85% of Americans may claim to be Christians, but our values sure don't evidence it. How do I know? If 85% of Americans were Christians, then this Worship Center and every Worship Center from sea to shining sea would be filled to capacity three or four times every Sunday morning, or Saturday, or at whatever appointed hours various groups meet. Billions and billions of dollars would pour into churches of every denomination. There wouldn't be any poverty in the land of the free and the home of the brave. In fact, poverty worldwide would slowly be dissipating. The Ten Commandments would be lived out, as would The Beatitudes. But none of these things is a reality, is it? This is why we are not a Christian nation and because we aren't, we are to be about the task of evangelism.

Some of us have forgotten that we are a people of freedom & free to spread the Good News of God's saving grace in the power of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. This is why I'm encouraging us today to remember that Christians are a people of responsible freedom – Baptists in particular. And the Galatians passage speaks to this.

Paul was battling a group called Judaizers in Galatia. These people said something like this: “The true descendants of Abraham are the Jews, who inhabit the city of Jerusalem. Here are the true people of God. It will follow that Jerusalem is the authoritative center of the renewed people of God, now called the Church. Those who are not prepared to attach themselves to this community by the approved means & circumcision and maintaining all of the Old Testament Laws & must be cast out. They cannot hope to inherit the promises made to Abraham and his seed.”

Paul countered that with an allegory about Hagar and Sarah using Genesis 16, 21, and 25 to show that those who rely upon the law instead of having faith in God's promise are the ones to be excluded from the inheritance. His word repelled the call of the Judaizers to view the Jewish law as a necessary addendum to the Christian faith. So Paul declared that Jesus Christ has set those who believe free from all of that. In essence, he said, “Listen up! You don't have to tack all those rules and regulations on to your faith. Your faith in Jesus Christ is enough to grant you access before God and your faith is also enough to enable you to live a Christ-like lifestyle.”

Baptist Christians are a people who champion that kind of freedom. To stand in the tradition of Paul, Roger Williams, George Truett, Martin Luther King, Jr., and countless others is to campaign for freedom – “liberty and justice for all!” If faith is enough to grant us access before God and enough to enable us to live like Christ, then we can live as a people of responsible freedom and affirm the Christian community worldwide as a free and diverse people dwelling together in unity. Paul told the Galatians in 5:13, . . . ***“but through love, become slaves to one another.”***

As a people of responsible freedom we, as believers in Jesus Christ, are to live as free people regardless. And a people of freedom lovingly submit to each other. Free existence is celebrated best whenever a diverse group has chosen to dwell in unity. We dwell in unity and not uniformity. Each of us basically believes the same things. Yes, there is and should be diversity, even in the manner of responsible interpretation and practice; otherwise, Paul misled all the churches where he ministered. Simply because we don't see every picture exactly the same, doesn't mean we can't be unified and enjoy the view. Some, especially among Baptists, have either forgotten this or never knew it.

The best thing Tabernacle Baptist Church can do is acknowledge that diversity enables us to be free to become slaves to each other and thus, fulfill the whole law of God by loving each other and everybody else, too. Hey, there's another one I don't hear anybody calling for a public display: ***“Love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 14b)***. Wonder why? The Ten Commandments are summed up with those five words. Interesting, don't you think?

Rabbi Norman Gerstendfeld did a good thing when he named his son after Roger Williams. Indeed, the Jews owe a lot to him and so do all Christians, especially those of us who call ourselves Baptists. We are a people of responsible freedom because Jesus Christ has set us free.

Maybe you are in bondage. If you are, let me invite you to experience the freedom that only Jesus can give. Christ, indeed, is our liberty. Come. Celebrate the joy of knowing what it means to be free in and through Jesus Christ. Praise God! In Christ we are a people of responsible freedom! Christians are a people of freedom! Jesus Christ has set us free! Join me in allowing His wonderful presence and power to set you free today and to live out that freedom with responsibility. So, how free are you? Here's a better question: "How responsible are you?"

**Sermon by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor  
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**All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from The New Revised Standard Version, 1989.**

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<sup>1</sup> Davis C. Woolley, Champions of Religious Freedom (Nashville: Convention Press, 1964), p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Justice C. Anderson, "Old Baptist Principles Reset" Southwestern Journal of Theology 31 (Spring 1989) 2, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, "One Nation, Under God? Numbers Say Yes" Atlanta Journal-Constitution Section B Sunday, June 20, 2004, p. 1. This essay is drawn from chapter 5 of Huntington's book, Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity.