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FIDELITY TO OUR BAPTIST HERITAGE

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Editor's note: Dr. T. J. Villers delivered this address in Buffalo in 1920. It was this editor's great privilege to hear it. I was grateful to God then that He had called me to follow in the train of such Baptists as Dr. Villers describes. I am still grateful that in His grace He has led the GARBC to keep on "following in their train." As the shadows deepen, may God give us grace and courage to go all the way, even as did these, our glorious fathers in the Baptist faith.

We plead for loyalty to our Baptist heritage, not because we want blind loyalty to a denomination, but because of that denomination's loyalty to the Word of God. We believe historic Baptists believed, loved, preached, and died for the truth of the Scriptures. As we Baptists of this modern day read Dr. Villers' account of these Baptist martyrs, we can only pray that God will keep us faithful to the heritage they handed to us with hands stained by their own blood because of their faith in the blood of the Savior.

When the *Mayflower* dropped anchor off New England, she carried a cargo more enduring than stone and more precious than gold. "She was freighted with principles, convictions, institutions, and laws." Her passengers were few; but they were tall men, sun-crowned. In all that constitutes true soul greatness, despite their poverty of purse, they matched our high mountains and broad plains. They were men with empires in their bosoms and new eras in their brains.

Our fathers bequeathed to us a heritage of principles, convictions, institutions, and laws; a heritage that we cherish because its price was their blood; the heritage of soul liberty, the new world's distinct and priceless contribution to political science and the church universal; the heritage of a regenerate church membership, a notion flouted for centuries, but now so commonly held that few know it to have been a conviction once peculiar to us. . . .

To us belongs the inextinguishable glory of Carey, the father of modern missions, and of Judson, the first missionary in these latter days to set foot on an unmixed heathen soil.

The words of Bancroft are familiar to us all: "Freedom of conscience, unlimited freedom of mind, was from the first the trophy of the Baptists." In this he agrees with Skeats, the English historian, who declared: "It is the singular and distinguished honor of the Baptists to have repudiated from their earliest history all coercive power over the consciences and actions of men with reference to religion. They were the protoevangelists of the voluntary principle."

For the first three hundred years, Christianity was a forbidden religion. Imperial power sought to suppress it as a depraved and immoderate superstition. Christians endured a great fight of afflictions from Jew and Gentile alike. Christians were publicly whipped. They were dragged by the heels through the streets. Their limbs were disjointed. Their noses and ears were cut off. Their eyes were dug out. Sharp knives were run under their nails. Melted lead was poured over their bodies. They were drowned, beheaded, crucified; they were ground between stones, thrown from high buildings, torn by beasts, smothered in limekilns, broiled on gridirons, scraped to death with sharp shells.

These horrors culminated in the dawn of the fourth century, when Diocletian issued three edicts in swift succession, commanding that all churches be destroyed, all Bibles burned, all Christians deprived of public office and civil rights. For eight years, fire and sword, rack and cross, wild beasts, and beastly men did their deadly work. Christ's people were killed all the day long. In one month, 17,000 suffered death; 144,000 were martyred in Egypt alone; of those condemned to banishment and slavery, 700,000 died. In the year 312, Constantine conquered Rome and put on the crown of the Western Empire. Eleven years later, by defeating Licinius at Chalcedon, he became sole master of the Roman world. He saw in Christianity a unifying force he could turn to his own advantage. He favored Christians, restored their confiscated property, rebuilt their places of worship, became a nominal Christian himself, felt that the suppression of heresy was a political necessity, turned persecutor, leveled pagan temples throughout his dominions, condemned to flames any Jew who threw a stone at a Christian convert, made it a penal offense for a Christian to embrace the Jewish faith, forbade the assembling of Arians and Donatists for worship, demolished their churches and banished their bishops. Then in 324, by making Christianity the religion of the state, he administered a blow from which the church has not yet fully recovered. For in that unholy alliance of church and state lay the germs of the papacy, with its fiendish Inquisition, an engine of oppression that surpassed all human and inhuman devices for confiscating men's property, torturing men's bodies, and coercing men's consciences.

From the fourth century, the time of Constantine, to the sixteenth century, the time of Luther, civil rulers, allied with ecclesiastical officials, claimed the right to dictate creeds and compel assent thereto. From popes and councils, Luther and Zwingli and Calvin appealed to Scripture as the final and supreme authority in matters of religion. But not one of these Reformers advocated the freedom of the church from secular control. Not one of them consistently recognized the sacred and inalienable rights of the individual conscience. In Switzerland the exponent of soul liberty was not Zwingli at Zurich. His statue there rightly represents him with a Bible in his right hand and a sword in his left. Not Calvin at Geneva, who openly advocated compulsory worship and whose good name is badly scorched by the burning of Servetus. Not these but Baptists like Sattler, who, before his tongue was torn out and his body burned, penned at Schleithem in 1527 the first Confession of Faith in which men claimed for themselves and demanded for others the boon of a free conscience; and Mantz, the noted Hebrew scholar, who, for the crime of rebaptizing, adults was thrust into prison, loaded with chains, and sentenced to be drowned. Led through the fish market and shambles, he preached to Zurich's people as he went. His old mother walked by his side, brushing away her tears and exhorting him to suffer bravely for Jesus' sake. He was put into a boat; his hands were tied together and looped over his knees; a stick was stuck between his arms and his legs; the black cap was drawn over his head; then, while uttering the prayer, "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit," he was thrown overboard into the lake.

In Germany Luther was so far from espousing the cause of soul liberty that he said of the Anabaptists, "Let the sword exercise its rights over them." Even the irenic Melancthon denounced our forefathers as "a diabolical sect, not to be tolerated," and advocated the sword as

the most effective argument against their views. The German apostles of freedom were not Lutherans but Baptists like Hubmaier, who, despite his learning, eloquence and acknowledged piety, was hounded from city to city until seized by order of the emperor and imprisoned at Vienna. Refusing to stultify his conscience and renounce his faith, he was tortured with red-hot pincers on his way to the headman's block, where the murderous ax fell flashing down and his headless body was burned. Three days later, his faithful wife, with a stone tied to her neck, was flung from a bridge into the Danube.

The Netherlands tell a similar story. They belonged to the domain of Charles V, who claimed the right to regulate their religion. In 1535 he issued an edict commanding that all "rebaptizers" be put to death by fire. If a man repented of his new faith, he was so far forgiven as to be beheaded. If a penitent woman confessed her "error," she was tenderly spared the flames and buried alive. By 1546 the number of these Baptist martyrs had reached the awful total of 30,000. Philip II continued his father's butchery. Duke Alva, the new king's chief adviser, urged that Dutch "men of butter" could be ruled only by the sword. Give him an army and he would pour into the royal coffers a stream of treasure a yard deep. Within three months after reaching the Netherlands, he had taken 1,800 lives. Then growing weary of such insignificant work as sentencing individuals, his Council of Blood with one fell swoop (February 16, 1568) sentenced to death the entire population—three million people! Trees and scaffolds by the roadsides were everywhere hung with the dead. Alva boasted that in addition to those whose deaths he had caused in battle, siege, and massacres, he executed 18,600 heretics. Philip, however, pronounced Holland "the country nearest to hell." No wonder he thought the climate there rather warm, for in his vain attempt to crush the civil and religious liberty of the people, not only did he drain his treasury, but he buried around the walls of the Netherland cities 300,000 of his soldiers. Of all the religious parties in this struggle, the Baptists alone had clearly grasped the new Testament principle of the soul's competency in religion; and it was they, as Douglas Campbell rightly affirms, who exerted "the greatest influence on the independent sects of England and America."

The first man on British soil to plead for complete religious liberty was Hendrik Terwoort, who, being persecuted for his Baptist views in Flanders, fled for protection to Elizabeth, head of the English Church, and for his misplaced confidence was roasted alive at Smithfield, dying, as Bishop Fuller tells us, "in great horror, both crying and roaring"; then this Protestant queen ordered all Baptists out of her realm on pain of imprisonment and confiscation of property. Bishop Spencer boasted that he would drive every Lollard from his diocese or make them hop headless or fry at the stake.

Baxter declared, "I hate unlimited liberty and toleration of all, and think myself easily able to prove the wickedness of it." Declaiming against baptism, he averred that "apoplexies, palsies, debility of the stomach, fevers, colics, and spasms" would be produced by it. Then having detailed that grim catalogue of Baptist woes, Baxter, author of *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, continued in this restful language: "All hepatic, splenic, and pulmonic persons, and hypochondriacs will soon get enough of immersion. It is good for nothing but to dispatch out of the world men that are burdensome, and to ranken churchyards. If murder be a sin, then dipping over head in England is a sin; and if those who would make it man's religion to murder

themselves are not to be suffered in a commonwealth, any more than highway murderers, then judge how these Anabaptists, that teach the necessity of such dipping, are to be suffered."

Soul liberty in England did not originate with Episcopalians or Presbyterians but with our Baptist forefathers. They, as John Locke declared, when Lord Chancellor King sought to crown him as the author of this blessing, were the first and only propounders of liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty. It was from a little dingy Baptist meetinghouse in London, where Thomas Helwys and his congregation worshiped (1611), that there flashed out first in England this sublime principle. The first official document published by a body of associated churches, advocating an untrammelled conscience, was the Confession of Faith issued by seven English Baptist churches in 1644. Article 48 of that Confession was then deemed revolutionary and dangerous. It is now, as Professor Vedder tells us, a shining landmark, not only of Baptist history, but of the progress of enlightened Christianity. It recognized king and Parliament as supreme in all civil affairs but affirmed that in matters of worship there is only one Lawgiver, even Christ.

It was in America, however, that this Baptist doctrine was destined to achieve its greatest glory. When the Puritans settled Massachusetts in 1628, they were determined to worship God according to their own conscience and to prevent everybody else from worshipping Him according to theirs. They organized themselves into Congregational churches, established those churches by law, limited political suffrage to membership in those churches, forbade all dissenting churches, and enforced these requirements and prohibitions by penalties of disfranchisement, fine, imprisonment, scourging, and banishment. Roger Williams was denounced as a man with a windmill in his head, a disturber of the peace, a disseminator of pestilential opinions because he dared to teach that the civil magistrate's power extended only to the bodies and goods of men. For this teaching he was banished from the colony, though John Cotton heartlessly remarked that it was not banishment but only enlargement. For fourteen wintry weeks, without bread and without bed, Williams wandered through trackless forests till he alighted upon a place called Providence, and there he built "a shelter to persons distressed for conscience." He founded a state without a king and organized a church without a bishop, the cornerstone of the new community being "the principle of absolute religious liberty combined with perfect civil democracy." The charter provided that no person within the colony should at any time be molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question for any difference of opinion in religious matters. And there for the first time since Christianity ascended the throne of the Caesars, we read in a code of laws, as Judge Story said, the declaration that conscience should be free and that men should not be punished for worshipping God in the way they believe He requires.

The story of William Witter, the old blind man, is well known. He lived at Lynn but was a member of the Newport church. In July 1651 he was visited by his pastor, John Clarke, and two other Newport brethren, Obadiah Holmes and John Crandall. They reached the old man's home on Saturday evening. Next morning the visitors were holding a religious service with Witter's family and four or five others who had come in unexpectedly. As Clarke was opening to them the Scriptures, two constables entered with a warrant for their arrest. Clarke, with his companions, was imprisoned in "the alehouse," then taken to Boston and brought before Governor Endicott for trial. Without accuser, witness, jury, law of God, or man, they were condemned. The governor charged them with denying infant baptism, declared that they were worthy of death, and that he would have no such trash within his jurisdiction. He sentenced

Crandall to pay a fine of five pounds, or be well whipped; Clarke to pay a fine of twenty pounds, or be well whipped; Holmes to pay a fine of thirty pounds, or be well whipped.

Tenderhearted friends satisfied the claims of Crandall and Clarke, but Holmes felt that he "durst not accept such deliverance." He languished in prison till September; then for the atrocious crime of preaching the gospel and denying infant baptism, he was taken into one of Boston's public streets, stripped of his clothes, and handed over to the executioner who was told to "do his office." Thirty strokes with a three-corded whip were laid upon his bared and bleeding body, the man striking with all his strength. "Yea," said Holmes, "spitting upon his hands three times." So gashed and torn was his flesh that for many days he could take no rest save upon his knees and elbows, being unable to suffer any part of his body to touch the bed. And yet while being unmercifully whipped, like Jesus on the cross and Stephen under the death-bearing stones, he prayed for his tormentors; and when the last lash had fallen, he cheerfully said to them, "You have struck me with roses!" This is the kind of stuff out of which our forefathers were made. We need a little more of the heroic in our present-day religion.

A halo of glory will forever wreath the name of Virginia Baptists, for they protested and petitioned, struggled and suffered till the principle of soul liberty was grafted into our national Constitution. Virginia was settled by Cavaliers, whose charter of 1606 made the Episcopal faith the religion of the colony. Withdrawal from the Episcopal church was accounted a crime equal to revolt against the government. The charter provided that nonconformists should be arrested and imprisoned till fully and thoroughly reformed. The clergyman's salary was fixed at sixteen thousand pounds of tobacco. It was levied on the parish and collected like other taxes. Absence on Sunday from an Episcopal service was punished with a fine of fifty pounds of tobacco; absence for a month, four thousand pounds; refusal to have one's baby sprinkled, two thousand pounds. So that the support of Episcopacy in Virginia, as Doctor Carroll remarks, made "awful inroads on Baptist tobacco." Baptist ministers were fined, beaten, imprisoned, poisoned. Sometimes a snake or a hornet's nest was thrown into their meeting. Not infrequently the ordinance of baptism was rudely interrupted, the administrator and the candidate being held beneath the water till nearly drowned. No wonder that Patrick Henry rode horseback fifty miles to a crowded courtroom, where he appeared unsolicited as the attorney for three Baptist preachers. He took from the prosecutor the indictment, and reading that the prisoners were charged with no other crime than that of preaching, he waved the indictment three times around his head, exclaiming each time, "Great God! Great God! Great God!" and thus shamed the prosecution out of court.

Sufferings were not fruitless. By the time of the Revolution, Baptists in Virginia were wielding a mighty influence. They were patriotic to the core; but as the war cloud darkened, they agreed to promote the common cause on condition that they be allowed to worship God in their own way, without interruption; that they be permitted to maintain their own ministers and no others; that they be married or buried without paying the clergy of other denominations. The first great triumph was scored when other than Episcopal clergymen were admitted to the army as chaplains. Then in May 1776 the Bill of Rights was passed, declaring that all people are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion. In October of the same year, the state salaries of the Episcopal clergy were suspended. In 1785 Jefferson's "Act to Establish Religious Freedom" became the fundamental law of Virginia. And in 1802 the last step was taken in the sale of the clerical lands, it being held that they had been purchased by a public tax and so

belonged to the state. With the sale of these glebes, Bishop Meade says, "The warfare begun by the Baptists seven and twenty years before was now finished."

In 1772 a general committee of Baptists was appointed to secure for all the colonies what was being so nobly won in Virginia. When the first Continental Congress convened at Philadelphia in 1774, this committee with Isaac Backus as leader presented a memorial, pleading for "the inalienable rights of conscience to all." They were told by John Adams that so far as Massachusetts was concerned, they might as well expect the planets to turn from their annual and diurnal course as to expect the Bay Colony to change its ecclesiastical establishment. But that Baptist committee believed in the perseverance of the saints. They persisted. They collected facts, circulated petitions, and memorialized colonial assemblies until the national Constitution was adopted in 1787. Article VI provided that no religious test should ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States. They saw that it would not prevent the government from erecting a state church. They consulted with Madison as to the wisest course of action; and on his advice they wrote directly to President Washington. In his reply he praised the Baptists as "the persevering promoters of our glorious revolution" and pledged to use all his influence in establishing effectual barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny and every species of religious persecution. One month after this correspondence, Madison, with the approval of Washington and in the language proposed by a committee of Virginia Baptists, introduced in the House of Representatives the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof"—the most important writing since the canon of Scripture was closed and sealed with the stamp of Deity. On September 23, 1789, Congress adopted the amendment; and by December 15, 1791, it had been ratified by all the states except Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Georgia. And so at last, after generations of suffering, the Baptist idea had become the American idea. At last, after centuries of bloodshed, the despised old Baptist doctrine of soul liberty had become a part of our national law; and America in the widest sense was the land of the free, as well as the home of the brave. Such is our glorious heritage of soul liberty, a heritage we are bound to defend, extend, and bequeath.

With our heritage of soul liberty has come that of a spiritual church. Our fathers bequeathed to us the conviction that the church is a body of believers called out from the world; that such membership is a regenerate membership, consisting of such only as have been renewed by God's Spirit and are by faith vitally joined to Christ. They could not, therefore, accept the Westminster Confession, which affirms that the church includes all throughout the world who profess the true religion, together with their children. Nor could they assent to the Book of Common Prayer, from which the minister, at the christening of an unconscious babe, reads, saying, "This child is regenerate and grafted into the body of Christ's church." Our fathers held that the reason for our denominational existence is not baptism as a mode but the church as a spiritual organism. They practiced immersion not simply because Christ was buried beneath the yielding wave, but because immersion is "our Lord's appointed sign of His death and resurrection, and of the believer's entrance into communion therewith." They rejected infant baptism not simply because it has no Scriptural warrant but because it admits to the church such as do not know and cannot know aught of the new birth. They opposed sprinkling or pouring in the case of adults not simply because no such method was known in apostolic days, but because the ordinance, when thus

administered, does not symbolize that dying and rising with Christ, which is essential to admission into a New Testament church.

History calls loudly to us to be true to the Baptist idea—true to it not simply because it is an inherited idea but because it is the New Testament idea; true to it because God has honored and blessed us in proportion as we have cherished and practiced it; true to it because, while other churches advocating a mixed membership have become decadent, our growth has furnished conspicuous evidence of divine approval.

What memories throng us as we mention the church of our fathers? We think of Pentecost, the birthday of the church, and of the army of martyrs who stand by the throne and gaze into the face that made glorious their own. We think of the romance and heroism of modern missions; the childhood days and the Sabbath chime of bells, when we joined the well-appeared crowd that went together to the house of God, where the gray saint just on the edge of heaven and the little child just taught to close the lash of its blue eyes while in prayer knelt in attitude of worship; then the hymn sincere in its old-fashioned melody and the tremulous accents of the preacher who lent Isaiah's fire to the truth of revelation. We think of father and mother and many loved ones. Part have crossed the flood, and part are crossing now. We loved them, and they taught us to love God. We followed them, and they taught us to follow Christ. We think of the barrenness and joylessness and hopelessness that might have been our curse had we not known the church. We think of the inspiration the church has breathed into us, of the safeguards that the church has thrown around us, of the hope with which the church has anchored us to things within the veil. The church has been to us a Bethel, where in our stony griefs we have seen the angel-crowded ladder; a Peniel, where through the long watches of the night God has wrestled with us, withered the sinew that resisted Him, and then, as we hung on Him pleadingly, showed us His face. The church has been to us a Patmos, where being in the Spirit we have looked right through Heaven's gorgeous roof and have caught visions of the land that is fairer than day. So we sing:

I love thy church, O God;
Her walls before thee stand
Dear as the apple of Thine eye,
And graven on Thy hand.
For her my tears shall fall;
For her my prayers ascend.
To her my cares and toils be given
Till toils and cares shall end.