

A Personal Struggle with Soul Freedom

We all know that the most vain of mortals are those who make a career of humility lest their true vanity be unmasked.

Exhibitionism is tacky, and vainglory is the cardinal sin, another reason to be judicious with superlatives when reporting on one's own pilgrimage. I have perceived over the years, however, that the only way we can truly learn from one another is by being willing to bare as much of our anatomy as our nervous system will permit, always, of course, circumscribed by some bounds of modesty. Generally, we are careful to hide our warts and blemishes and thus deny our true humanity.

I consider this appearance more of a visit over the fence than a formal lecture. However, if in the course of my remarks I should saunter off into a homiletical mode please understand that I get exceedingly few opportunities to preach to Baptist audiences. Some of it might be retroactive.

To digress from that assigned topic right off, a geriatric propensity it seems, there are a couple of things I want to say before getting more personal. So rather than bury them deep in the bowels of this palaver after some might have dozed off or made a hasty retreat to more pleasant pastures I will simply get them out of the way early.

Jesus was not a moderate

The first thing I feel disposed to share is what is apparent to all, namely that if Jesus Christ had been a moderate he would never have been crucified. By definition of the word there are too many options. Had he been a moderate he would have joined Pontius Pilate who gave him ample opportunity to cut a deal, to compromise.

And just to make sure all established camps are alienated forthwith, I hasten to add that it is further obvious that Jesus certainly would not have been crucified had he been a fundamentalist, for it was they who, in their zeal and certitude, clamored for his blood. Had he been a fundamentalist he would have been one of them, and accepted the crown they offered.

Jesus Christ was a radical. And for that he died. Died so that we might be free. Free from religiosity for certainly he was not a religious man. Far from it. Free from the law. Free from tyranny, especially religious tyranny. Free from piety to save us. Free from certitude and thus free from creedal strife. Jesus was a radical

I can make no such claim for myself. I am an old man now and haven't been killed for my radicalism. Always the cock has crowed in time. Sometimes just in time but nevertheless in time to cut a deal. So in the little anecdotes that follow, do not hear this as boasting of my own faithfulness. Mine has not been the excursion of a martyr. I can claim no heroics. Quite simply, I am a Baptist preacher of the South, but it was determined a long time ago that I was not a Southern Baptist preacher. And I know the difference between the two.

I must add, however, that the decision that I was not a Southern Baptist preacher in the conventional sense (make that, Convention sense) was not made under the sovereignty of King Judge and his band of ecclesiastical highwaymen, but under the reign of those who, when met with ignominious defeat, dubbed themselves "The Moderates." Please believe me when I add that I report that with neither rancor nor self-righteous gratification. If I didn't love you I wouldn't be standing here today. I would be back in Tennessee tending my crops or sitting before my typewriter. I report it as a matter of history. That's just the way it happened.

My God can whip your god

The second thing I want to say is that on one occasion when a certain prophecy didn't come to pass Jeremiah said that it was not good to be too sure of God. Today we are bombarded with a theology of certitude, and even cocksureness. A creed that might well begin, "My god can whip your god."

On a later occasion Kierkegaard observed that God may take Christianity away as the one way of convincing people of its truth. That is what the prophets called living under judgment. It would seem clear, to any discerning reader of Scripture, that judgment is the only term that can be applied to the absurd, conniving, farcical, nonsensical, mean-spirited schoolyard scuffle that has raged in Southern Baptist circles for more than a decade. Some would prefer to call it Diaspora. But Diaspora infers that there are somewhere the righteous, the faithful, living outside the tribal boundaries. Where do we see the righteous in this depraved imbroglio?

Was Kierkegaard onto something when he said that God may take Christianity away as the one way of convincing people of its truth?

The judgment of God

How many of you remember the pulleybone? That delectable little part of the chicken that is no more. Don Tyson doesn't know how to cut up a chicken. I remember one Sunday when my two brothers and I were literally fighting over who would get the pulleybone. Our mother had placed it aside and we had drawn straws for it. Contending that one or another had cheated to draw the shortest straw we had resorted to childish fisticuffs to settle the matter. But while we were fighting the cat jumped on the table and made off with the pulley bone. If you don't mind a pussycat being a metaphor for God, it seems to me that is precisely what has happened.

But judgment? That's a harsh word, an awesome notion to ponder. Are we prepared to consider that the so-called fundamentalist (a misnomer if ever I heard one) takeover may just be God's judgment on the rest of us? We have it on good authority that it has happened in our history. Read the Bible. Not all the kings of Judah and Israel were good kings; righteous, just. Some were despicably evil, yet the Scriptures tell us they were raised up by God's own self as judgment.

If you will permit an aging wordsmith this bit of literary license I will remind you of Manasseh, in the lineage of David, successor to Hezekiah, who ruled in Dixie-land, it was called the Southern kingdom, but you can see where a devious mind is going. He ruled for 54 years. Not one word of prophecy was recorded during

those years. During the reign the prophets were killed.

A further parallel is the manner in which the Southern kingdom was influenced by the politics of the day, becoming so subservient to, so at one, with Assyria. Surely we can see what is happening, what has already happened in this country when there is never a SBC gathering without a wall-sized American flag in the background—a George Bush, a Dan Quayle, an Oliver North—people who wouldn't have been able to join the early Baptist Movement by virtue of being civil magistrates—spewing forth the most un-Baptistic nationalistic rubbish and receiving frenzied, rabid, fanatical cheers and foot-stomping from 30,000 alleged Baptists—Great. God Almighty!! What's going on here? What happened? The radical Gospel is not sixth grade civics. And American nationalism is not the Gospel of the Kingdom now. But I don't want to get into that. I've never ' been one to get involved in any kind of controversy.

An even more frightening parallel between Manasseh 's reign and what is happening today is that the Southern kingdom prospered during that given to a reign. Both church and state prospered, and so it person who was assumed that God was blessing both, has Judgment is a tricky thing. It isn't measured by the every member canvass, the latest Cooperative Program figures coming out of Nashville, or the latest figures out of Atlanta. The implications of that Scripture are in the Book and you are the proclaimers of the Word. I am not suggesting that your exegesis of that text next Sunday refer to the face of Judge Manasseh of Houston or the Revered Doctor Manasseh of Dallas, but that's up to you. I'm not your homiletics coach.

Were we better than they?

Judgment? But we were better than they are. Were we? Where were we as a denomination in the '60s and 70s when cities were burning, when black Americans were being gunned down for no greater crime than the color of their skin and their quest for freedom? Where were we during those long decades when human beings were denied the ballot, had to drink from designated fountains, could not go to parks, theaters, schools?

If you don't recall I'll remind you. We were sitting in silence, minding our altar fires and tea parties, building tall spires and [me steeples, watching God's world crumble around us. Ah, but now we have apologized for all that. Have we now? If we bump our neighbors off the sidewalk and into oncoming traffic and say, "Excuse me," and walk away we have served the neighbors not at all. It is only when we bind their wounds and see them through the ordeal that true reconciliation is in evidence. Biblically it is called the story of the Good Samaritan. Politically it is called affirmative action. We await some timely word on that currently controversial moral issue called affirmative action from the Christian Life Commission, the CBF or any other Baptist faction.

Where were we as a denomination from 1845 until 1920 when no woman was allowed even to cast a ballot as to who would rule them'? We know very well where we were. And how many female preachers and deacons did we have during those years we look back on with yearning'? We know how many. Where were we as a denomination during the long years of carnage in Southeast Asia'? What support did we offer those noble youths who refused to participate in that evil and uncivilized scandal? What prophetic resolutions did we pass in our solemn assemblies as thousands of our finest fled to Canada or suffered incarceration in obedience to the very principles that brought the Baptist movement into being? Ah, some day we'll apologize for that also.

An apology to the gays?

And some day we'll apologize for what we are doing to Gay and Lesbian Christians and non-Christians. But not yet, for we ride the waves of culture. I mention that, not to dramatically inject into the discussion the most explosive issue on so many agendas today-well, that, too-but to suggest that we always take our cue from culture, from Caesar. We discern the signal of culture, rush out and clothe the sign in vague and misinterpreted Scripture, never taking the Bible for what it is, a book about who God is, but as a buttress of the biases of culture. We did it with slavery. We do it with war, gender exclusionism, poverty, and now we're doing it with homophobia. And some day we'll apologize. Some day we'll call the fireman when the fire is out. We joined the Civil Rights Movement when

the prophets were safely dead. Jesus was a radical.

Behavior under judgment?

The list is long. How does one behave under judgment? Maybe by just not caring about the things that really, after all, just don't matter anymore. If they ever did. By not agonizing over triviality. Jesus, quoting Isaiah, said that he had come to proclaim the opening of the prison doors, and letting the prisoners go free, bringing good news-food and housing-to the poor, seeing eye dogs for the blind. Jesus was a radical. So should I care who the next president of some man-made, convention, fellowship or what have you may be'? Does it really matter in the glaring white heat of Isaiah and Jesus' words? I say you, nay.

Am I going to alter the course by the latest utterance of some institutional pimp who appears to spend most of his time blow drying his hair and in his free time dismisses some of his finest teachers and scholars, seeking to make robots and handmaidens of a once gifted faculty? I say you, nay. But again, I don't want to get into that.

Fireside introduction

I reckon I'm supposed to say something about my own personal quest for soul freedom, painful and pretentious as it may be. I was introduced to the radical Christ I have sought to follow, albeit from afar, sitting around a pine knot fire casting its light upon the pages of my parent's Bible as they read to their four issue in a little frame house in rural Amite County, Mississippi. And then they prayed. Every night. It was in the throes of the Great Depression and sometimes bones were weary from heavy work and stomachs not always full, but the ritual was never neglected.

I learned theology from my father's table grace as he said the same word~ three times a day no matter how meager the fare. The words I heard from the day I was born until I left his table at 17 summed up his theology, his philosophy, his very life. And after eight years of what we call higher education I never found a more succinct summary of the Christian movement. For his simple words acknowledged

the existence of the Deity, they spoke of mercy, of thanksgiving, sin, forgiveness, restoration, and always concluded with the benedictory AMEN. What else is there to our faith? Hear his words and see if anything essential is missing:

O Lord, look down on us with mercy, pardon and forgive us our sins, make us thankful for these and all other blessings, we ask for Christ 's sake. Amen.

These words made a deep impression on me, and I began early to take them to heart. As the words took flesh it was in relationship to other human beings. We lived in one of the most rural and presumably most racist counties in the nation. How then did I grow up to give my entire adult life to the struggle for racial equality and reconciliation? I learned lessons, lessons centered around my father's table and hearth. No mandated prayers in Caesar's schoolroom.

A lesson in mercy

Mercy? I was about five years old. The Campbell families lived in a little cluster adjacent to our Campbell grandparent's house. Grandpa Bunt and Grandma Bettye. On Sunday afternoons we gathered on their yard to play. Twelve or fifteen of us yearling boys at one time. On one occasion an elderly black man was shuffling down the country dirt road. Some of us began to taunt him. "Hey, nigger. Hey, nigger." Grandpa Bunt was sitting on a tree stump whittling. He called us all around him and spoke gently but firmly. "Now, Hon." Grandpa Bunt called everyone Hon, Boys, girls, men, women. We didn't have all those Freudian hang-ups in AmiteCounty in 1929, "Now, Hon. there ain't no niggers in this world. All the niggers died a long time ago."

"Yeah, Grandpa. John Walker. He's a nigger. There he goes on down the road," John Walker was just out of the state penitentiary for stealing a mess of roasting ears.

Grandpa Bunt wasn't through with the lesson. "No, Hon, He's not a nigger. He's a colored man. Have mercy, boys, always have mercy." Colored, of course, was the acceptable term at the time. I never forgot it. Grandpa Bunt would be considered uneducated today. But he knew of mercy. I went I away to college and university

to study social ethics and race relations. I never heard a more profound lecture on the subject. If I did I forgot them.

Learning of a radical Jesus

I also learned of that radical Jesus in experiences in a little one-room church house called East Fork. One of my earliest recollections is of sitting in that house one night during a summer revival. As coal oil lanterns flickered dimly and the preacher was about to begin, the service was interrupted by a long line of robed and hooded men. We were low church Baptists not accustomed to vestments in the service, so it got our attention. It was the Ku Klux Klan, marching in a somber and ghostly procession.

The Grand Dragon presented a large pulpit Bible and an offering of money to the congregation that was politely accepted by the visiting preacher. The men then turned and left as they had come. Only one person stirred during the proceedings. Uncle Jesse, my father's oldest brother, a man not known for personal piety, left his seat, walked out of the church house and never came back. When I preached my first sermon at the age of 16, as I read the Scripture my hands moved across those large, embossed letters, KKK, on the back cover of the pulpit Bible. I thought of Uncle Jesse, then dead of a gunshot wound. I hope I thought also of pardon, sin, forgiveness.

I was a little older when a young Negro lad got in Albert Carroll's farm truck one Sunday afternoon and drove it into a tree not far from where it was parked. I was visiting my mother's parents, Grandma Bertha and Grandpa Will Parker. A group of men soon gathered with the lad and a gin belt. Grandma Bertha confronted them, !.'Poke firmly and stood fixed on a her picket gate. "I don't care if he's colored. And I don't care if he stole Albert Carroll's ole truck. He's 15 years old and you ain't gonna beat him." And they didn't. Grandma Bertha died at 59 and I never forgot her.

I was seven years old when I joined the East Fork Baptist Church. We had to wait until spring for the baptizing. The white, linen pants Mama had ordered from Sears Roebuck didn't come in time, and as we left for the river I was seething

with anger and disappointment. I had to be baptized in overalls. ‘I hate Sears Roebuck,’ I said to my brother Joe, the beloved dragonfly of whom I would write a book many years later.

“It’s a sin to hate, Dave,” he said, patting my shoulder. “You’re fixing to get baptized and you promised the preacher that you repented of all your sins and intended to follow Jesus. I’ll tell you what. I’ll hate Sears Roebuck for you.” As I waded into the cold, crystal clear waters of the Amite River in Mississippi, the congregation standing on the bank singing, “Happy day, happy day, when Jesus washed my sins away.” I must have had a little better understanding of sin. And of what the preacher was talking about when he said Jesus was the propitiation for our sins, even if Joe had taken my sins upon himself that day.

A move to discipline

When I was just turned 17, I was ordained in that little church house. The ordaining council was my daddy, my Uncle Luther, my Grandpa Bunt, a cousin and a country preacher. They didn’t ask me a lot of doctrinal questions. They understood that I wouldn’t know the answers and didn’t really need to. They had taught me about Church. And what it meant.

Some years later when deacons of the church voted to commend Governor Barnett for his brave, Christian stand when he defied constitutional authority and tried to keep a black citizen from enrolling at the university, my father was the only one to oppose it, insisting that there was nothing Christian about inciting a riot among the citizenry.

My daddy knew a lot about personal soul freedom. A lot more than I know. When a young deacon had divorced and was under heavy criticism he came to deacon’s meeting and ceremoniously resigned each office he held, one at a time—deacon, church treasurer, and music director. The preacher, smelling doctrinal blood, suggested that the transgressor should be disciplined like in the old days.

“He will have to come before the church, confess, and ask for forgiveness and the church will vote on restoration,” the preacher said. When the five-man deacon

board fell silent the preacher: asked, "Brother Campbell, you're the senior deacon. What are you thinking?"

Whereupon Brother Campbell replied, "Well, if you hadna asked Brother Campbell what he was athinking, Brother Campbell wouldna told you. But since you asked, Brother Campbell is athinking, whosa gonna make the motion'? And whosa gonna second it?" He knew that he was the only deacon there who hadn't been divorced or who wasn't married to a woman with a living husband. Let him who is without sin. Best sermon on that text I ever heard.

Stuff of Baptist history

Now, in case you've missed it, the point of my lifting up my progenitors before you is not to suggest that through their influence I, Will D. Campbell, became a courageous man, deserving of the great honor you are now bestowing upon me. I know better than that. I lift them up because they can be duplicated in hundreds of thousands of cases throughout this land. All of you can tell these same stories of those stalwarts who came before you. The point, the only point, is that these are the stuff of Baptist history.

And these are the people who have been double-crossed, betrayed, ignored, trampled on like so much chaff in this demonic fight over the pulleybone, a fight of which every last one of us here has been a part. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here at all. We would be back in those little communities at the gravesides celebrating the Grandpa Bunts, the Grandma Berthas, those great people who were, and are, our history but are now discounted by the high and mighty whose fight, in the total scheme of human history and Christ's unendable story wouldn't amount to the crepitation of a flea in a whirlwind. Does it ever occur to those doing the fighting that the world is paying not the slightest bit of attention to their sparring? And when they notice at all it is only for a chuckle.

My marching orders

To be more immodest, there was a contract out on my life for a time when I was involved in the Civil Rights movement. The community was much upset about Will

Davis's carryings on with the colored people. I had been writing about it, speaking widely and it was being reported. There was a movement to strip me of my ordination. Two things prevented it. One, they didn't know how to go about it. (One of the beauties of Baptist polity.) And two, a couple of crusty old Navy veterans sent word that if they tried to take Will Davis's ordination away they would come up there and filibuster until hell froze over. At the risk of disharmony within the fellowship the matter was dropped.

What they didn't understand was that my ordination certificate, with misspelled words and the marred grammar of country people, signed by those mentioned above, hangs above my mantle, glued securely and forever on top of my college and university degrees, hiding them from the eyes of the world. That's my marching orders and no one can ever, ever take that away from me. Not ever. Those Baptist people did that to and for me and it can never be undone. Not with anyone's words, resolutions or actions. That's what it means to be an old fashioned Baptist. That's what soul freedom is all about.

Are you listening, you who wreck schools of learning, who pass absurd resolutions, who place limitations on God Almighty as to what gender He can and can't call to preach His gospel. You don't scare me, you ecclesiastical bullies, you blind guides who strain at a gnat and swallow a camel, who devour widows' houses, who bind heavy burdens and lay them on the shoulders of the poor and lift not a hand, you who for a pretence make long prayers, you who compass sea and land to make one convert and when he is made make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves. Woe unto you! Whited sepulchres outside; inside full of the bones of the dead, and of all uncleanness. Are you listening to this old man?! THERE COMES A TIME!

Institutions serve self

With that under girding from a tiny, rural church, with no paved parking lot, no gaudy steeple, no Betty Crocker kitchen nor gymnasium for our own children, and with a half-time preacher, my quest extended into adulthood. As most of you know my institutional flings didn't work out. None of them. There is not time here to list

them nor explain their demise. To do so would serve no purpose. Doubtless part of my failure within the structures had to do with my own intractable genes. Whatever. I was a pastor, a university chaplain, an employee of the allegedly most free religious institution in the world. I didn't keep any job for long. But through it all I discovered one thing. All institutions, every last single one of them, are evil self-serving, self-preserving, self-loving and very early in the life of any institution it will exist for its own self. So beware out here this week. True soul freedom cannot be found in any institution. That is the guts of my testimony to you today. True soul freedom can *never* be found in any institution. If they will pay you, let them. I did it, too. But never trust them. Never bow the knee to them. They are all after your soul. Your ultimate, absolute, uncompromising allegiance. Your soul. ALL OF THEM. Jesus was a radical. And His Grace abounds.

Grace abounds

As the sands of time run out on me I do not consider that I have had a ministry at all, except in the sense that all believers are priests. I have had a life. As to how well I have conducted it I am willing to leave to the One so mysterious, so elusive and evasive, so hidden as to say to Moses from a burning bush, I AM WHO I AM, to be the sole judge. I can only exult that grace abounds.

I leave you now with these brief paragraphs from a little novel I wrote some years back. I called it *CECELIA'S SIN*. It is the story of three of our Anabaptist ancestors in Amsterdam, those wonderful, saintly people that William Estep has done such noble work in keeping ever before us. How in his debt I am.

They knew that they were going to die for their faith. But before the soldiers came for them their leader, pastor, counselor, preacher and friend, Cecelia Geronymus, undertook to write the story of the Anabaptist movement. She was impelled by the fear that the Ienemies of God would not stop until the last of the Anabaptists were killed. Now Cecelia has finished her work. They know this is the day the soldiers will come and take them to their death. Her book is finished. But by some strange and unexpected epiphany she is burning the book page by page. "Writing the Story is not the Story." she says. Only the living of it. Her sin has been her

obsession to appropriate possess the story; write the ending to it. Now the three of them are seated before the fire throwing the pages into the flames one by one.

“A finished story which has no ending,” she said as they reached the last page which was the first. “We have reached the beginning. There is no ending.” she said, as if to clarify what she had just said. Goris continued to sit between them, whimpering softly, making no effort to conceal the sound. ‘That was the error of Rome and Wittenburg. Of Geneva and Zurich. And almost us as well. To end the story. The end of a story can only be defended with violence. Nothing else is left.”

*Pieter sat now with his arms folded across his chest, watching with Goris as the smoke blended with the gathering clouds, the clouds accepting and embracing it like a vacuum. Cecelia continued to speak, softer now. ‘The tattered coat can **never** be possessed.”*

The wind had shifted and a slight gust down the chimney livened the coals, blowing a wisp of the white smoke, the very last of it, back into the room. Cecelia leaned into it and inhaled deeply. Goris and Pieter did the same, saying nothing. Goris no longer sobbing. “Until we came together we knew the words,” Cecil continued. “Now, in death, we know the tune.”

Without moving from the bench where they sat they heard the hoofbeats of what sounded to them like a legion of horsemen, approaching slowly and deliberately. They were sitting as one person. They did not move and did not speak again until there was a loud knocking, followed by a continuous rattling of the latch chain. Goris started for the door.

“No.” Cecelia said, catching him by the hand, her voice calm and warm. “We will let them in together. And together we will go with them.”

So the little novel of the 16th century Anabaptists ends there. Now here we are. A pathetic, defeated little band of Cecelia’s descendents, huddled here together in Fort Worth, waiting for the soldiers to come and take us away because we have chosen to be close followers of the radical Christ. Afraid. But rejoicing.

So listen carefully now. Do you hear the hoofbeats?

Do you hear the chilling anger of the federal agents as they approach?

They have documents. It is altogether legal. Caesar has the power. They are coming closer. Do you hear the loud pounding on the door there, the rattling of the latch chain? They are here. We must go with them. We will not cry out.

I don't hear anything at all. There are no agents, no soldiers there. No hoofbeats. We are not pathetic and certainly we are not huddled in fear. We are rich and secure. Safe from the power of Caesar. We are free to go now. Free to return to the prisonhouse of our own unfaithfulness. The agents are not at the door.

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