

## Individual Soul Liberty

Imagine this scene. You have heard that there is a Baptist church starting up in your community, and a friend has invited you to attend. You attend but before the day is over, you find yourself in jail for having attended a church not sponsored or endorsed by the State you live in. Imagine this scene. You have been given a Bible and have started reading it and have found that what the Bible says is opposed to what you have been taught in the church you have always attended, as well as family members as far back as anyone can recall. You make an appointment to speak to the preacher and when there, lay out the apparent contradictions between what your church teaches and what the Bible says. You are told that you are not capable of understanding the Bible since you have not been to special schools and should leave the interpretation of the Bible to the minister. If you do that, you will prevent much trouble from coming your way. Imagine this scene. You live in a small Alaskan village where the Russian Orthodox priest and church rules and reigns. You have attended the little Baptist church in town, but are promptly visited by the priest and told to never go back to that church again or ever to speak to those people again or you will go to Hell. Sound familiar? Mark and Wendy Winans, our Baptist Mid-Missions missionaries serving in Iliamna, Alaska told us this while with us this summer. Are these make-believe scenarios that I have told you about? Certainly not. Down through the ages of the Church, these same arguments have been used time after time against those who dared to question the presiding religion where they lived. Christians in those times, and even to this day in many countries of the world, such freedom of thought and expression about the Scriptures is frowned upon and discouraged. You are taught to depend upon the church to teach you everything that they think you need to know. They know how dangerous it is when you let people begin reading the Word of God for themselves.

Baptists have taken another position on this whole issue, and it is called Individual Soul Liberty, or Individual Freedom of Conscience. This principle permeates Baptist doctrine and distinguishes Baptist from other Christian groups. Baptists throughout history have stood upon this principle, derived from the New Testament, and in many cases were persecuted, imprisoned and even put to death as a result. In American history, as we shall see at the end of today's message, Baptist influence has contributed greatly to the incorporation of many personal freedoms that are now taken for granted. This distinctive of Baptists needs to be understood and defended.

### I. The Meaning Of Individual Soul Liberty

1. There are probably some here this AM who have already been wondering what is meant by individual soul liberty. Here is a working definition of this Baptist Distinctive: Every individual, whether a believer or an unbeliever, has the liberty to choose what their conscience or soul decides is right in the religious realm. This also involves the personal and individual accountability of each person before God.
2. In other words, Baptists do not force anyone to assent to or deny any doctrine. We do not coerce anyone to worship God against their will or to refrain from worshiping God as they believe they should, unless their worship involves a practice that violates basic moral and ethical principles. Baptists do not believe in using imprisonment, confiscation of property, torture or other coercive methods as punishment for rejecting Christianity.
3. We may not agree with a person's decision on a religious matter, and that person's beliefs may be totally wrong according to the Scriptures, but we will not use any means of force to make them think differently. This does not

imply that Baptists will not oppose error when they find it, and seek to persuade others to embrace the truth. That should go without saying, but some might get the wrong idea of what I am talking about based upon the definition I have given to you for Individual Soul Liberty. If somebody came to me and said that they wanted to join North Eulalia Baptist Church, but they didn't believe in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ or the inspiration of the scriptures, I would have to tell them that they needed to get saved first, then we would talk about joining the church. That is not using force to change a person; it is taking a stand for the truth which the scriptures make clear we must do (Jude).

## II. The Biblical Indications of Individual Soul Liberty

Baptist view the concept of Individual Soul Liberty as inherent in the instructions of the New Testament. This is derived from the many passages that teach that each individual soul will be called into accountability and judgment before God.

### A. An Example From The Church of Rome, Romans 14:5-8 & Romans 14:9-12

1. This passage of scripture deals with the individual liberty of believers. In verse 2 one follower of Christ thought that to please God one should eat only herbs, while another believed one could eat anything with God's approval. In verse 5 one Christian set aside a day as a special religious day for God, while another Christian did not.
2. Notice how the Apostle Paul rectified this situation that probably was causing conflict in the church at Rome. Instead of recommending that one or the other be punished or both do the same thing, he simply stated that each believer was to be fully persuaded or convinced in his own mind about their actions. This is individual soul liberty - allowing the individual Christian the freedom to choose what they believe is best. When the issue is a matter of right and wrong, and there are many of those issues, the Christian approach is to exhort people to do right, not to coerce them. There will never be any giving in to that which the Word of God says is wrong!
3. The reason for taking such a position is found in verse 12: "So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God." Notice that it very clearly says that each Christian will give account of themselves and not of others.
4. This same truth is also stated in 2 Cor. 5:10 which says: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad." This verse is stating that every believer will one day stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ and give an account to Christ. It is not a judgment of whether one is saved or not; it is a judgment of what we have done or not done for Christ while in our body here on this earth. Notice again, it does not say that we will have to give account for what other believers have or have not done. The point is clear - each believer is totally responsible for their own actions before God. When we understand this, then it should be understood why it is unbiblical to use force or to coerce others to believe and practice the scriptures. They will have to give answer to God as to why they didn't. Let's leave it in God's capable hands.

### B. Christ emphasized individual soul liberty

1. Christ emphasized individual decisions to obey God and follow Him  
Matthew 7:24-27 says, "Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and

beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it."

2. Christ called individuals to discipleship and service

Matthew 4:18-20 says, "And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. And they straightway left their nets, and followed him."

3. Christ commanded that the gospel be preached to every person

Mark 16:15 says, "And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature."

Acts 17:30 says, "And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent:" This verse is from near the end of Paul's message to the Athenians on Mars Hill. Very soon after Paul uttered these words most of them made individual decisions to not listen any more to what Paul was preaching. Praise God, several folks did respond and were saved.

### C. Further examples of Individual Soul Liberty

1. Acts 15:36-41 This passage of scripture relates to us the difference of opinion that Paul and Barnabas had over John Mark going with them on the second missionary journey. They parted ways and Barnabas took John Mark under his wings and God used them both, even as God used Paul and Silas. Both men argued their reasons for or not for taking John Mark, and they both had good reasons. Though the contention was sharp between them, and though they separated, they both understood each man's position and respected it.

2. 1 John 2:27 says, "But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him." This verse clearly teaches that every believer, because of the Holy Spirit's indwelling, is able to individually understand the Word of God for themselves. Note that the Holy Spirit of God is not imparting new truth, but rather teaches the truth. Notice that it says the Holy Spirit "teacheth you of all things" or literally "concerning all things." For this to happen, each believer must read and study the Bible with the help of the Holy Spirit of God.

3. Revelation 3:20 says, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me." This verse pictures the Lord outside the door of the Laodicean church, asking the church to admit Him. He does not break down the door and force Himself on the church. The individuals of that church could either choose to accept Him or to reject Him. If they rejected Him they would suffer the tragic consequences of doing so.

3. Note that the freedom of choice we find in these passages of scripture does not deny the sovereignty of God. He is in control of everything, but He does not force a person to act against their will. He appeals to people to make the right choice.

### III. The Limitations of Individual Soul Liberty

A. Individual soul liberty is not a justification for disobeying the Word of God.

A believer may freely choose whether or not to obey God's Word. Individual soul liberty allows them to make that choice, but it does not justify disobedience. David made a choice to commit adultery and murder, and though forgiven by God when he asked God to forgive him, he suffered the consequences of his actions. An unbeliever has the liberty to remain in unbelief, but liberty does not free them from the consequences of their choice - separation from God for all eternity in the Lake of Fire!

B. Individual soul liberty does not mean a believer can do whatever they want without regard for others. This is one of the important points that Paul was making in Romans 14 - your actions should not cause another believer to stumble. Every believer should be aware of the impact of their actions upon others, even if those actions are not specifically forbidden by Scripture.

C. Individual soul liberty does not make each Christian a law unto themselves.

God told believers to exhort and encourage one another, and He has placed us in local churches, where we are to be as interdependent as the parts of the human body. Therefore, we are not exempt from the godly ministry of fellow Christians who desire to warn us when we are violating Scripture and who desire to encourage us to obey it.

#### IV. It Is A Historical Distinctive

A. Early declarations of Individual Soul Liberty Soon after Christianity was recognized by Rome and the Catholic Church was being organized, a group called Donatist (from the name of their most prominent leader), separated from the official church over several issues, one which was the employment of force in matters of religion. A Donatist pastor named Petilian wrote, "Christ persecutes no one; he was for inviting men to the faith. Why do you not permit every man to follow his own free will? Christ in dying for men has given Christians the example to die, but not to kill." Donatist, and their successors, the Waldensians and Anabaptists had their properties confiscated, were persecuted, imprisoned and in some cases were killed.

B. English Baptist were persecuted for their views on Individual Soul Liberty

1. Thomas Helwys was an early Baptist preacher in England. In 1612, he wrote a book called, *The Mystery of Iniquity*, demanding full religious liberty and challenging the authority of the state church to coerce adherence. He dedicated it to James I, King of England and head of the state church with these words:

"The king [James I], is a mortal man and not God, and 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; he is but dust and ashes as well as we; yet, though he should kill us, we will speak the truth to him.. for our lord the king is but an earthly king, and he hath no authority as a king but in earthly causes; and, if the king's people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all human laws made by the king, our lord the king can require no more; for men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves." King James I responded to Helwys' Baptist challenge of his "divine right" by arresting the preacher and putting him in prison, where he remained until death.

2. Later in the 17th century, John Bunyan also felt the wrath of the King of England. He was a Baptist pastor in Bedford, England, who was imprisoned for

leading a religious meeting without the approval of the state church. His crime was believing in the Baptist distinctive of freedom of conscience or soul liberty. During his 12-year imprisonment he wrote several books including the famous Pilgrim's Progress.

C. Baptists in Colonial America suffered in a similar way

1. Baptists fled European persecution to come to America.

a. Congregationalists established a State Church in the state of Massachusetts.

1) Obadiah Holmes: Baptist (1651) Was whipped for holding a prayer meeting.

2) In Court he was told: "You have denied infants baptism ... you deserve to die."

3) He was beaten so "the blood ran down his body until it filled his shoes "; for two weeks, had to sleep on his hands or elbows, and knees.

b. Maryland: Roman Catholic Colony.

c. Connecticut taxed Baptists and confiscated their lands to pay for Presbyterian Churches.

d. North and South Carolina, and Virginia: Church of England was the state church

2. Baptists scattered throughout the Colonies.

a. First Baptist Church, of Providence, established under Roger Williams, who had been banished from Massachusetts.

b. Establishment of Rhode Island

1) John Clarke went to England to obtain a charter for a new colony.

2) It took 12 years.

3) Wrote charter for R.I. in (1663)

4) The words "religious liberty" were used for the first time in an official government constitution.

3. Virginia: Persecution of Baptists

a. John Ireland: Arrested with two other Baptist preachers; imprisoned in Culpepper, Va.

b. They attempted to blow him up with gunpowder; smother by burning sulfur under his cell; hired a doctor to poison him, and built a wall to keep him from preaching through the bars of the cell.

c. John Waller, Lewis Craig, James Child: on June 4, 1768, were dragged before the Magistrate of Spottsylvania County, Fredricksburg, and held for trial, accused of being 'disturbers of the peace. How were they disturbers of the peace? They witnessed to people they meet. They were defended by Patrick Henry.

4. It was this belief by Baptists, based on the Scriptures, that lead to the U.S. Constitution providing equality and personal freedoms to all Americans. We would all frown upon the state of Pennsylvania imposing a state religion upon us. We have never known such a thing to happen in our life time. Why? Because of those who came before us, who suffered for what they believed the Word of God taught, and took a stand for such beliefs.

Conclusion: Here are some applicable conclusions from our study this AM:

1. Be aware that each believer here is a going to give account of themselves before God one day. That should motivate us to obey the Lord's commands given

to us in the Word of God. This liberty comes with great responsibility - the responsibility to obey the Lord.

2. If you are not saved, realize that you too will stand before God one day to answer why you didn't place your faith and trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ. You have a right to reject Him all your life, but you will suffer the irreparable damage of such a decision. Use your free will today to accept what God has provided for you as a free gift - your eternal salvation.

3. We each need to appreciate how the principle of individual soul liberty has been incorporated into our U.S. national laws.