

2026 TALK, 12.7.26, GALATIANS 5:1, 13-14

STANDING FIRM FOR FREEDOM!

The question we are asked ourselves last week and are asking this Sunday & next Sunday is this: What does it mean to be a Christian & a Baptist? One aspect is that Baptist Christians particularly prize freedom, for themselves & others. This is because for many years Baptists in this country were persecuted & not allowed to worship freely. One of the reasons William Carey's two sisters ended up in Boxmoor, was because they were told to leave the farm where they were tenants. This was because they & others had been holding open-air worship services in the landowner's barns & fields. The landowner was an Anglican & wanted people only to attend worship in the parish church... Baptists have always stood up for freedom, in various ways.

I would like to illustrate this aspect of being a Baptist, from the lives of three Baptists you may or may not have heard of... I'm pretty sure you will all have heard of John Bunyan...(Yes?)... Bunyan was imprisoned for his beliefs & wrote a now famous book called 'Pilgrims Progress'. The hero of his tale carries a heavy burden with him, wherever he goes. It's a burden he hasn't ever been able to shift. But when he comes near to the cross of Jesus & looks to Jesus, suddenly his burden falls off his back, rolls away & completely disappears. This speaks of the first kind of **personal** freedom Christ brings us: freedom from sin & guilt. Whenever anyone comes to Jesus, they experience forgiveness & new life. By the Holy Spirit, Jesus helps everyone who follows him to live without guilt; also without fear or hatred. Jesus instead offers us faith, hope & love...

The second person I want to tell you about is Thomas Helwys. Thomas is one of the earliest Baptist leaders. He did something very brave – or very crazy, depends who you ask. Thomas wrote a letter to the first King Charles. Not something ordinary people did much. Thomas made a simple request. He asked that, not only Baptists, but people of other faiths, like Jews or Muslims, be allowed to worship God freely in Britain, without persecution. Did the King listen?... Not a chance. Instead, Thomas was locked up in the most foreboding prison – The Tower of London. And that's where he died, 3 years later. One of our 1st Baptist martyrs, a pioneer for religious freedom, way ahead of his time. Thomas Helwys campaigned for people to have public freedom, and not to be disadvantaged by their beliefs.

The third story, brings us into the 20th century. Someone you may not have heard of is Sarah Bonwick. Sarah was one of the first women to be co-opted onto the BU Council. One of the first women to be elected as a deacon in her north London Baptist church. Throughout her life Sarah to spoke to may thousands of people. She spoke of her love for her Saviour, Jesus. She spoke also about her godly desire to see justice in her lifetime. Sarah Bonwick was one of many Baptist women (& men) who campaigned for women to have the freedom to vote in Parliamentary elections. Seems crazy to think that just 100 years ago, not all women could have voted in the Clacton-on-Sea by-election, for example.

So, throughout the centuries, Baptists have stood up for freedoms: personal, public & political. Impossible to preach about spiritual freedom for individuals without also proclaiming wider freedoms for groups of people. God always has a bigger vision. Through Jesus, God is in the business of breaking down walls of division between peoples. As Jesus said, the good news proclaims freedom for the downtrodden – for all those held back or held down by the oppressive systems we see in too many nations today. That's why Baptist missionaries in Jamaica campaigned against the slave trade in the British Empire. That's why Martin Luther King marched for civil rights for all peoples of the United States. This cry for 'freedom' still rings out across our world, partly through the prayers of God's people in every nation...

Here in Galatians, Paul calls his fellow believers to 'stand firm for freedom' and not to become subject to any 'yoke of slavery'. As Paul put it in Romans 8, God wants all of creation to share in the 'glorious freedom of the children of God'. We are all called to be free – free to love God and to love our neighbour as ourself. Elsewhere, Paul proclaims: 'It was for freedom that Christ has set us free!'. As Jesus put it: 'If the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed!'. Free to live life in all its fullness.

Thank God for the good news of Jesus! Alleluia!