

‘Til Moss Grows On My Eyebrows!
Acts 5:17-40

Winning Sermon in the 2008 Baptist Heritage Preaching Contest

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In 1954, CBS newsman Edward R. Murrow did what few in America were brave enough to do. He took Senator Joseph McCarthy to task. McCarthy claimed to have lists of communist sympathizers in the government and in many other arenas of American life. Anyone who dared oppose him was labeled a communist and placed on a “black list,” making employment impossible for them. Murrow ran a show in which he challenged both the methods and the integrity of McCarthy. He offered McCarthy airtime to dispute any fact brought up in the show. Instead of disputing facts, McCarthy simply attacked Murrow, branding him a communist. Murrow’s response should be enshrined somewhere as a classic American response to those who fear freedom and seek to rule by force and intimidation. In part he said,

I believed twenty years ago and I believe today that mature Americans can engage in conversation and controversy—the clash of ideas with communists anywhere in the world without becoming contaminated or converted. I believe that our faith, our conviction, our determination are stronger than theirs and that we can compete not only in the area of bombs, but in the area of ideas.¹

What Murrow believed was that truth and freedom win out in the end. Lies and oppression sometimes have their day. It often seems that wrong is stronger than right, that evil is greater than good. But Murrow realized that neither is the case. And so, with more confidence in the values of truth and freedom than McCarthy ever had, Murrow asserted that those values can both compete with and triumph over the values of lies and oppression, whether those values are espoused by the communists or by a Republican senator from Wisconsin.

That was the same view held by the very eminent Jewish leader Gamaliel in the scripture lesson. Peter and the apostles had been brought before the Jewish leadership council because of their preaching about Jesus. After hearing the testimony, the council retired to deliberate. Most of the council wanted to kill Peter and the other apostles, to try to violently end their heresy. But Gamaliel held a different view. He was confident that the council was correct in rejecting Jesus. He was sure enough of his convictions that he said, “Listen, if they are not from God, their little movement will come to nothing. Lies cannot stand forever or even for long. If they are from God, then there is nothing we can do to stop them. No amount of bloodshed or hand-wringing or threats will stop it. The best we can do is to let them go and simply watch truth prevail.”²

Neither Edward R. Murrow nor Gamaliel were Baptists, but in a way they both espoused one of the most deeply held of Baptist convictions: that all truth is God’s truth and we have nothing to fear as long as we strive for the truth of God. This truth is expressed in Baptists’ insistence on religious liberty for all.

In 1612, Thomas Helwys, one of the first Baptists, wrote a book in which he outlined his belief in religious liberty for all. He wrote, “For men’s religion is betwixt God and themselves; the King shall not answer for it, neither may the King be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it is not for the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.”³

Keep in mind, Helwys wrote nearly 400 years ago, and his statement was the first statement of its kind in the world. He wrote to King James and told him that, as king, he could do whatever he chose to Helwys’s mortal body, but the king had absolutely no control over his immortal soul, and thus, he should not do anything to prevent individuals from exercising their faith—whatever it was—or from refusing to have any faith at all. For his efforts, Helwys was thrown into

Newgate prison, where he died several years later. But his ideas could not be locked up in prison, and neither would they die with him.

Beginning with Helwys, when we Baptists have been at our best, we have always stood for religious liberty for **all**, not because we believe that all religions are equal, but because we believe that truth is best found in a system that encourages a free and unfettered search for it.

Religious liberty holds two great ideals: that for faith to be true and genuine we must provide the freedom FOR religion and the freedom FROM religion. Those are dangerous concepts. Most governments around the world do not accept those concepts because of their danger. They choose trying to force people into one faith or another in order to control them rather than allowing the freedom to practice or not to practice the religion of their choice.

John Bunyan (not to be confused with Paul Bunyan, the guy with the big blue ox!) wrote the book you have probably heard of, even if you have not read it: *Pilgrim's Progress*. You might be surprised to learn that he was a Baptist. Like Helwys and many other Baptists throughout history, Bunyan was imprisoned because he simply refused to behave. He was told that if he wanted to get out of jail, he would have to give up his dangerous Baptist beliefs such as soul freedom, which challenged the power of the church to mediate between God and people; Bible freedom, which took the responsibility of interpreting the scriptures away from the clergy and gave it to all; religious freedom, which prevented the majority religion from making all the rules. Bunyan's response was classic. He said, "I will stay in prison until the moss grows on my eyebrows rather than make a slaughterhouse of my conscience or a butchery of my principles!"⁴

A few weeks ago a number of my church members signed a letter that we sent to the Afghan Embassy in Washington asking the government of Afghanistan to release a man who had been

convicted of converting to Christianity and had been sentenced to death. In that letter, we affirmed our Baptist belief in religious liberty for all.

Someone only half-jokingly said to me, “If I sign this, are they going to send terrorists to blow up my house?” Of course, the risk of that is pretty small, but we need to be willing to give up our lives—to stay in prison until moss grows on our eyebrows—if that is what it takes for us to insist upon a free exchange of ideas so that the truth may ultimately emerge. We cannot be afraid of the truth! If we seek to deny the freedom of religion, we are saying that we are afraid of the truth.

And that means that we must insist on our right to freedom of religion, but also of everyone else’s right to freedom of religion. The Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty in Washington, D.C., has, in our name, lobbied on behalf of the Moonies and the Mormons and the Muslims. Is it because they believe that all are equal in their understanding or presentation of the truth? Of course not. Do they not know that some of these groups have some dangerous ideas? Of course they do. But they know that to oppress them would be MORE dangerous.

The first Baptist in America, Roger Williams, was known to row upstream for twelve hours or more just to enter into public debates with Quakers over their beliefs. But he was adamant that in his colony of Providence, Rhode Island, they and anyone else would have the absolute freedom to practice their religion as their conscience dictated.

We Baptists must be confident enough in our beliefs and humble enough to admit that we don’t possess all the truth to be able to converse with anyone—Christian or not—in order to allow truth to blossom. As Gamaliel said, “If their plan or their undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!”

We Baptists simply cannot leave well enough alone. We go whole hog. It is not enough to get a little bit of water sprinkled on the head. We are going to put you all the way under. Grady Nutt, that outstanding Baptist preacher and comedian, used to say that the Greek word “baptize” means in English, “hold ‘em under ‘til they bubble!” Because we cannot leave well enough alone, but often take all of our core beliefs to their absolute logical conclusion, no matter how much trouble they cause for us, we do not insist merely on the freedom OF religion, but also on the freedom FROM religion.

E. Y. Mullins, the great Baptist scholar said, “While we have no sympathy with atheism or agnosticism or materialism, we stand for the freedom of the atheist, the agnostic and materialist in his religious or irreligious convictions.”⁵ They have the right of unbelief and the right to fully participate in our society without being forced to believe. Why would we allow them that right? Because we trust God. Because we trust that the truth will ultimately emerge. Because Jesus calls us to do things HIS way, not our way!

The goal of the crusades in the middle ages was to “restore” the Holy Land to Christianity. The way to make the Holy Land Christian, thought the crusaders, was to go and conquer it and fill it with Christians from Europe. It did not work. There were too many Muslims there, and their supply lines were much closer than the European’s supply lines. St. Francis went down to see what was happening and a solution immediately dawned on him. The way to make the Holy Land Christian was not to kill everyone who was not a Christian. It was to witness to everyone who wasn’t a Christian. If the crusaders would become missionaries, then the land would become Christian by conversion rather than conquest. The crusaders didn’t like his idea, but they did allow him to go under a flag of truce and try to witness to the Sultan who was in charge of the Muslim armies. The problem was that the Christians had spent decades killing Muslims. One

lone monk offering testimony to the Prince of Peace was drowned out by the decades of violence and oppression the Muslims had already suffered. The Sultan's advisors thought it was a Christian trick. They wanted to kill Francis, but the Sultan simply dismissed him and went on with the war.

I worry that today we tend to be on crusades against people trying to win them by conquest rather than conversion. Does the incessant ranting and raving from the church about "godless America" and "immoral secular humanists" really do anything to bring those people closer to Christ, or does it function simply to rally the troops to go off into more fruitless battles? There is no more ridiculous claim than "they kicked God out of the schools." I have heard James Dunn, the former director of the Baptist Joint Committee, say, "What kind of a weak god do those people think we have, that we would have the power to kick him out of the schools. God has a perfect attendance record at school. They can't get rid of him!" What they can—and should—get rid of is any governmental attempt to force children to pray, particularly some prayer that will be written and approved by the government to some generic god in some generic heaven. I want my children to pray in school. But I do not need the school to give them permission to pray. And I don't want the school telling them how they should pray or to whom they should pray. That is my job!

Several years ago, one of my church members, Andy Mount, befriended a secular humanist at work. He kept telling his friend, "You really ought to meet my pastor." The friend worked it out for me to go and speak at a meeting of the secular humanists. That speaking engagement resulted in an invitation to a second speaking engagement with them. The second time I went they issued a challenge to me, "You would not allow us to have a joint meeting at your church, would you?" I responded, "If the topic were a worthy enough topic, I gladly would." We

decided on the topic of religious liberty. I took to our deacons their request along with my recommendation that we do it. Some weren't so sure—and they had good reason to be suspicious. But I will never forget Jim Davis getting a little bit emotional when he said, “Wait a minute. I think any opportunity we get to have people like that come into our church we should take.” It was one of those beautiful moments when the whole mood in a room was changed by a single comment.

We invited them and we received a couple of angry calls from Christians in our area who strongly disagreed with our letting secular humanists come into our church. We held the meeting, and our friend Brent Walker from the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty came down and sat on the panel for the discussion. I think many of the secular humanists were surprised to learn that Baptists, when we are true to our history and heritage, are always in support of freedom for AND freedom from religion.

But more significant to me than the good discussion that we had that evening was what happened at the conclusion of the meeting. One of the secular humanists said to me, “I did not know there were Christians like the ones I met tonight and I did not know there were Baptists like the ones I met tonight. Tonight was a breath of fresh air for me.” He had been prepared to be attacked and ridiculed, and ,instead, we treated him like Jesus treated people, with love and respect. He didn't know he was using theological language, but the breath of fresh air he experienced was surely a breath of fresh air from the Holy Spirit. I do not know where he is in his journey right now, but I do know that he left that night with a better and more true picture of Jesus and his followers than he ever had before.

To this day, I pray often for secular humanists. When I hear some Christian attack them, much the way that Senator McCarthy attacked communists, I beg to differ. Rather than attack, I

want us to embrace them—not their philosophy, not their beliefs—without fearing they will change us but confidently believing that God can change them and in so doing change us as well.

To do so is to be true to our Baptist heritage and even more importantly to be true to our Lord.

¹*Good Night and Good Luck*, a movie about these events.

²Paraphrased by the author.

³Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity (1611/1612)*, ed. Richard Groves, *Classics of Religious Liberty*, vol. 1 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 53.

⁴*Memoir of John Bunyan*, lxxxiii.

⁵Cited by Walter B. Shurden, ed., *The Life of Baptists in the Life of the World: Eighty Years of the Baptist World Alliance* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985), 62.