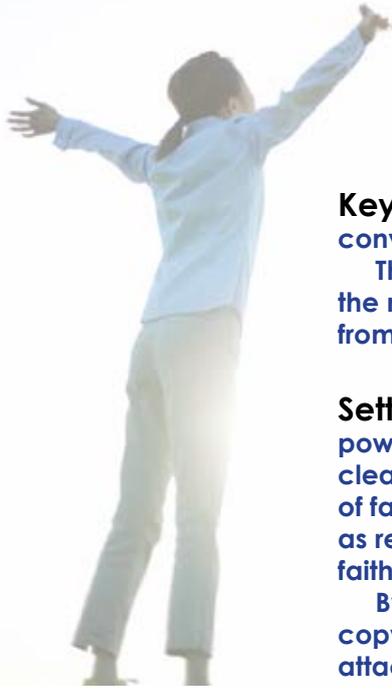


Religious Freedom

Small Group Studies in Three Modules



Module 2: 'Aliens and Strangers' (Eph 2:19, Heb 11:13)

Key Question: Do Baptist Christians have a distinctive contribution to bring to the current conversation in society regarding the nature of religious freedom?

This module provides resources to help us reflect on some distinctive Baptist heritage on the matter of religious freedom. It also invites us to think about some practical examples from real life, including within our own worshipping community.

Setting a Context Baptists are not alone in recognising the limitations of words and the power of actions. But, unlike many other Christian traditions, this has led Baptists to steer clear of creeds or statements of faith. Our 'declaration of principle', rather than a statement of faith is what binds us together. And the focus of that declaration is the person of Jesus, as revealed in scripture – not a set of statements about what we believe. This approach to faith and living has historically influenced a Baptist understanding of religious freedom.

By way of preparation for this module, invite those attending to read, in advance, the copy of the reflection by David Kerrigan, General Director of BMS World Mission, which is attached in an Appendix to this module.

Our Baptist Heritage (30 minutes)

John Locke: "The Baptists were the first propounders of absolute liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty."

In 1606 John Smyth and Tomas Helwys fled England for Amsterdam because of religious persecution. This is one strand of the origins of Baptist heritage. Having returned to England, Tomas Helwys (c.1556- 1616), credited with being the first Baptist pastor on English soil, dared to challenge the king's claim to be authoritative in religious matters. Helwys wrote a booklet in 1612 titled *The Mystery of Iniquity* and sent an autographed copy to King James I with a personal inscription in which he declared, "The King is a mortal man and not God, therefore hath no power over immortal souls of his subjects to make laws and ordinances for them and to set spiritual Lords over them." For Helwys' brave declaration of Baptist convictions about religious freedom, King James had him thrown in prison where he died ... for the cause of religious freedom, not just for Baptists but for all people.

Baptist convictions concerning separation of church and state are rooted in our earliest history. "men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves...Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure." from *The Mystery of Iniquity*

Many Baptists sought freedom in colonial America. Baptists were outlawed in Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1644. They found a welcome in New Jersey, Philadelphia and Rhode Island. Under the political leadership of Baptists, Roger Williams and layman John Clarke, the principle of freedom of conscience, including freedom of religious conscience, was written into law in the Charter of Rhode Island (1663).

Q. How do you think these experiences may have shaped Baptist attitudes to religious freedom?

At our Baptist Assembly in Scotland in 2010, Ian Randall gave a talk reminding us that, as modern Baptists, we are the inheritors of a rich and distinctive tradition of religious freedom, seeking that freedom not only for ourselves, but for all groups, including faith groups, in society. That talk was recorded. It is available for downloading as part of this module. A transcript is also available. The format of the meeting or group in which you use this material will inform whether you use the audio recording of the written transcript. However, it is suggested that, if possible, the audio version should be used as the talk is intended to be listened to, not read. http://bmsmediaserver.org/download/Religious_Freedom_Ian_Randall.mp3 If the audio is used, it is recommended that it is listened to with the group all together. If the written transcript is used, this could either be read by everyone in advance as 'homework', or could be read in groups at the event itself.

www.bwa-baptist-heritage.org/Ede-Randall.pdf (Communities of Conviction By Ian Randall, Spurgeon's College London As presented to the European Baptist Federation celebration of 400 years of Baptist life, Amsterdam July 24-26, 2009)

Reflection (15 minutes)

(1) In groups of 3 or 4, share your reaction to Ian Randall's talk.

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(2) At the Assembly in 2010, Stuart Blythe posed this question: 'As those who seek freedom for ourselves, why do we find it hard to give it to others?'

Challenging Case History (15 minutes)

Together, we listen to the following story, pausing for communal comment and reflection.

Medhi Kazemi arrived in the UK on a student visa in 2004. Whilst he was attending university here, his boyfriend was arrested back in Iran, charged with sodomy, interrogated, and hanged in April 2006. All sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage is illegal in Iran under Shari'a law. Homosexual activity is punishable by death. During interrogation, his boyfriend gave up Kazemi's name and Iranian authorities began looking for him. Fearing for his life if he returned to Iran, Kazemi applied for asylum in the UK. However, his case was refused by the Home Office.

Kazemi then fled to the Netherlands to apply for political asylum, but was refused in accordance with the 2003 Dublin Convention, which prevents application for asylum in more than one EU country. Kazemi was held in a detention centre pending return to the UK. If he returned to Iran he would have been at risk of imprisonment and execution. After a sustained campaign by several supporters, including Simon Hughes, Michael Cashman MEP, Peter Tachell and Middle East Workers' Solidarity, Home secretary, Jacqui Smith agreed to review his case when he returned to the UK. He was refused asylum in the Netherlands and returned to the UK April 4, 2008.

(NOTE FOR LEADER: Pause at this point, and pose a question for communal discussion)

Q. What would you do if you had the authority to grant or deny asylum? (7 minutes)

Q. Following discussion, read the next section then pose the further questions.

On March 22, Middle East Workers' Solidarity and National Union of Students staged a protest opposite Downing Street in defence of Kazemi. Several LGBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual and Transgender) student organisations also attended, including the Manchester, Bradford, and Leeds University LGBT Societies. The demonstration demanded that Kazemi should not be sent to his death in Iran, and that he should be allowed to stay in Britain.

Q. Should the church have campaigned alongside others in this case? What is influencing your answer? (3 minutes)

Q. Following a brief discussion, reveal the outcome by reading the next section.

On May 20, it was confirmed that Kazemi's case for asylum had been accepted by the British government.

Resource: House of Commons guidance on applications for asylum based on sexual identity
www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05618

Theological Reflection (25 minutes)

In the same groups of 3 or 4 as before, consider one of the following (the leader can ensure that half of the groups follow one study and the other half the other study):

Study 1 - Read aloud: John 8.12-59, then the opening verses of the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5.1-12. Consider the following:

Q. In the John passage, what are the key characteristics in Jesus' perception of 'freedom'?

Q. In what ways have group members experienced this type of freedom, brought by Jesus Christ?

Q. Might the Beatitudes, in Matthew's Gospel, lead us into a deeper understanding of the true meaning of religious freedom? If so, how?

Study 2 - Read aloud Revelation 21. Consider the following:

Q. How might the powerful imagery of this passage inspire us in Christian hope?

Q. What might be the characteristics of the eternal freedom to which we are being called?

Q. How might this affect our present behaviour?

Drawing Things Together (10 minutes) With everyone together again:

- Discuss if any fresh thoughts have emerged from the conversation and reflections.
- Consider again if any common themes have emerged.

Appendix: 'Of Heretics, Jews And Turks'

By David Kerrigan, Executive Director, BMS World Mission (Blog, January 2013)

A contribution to the topic of Religious Freedom

Most people dislike controversies, but even in church life they are inevitable from time to time. When you care deeply about theological or ethical matters, then you'll argue your corner and others will argue theirs. Such is life.

Steve Chalke's recent contribution (January 2013) to the debate about the stance of the evangelical church towards the gay community is a current hot topic. And because Steve is a Baptist Minister, this has an immediacy for Baptists and so I would like to commend important Baptist principles that ought to help us handle this matter.

In doing so I am aware that today it is considered passé to say that 'most of the people in our churches are not Baptists'. By that we mean that for one reason or another, many people who have not grown up in a Baptist church, or studied Baptist principles, have nonetheless found a local Baptist church their spiritual home and they have settled there. Given that most, I believe, would be relatively unaware of our heritage, (here I'd challenge pastors to ask themselves whether, over a period of time, their sermons contain enough theology) it is important at a time like this to remind people why Baptists are who they are and what that has to do with handling theological debate.

In the year 2000, a short book entitled *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way* (Whitley Publications, Oxford) was published with contributions from four of our then college principals, Paul Fiddes, Brian Haymes, Richard Kidd and Michael Quicke.

Brian Haymes writes of his understanding of the core of Baptist Identity as being "the gathered church, the priesthood of all believers, the absolute authority of God in Christ, believers' baptism, the call to

faithful corporate discipleship, and religious freedom." (P2)

This last point, the plea for religious freedom, takes us to the beginning of our 400-year-old Baptist story and the cry of Thomas Helwys, addressed personally to King James, for freedom from the coercion of the State and the coercion of the ecclesiastical powers of the day. This freedom cry was contained in his publication *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*. His call was, in large measure, for the freedom to read the scriptures for themselves, and together to discern the mind of Christ.

It is for this reason that Baptists recognise no magisterium or hierarchy to tell us what we must believe, and why Baptists have no formal creeds or statements of faith. For Helwys, so deep-seated was this call for freedom that for him it extended beyond Baptists, even beyond the Christians faith:

'For our lord the king is but an earthly king, and he has no authority as a king but in earthly causes. And if the king's people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all human laws made by the king, our lord the king can require no more. For men's religion to God is between 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 appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure'. (Helwys, *Mystery of Iniquity*)

So freedom of religion is a key principle that should govern our response to theological debate. And in due time the community will make its discernment.

So, for example there are those within our union of churches who believe that Scripture does not permit women to teach but they are not asked to leave, even

though the long-established position of the union is that men and women are considered equally qualified to teach and hold the role of pastor. Similarly, we have different views on what the authority of scripture actually means, different approaches to communion and baptismal practice, and so on. We live with this diversity and at best we are richer because of it, at worst we tolerate it. I will return to address the limits of such freedom in a moment. This freedom motif that I have stressed here is only one of those above* that Haymes notes as contributing to Baptist Identity. But it is of special note in the present context. **Haymes goes further in suggesting four ways in which our Baptist identity affects the way Baptists do theology:** the underlinings here are mine to bring out the key points I want to stress:

- **firstly**, because Baptists eschew authoritative creeds, and because each church has liberty in the Spirit to interpret and administer Christ's laws, "*then each new generation must work at its theology as reflection upon practice*"

- **secondly**, because the church is gathered into being by God, theological discernment must be done in the community of the gathered church. "*We bring our theological reflections to the test of others, and not just other theologians, but the whole people of God.*"

- **thirdly**, Haymes argues that to keep theology alive, it is not enough for theology simply to shape our life (though it must) but life must then be reflected back in order to renew our theology. *Reflection is therefore two-way - from theology to practical living; from practical living back to theology.* Drawing on the work of the late American Baptist theologian James McClendon,

Haymes affirms McClendon's rejection of "a dull 'biblicism', an imprisonment in the understanding and practices of the past as 'word' becomes fixed..."

• **fourthly**, "since all authority in heaven and on earth is given to Jesus Christ, then *all our theologies must have a provisionality about them...* Hence, in Baptist theology, there will be a recognition of plurality and we shall be properly wary of those who wish to squeeze us into their own mould".

Now, these principles do not of themselves support or undermine either side in the current debate, but they do establish a principle, and I believe it to be a Baptist principle, that at times of controversy and debate we will be at our best when we step back, and create the safe and healthy space where

the debate can be respectfully undertaken. The outcome may simply be a reaffirmation of the status quo but we should never fear that new truths may yet emerge from "the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! (Rom 11:33)

It is both unhelpful and inaccurate to declare that the raising of a controversial matter is a sure sign that we are drifting towards the rocks.

Of course I must be fair. There are limits to such freedom. If a pastor openly denied the divinity of Christ, and preached such, this would be in direct contradiction to the Declaration of Principle that is the basis of the Baptist Union of Great Britain. That would be an example of my 'limits to freedom'. (I would defend the right of someone to hold such views but Voltaire got there first on that score!) By denying

a primary theological issue, the community would rightly say that to hold such views is to deny the discernment under Christ on a matter of primary importance. But we are not talking of such primary issues. Certainly the response of the church to those who are gay is a vitally important issue, and I don't want my words here to be taken to mean that our engagement with the gay community is an unimportant matter. Nothing could be further from the truth. But it is not in that narrow category of theological primacy.

So, like many a time before, be it Acts 10, Acts 15, or the church's changed positions in relation to slavery, women in ministry or remarriage of divorcees, careful reflection on theology and practice has yielded fresh insight on how to best live in a broken and hurting world.



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