**Individual Soul Liberty**

**Saved, Baptized Church Membership**

**CONVICTION OF CONSCIENCE | COMMITMENT TO UNITY**

**INTRODUCTION:**

If you study the history of Baptists in America, you will find that many of the freedoms we enjoy in our country can be credited to the influence of Baptist people upon our Founding Fathers. President George Washington in May 1789, writing to the to the United Baptist Chamber of Virginia regarding the First Amendments to our Constitution, said "Every man, conducting himself as a good citizen, and being accountable to God alone for his religious opinions, ought to be protected in worshiping the Deity according to the dictates of his own conscience." Many Baptists have died refusing to compromise the principle of Individual Soul Liberty—it is that important. Another distinctive that has caused Baptists to be persecuted is adherence to biblical idea of a saved, baptized church membership. We will look at both of these today.

1. **INDIVIDUAL SOUL LIBERTY**

The doctrine known as individual soul liberty means a man has a right to be wrong if he wants to be. This could also be called the doctrine of religious freedom—that no one can be coerced into believing something. Every man is responsible to God for his choices, but every man is free to choose. It is the right to worship according to the dictates of one’s own conscience; to believe as they are convinced in their own heart and mind.

* 1. **The principles of Individual Soul Liberty**
     1. An individual’s heart must change before his beliefs. You cannot change an individual’s mind by forcing or imposing upon him your own religious beliefs. The Holy Spirit must work! “He that is convinced against his will, is of the same opinion still.”
     2. In *Romans 14:5-6*, we are told of two men. One sets apart a special day, the other does not. One eats certain foods and thanks God for them; the other does not. Paul does not condemn either man, but says in verse 5, “*Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.”* Notice that in both cases, a person has a right to believe as he sees fit. Verses 7-12 tells us why this is so.
     3. So every one of us is individually accountable to God. Since no man is accountable to us, we have no right to try to force men and women to believe as we do. We may try to persuade their hearts and minds what is both right and biblical, but we do not have the right to force them and coerce them, using any means to agree with us.
  2. **This is historically a Baptist distinctive**
     1. We are living in a day of religious tolerance and pluralism. These are terms used by liberals and ecumenical groups that try to convince us to drop our doctrinal barriers and come together towards the Supreme Being with them! These groups try to say that Baptists are the ones forcing their opinions on others, because we will not unite and yoke up with them. However, it can be historically shown that the Baptists are the only group of Christians that have been around for any length of time that haven’t forced their beliefs on others!
     2. History does not record one incident where any Baptist group has persecuted a non-Baptist group. It does record how Baptists were persecuted by non-Baptists of all persuasions. Catholics killed millions of Bible-believers. The Protestants—Calvin, Zwingli, and Luther— persecuted the Baptists. Even in Colonial America Baptists were persecuted. JD Freeman, a Baptist pastor in 1905, said, “Our demand has been not simply for religious toleration, but religious liberty; not sufferance merely, but freedom; and that not for ourselves alone, but for all men. We did not stumble upon the doctrine. It inheres in the very essence of our belief. Christ is Lord of all...The conscience is the servant only of God, and is not subject to the will of man. This truth has indestructible life. Crucify it and the third day it will rise again. Bury it in the sepulcher and the stone will be rolled away, while the keepers become as dead men... Steadfastly refusing to bend our necks under the yoke of bondage, we have scrupulously withheld our hands from imposing that yoke upon others...Of martyr blood our hands are clean. We have never invoked the sword of temporal power to aid the sword of the Spirit. We have never passed an ordinance inflicting a civic disability on any man because of his religious views, be he Protestant or Papist, Jew, or Turk, or infidel.”
     3. Rhode Island was founded in 1663 by Baptists who wrote their own constitution. That constitution attracted world-wide attention, because it was the world’s first declaration of religious liberty. It said in part, “No person within the said colony, at any time hereafter shall be otherwise molested, punished, disquieted or

called in question for any differences of opinion on matters of religion.” Baptists have long been the leaders in the fight to secure our nation’s proud heritage of religious liberty.

* 1. **A precaution concerning Individual Soul Liberty**

We are glad to support each individual’s right to worship as they please, or not to worship at all if they please. However, consider the following:

* + 1. This does not mean that we do not care for others. Baptists have always been missions-minded. Each individual has a right to choose not to be saved, but that same individual also should have the right to make that choice after hearing the Gospel!
    2. We do not have the right to use our personal soul liberties to put a stumbling block before another. In *I Corinthians 8:1-13,* Paul said that he was free to eat any type of meat he wanted, but then he added that if eating that meat would offend another brother, he would not exercise his right. *Romans 14:21, “It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby they brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.”* Neither does Individual Soul Liberty justify living in sinful disobedience to the Bible.

1. **SAVED, BAPTIZED CHURCH MEMBERSHIP**

This doctrine holds that only those who have been born again and have been subsequently scripturally baptized can rightfully be members of a New Testament Baptist church.

* 1. **The basis from the Bible**
     1. *Acts 2:41; I Corinthians 1:2, 13-16; Matthew 28:18-20*
     2. Baptism is the first step of obedience after salvation. Baptism is the door to church membership. There is a biblical basis for believing as we do regarding who is eligible for church membership.
  2. **Some have been belligerent toward Baptists for this belief.** 
     1. Catholic and some Protestant churches sprinkle babies. That “baptism” places them in the church before they can decide for themselves. For this reason, the vast majority of Catholics and Protestants are not saved yet are members of their churches. At times in history, the Catholic and Protestant churches became infuriated with the Baptist churches because they would not acknowledge these denominations as legitimate New Testament churches.
     2. Today the lack of commitment has prompted many churches to do away with requirements in order to join their congregations. It is becoming popular for some churches to proudly announce that anyone who attends their services is a member. This is a dangerous philosophy, but one that would be popular to those who want to be a part of a church but do not want to have to commit themselves in any way. In fact, there are some churches that do not practice baptism at all. They would say that “baptism of the Spirit” is enough, and they have no need of a man-made baptism. But to come to this conclusion, they have to ignore all the verses in the Bible that teach water baptism!
  3. **Benefits of saved, baptized membership** 
     1. For the church:
        1. It allows the church to follow the biblical pattern found in *Acts 2:41*.
        2. It protects the church’s purity and unity. Very few unsaved people will submit to believer’s baptism.
     2. For the believer:
        1. The believer will begin their fellowship in church as a child of God. Church will not be a means of trying to win God’s favor, but an enjoyable time of worship and service to God Who already favors them.
        2. The new member will begin their membership in obedience to Scripture. Baptism can be a difficult and sometimes embarrassing step of obedience that teaches the new believer that obeying the Lord is not one of comfort and convenience, but of sacrifice and openness to the Lord. That obedience will serve to propel their Christian lives into daily obedience.
        3. The new member will begin their fellowship on common ground with the rest of the church, all having experienced believer’s baptism. The new member will have a sense of belonging, and a church family to help them through their times of need.
        4. They will have a deeper commitment to the church and will be more likely to get involved in its work.

**CONCLUSION:**

These two Baptist distinctives have great historical significance and should be understood by every member.