

Voluntarism

by **Glenn Hinson**

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At the heart of the Baptist tradition is the voluntary principle in religion. Indeed, E.Y. Mullins wrote, “The voluntary principle is at the heart of Christianity.”¹ What is the voluntary principle? It can be summed up in this way: “To be authentic and responsible, faith must be free. Obedience to God must be voluntary, or it is not obedience.”²

The Theological Foundation of the Voluntary Principle

Underneath this principle in Baptist life stands a theological conviction. Early Baptists put it at the center of their statements about freedom. In the Second London Confession of 1677, they asserted that “God alone is Lord of the Conscience” and drew from that principle the conviction that God has freed the conscience from any human teachings or decrees that stand in opposition to the Word of God. To believe such teachings or to obey such decrees, they said, “is to betray true liberty of Conscience.” To require such faith and obedience destroys liberty of conscience and reason.³

What does it mean to say that “God alone is Lord of the conscience”? It means that, in religious matters, we are answerable to God alone. We have an inner sanctuary reserved for us alone. Neither the state nor the church nor any other human agency can determine what we must believe. God has left faith in God’s own hands. Creation itself bears witness to that conviction.

Out of love, God created human beings with a capacity to make choices, including a choice as to whether to live from the vantage point of a relationship with God. Isn’t that what the author of Genesis meant when he had God say, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” (Gen. 1:26, NRSV)? God did not make robots, and God does not impose or inject or impute faith. No. God wants each person to

respond voluntarily, as a child responds to a parent or a friend to a friend.

Why did God create us with such freedom? Wasn’t that very risky? Hasn’t it cost God a lot of pain and suffering? Yes, it is risky and has cost God a lot of pain and suffering. This is the very point we get from the whole biblical revelation. God chose a costly way. Because God created us as God did, God has had to find a voluntary means for restoring the broken relationship with a disobedient and errant humanity. God has worked through a particular people, Israel, to do exactly that. Ultimately, the Christ-story tells us, God shared our human lot even to the point of death so that we could see with what incomprehensible, infinite, unconditional love God loves us.

Why, then, did God create us this way? We may be presumptuous to think we can fathom God’s mind, but any answer would seem to reside in God’s nature as love. Out of love, God created those with whom God could share and who, in turn, could love freely as God loves. It is in the very nature of love, whether divine or human, to prefer a voluntary response.

Some Baptist Corporate Memories

This basic conviction says that Baptists have more confidence in God, the Spirit of God, to effect a loving response than they do in human contrivances and use of force. Our Christian corporate memories can recall

all too many instances in which well-meaning believers sought to coerce faith. Christians of the first several centuries experienced the lash of intolerance and the pain of persecution and cried out for freedom. But when Constantine's conversion made Christianity the favored religion of the Roman Empire, they forgot. The persecuted became persecutors. By the time of Theodosius I (379–395), intolerance had become a public virtue.

Even Augustine, the great theologian of grace, yielded to the logic that coercion worked in the reconciliation of rebellious Donatists. Until 406, he opposed the use of force, but, when he saw that it brought many people back into the Catholic Church, he changed his mind. Using force against them was similar to parents disciplining children because they loved them. Invoking the same argument, the medieval inquisitors used terror and torture and might of arms to secure “conversions” and to ensure “right faith,” and valiant knights took up the cross to bring back the wayward dissenters and to crush “the enemies of God.”

Sad to say, the Protestant Reformation did not put an end to the use of violence to effect right faith or worship. In Zürich, the town council drowned Anabaptists in the Limat. In Geneva, with John Calvin serving as interrogator, officials burned the Spanish heretic Michael Servetus for questioning the doctrine of the Trinity. In England, Parliament issued Uniformity Acts to guarantee “right worship,” rather than right faith, and jailed Baptists and other dissenters who refused to conform. In New England, Congregationalists fined and imprisoned Baptists for refusing to pay taxes to support the established church on the grounds that religion must be voluntary.

Fruit of the Voluntary Principle

The voluntary principle has borne much fruit in Baptist life and practice. It is the source of believer's baptism, democratic polity, autonomy of congregations, religious liberty, and separation of church and state as a means of safeguarding religious liberty.

Believer's Baptism: Many persons, even Baptists, may think that believer's baptism by immersion is the root principle of Baptists, and Baptists certainly have

paid a price to defend the practice and engaged in much controversy regarding the proper way to validate it. The real issue, however, runs deeper than believer's baptism by immersion. Baptism on the basis of public confession of faith by the person receiving it is a vivid external sign of the voluntary principle. In the Baptist view, an infant cannot consent of its own free will and enter into a binding covenant with God.

The issue bothered some reformers. They knew that the early Christians linked baptism inseparably to the faith of the recipient and that faith had to be free; yet they felt that the churches should continue to baptize infants and children. Martin Luther penned a treatise on *The Liberty of the Christian* in which he argued that, by virtue of faith, the Christian is “the most free Lord of all and subject to none” but, by virtue of love, “the servant of all and subject to everyone.”⁴ When it came to baptism, however, he had to solve the paradox this posed by claiming “infant faith.” Huldreich Zwingli evidently agreed at one point with Grebel, Manz, and other advocates of believer's baptism, but he backedpedaled and left them exposed to the charge of “rebaptizing.” He then sustained baptism of infants on the analogy not of baptism but of circumcision in Judaism.

Democratic Polity: Because of the voluntary principle, it's one person / one vote in Baptist churches. Neither the pastor nor any other member has more than one vote, although in practice leaders may influence other members. “The voluntary principle is the heart of the Scripture teaching as to the individual and as to local churches,” E.Y. Mullins judged.⁵ Because Baptists grew up with democratic ideals in the American colonies, many have concluded that the culture shaped Baptists' preference for the democratic model. A careful look at the evidence, however, shows that Baptist democratic practice preceded the growth of that model and significantly contributed to its popularity. The First London Confession, 1644, drawing from *A True Confession* drafted in 1596 by a Separatist Congregation led by Henry Ainsworth, clearly exhibited the operation of the democratic model in the administration of discipline as a congregational responsibility.⁶

Congregational Autonomy: Because of the voluntary principle, moreover, congregations, associations,

and conventions are “autonomous.” They may not exercise authority over others. They interconnect, but they do so voluntarily and not hierarchically. The great champion of religious liberty in New England, Isaac Backus, feared even associations. He insisted that a congregation is “the highest judicature” Christ has established on earth to execute judgment in Christ’s name.⁷

The earliest Baptists sensed a danger that has plagued Baptists throughout their history, for the *First London Confession* went out of its way to repudiate an extreme congregationalism that would result in independency. It insisted that although congregations are “distinct,” they all are to seek the counsel and help of others in church affairs “as members of the one body in the common faith under Christ,” their only head.⁸

Religious Liberty: The strength of the voluntary principle in Baptist thinking has forced Baptists to carry its application beyond their own ranks. No other religious group has surpassed, if it has equaled, Baptists in the comprehensiveness of their understanding and in their vigilance regarding the right of every person to direct access to God. Religious liberty does not mean mere toleration. Because God alone is Lord of the conscience, it means freedom not to believe as well as freedom to believe.

Baptists, of course, had reason to desire not only toleration, a concept far more restricted than religious liberty, but also genuine freedom of the most comprehensive sort. They were a minority, and minorities depend on such liberty to pursue their goals—to worship God according to conscience without interference, to organize, to witness to what they believe in, and to win others. Not surprisingly, evangelistic objectives stretched and expanded the voluntary principle in Baptist life more than anything.

Separation of Church and State: Freedom to interpret and to proclaim the Word of God made Baptists ardent advocates of the separation of church and state from the beginning of their history. Thomas Helwys, who in 1612 led a group of refugees from Amsterdam back to England to found the first Baptist church on English soil, composed the first treatise calling for complete religious liberty. In *A Short Declaration of the*

Mystery of Iniquity, he boldly challenged King James I to recognize the limits of his authority.⁹

Roger Williams illustrated the concept of separation of church and state with the analogy of a ship at sea: On board ship, the captain holds complete responsibility for the well-being of all persons and can establish rules and enforce them accordingly. But he has no authority over the ship’s worship. He can neither forbid the gathering of the passengers on their own nor compel any to attend the ship’s worship services.

The Price Paid for the Voluntary Principle

Commitment to the voluntary principle came at a great price, but one that many early Baptists were willing to pay. Such commitment landed Thomas Helwys in prison, where he died sometime between 1614 and 1616. The library of the House of Lords holds a handwritten “supplication of divers poore prisoners . . . only for cause of conscience.” Signed by “his majesties faithful subiecties most falsly called Anabaptistes,” possibly composed by Helwys, the letter complained that they had been kept in prison many years, separated from their wives, children, servants, and callings for no other reason than “for conscience towards God,” with devastating consequences for themselves, their wives, and their children.¹⁰

Unfortunately, little information exists about the heroic women who accompanied John Smyth and Helwys to Amsterdam. However, women manifested equal courage. Of the thirty-two persons who applied for membership in the Waterlander Mennonites, seventeen were women, only three or four of whom were wives. Given the patriarchal nature of English society, not many of the women had opportunity to publish their ideas, but they took full part in the activities. A feature of early General Baptists that distinguished them from other Separatists was insistence that women could preach, make converts, and baptize.

John Murton, Helwys’ successor at the General Baptist helm from 1613 until his death in 1626, presented their argument in a treatise written in 1620 titled *A Discription of What God Hath Predestinated Concerning Man*. This statement shows how far the

earliest Baptists carried the voluntary principle. Murton declared it “a meere fixion” unsupportable from the New Testament that only pastors can baptize. What is absolutely sure, though, is that “every Disciple that hath abilities is authorized, yea commanded to Preach, convert & Baptise, aswell and asmuch (if not more) than a Pastor.”¹¹

John Bunyan spent more than twelve years in prison because he refused to stop his unlicensed preaching. The account of Christian and Faithful at Vanity Fair in *The Pilgrim's Progress* shows how much he and other Puritans measured Christianity by unflinching faithfulness to this principle.

Removed as we are today from the persecutions and religious wars of the seventeenth century, we may have trouble imagining how such a decision pierced Bunyan's heart. All he could do was to leave his loved ones in the hands of God and friends. For all he knew, he might end up on the gallows. He felt as if he was already there, noose around his neck. Yet he could do no other. Even “if God doth not come in,” he thought, “I will leap off the ladder even blindfold into eternity, sink or swim, come heaven, come hell, Lord Jesus if thou wilt catch me, do; if not, I will venture for thy name.”¹²

The Voluntary Principle and the Vitality of Religion in America

Baptists may have been wiser than they knew in their dogged support of the voluntary principle in religion, for many historians would ascribe the vitality of religion in America to the almost complete religious liberty that Americans have enjoyed since the founding fathers framed the Constitution. Thanks to the tireless efforts of Baptists such as Isaac Backus in New England and John Leland in Virginia, the first Continental Congress made religious liberty and the separation of church and state the first article of a Bill of Rights: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, nor prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

In New England, Baptists objected strenuously to taxation for the support of the established church in New England. They refused to recognize the state's

right to judge an individual's religious standing. Support of religion should be voluntary, they argued.

Strengthening their efforts for voluntary support of religion, Baptists formed the Warren Association in Rhode Island. The association employed Isaac Backus as its agent to promote the cause of religious freedom. Backus was a vigorous evangelist. Between 1756 and 1767, he traveled almost 15,000 miles outside his own parish in Massachusetts and preached 2,412 sermons. When the Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia in September 1774, the Warren Association sent Backus to lay before the Congress their concerns about the certification requirement for Baptists and others. A meeting with delegates of Massachusetts to the Congress did not go well, however. Samuel Adams insinuated that the Baptists represented “fanatical” and not “regular” Baptists, and Robert Treat Paine saw nothing of conscience in Baptist complaints. Backus, however, argued that it was precisely conscience that was at stake. He could not turn in the certificates required by authorities for exemption without acknowledging “that power in man which . . . belongs only to God.”¹³

The Baptists' plea did not result in immediate redress of their grievances in the Revolutionary Constitution of Massachusetts. The establishment continued there. Baptists fared better in Virginia. In 1779, Thomas Jefferson introduced a Bill for Religious Freedom. Although it did not pass, it paved the way for James Madison's bill adopted by the Assembly in December 1785. The Established Church came to an end in Virginia in 1787.

John Leland, a Baptist pastor in Culpeper County, Virginia, merits kudos here. Fortunately, he had powerful friends in Thomas Jefferson, who sometimes came to hear him preach, and James Madison. At Orange, he worked out an agreement with Madison whereby he would support Madison as a representative to Congress with the stipulation that Madison would back an amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing religious liberty and separation of church and state. On June 8, 1789, Madison offered a series of proposed Constitutional amendments for the approval of the House of Representatives, including one which would bar restriction of religious liberty and establishment of any national religion.

What held back the adoption of the far-reaching position was a fear that disestablishment and the guarantee of complete religious freedom would impair religion and, in consequence, weaken the welfare of the state. Many American colonists subscribed to the thinking of the mother country that the welfare of the state depended on the right worship of God.

Some members of the Senate, concerned to boost religion in public life, proposed in place of the present Article 1 of the Bill of Rights: “Congress shall not make any law infringing the rights of conscience, or establishing any religious sect or society,” and “Congress shall make no law establishing any particular denomination of religion in preference to another, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, nor shall the rights of conscience be infringed.”¹⁴

The timorous did not win in the end, and history has proven the wisdom of those who followed in Madison’s footsteps. The voluntary principle has proved far more beneficial than harmful to religion, which became quickly evident.

Lyman Beecher, the most noted preacher of the early nineteenth century in New England, considered the victory of the Fusion party that favored the withdrawal of state support for the churches “as dark a day as ever I saw,” doing “irreparable” injury “to the cause of Christ.”¹⁵ For almost a decade, he had led the fight in support of the establishment as a means of preserving true religion, good morals, and sound government. Disestablishment would lead to the triumph of irreligion and immorality and the destruction of society.

After the disestablishment, Beecher had to confess that he had been mistaken, that what he feared as the worst thing turned out to be “the best thing that ever happened in the State of Connecticut,” for “it cut the churches loose from dependence on state support” and “threw them wholly on their own resources and God.” Rather than losing their influence, the churches gained.¹⁶

Kenneth Scott Latourette called the nineteenth century “the greatest thus far in the history of Christianity.”¹⁷ He documented that assertion by citing:

- the unequaled penetration of all areas of the world
- the planting of Christianity over such a large portion of the earth
- the introduction of Christianity to so many different peoples and cultures
- the number of individuals giving full time to the propagation of their faith
- the thousands contributing voluntarily to assist the spread of Christianity or any other religion, approaching the goal of reaching all persons with the Christian message
- the number of agencies pioneering in education for so many different peoples
- the winning of adherents among so many peoples in so many countries
- Christianity’s exerting so wide an influence on the human race.¹⁸

In the twentieth century, wracked by two world wars and numerous lesser ones, Christianity did not come close to achieving what it did in the nineteenth century; but polls have shown that it did not suffer the radical diminishment it experienced in Europe through secularization. The voluntary principle is precisely what has distinguished the American from the European setting.

An Endangered Principle Among Baptists

The growing pluralism of American culture probably assures the survival of the voluntary principle. No single denomination or religious group can dominate and impose itself on the body politic. Ironically, the most serious threat to the principle has come from those who espoused it most ardently in the beginning, namely, Baptists. Recent developments in the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, the Southern Baptist Convention, have given off some clear signals of the danger. The voluntary principle and its derivatives are all at risk. Baptists, if they are to remain true to their heritage, must vigorously reassert the voluntary principle.



Notes & Questions for Discussion

1. E.Y. Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs* (Louisville, KY: Baptist World Publishing Co., Inc., 1912), 7.
2. *Ibid.*, 23.
3. *The Second London Confession, XXI.2*, in William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1959), 279-80.
4. Martin Luther, *A Treatise on Christian Liberty, 1520*, in *A History of Christianity: Readings in the History of the Church from the Reformation to the Present*, ed. Clyde L. Manschreck (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), 24.
5. Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs*, 65.
6. *London Confession, 1644, Art. XLII*, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 168; cf. *A True Confession*, 24.
7. Isaac Backus, *History of New England with Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians Called Baptists*, 2nd ed. (Newton, MA.: Backus Historical Society), 1:338.
8. *London Confession, 1644, Art. XLVII*, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 168f.; cf. *A True Confession*, 38.
9. Thomas Helwys, *The Mystery of Iniquity* (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1935), 69.
10. In Champlin Burrage, *The Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), 1:255.
11. In *Ibid.*, 262. Spelling is original, but underlining for emphasis is mine.
12. John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, in *The Doubleday Devotional Classics*, edited by E. Glenn Hinson (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1978), I:305.
13. Backus, 2:202.
14. *Journal of the First Session of the Senate*, 70; in Stokes and Pfeffer, I:546.
15. Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography, Correspondence, etc., of Lyman Beecher, D.D.*, ed. Charles Beecher, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1871), I:344.
16. *Ibid.*, 452-53.

17. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1938-45), 6:442.
18. *Ibid.*, 450.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the voluntary principle?
2. What theological foundation supports the voluntary principle?
3. What are some of the fruits of the voluntary principle for Baptists?
4. Why and in what ways have Baptists paid a price for the voluntary principle?
5. Is the voluntary principle an endangered principle among Baptists? If so, why and what can be done to preserve it?

Credit: E. Glenn Hinson, retired, most recently served as senior professor of church history and spirituality at the Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, and was named emeritus professor of spirituality and church history at Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia.
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