

WHAT BAPTISTS STAND FOR

But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

The subject announced for this morning is “What Baptists stand for.” I am not particularly wedded to a name. I am a Baptist in the sense that I believe the principles for which Baptists historically have stood. If you empty the name “Baptist” of its content, though, and make it mean something opposite to that for which it has stood in history, then you may have the name and I will retain the principles. I am not very particular what I am called, but it is necessary sometimes to define our position and sometimes to define a name.

A couple of years ago I visited Vancouver and one day a Baptist minister in the city telephoned me at the hotel and cordially greeted me. I asked him to come over and have lunch with me. Years before I had met him in Vancouver on a holiday occasion, and had very delightful fellowship with him. He came over to the hotel and we had a very happy time together. He said, “I have heard something from the East, but the news that has come to us has been very fragmentary, and I thought I would like to have a talk with you and find out how things are in Old Ontario.” I told him something of our experience, and of our battle for the Book. “Well,” he said, “there is nothing but the old gospel.

I have always stood for that, as you know; and still stand for it.” I said I was happy to be assured of that. We went to the meeting together in the afternoon—I was to speak in the afternoon—and we entered the church together. He remained in the body of the church and I went into the vestry. There a company of ministers were gathered, and they said: “We were astonished to see

you come in with Mr. So-and-So today.” I said, “Why?” “Well,” they said, “he has no kinship with you theologically, has he?” “Why,” I said, “I supposed he had. I met him here some years ago and enjoyed his fellowship, and he assures me that he stands where he has always stood.” They replied, “He is the worst enemy of evangelical faith we have in the city. In the Ministerial Association he strongly objected to your being invited here, or being received on any terms; and in our Convention and in our Board meetings he has been the leader in opposing every kind of Fundamentalist movement.” “Well,” I said, “do not worry, brethren, just leave him to me, and we will get along all right.”

During the course of my afternoon address I told the congregation that I was very glad to have the opportunity of renewing old fellowships and that it had been my great delight that day to spend an hour or so with my old friend Mr. So-and-So—that he had always been known as an out-and-out evangelical, and I was delighted to have been assured by him that he was standing squarely and uncompromisingly for the faith as he had always stood. I saw the congregation react! When I had finished my address I said, “I should like to have a conference and especially invite all the ministers to remain, and others who may be interested in this great conflict in which we are engaged.” This gentleman remained, and I suppose from 150 to 200 people. I said, “I am going to throw the meeting open for discussion, and any of you can say whatever you like to say.” The pastor of the church got up and said, “I should like to say a word.” He was a very mild gentleman but that day he was like a lion. “I have never been more astonished in my life than I have been today at what Dr. Shields said when he declared that Mr. So-and-So was still standing for the faith.” He looked at the gentleman in question and said, “You know, sir, that that is not the position you have taken in the meetings of our Board, nor is that the position you have taken in the Convention. You know that you have endorsed, sponsored and defended the rankest kind of Liberalism, and that what you have reported to our guest today is absolutely contrary to fact.” Then this man got up and said, “Well, I am a



BY T. T. SHIELDS

WHEN BAPTISTS SURRENDER THEIR BELIEF IN THE BIBLE AS THE WORD OF GOD, THEY HAVE YIELDED THE LAST LOGICAL REASON FOR THEIR EXISTENCE

Baptist... I am a Baptist. That is a name good enough for me. I don't want any other name. I have always been a Baptist!" "Oh," I said, "Brother So-and-So, that will not do today. You will have to tell us what sort of a Baptist you are. Are you an Andrew Fuller Baptist, or a William Carey Baptist, or a C.H. Spurgeon Baptist, or a Thomas Armitage Baptist? Or are you of another sort—are you a W.H.P. Faunce Baptist, or a Henry C. Vedder Baptist, or a Harry Emerson Fosdick Baptist, or a Shailer Matthews Baptist? We have at least fifty-seven varieties of Baptist and we are in a pretty pickle altogether! It will not do for a man to say 'I am a Baptist.' He must define his term, and let us know just what he means by the use of that word."

I shall use the word this morning as representative of that body of truth for which people called Baptists have in days gone by heroically stood.

THE SUPREME AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

First of all, Baptists have always stood for the supreme authority of the Holy Scripture. Upon that our whole position is based. To us the Bible has been the inspired and infallible and supremely authoritative Word of God. When Baptists surrender their belief in the Bible as the Word of God, they have yielded the last logical reason for their existence. A Baptist without an authoritative Bible is a misnomer. He is not a Baptist. I do not know what he is, but he is not, in any true sense, a Baptist.

It is upon that position we stand, namely, that God has really spoken and spoken in such a way that He can be understood by men. Since He has spoken, we ought to obey God rather than men. Now, that is the first thing. I need not elaborate. I simply content myself with stating the principle that Baptists have held the Bible to be their sole authority because they have accepted it as the Word of God.

Out of that position many principles naturally grow. If the Bible be the Word of God, it follows that we must individually examine it. Our appeal has been always to the Bible and to the Bible-enshrined Christ. He is in the Old Testament; He is in the New. His Person binds the whole book together and it is the infallible Word of God to us. That being so, it is incumbent upon us *to prove that our position, whatever it be, is in agreement with Scripture*. If the Bible be our supreme authority, then we must be above all things scriptural. We must obey God rather than man.

Well then, we need to ask whether our practice of appealing to Scripture is itself scriptural and apostolic. What about the early church? What about the foundation laid on the day of Pentecost? Read the inspired record of Peter's sermon. To what authority did Peter appeal? *To no other authority than the Word of God*—simply what was written; that was the highest authority Peter knew. The preacher on the day of Pentecost was able to quote Scripture, and he proved his position by reference to the Word of God. Let that be sufficient for us. That is the Baptist position, and if they call you "unlearned and ignorant," well, let it be so.

And, that authority found its climax in the Person of Jesus Christ: "Therefore let all the house of Israel"—that is, because the Scriptures were fulfilled in Him, and because His promise respecting the coming of the Holy Spirit was now fulfilled in their experience—"Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" [Acts 2:36].

THE ABSOLUTE SOVEREIGNTY OF JESUS CHRIST

That brings us, really, to that which is central in the Baptist position, namely a recognition of the absolute sovereignty of Jesus Christ our Lord. We are to obey Him. He is our Lord. Out of that truth comes the foundation of our whole Baptist position. It is that which marks our individuality. "One is your Master, even Christ; and all of you are brethren." We are—everyone of us—directly, personally, related to Him. We must ask: "What will You have me to do?" For you remember that when Peter proclaimed the great truth that Christ was exalted and was now Lord of all they immediately enquired: "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" [Acts 2:37] If that be true, that the Jesus whom we rejected and crucified and buried out of our sight, has been approved of God, and exalted to His right hand, how shall we adjust ourselves to that tremendous fact? What is our duty in the promises? If He is Lord, what shall we do? That is the Baptist position. That is purely the apostolic principle and by that we must be guided.

Out of this principle comes the Baptist *insistence upon soul liberty*. It is useless to tell me that I am responsible to God, if some other power is to control my conscience. If He is my Master and I am answerable to Him, then I must say to all other authorities, "Hands off." I will obey Him. "We ought to obey God rather than men." Baptists therefore have

CENTRAL IN THE BAPTIST POSITION [IS] A RECOGNITION OF THE ABSOLUTE SOVEREIGNTY OF JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD

always resisted the interference of any civil or ecclesiastical authority in the realm of conscience. We are to be free men. We are to stand fast in the liberty in which Christ has made us free. And because of that, we have stood for *the separation of church and state*. We have insisted that it is not the function of the state to interfere in matters of religion—a man must be permitted to exercise his soul toward God according to the measure of divine illumination that God sovereignly grants him.

Let me pause here to say a word about that hackneyed phrase “Baptist liberty.” There is a world of difference between the *liberty of faith* and the *license of unbelief*. Liberty is never license. Look at a great engine—see it speeding along, dragging a great train loaded with living freight. With what glorious freedom that mighty engine moves! I never see a train without wanting to stop and look at it.... When I was a little boy, I was always interested in the “puff-puff” and I am just as interested as I ever was. Whenever I have time when I get off the train at a station, I want to see the man who is in the cab.... I want to see what kind of a man has his hand on the throttle. Then the engine moves out with such freedom—but it is free to exercise its power just so long as it keeps on the prescribed track. Let that engine get off the track and it is the most helpless thing in the world. It is in the ditch and no one can do anything with it.

Liberty means the perfection of law, and when the law of God is written in our hearts and expresses itself through our lives, then against the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus there is no law. We are free to bear the fruit of the Spirit. But nowadays one may suppose that the cardinal principle for which Baptists have always stood is the fight to doubt anything and be sure of nothing. They say that is Baptist liberty! They tell us you must not prepare a statement of faith. Baptists have never been bound by a creed. If you go into a Baptist church you can be a Unitarian, or a Mohammedan, or almost anything, because Baptists believe in liberty! That is sheer nonsense.

When Baptists have spoken of religious liberty, what they meant was not that they were free to refuse to believe the Word of God. Such freedom is not insisted upon here. There is a certain obligation: “we ought to obey God rather than men.” We are not free to reject God’s Word. We are not free to refuse obedience to the plain commands of God. We are not free to change that which is written. We never were. True Baptists have never claimed such freedom.

There is an oughtness about it, a moral obligation. If God has spoken, then it is the duty of every believer to hear Him and obey Him. The Apostle gloried—while he spoke of freedom, and said to the Galatians, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage” [Galatians 5:1]—in being Christ’s bondsman. He was the slave of his Master. And so completely was he mastered and dominated by Christ that even in the realm of the intellect he counted it a sin to entertain a thought that was contrary to Christ. He exhorts believers to bring “every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” [2 Corinthians 10:5].

That is the norm—what Christ is, what He has said. And we are bound to Him and have no right to question what He has said, or to depart from that which He has commanded. That is our cardinal principle and, because we have said to the civil power, “Keep your hands off our conscience,” Baptists have gone to prison and to death rather than surrender their liberty in Christ. It does not mean that they have not believed something. It means that they have believed things so profoundly that they would rather die than surrender them.

Now I need not pause to say that *we hold the great fundamentals of the faith* in common with all evangelicals, respecting the deity of Christ, His miraculous birth, His supernatural life, His expiatory death, His literal resurrection, His ascension to heaven and accession at God’s right hand, and His coming again—all these have always been fundamentals of the faith with Baptists. So also faith in the atoning sacrifice, justification by faith, regeneration by the Holy Ghost, sanctification through the Spirit, a godly walk.

THE AUTONOMY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

Then we have held from the beginning that out of that individualism has come our conception of the church. The church is a local assembly of believers. The word “church” is used in a larger sense, I know, in reference to the body of God’s elect, the body of Christ. He “gave Him to be head over all things to the church” [Ephesians 1:22]. But there was a church at Antioch, a church at Corinth, a church at Ephesus, churches that were in Galatia, churches of Pergamos, Philadelphia, Thyatira, and so on—each church a self-governing body, a theocracy of which Jesus Christ is Lord and King, the Head of the Church. And for this reason *we have always resisted any sort of extra-church authority*.

AS LONG AS THE CHURCH IS MADE UP OF SPIRITUAL PEOPLE, AS LONG AS IT IS AN ORGANISM ANIMATED BY THE SPIRIT OF GOD, IT WILL FUNCTION

That principle makes it impossible for us to be sacramentarians or sacerdotalists. To us, baptism and the Lord's Supper, strictly speaking, are not sacraments. They are ordinances by which the believer expresses his faith in God. No part which the administrator may play has any effect upon the validity of that ordinance. If baptism is made to depend upon the qualifications of the administrator—if he is a kind of priest, who has special authority from God—then if I come to him for baptism and I receive baptism only at the hands of one who is thus specially ordained for the purpose, if there be a defect in his qualifications, then however sincere I may be, my baptism becomes invalid. It is no longer a personal act. But whether it be baptism or the Lord's Supper, its validity depends upon the spiritual fitness of the participants, and we each are answerable to God Himself. And so we abide by the ordinances in their primitive simplicity and order.


We practice immersion because Christ commanded it. Of course, we can see a value in the symbolism of it, but primarily because Christ commanded it. I remember a statement of Spurgeon who said: "If the Lord told me to go and put twelve stones in the middle of the road, I would go and do it. I might not see any wisdom in it, but if He commanded it, it is my duty to obey." Now, we are Baptists, not because we are specially enamoured of a particular ordinance but we practice that ordinance because "we ought to obey God rather than men" and we have no right to change that which He has ordained.

That, of course, in the nature of the case, compels us to the position that a church is a spiritual body, made up of regenerated persons, every one of whom is personally responsible and responsive to God. That is what the church ought to be. The simple organization of a New Testament church—and I am more and more convinced of the importance of it the longer I live—is designed to meet the need of a spiritual body. As long as the church is made up of spiritual people, as long as it is an organism animated by the Spirit of God, it will function. But when the simple congregational principle of the church of God departs, the church crumbles to dust.

Out of this comes the very simple view of the function of the minister. What is a minister? He holds no authority over God's people merely by virtue of the fact that he is an officer of the church. If he be a spiritual man, if he be in a true sense a father in Christ, then he will have an authority over the people that rightly belongs to a mature spiritual life.

Apart from that, he will exercise no authority at all. The offices are very simple: pastor or bishop, and deacon. And they are both servants. The proper position for any minister to take is the position taken by the apostle: "God has displayed us, the apostles, last" [1 Corinthians 4:9]. I think I told you that I once heard my father preach on this text: "For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake" [2 Corinthians 4:5]. I remember his emphasis. He said, "Mark you, my brethren, 'Your *servants* for Jesus' sake.'" A recognition of the supremacy of Christ in all realms of life is the Baptist position and to forsake that is to forsake everything.

I wonder how many Baptists are here this morning. I do not mean Baptist church members, but real Baptists to whom Jesus Christ is Lord. "Well," some of you say, "I am a convinced Baptist in the sense that I believe in immersion." Well, Baptists are obedient to their convictions; and if you are a convinced Baptist in that sense you will make haste to obey. "What shall we do?" said they at Pentecost. The answer was, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ." That is only the initial step. That is an outward confession.

As for you who are not Christians, hear it once again: Salvation does not consist in church membership. We must, first of all, personally repent, personally believe, personally surrender to Christ; and then in the might of His Spirit go on and obey Him. 

O Lord, we desire to walk in Thy ways, and we pray that Thou wilt bless our simple exhortation this morning. Help us to stand fast in the spiritual liberty which is ours in Christ, but which can never be ours apart from Christ. We pray that many this morning may be led by Thy Spirit to ways of obedience, for Thy name's sake, Amen.

Dr. T.T. Shields was the pastor of Jarvis Street Baptist Church from 1910 to 1955. This address was given on January 22, 1928.

The Gospel
WITNESS

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your prayers and support.