

LOOKING FOR SOME BAPTISTS

Meeting of the Coalition for Baptist Principles
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I have come here this evening for four specific purposes—first, to identify with The Coalition for Baptist Principles; second, to praise you for your work; third, to urge you not to grow weary in what you are doing; and, four, with all due respect, to request that you do more.

What you are doing is incredibly important. Real Baptists are a vanishing breed though counterfeits are plentiful. Confusion between the counterfeit and the real is rife. As a result of that confusion, the historic Baptist tradition is in no small degree of trouble at another moment in history when that tradition can make an invaluable contribution to the world—the ecclesiastical world and the larger world of which it is a part. Your being together is important and your work is important.

Many of you may know Doops Momber, a fictional character created by my friend Will Campbell—a rugged Anabaptist minister-author who has one foot firmly planted in the ancestry of the Baptists from whom we have derived and the other in the contemporary society to which we are called to minister. Doops may be Will in disguise; I am not sure. What I know is that, though fictional in nature, Doops is the spiritual image of the brother or sister that I want to know better and with whom I want to walk together.

I met Doops Momber many years ago in Will Campbell's book *The Glad River*—a volume in which Will spins a tale that is strange, at times crass, always interesting, and, in a remarkable manner, so inspiring—at least for someone who cares about Baptists and the tradition that best reflects their principles. Doops never had been baptized, a reality that was a serious bone of contention among people who knew him, a touchy, rather inflammatory subject for Doops himself. Doops constantly was pressured by his family, humiliated by his church, criticized by his community, and, at one point, even condemned by a court because he had not been baptized. Knowing how Baptists spoke of baptism as a non-efficacious act, Doops concluded that baptism had to be the most efficacious of all the acts that Baptists deemed non-efficacious! Often pressed to explain his resistance to baptism, Doops only could say that if he

were going to be baptized, he wanted a real Baptist to baptize him and that he never had found a real Baptist. A story within Will Campbell's larger story in *The Glad River* is that of Doops Mumbry's search for a real Baptist.

While recovering from a serious war wound, Doops decided to write a novel. He explained to his nurse the essence of his narrative, "It's about how there aren't any Baptists left in the world . . . an extinct species, I think." Later in Will's novel, someone remarks to Doops, "You would wander all over the globe looking for a Baptist." One could do worse, I thought as I read those words and turned my own eyes and spirit to the near and far horizons with an interest not unlike that of this fictional man. Where are they, the real Baptists?

I cannot tell you what made Doops Mumber that way—the way he was. But I can sketch for you at least a part of the reason for my passion regarding the discovery of people who stand in the historic Baptist tradition.

I am fortunate to have a job that takes me repeatedly to nearly every part of this great country and to sites of dialogue and public interaction around the globe. The Interfaith Alliance, the organization that I serve as president, is made up of over 150,000 people who come from 75 different religious traditions. Since our organization focuses most intently on what is happening to religion at the intersection of religion and politics, I am privileged or cursed to see up close what is happening to faith and freedom in our nation and beyond.

Let me attempt briefly to characterize the larger context in which we meet tonight.

We live in a divided nation even as in a divided world. The divides are political, racial, educational and economic in nature impacting the environment, health, and security with which we live and defining the fears, hopes, and agendas that determine how we live. And, religion is a pervasive factor in the divides—often deepening chasms, though occasionally offering blueprints for the construction of much-needed bridges.

The meaning of religion in our day is being decided by voices speaking from the periphery of religion, often by the voices of politicians. Recently, at an international gathering of business and governmental leaders in Switzerland, I asked some of those present to identify the leading religious voices in the United States. The answers were few in number and disturbing in identity: Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and Franklin Graham, though several argued that the most powerful religious leader in this nation is

now President George W. Bush. Reciprocally, most Americans likely would point to Osama ben Laden as the best known voice of religion in other parts of the world, especially in Arab nations. The meaning of religion is being seriously distorted.

In the deeply-divided United States, religion itself is divided. Sadly, religions in America are divided along the same fault lines as those so visible in American politics. Why, now, we speak regularly and with frightening comfort about red and blue churches. Perhaps it is the inevitable result of the politicization of religion and the religiofication of politics. Gone are civil dialogue and compromise between competing points of view as the art of government. But, friends, what did we expect? When perspectives on social-political issues are escalated to the status of absolute religious convictions, public discourse deteriorates into shouting matches between those convinced that they are right and all others who have been written off as evil.

The work that you are doing in this coalition relates directly to the divides in our nation. I hope that you are aware of that connection. The manner in which these divides are managed will be determined by whether people agree or disagree with the principles with which you have wrestled until you could encapsulate them in printed words.

The United States is now the most religiously pluralistic nation in the world. More different religions are represented among our population than is true in any other national community on the face of the earth. Thankfully, the founders of our nation, with foresight far beyond the immediate capacity or wisdom of any one of them, provided us with an amazingly valuable formula by which to achieve mutual respect and occasional cooperation among religions despite their breath-taking diversity. Through the First Amendment to the Constitution, our nation promised that no religion would have to worry about any other religion becoming the official religion of the government, that people who choose to stand apart from religion never have to worry about a compromise of their freedom based on their view of religion, and that every religious person has the freedom to practice his/her religion up to the point that such personal practice does not infringe upon, compromise, or destroy the freedom of another person. Frankly, this constitutional provision explains in large part both the diversity and the vitality of religion in this nation.

Now, though, that formula for cooperation comprised of those two religious liberty provisions in the constitution is in serious trouble. Indeed, that principle may be in more trouble this evening than it was yesterday before Justice Sandra Day O'Connor announced her resignation from the United States Supreme Court. Of course, one could argue forcefully, and correctly, that religious freedom always has been in trouble

here. Without question, the lure of majoritarianism present among the early colonists remains strong and often irresistible even now. Witness the disturbing erosion of sensitivity to minority rights among constituents of a democracy in which, originally, the guarantee of minority rights was considered non-negotiable.

Shockingly many of the first immigrants who came to these shores were members of a religious minority who had experienced discrimination and victimization at the hands of a religious majority. However, once inhabitants of this land, these same people quickly moved to make their religion an established religion that denied freedom and rights to those in the minority here. As President Taft pointed out during a celebration of the founding of Norwich, Connecticut, the Puritans “came to this country to establish freedom of their religion, not the freedom of anybody else’s religion.” Jefferson wrote about the lack of religious liberty prior to the First Amendment. Quakers fleeing from religious persecution found civil and religious freedom in this new land “only for the reigning sect.”

Today, fed by a gnawing fear of terrorists and a near-consuming desire for security, the American public is rushing headlong into a return to a pre-First Amendment situation in our nation. Not quite a year ago, the Council for America’s First Freedom commissioned a national survey on religious freedom. Pollsters found that 52% of their respondents believe that freedom of religion is the most important constitutional right they have besides freedom of speech. Additionally, 84% of the respondents affirmed that religious liberty is at least as important today as it was when the nation was founded with 83% rejecting the idea of a state-established religion. However, only a measly 49% of these same people indicated that separation of church and state—the corollary to religious freedom that offers support for religious freedom—either is unnecessary or is currently interpreted too strictly. (Incidentally, only 47% of the respondents identified the First Amendment as the source that guarantees religious freedom; 32% cited the Declaration of Independence as the source of that guarantee and 9% cited the Ten Commandments.)

With a commitment to religious freedom weakened or in question, we now have a situation in which the holy name of God is dubbed a patriotic term, politicians critique those who refuse to say that God has a deferential bias toward America, executive orders allow government funds to pour directly into the coffers of pervasively religious institutions, candidates running for public office explain that Jesus could not vote for their opponents, some churches turn holy rituals into partisan political tools, and a Supreme Court justice suggests that church-state issues might best be decided by majority votes in local communities. I agree wholeheartedly with my friend Brent

Walker, the Executive at the Baptist Joint Committee, who said recently that if the First Amendment to the Constitution were put to a vote today, it would fail.

A growing religious fundamentalism is reeking havoc both in this nation and around the world. As you well know, fundamentalism replaces grace with law, creativity with conformity, and education with indoctrination. Fundamentalism so skews values that advancing war can be deemed a lofty moral enterprise while seeking peace can be labeled a liberal diversion from pursuit of the will of God. Christian Dominionists and Islamic Fundamentalists differ largely on their tactics of preference; their goals are frighteningly similar—take over the government and use civic structures to advance the ideology, hierarchy, and laws of the religious movement. Neither must be the destiny of this nation. The United States has no more business seeking to establish The Christian Republic of the United States than to establish The Islamic Republic of Iraq.

Well, that is something of the nature of the world around us, the context in which we meet this evening. Now let me tell you why I have somewhat of a Doops Momber preoccupation and passion. I believe that Baptists can make a major contribution for good in the midst of a bad situation. That is why I have come here to call you to do more. Your work within the American Baptist Convention is needed. But, this work is also needed our nation. Within our Baptist tradition reside the makings of a promise for satisfactorily challenging and even in some instances correcting large chunks of what is wrong in our midst.

It begins with freedom—a good word, not a bad word; a gift that is not a threat but a source of promise; a provision without which there is little authenticity anywhere but especially in the realm of religion. Whatever else Baptists have been about through the ages, we have been about freedom. Listen to John Smyth: “Magistrates are not by virtue of their office to meddle with religion or matters of conscience, to force or compel people to this or that form of religion.” Hear John Leland: “All people ought to be at liberty to serve God in a way that each can best reconcile to their own consciences.”

Reading Forrest Church’s new book on church-state separation, I swelled with pride as I discovered Forrest’s praise for Baptists, whose vision and courage as advocates for religious liberty, he said, were singular within the early religious community in the colonies. Now, that reputation must be regained. That work must be done again to defend, protect, and preserve a liberty won long ago, which if compromised now, may never exist again. I am looking for some Baptists who, true to our historic tradition, will not waver in their advocacy for a strict separation between the institutions of religion and government. Baptists well could lead but certainly must

participate in, a new broad-based ecumenical and inter-religious coalition to preserve religious liberty. We can do that, and we should do that.

Baptists are needed in the present to espouse the principles that laced our message and guided our development for so many years. On Monday of this week, in the midst of a two hour visit with a Roman Catholic member of the House of Representatives, the congressman suddenly asked me, "Aren't Baptists supposed to be known for their commitment to freedom, respect, and tolerance? What happened to them?"

Doops and I are looking for answers to that question—searching for those kinds of Baptists.

Several days ago, I read again the moving words that make up The Judson Declaration. Without offense to its framers, I hope, I sought to enunciate in other words the values represented in that Declaration, values that would be of inestimable worth should they prevail both in the church and in the world outside the church.

Take Article 1 for example—the living Christ is the final judge of our beliefs and actions.

In the midst of a flourish of rigorous national rhetoric about values, here is a ringing affirmation of the forgotten value of humility. And, how we need it! Both religiously and politically, we are experiencing what happens when a few people arrogantly act out their assumption that they alone have answers to all of life's most pressing questions and everyone else must embrace and live by these answers. When individuals start placing periods or exclamation points where commas or ellipses belong, trouble develops theologically and socially as well as grammatically.

I turn to another piece of fiction penned by Will Campbell, a brilliant novella entitled *Cecelia's Sin* that highlights the danger of attempts to write the end of a story that cannot be completed. The central character in this work of Will's has written a history of that fiercely independent group from the radical wing of the Reformation called Anabaptists. As Cecelia reflects on that narrative, she comments that the story really has no end; that the conclusion represents not the ending but a new beginning. She recognizes that when you declare a story ended, you then have to defend it even with violence if necessary, to preserve your conclusions.

Alive and sick in contemporary American religions are people who have presumed to construct the end, to write the final conclusion, of a faith so dynamic in nature that it defies any form of captivity. Rather than continuing to ask questions,

think new thoughts, pursue unvisited avenues of truth, and thus grow, these folks spend all their time defending their dogmatic conclusions and imposing their static beliefs on others, even attempting to use the power of government to do so when possible.

Look also at Article 2—the Bible is a dynamic, not a static document, that needs to be interpreted for every age.

Here is much needed contemporaneity for religious conversations—a revealed faith relevant to the present moment. The former great professor of preaching at Duke University, James Cleland, taught me that the Word of God always consists of the biblical text in interaction with the contemporary situation. Leave out either the ancient text or the current context in a message and people will not be challenged by the Word of God.

There have been times that I thought quibbling with each other over words to describe the Word was time ill spent; but, no more. Whether we describe the Bible as infallible in order to mandate that we interpret it literally or describe the Bible as dynamic and mandate sensitive, faithful interpretations of it can spell the difference between using the Bible as a foundation to justify continuing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians and standing on the foundation of the Bible to advocate non-violent reconciliation in the Middle East, between appealing to the authority of the Bible in writing off people because of their sexual orientation or being moved by the Bible to affect reconciliation and advance rights among all people.

I will not elaborate the values resident in every article of The Judson Declaration, but you get the picture, I hope. Contained in this document are invaluable, enviable principles like integrity and independence, unity and diversity. These principles are as much a part of the Baptist heritage as Roger Williams or Isaac Backus. And these are principles which, if heeded, can alter the spirit, the rhetoric, and even the direction of our nation and maybe of the world.

I repeat now the words with which I began. I have come here to commend The Coalition for Baptist Principles and to praise you for your work, to urge you not to grow weary in what you are doing and to request that you do more. You are demonstrating the best of the Baptist tradition and working on matters that literally can help change the world. I know it is difficult. I know you get called names that sting the spirit and numb the will. Though doing the work of religion at its best, maintaining vigilance in defense of freedom and remaining faithful in an earnest pursuit of truth, you get charged with being anti-religious, dangerously liberal, and reckless with truth. Please do not allow the critics to weaken your voice, blur your vision, or stifle your activities. Thinking is not a sin. Study is an act of faith. Working toward consensus can be a

moral enterprise. Freedom is the state to which God called us. Nothing is inconsequential here.

Near the conclusion of Will Campbell's book *The Glad River*, Doops Momber gets baptized. Finally he found a real Baptist—not a perfect Baptist but a real Baptist—and he got soaking wet with excitement and joy, obedience and promise. Will Campbell's novel concludes with Doops letting loose a ferocious shout of joy that went resounding through a forest—the kind of shout that comes from the joy of being blessed for who you are, knowing your identity and staying true to it, sensing your calling and keeping at it until somewhere, sometime, some one along the way blesses you with water, with a hug, or with words.

You have honored some real Baptists this evening—Bill and Judith Moyers are such Baptists as are Sally and Ken Dodgson. There are some real Baptists here tonight. Blessings on you! And, thanks be to God for you. Amen.