

## **Baptist Essentials – Why Are We Baptists?**

### *Lesson 6 | Individual Soul Liberty*

Tonight, we find ourselves in lesson 6 of our series of learning about the essentials of being a Baptist. We started our series off by talking about the vast importance of having polity. Through that lesson, we learned that without polity, a church cannot truly operate in a concise and appropriate way because that church becomes like the wild wild west with everybody being a gunslinger. Having a particular polity helps the church to be protected from heretics and hypocrites, those that don't truly know the Gospel and those that think they know the Gospel.

Then after that lesson we begin to get into the meat and potatoes of our series and started using the acrostic of BAPTISTS to help us think logically and with more organization, and maybe even in a way that might be more memorable for us.

The B stood for Biblical Authority. As Baptists, we believe that the Bible is the final Word and is authoritative for all of faith and practice. Whatever the Bible says dictates what we believe and what we do. We don't have a different rungs of the ladder that present different authorities, it is the Bible and nothing else. Sola Scriptura.

Next, we spoke about the autonomy of the local church, the A. The autonomy of the local church can simply be understood as the independency of the local church, meaning that we do not have a hierarchical government that manages the church. We even spoke about the form of government that we believe the Bible adheres too, that being congregationalism. Being a congregationalist church, we believe that the church is not ruled by the pastors, only led by them, and that the church gets the final say as to how the church is to operate. Thus, why we vote on budgets and the deacons and the differing teams we have here.

Next, we learned about the P which stood for the Priesthood of believers. We learned here that the individual believer has the right and responsibility to act as his own priest. We don't have to go through a person to get to the Lord, the torn veil in the temple when Jesus was crucified gave us that privilege to where we can boldly approach the throne of grace in time of need.

Last week, about the first T in the acronym and that it stood for Two offices. The two offices of the church is that of the deacon and the pastor/elder. You learned about what the deacon does and how he is to operate and his relationship with the pastor. You learned about the pastor and his role and responsibility concerning prayer and the Word of God and how it is to be administered. You also learned why I have only used the pronoun of HE when referring to these offices.

That leads us to our next letter, the letter I. **“I” stands for Individual Soul Liberty.**

Here is our **Definition: Every individual, whether a believer or an unbeliever, has the freedom to choose what their conscience believes is right. With this, they are responsible to God for their own beliefs and should not force anyone to believe something that goes against their conscience.**

Soul liberty is very similar to the doctrine of the priesthood of believers that we have already discussed. Remember, the priesthood of believers teaches that you’re your own priest. While different, these two doctrines overlap some because both are dealing with the freedom of the believer within the confines of God. Hopefully this evening, we will flesh out the main differences here so that we will have a proper understanding.

So while I have given you the definition, let me break it down a little bit further for us that I believe will be helpful in our time together this evening. Essentially soul liberty is that belief where we choose what is right according to how we understand the Bible. The Bible informs our beliefs, right? Therefore, we have the liberty to have a particular interpretation of the Scriptures. Once our conscience has been informed due to our own liberty of informing it, we shouldn’t go to others and push that same belief onto them. Some might call that shoving it down someone’s throat. This is the angle that we will take this evening by breaking this up into two sections: 1) The ability to Choose for ourselves and then 2) The inability to compel others.

### **The Ability to Choose for ourselves**

This first section here is simple and we will not be spending much time discussing it.

It is our responsibility as individual members of the body to have our conscience informed by the Scriptures. This is what Paul spoke about in Romans 12. Turn with me there. **Romans 12:2**—*And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*

The Apostle Paul is telling us that the only way for us to truly be able to understand and know the perfect will of God, that which is good and acceptable and perfect, is to first not be conformed to the world and its way of thinking but then be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Let's break this down a little further for us.

This word conform in the original language is where we get our English word metamorphosis. Think of a frog. A frog starts as a tadpole and as time goes on, he is slowly morphing into something else. He grows legs and an actual head. His body begins to absorb its tail. Eventually he no longer needs to be in the water full time and will soon exit the scum pond and enter onto the land where he has totally morphed into something else. Let's use another example. Think of a butterfly. This creature starts as an ugly caterpillar and by the end of its life cycle, through its entire process of metamorphosis, it ends as a beautiful butterfly. Paul says, do not be morphed into the way that the world thinks and believes. But he doesn't leave us there, he gives us what we ought to do next.

Let me ask a question: do you know what a schematic is? A schematic is simply the internal design of something. We get our word English schematic from the Greek word that's translated as transform. So according to Paul, our minds can be transformed as they have are "reschematic-ed" by renewing it. We must have a complete and total refashioning and redesigning of our minds.

The question is how do that happen? By a regular intake of studying the Word of God. Only through the Word of God will your mind be renewed so that you may have the ability to consciencely live according to the way that God has commanded us.

Let's look at how this practically plays out in our lives. Turn with me over to Ephesians 4.

*<sup>17</sup> This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as <sup>[i]</sup>the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, <sup>18</sup> having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; <sup>19</sup> who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. <sup>20</sup> But you have not so learned Christ, <sup>21</sup> if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: <sup>22</sup> that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, <sup>23</sup> and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, <sup>24</sup> and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. <sup>25</sup> Therefore, putting away lying, "Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor," for we are members of one another. <sup>26</sup> "Be angry, and do not sin": do not let the sun go down on your wrath, <sup>27</sup> nor give <sup>[a]</sup>place to the devil. <sup>28</sup> Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. <sup>29</sup> Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary <sup>[h]</sup>edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. <sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup> Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, <sup>[i]</sup>clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. <sup>32</sup> And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.*

How is one able to put off the old man? By renewing his mind. How is one able to put on the new man? Again, by renewing his mind. Allowing the Word of God to control your thinking and be dominated by it and having your conscience absolutely informed by that renewal.

So bringing our minds back to the doctrine at hand, what we must understand that is that each person is responsible to God. Or, we could say, **The individual soul is answerable to Almighty God and to Him alone.** We do not answer to the church, the convention, or anything or anybody else. We answer to God. Therefore, the necessity of knowing our Bibles and allowing the Scripture to inform our conscience isn't the job of anybody else but us. The doctrine is called, individual soul liberty. The individual has the liberty to have their soul informed.

So what does the soul NOT have liberty to do? That leads us to our second section this evening—

### **The Inability to Compel Others**

Now, at first, that sounds antithetical to the Scriptures, right? Does even Jesus tell us to go out and preach the Gospel to all of creation? Well, yes and amen.

Turn with me in your Bible to 2 Corinthians 5 and we will read verse 11. Paul is telling us why he is preaching and telling us about this theology about the future and then he gets to verse 11 and says, *Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men.*

Not notice, Paul says that he persuades men, not compels them. Why does he say “persuade” and not “compel”? Why wouldn’t Paul use any means possible to MAKE men follow Jesus? Paul was the man, right? The majority of the NT was written by him! Why not make them be followers? Simply because, you can’t make people do anything. It is impossible to compel anyone to believe against their own will.

So here is a good time for us to define some terms.

**Compel: Forcing someone to do something against their will**

**Persuade: Convincing someone to do something willingly**

Turn with me over to Acts 17 and we will drive this point home. Acts 17:1-4 – *Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, <sup>3</sup>explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.” <sup>4</sup>And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas.*

Paul reasoned with them, or he persuaded them, to believe. Verse 4 says that there were some who were persuaded. Verse 5, what we didn't read, says those who weren't persuaded formed a mob and did some pretty wicked things.

The bottom line here is that we cannot compel people to do anything. Even if your name is Constantine and you're the emperor of Rome and you're the first Christian emperor and EVEN if you make Christianity a legal religion in the land and you paved the way for Christianity to be the official religion of the land and you made the dictate that everybody must be Christians, DOESN'T MAKE A SOUL BECOME BORN AGAIN! Even if you're in the middle dark ages and you go through the land in crusades to make people disciples of Christ, YOU CAN'T CAUSE A SOUL TO BE REGENERATED. Do you see what point I'm trying to make here? You can only persuade people to be followers of the Lord. You can only persuade people to call upon the name of the Lord and believe in their heart that Jesus was raised from the dead. You can only persuade people to believe the Gospel. There is no coercion, no manipulation, or compelling, only persuasion.

Now that we know that we can only persuade man to become a Christian, let's look at it from a different angle that might will be a little more helpful for us this evening. I think everything I just described is easily understood and you already knew this. You already knew that salvation is of the Lord and you can't make people be Christian. But, what if they are already saved and they have some differing theology than you? What if you have been some convinced of a particular doctrine because of the Scriptures but your friend has been persuaded otherwise, how do you go about that? Do you compel them to believe otherwise? Again, no. There is NEVER any room for compelling but only persuading. This is where things can get a little sticky.

Let's think of something theological. Let's use a pretty controversial doctrine, that of Calvinism. Some of you may not know what that is, while many of you might. Essentially, Calvinism is a doctrine that strongly emphasizes God's sovereignty and specifically God's sovereignty in dealing with man's salvation. You're going to get a biased definition from Calvinists and non-Calvinists, so I am not going to give a further definition beyond what I have given you, but what

I have given you serves enough of the purpose for the point that I am trying to make this evening.

Both Calvinists and non-Calvinists have a Biblical conviction as to why they are theologically correct. Both have had their conscience informed by the Scriptures and neither are out of the bounds of orthodox, or out of the bounds of being a Biblical Christian. Both can Biblically defend their position. So how do we work with this concerning the individual soul liberty of the Christian? You try to persuade each other. But have Biblical evidence to prove their position, therefore, you persuade. Many times you won't get far with your own abilities, but that's why we lean upon the Word of God and let the Word do the work.

What about that of the miraculous gifts? Those gifts like speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, prophecy, and healing. What does this look like? Again, both sides have a Biblical argument, though I think those who believe these gifts continue have an incredibly weak Biblical argument, therefore we persuade.

Both of these topics that I have risen to our attention are what we could consider a second-tier topic. While they are INCREDIBLY important to discuss, they do not necessarily deal with the Gospel itself. But what about a first-tier issue, such as a differing understanding of the Gospel itself? Let's using Roman Catholic doctrine as our case study.

Rome teaches that you must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved. To that, we say yes and amen. But then they also believe that you must complete the different sacraments to receive grace for God. I must complete the sacrament of Mass to receive grace, I must participate in the Lord's Supper to receive grace, I must do this and that to receive grace from God. And not only that, when I sin and I confess my sins to the priest, I am told that I need to complete certain criteria to pay my penance so I may be forgiven. Friends, is that salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone? No, what type of salvation is this? This is a works-based salvation. Anything that is more than just faith alone in Christ alone is a false Gospel and falls into the category of heresy, a damnable belief.

So how do we deal with our Catholic family and friends? Do we compel them? No, again, the same method is applied—we persuade them.

Now let's get practical outside the realm of theology. Let's say something insane happened in the world five years ago and literally the whole world shut down and we are essentially caged into our homes for months on end. This is just a hypothetical situation, right? Let's say that the government has produced a vaccine that'll help keep you healthy from this virus that is spreading around the world. How are we supposed to think through this? Well, some might say Biblically that it is wrong to take the vaccine. Others say that there isn't Biblical that would keep me from taking the vaccine. Remember, this is all hypothetical. But if you hypothetically remember, there was a lot of hatred and anger flying around the world saying that if you didn't take the vaccine, then you wasn't showing any love towards your neighbor.

Take your Bible and turn to 1 Corinthians 8 and we will see how we sometimes take our liberty and why we cannot impose it onto others. I want to read the whole chapter.

*Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge <sup>[a]</sup>puffs up, but love <sup>[b]</sup>edifies. <sup>2</sup> And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. <sup>3</sup> But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him.*

*<sup>4</sup> Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. <sup>5</sup> For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), <sup>6</sup> yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live.*

*<sup>7</sup> However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. <sup>8</sup> But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse.*

*<sup>9</sup> But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a <sup>[c]</sup>stumbling block to those who are weak. <sup>10</sup> For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? <sup>11</sup> And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? <sup>12</sup> But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. <sup>13</sup> Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*

You have the liberty to believe what you want to believe if it is informed by the Scriptures. What you don't have the liberty to do is compel, manipulate, or coerce others to believe the same thing.

Alright, let's put all of this into the most practical way possible and let me give you an example of my own soul liberty—What about alcohol? The Bible is VERY clear, you should not become intoxicated. It's incredibly plain there, right? But it doesn't say you should've have a drink. So we have clear Biblical mandate but then there is some liberty that follows it. How do I go about with this? Well, first and foremost, if you drink to intoxication, you're in sin and you should repent. Plain and simple. But do I personally believe that you should have any alcohol at all? Personally? No. I do not believe there is any wisdom whatsoever is having alcohol. There are just too many variables involved—have you ate enough food with the drink? How strong is the drink? Are you at home or out at the restaurant? Proverbs 6:27-28 says this – Can a man take fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned? Or can a man walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched? The point is, how much can you drink before you begin to feel that tipsy feeling? Because just as soon as you get there, you're not longer sober minded and have fallen into sin. What about me as your pastor? What if Jamie and I have a glass of wine at home with dinner and just as soon as I finish that glass, you call me because your child was in a terrible car accident and they might not make it and you need me. Friend, I'll then be faced with a terrible decision to make—drive under the influence and break the law by getting behind the wheel or let you know that I can leave in an hour or so once my body has had time to metabolized the alcohol?

With this example that I have given you, I have shown you that I can persuade you without compelling you. I have Biblical evidence and conventional wisdom that

helps me to make that decision. I haven't infringed on your liberty one bit nor try to make you go against your conscience.

Do you remember what Martin Luther said about the conscience? Martin Luther said that it is neither right or safe to go against your conscience. Therefore, not only would it be sinful for us to go against our own conscience, it would be just as sinful to make somebody else sin against their own conscience. Look at Romans 14:19-21.

When it is dealing with topics such as the vaccine, or Calvinism, or speaking in tongues, sometimes we just have to adhere to a principle that isn't taught much in church. Here is a basic principle that I believe we all would do better if we lived by. Jesus taught this principle in John 21:22. Turn there and let's read it together.

*Jesus said to him, "If I <sup>[a]</sup>will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me."*

Do you know what this principle is called? It's called **[What principle did Jesus teach in John 21:22?] the Mind Your Business Principle**. Really, look again, what is that to you? You just need to do what you're called to do and follow me. Jesus essentially said shut up and mind your business. I don't know about you, but man if I could take a little more of this principle and keep my nose out from where it belongs. If we could just remember that we answer to God for our own actions, that I answer to God for what I do, say, believe, and behave, then there would be a lot less strife among the evangelical church. Right?

So we see that our conscience must be informed by the Scriptures which gives us the liberty to believe what we believe to be true. We've also learned that we must not compel others but persuade them. What we now need to understand is that there are some limitations to this doctrine. Because we believe in this doctrine, what are the guardrails to ensure that I don't fly off the cliff?

First, **I cannot violate the Scriptures**. Soul liberty can never be used in a way that'll allow for me to disobey Christ and His Word. Liberty is not a license to sin.

Second, **I cannot violate the conscience of another.** As we have just discussed, if another is convinced by the Scriptures of something, and their conscience is bound to that, I cannot make that person violate their conscience. What do we do? Persuade them.

Next, **I cannot violate the unity of the local church body.** The Lord hates the one who sows discord, right? Therefore, you are not given permission to go into the church and begin to teach things that are contrary to where that particular church stands. I cannot superimpose my will onto the churches. Beloved, not even the pastors can do this. We can passionately plea with you and persuade you, but I cannot force you to believe anything.

Now this gives us another rabbit hole to walk down. How does soul liberty work within the church? Well, remember, when you became a member here, you said that you would adhere to a certain set of theological distinctions that we believe that Bible teaches. Our doctrinal statement is called the Baptist Faith and Message and this is our guardrail and what we operate by. It's nothing that we force onto anybody, but it is the standard that this church (and every church for that matter) offers as a way for membership to the flock. Therefore, if there are theological differences that you cannot seem to get on board with because your conscience doesn't allow you to, then you cannot become a member of the church and you're free to find another church that aligns more closely with you. But, what if you don't want to go anywhere else? Well, first, you don't sow discord among the brethren. Secondly, you cannot come in and try to persuade because you're already in an established organization, or church for that matter, where established doctrinal distinctives have been given. Essentially, you're fully on board with the Mind Your Business principle.

Has this happened here? Yes. I have counseled some folks here who love our church but believe that their baptism inside of the Presbyterian church is Biblical and sufficient. Well, they cannot become members here, they realize that, but there isn't another local church they want to be a part of because they love it here, they love the teaching (outside of baptism obviously) but are willing to overlook a second-tier issue.

These are some of the limitations of the doctrine. What I'd like to finish with tonight are some of the perversions of soul liberty.

- 1) **I don't need the church.** Many within the American church find themselves with the American attitude of, don't tell me what to do or you can't tell me what to do. Many refuse to subject themselves to discipline or teaching. They don't believe they need the church or any leaders for that matter. If they have the ability and liberty to learn on their own, they therefore no longer need the church. Beloved, this is a direct contradiction to the Scriptures themselves. We all must be under the authority of pastors and within the confines of the church but this doesn't negate our own individual soul liberty. There is a balance.
- 2) **I don't need to correct others.** Again, balance is needed here. There's around 60 "one-another" commands of the New Testament. What does that mean? It means we need one another. We need to love one another, encourage one another, carry each other's burdens, we are even told to correct and rebuke one another when needed. If you have a misbalance of this doctrine, you'll easily find yourself not believing it is your role to confront others if they find themselves in sin. You have a duty to one another, right? But if we swing too far on the liberty swing, we will find ourselves in the ledge of believing we don't need to correct others because that's their freedom.
- 3) **I don't need to be concerned about my testimony.** Essentially, you don't think there is any need to care what others think about you. Now, on one hand, we don't want to be people pleasers nor do we need to have a fear of man. Those are Biblical warnings and sins that the Lord gives us in His Word. But having a total disregard of being a good example is wicked. Flaunting my liberty to the world, or even weak brothers, is wicked. Beloved, be concerned about your testimony for the outside world is looking.

In conclusion, this doctrine isn't as nice and well defined as that as the two offices within the church or even that of Biblical authority. But, it is something that we must be aware of. We've spoken about a lot this evening, no doubt. So if there is one thing that you walk away with this evening, it should be this – You will answer to God for you. You will answer to God for what you believe, what you say, how you act and behave. You will not answer to me as your pastor. You, alone, are

responsible to God. And when you come across somebody who believes differently than you, persuade them while also adhering to the principle Jesus taught – what is that to you? Follow me.

It's a fine line, sure, but one we can walk together in the power of the Spirit. Amen?