

***“Free to Be: A Non-Creedal People Who Interpret Scripture  
for Ourselves and With One Another”***

First of Four Baptist Freedoms: Bible Freedom  
Third Sermon in the 14-week summer series: Free to Be

*Nehemiah 8:1-8; Luke 2:46-47, 52; Acts 8:27-31;  
2 Timothy 3:14-17; Hebrews 1:1-3a*

New Revised Standard Version

Pop quiz: Can you find the 24 words in our Order of Worship today that proclaim the heart of what it means to celebrate Bible Freedom? (And if you're already counting, no it's not the title of my sermon; it is quite long, but it only has 16 words!)

Here's a hint: Pastor Alice just said twenty of them and you chimed in with the last four:

One: “For the Word of God  
in Scripture,  
for the Word of God  
Among Us,  
for the Word of God  
Within Us,

**All: Thanks be to God!”**

How about that? You probably didn't even realize you were voicing one of our four Baptist freedoms each Sunday! Liturgy is sneaky like that, isn't it?

We are in week three of our series *Free to Be*, exploring

what it means to be Baptist. The first two weeks we looked at some foundational truths we glean from scripture. The Old Testament tells us WHOSE we are – God's beloved children who are in a covenant relationship with God (which essentially means that God loves us no matter what). And the New Testament tells us and WHO we are – followers of Jesus who share life together in community for the sake of the gospel good news.

We are created by God, we called by Christ, this week we begin to see how we come together in our various Christian communities through the power of the Holy Spirit. Once the church was formed at Pentecost, we see throughout history that the Holy Spirit did not unite us as one people in one place as much as it dispersed us as many people in many places using many gifts. There are some

45,000 Christian denominations globally, and over 200 just in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> *“Differentiation and variety have been markers of Christianity since the very beginning.”*<sup>2</sup>

So what we hope to impart over the next six weeks or so, in no particular order, are the things that make Baptists “Baptists”: Bible Freedom, Religious Freedom, Soul Freedom, Church Freedom Believer’s Baptism, and how we observe the Lord’s Supper.

We begin with Bible Freedom. It’s probably not a surprise to you that Baptists love the Bible. It is at the heart of who we are; and it’s why Sunday School has always been just as important for adults as it is for children. The gospel passage in Luke not only reminds us Jesus was studying scripture and asking questions in the Temple when he was a boy, but also that he “increased in wisdom and years” – meaning – he never stopped learning! I hate to break it to you, but my experience is that the more I learn and study Scripture, the more I realize what I don’t know and how many more questions I have!

But I’m in good company, as we Jesus in Luke 2:46-47, 52 learning from and asking questions to rabbis.

Here at Calvary, we are blessed to have Bible teachers that encourage questions as an integral part of learning and scriptural study. This same sentiment is stressed in our passage from 2 Timothy, as lifelong learning of scripture is encouraged – not for the sake of biblical knowledge in and of itself (like old school “Bible Drill” – if you any of you remember that!), but for the sake of transformed lives, or as the Apostle Paul puts it *“so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work,”* (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

Like most Christians, Baptists view the Bible – as our guide for living, as the Psalmist sings in Psalm 119:105: *“thy word is lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.”* But even more than being a helpful guide, while other denominations may have creeds or statements of faith they hold as truth alongside Scripture, Baptists believe the Bible is sufficient to

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<sup>1</sup> Donavyn Coffey, “Why does Christianity have so many denominations?” *LiveScience* (27 Feb. 2021), accessed on June 20, 2021 at

<https://www.livescience.com/christianity-denominations.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Coffey, *ibid.*

reveal what we need to know about God and the revelation of God in creation, in Christ, and in the Church. While creeds, prayer books, hymns, sermons, and theological writings can all be helpful in discerning our faith, *“they are secondary to, and should be examined in light of, Scripture.”*<sup>3</sup>

Baptists take Scripture seriously and it is central to our faith. But whether you say you believe in a literal interpretation of Scripture or a more metaphorical one or fall in between, or (more likely) think in a literal way about some passages and a metaphorical way about other passages, the fact is we all come to scripture with our own history, culture, education, biases, background, and perspective and so as we read it and interpret it – we need a filter on our lens to help us discern its meaning apart from just our own personal desires. As one source says, for Baptists, *“Scripture cannot be interpreted independently of either Jesus Christ or the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”*<sup>4</sup> This quote highlights the importance of community in interpretation (the role of the Holy Spirit) and the importance

of Christ as a filter for interpretation.

So first, let’s look at the filter – Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that God spoke to our ancestors in many ways, but now God speaks most powerfully to us through a person, God’s Son, Jesus Christ, who not only reflects God’s glory, but who sustains us all by his word (Hebrews 1:1-3a).

When we come upon passages that contradict themselves or that seem to say two different things, or three or four or five different things, the key way we discern what meaning for our lives we should take away from the text is how we read that text in light of the life, love, ministry, and sacrifice of Christ. So how does this work?

Well, if I read a verse in one of the books of the Old Testament, for example, that talks about sacrificing animals for worship or killing enemies in their land, I do not just assume that “the Word of God” says it’s okay to kill animals and people. Rather, I read that text, and then read the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – the four books that tell us about Jesus’ life and

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<sup>3</sup> As described on <https://wilshirebc.org/about-wilshire/what-we-believe/> on June 20, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

teachings and I ask myself – do these words reflect what I understand to be the Spirit of Jesus? If so, what does that mean? If not, what does that mean? It's still a subjective question and exercise, but at least it gives more of a focus to sorting out the contradictions and mixed messages we find in the Bible. Truth is, we cannot read the Bible without a lens or filter, so we might as well look to the One God sent as the embodiment and fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets to be that filter for us.

And here's why the "Jesus lens" is important for focusing us. The Bible is a compilation of 66 different books – which include dozens of different authors and editors written over the course of thousands of years – in all different styles and genres.

If we're reading Genesis or Psalms or Song of Songs, we ask ourselves, what truth is this poem or song or origin story pointing us to beyond the face value of the words themselves? Because poetry, music, and myth are often about metaphor.

If we're reading Proverbs or Ecclesiastes – we take note that these are wisdom sayings which are helpful quotes, but often do

not come with a lot of context around them.

If we're reading 1 or II Samuel or I or II Kings, we take note that we're reading books that depict historical events (told by a certain perspective of course), and if we're reading one of the prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah, we realize that we're reading texts that are written in one time period that are reflecting on a past time period while forecasting to a future time period. So it can be an exercise in time travel – *is this about the pre-exilic time or the post-exilic time?*

And in the New Testament, when we read Galatians or Ephesians or Romans, we note that we're reading the personal letters and correspondence of a specific pastor writing to specific churches dealing with specific issues. So if Paul talks about women speaking in church – he's definitely speaking directly to something that's happening in *that* church and not necessarily making a generalized statement for all time.

And of course, a book like Revelation is apocryphal literature – full of dream language and often speaking

about subjects like the Roman Empire in code or metaphor because it was too dangerous for them to address it directly.

The point is – you wouldn't read the poetry of Emily Dickinson, the songs of Bob Dylan, the fables of Aesop, the history books of David McCullough, the fantasy adventures of Harry Potter, the pastoral letters in the Calvary Enews, or an inspirational quotes coffee table book all in the same way, would you? So it is with the Bible.

And besides all the genres, authors, and styles – remember that most of us do not read Greek or Hebrew so we're not reading this book in its original language; we're reading a translation of it, if not a translation of a translation, which has been edited and categorized with neat little headings like "The Story of the Prodigal Son," which is a fine title, but it automatically leads you to read the story from the perspective of the younger son rather than from the perspective of the eldest son or the father. These are all editorial influences, that are subtle but significant.

And of course, then there's the issue of which books made it

into what we know as our Bible today and which ones did not make it in. I mean, nobody asked me, but it seems like a few chapters of Leviticus or Numbers could have been trimmed down to make room for the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Mary (neither of which are long, both of which are super interesting). But this is a whole other huge topic that we can't even touch today.

But even when you learn and know all that history, no matter what you think about it, what matters is that this is the text we have, and we take it seriously and we see it as part of the ongoing revelation of God, more so even than say the "THE literal word of God." But there is divine inspiration in these pages. God was working in the lives of all these human authors as they wrote down their experiences and feelings; they are telling the Story of God through the voices of God's People, but these authors are not the ONLY people who hold and tell God's Story. Which brings us to the phrase, "For the Word of God Among Us."

We do not interpret scripture or understand it in isolation. For one, it's way too complicated to do that! If we're reading

scripture for our own devotional reading and edification – that’s totally possible and encouraged. However, if we’re reading it to discern core theological truths from its pages – we need the community’s discernment through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. I love how this is stated so bluntly by the Ethiopian Eunuch when they say in response to Philip’s question, “*Do you understand what you are reading?*” (insert exasperated expression here): “*How can I unless someone guides me?!*” (Acts 8:27-31).

We need each other to understand and interpret Scripture. This is the main point in the Nehemiah passage from today. The women and men of Israel are gathered in the town square (the city walls of which they had recently rebuilt together) and they asked the priest Ezra to bring the scroll, the Torah, or the law of teaching, to read it to them.

First key point here is that they *wanted* to listen to all that the scriptures had to say. They had been through a lot spending a half century in exile, and they had done a lot since their return – having embarked on urban renewal projects under Nehemiah’s leadership – but

even with all that, the situation was still bleak – the Persians still dominated and taxed them heavily; external enemies threatened them; internal divisions and injustices pitted neighbor against neighbor. So they wanted to be reminded of the stories of their history and heritage. And as Ezra the priest read the stories of creation, of Noah and the flood, of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, of Joseph and his brothers, of the Exodus across the Red Sea and the giving of the tablets of 10 Commandments on Mt. Sinai – he translated the stories into people’s everyday language. But even more fascinatingly, knowledgeable *priests* circulated in and among the people to “*give instruction to what was read*” to “*help make sense of the meaning,*” (Nehemiah 8:1-8). People who knew the material and had really studied it, added depth of meaning to the people’s understanding. Not telling them what to believe about it but giving them insights to enhance what they might glean from it.

Reading the Bible was a group activity done in community so that these were not just ancient words on a page but living truth for them today. It’s a powerful example for why we read the

Bible: to remember our history and learn about what we may have missed, to be reminded of what God wants *from* us and *for* us, and to be remolded into folks who look more like Christ than creatures of habit.<sup>5</sup>

Reading the Bible in community keeps us from just making it say whatever we want it to say. Communal discernment and interpretation are about listening, learning, remembering, revising, and coming to new understanding and insight based on hearing other voices, and not just our own – and getting pieces of the puzzle we may have missed. We've seen a great example of this in our country this week as Juneteenth officially became a national holiday, revealing how crucial it is to listen to voices beyond our own – especially voices that have historically not been allowed to contribute their perspective to history.

We all know the quote “history is written by the winners” and it's so true; many parts of history are told only from just one side or are heavily weighted and biased from singular perspectives – and heavily

edited and redacted too! With a spirit of humility in knowing there is always more to the story, we all have room to grow and learn and allow new voices into our understanding.

I like the example of Juneteenth because it has been in our history all along – certainly African Americans have long celebrated it. But some of us – including myself as a white person who grew up in public schools in Texas in the 80s and 90s – were not taught this history extensively or at all, let alone encouraged to celebrate it.

Collectively, our country has long told and celebrated the story of freedom through the singular lens of July 4th – which is our Independence Day from British Rule. Which is a big deal; it's worth celebrating. But freedom from the British did not mean freedom from ourselves, for we continued to enslave people. On June 19th, 1865 – two months after Confederate General Robert E. Lee's surrender ended the Civil War – Union General Gordon Granger read a federal proclamation in Galveston, Texas. He notified enslaved people of African

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<sup>5</sup> Anne M. Jernberg, “The Word(s) of the Lord?” *Sermon preached at Calvary Baptist Church of Denver, CO* (January 3, 2010).

descent that they were free. Granger's announcement put into effect the *Emancipation Proclamation*, which had been issued more than two and a half years earlier on January 1, 1863 by President Abraham Lincoln.

Fellow Baptist minister, Rev. Dr. James Forbes says, “[Juneteenth] was the first day all slaves were free. It’s an all-America freedom day.”<sup>6</sup> Of course this statement does not speak to the reality of indigenous peoples on reservations or continual injustices and racial oppression that live on in the fabric of our systems and structures. But the point remains that our country has been celebrating an incomplete understanding of freedom and adding Juneteenth as a holiday expands our understanding of freedom and how we must continue working for it today.

Rethinking what we thought we knew to gain deeper knowledge that impacts how we live – that is what the best of community interpretation does for us. Just as Juneteenth does not erase or replace July 4th, but in fact, gives that day renewed and different meaning, when we

read or discover a new passage in the Bible and learn something new about it – it informs all of the other passages we’ve read and held dear. It may even cause us to think about them differently or with more nuance or reverence. The new passage has always been in the scriptures, but we may not have known it was there without the gift of community interpretation and listening to the voices of all people trying to tell the story. This is the power of the Holy Spirit at work.

Just like the national conversation about our history is richer and more accurate when more voices are at the table, something special happens when we’re sitting around tables talking about the Bible that’s very different than me just talking to you about the Bible in a sermon. And if it sounds like a lot of work to understand the Bible – it kind of is! It’s not a book we just read front to back, it’s an entire library that we learn from throughout our lifetime. That’s why we Baptists cherish Bible study and really diving into this text at all ages of our lives. We are continually learning, and one of the greatest gifts of Scripture is that no

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<sup>6</sup> Accessed on June 20, 2020 from Juniper Formation website at

<https://mailchi.mp/juniperformation.org/juneteenth2021?e=d3d3c1b6d9>.



matter how many times we have read a passage, each time we read it, something different has changed in our lives and so we are coming to it as a changed people – ready to hear anew what God will say to us through these pages.

I personally believe that God can speak to us through many texts, not just Scripture, and some of the best texts through which God speaks are the stories of our lives. This is why I find it such a privilege to honor someone's life in a memorial service. I view their life as a text alongside the scripture texts and look to see how these texts intersect to teach us all something beautiful and new about the light and love of Christ. This is the truth and wisdom of the "Word of God Within Us."

God did not stop speaking when the Bible was complete – God continues to speak in and through you and through me today. The Bible is our communal written teaching tool, divinely inspired, I believe, but not divinely dictated. (You are free to believe otherwise; remember the title of our series – *Free to Be!*) The stories of our lives are the scriptures God continues to write through the

presence and gifts of the Holy Spirit within us. And all of it – both the pages in this book (The Bible) and the pages of our lives – are filtered and evaluated through the life, love, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – the Word made Flesh, as the Gospel writer of John says.

Because Baptists treasure Scripture as we do, it can be easy to get so tied to the words on these pages that we almost start worshipping the words on the page rather than the Word made Flesh that is alive and at work in the world. A key point of Bible Freedom is that we do not worship the Bible, we worship the Lord. Singularity of meaning and uniformity of belief is not the Baptist way, because it's not the way of the Bible – there are so many beliefs and voices in scripture!

And so any time you get hung up on a passage or its meaning and wonder if it means you're a heretic for reading it a different way or if you're "a lost cause" because you doubt so much, just remember – the Bible is not the end all be all – the living Christ is. The purpose of the Bible is not to force us to believe certain things but to form us in faith and free us to live our lives

more like Christ. At its best, the Bible does not leave us lingering in legalistic or literalistic debates, it unleashes love in our lives. In short, the Bible is here to bless us not bind us. It is one of the greatest gifts we have from God and God's people.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in our Baptist tradition, Bible freedom means that no priest or pastor or denominational body can interpret Scripture for you. This is why one of my predecessors in this pulpit, Rev. Larry Loughhead, taught that we need "*hammer out our own faith*" and ended his sermons with "*Think about that.*" Two phrases that are thoroughly Baptist, for sure.

The Bible reveals truth about God. Your life and my life reveal truth about God. And all our lives and voices and interpretive discernment

together reveals truth about God. If one piece of that puzzle is missing, we miss out on all the ways Scripture can inspire us and speak to us.

So, as Baptists, we embrace Bible Freedom. We are free to interpret Scripture, how we see fit, but we don't fly solo as we read Scripture – we fly in the midst of the Spirit with our siblings of faith at our side.

And so we say, not as a creed, but as an affirmation and celebration for how God speaks into our lives and throughout the world today:

One: "For the Word of God  
in Scripture,  
for the Word of God  
Among Us,  
for the Word of God  
Within Us,

**All: Thanks be to God!"**

Amen.