

**A Testament of Personal Faith**  
**June 14, 1970**  
**by Richard J Milham**

Last week in my sermon "A Testament of Personal Freedom", I had some pointed things to say. Very briefly I was asserting, in reaction to certain trends apparent at the Southern Baptist Convention in Denver, that we can never yield our basic principle of individual freedom before God. No matter what else transpires there must be a basic commitment to the truth that all of us must answer to God for ourselves as individual human beings. I am sorry that coverage of the Convention was not sufficient enough to give a full-understanding of the events that took place. If you received yesterday's evening paper you saw an article 'Baptist Bans Their Own Volume', which gives a clear insight concerning the action which brought me into this pulpit fired up about this matter of individual freedom and our right to private interpretation of the Scriptures.

This morning I want to move on from a Testament of Personal Freedom to a Testament of Personal Faith. I begin by reasserting that among Baptists there is great variety in doctrine and practice. Last week, though, I tried to drive home the simple point that there is one basic characteristic of Baptist life that marks us across the board as denomination and as a people from a historical perspective -- we believe there is religious freedom for every individual believer in his personal relationship to God and that every man can stand before God on his own two feet and do business with Him. Further, we believe that a man's experience in Christ releases him to be free to grow in Christ. From this one basic premise of individual freedom everything Baptists have ever maintained flows. Our belief concerning religious liberty, our belief concerning the separation church and state, our belief that the congregation should be free to decide its own policy and its own practice, our belief that Baptism is a free choice that a man enters into, our belief that a man is a Christian through a personal experience and a personal choice of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, our belief that God deals with every individual in terms of his life, his career, his experiences, all these beliefs arise out of this one basic, solid, fundamental commitment--that we are free before God to act and respond to Him. When that is lost--when that basic freedom is taken away, we are destroyed as a people.

Now a great price is paid and a great risk is run for the precious freedom of the individual believer, but Baptists have always been willing to pay that price. Baptists have always been willing to run that risk, they have always dared to be free, and by nature they say that we are free men. The greatest danger that faces us comes from those who will attempt to solidify us and say we must believe this as a Baptist, we must be committed to this as a Baptist, we must practice this as a Baptist. When we lose our individuality, we are lost indeed. The most unbaptistic thing a man can do to another Baptist or to any other Christian is to deny his fellow believer the right of his responsibility to search the Scriptures for himself and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit as he arrives at his own theological convictions. The most unbaptistic thing a man can do is try to tell another believer what he has got to believe. We have been called by the grace of God to believe that we have direct access to God. The most immediately theological implication of this basic belief of personal freedom maintains that a man has the right from that point on to enter into the world of the Scripture for himself.

Let it be said, though, that there are prerequisites for Biblical interpretation. The doctrine of private interpretation is not something that is tossed out like a bone. The first prerequisite is a personal experience of God's grace through Jesus Christ. As a man approaches the scripture he must have first yielded his life to Christ as he must have been transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. At this point I say as clearly as I know, since I am trying to lay out what I consider to be a testament of personal faith, that as a young man I entered into that experience with Jesus Christ--entered into it without a lot of theological hangups. Without a lot of confusing babel I entered into it as a seeking spirit and discovered the living presence of a living God. Having experienced his grace within I was promised by His Word that His Holy Spirit came to dwell within my life and that His Spirit was to guide and direct my life into truth. So that now I can comprehend for myself a depth within my own theological understanding.

Most people, though, if they are really honest with themselves - if they really take a good hard look - will probably admit that they did not root out their theological convictions for themselves. They would say "they were given to me, they were indoctrinated into me, they were superimposed upon me, I was told to believe them." Very rarely do you find a man who stands back and says I have experienced them, I have searched them out, I have worked through them and I believe these things because I am personally convinced. As I have approached the scriptures these truths have become my own. When a man lives with the shaky feeling that his doctrine is

something he has to tenaciously hold on to because he inherited it, he is constantly on the brink and is tremendously frightened by new thoughts--frightened by any experience that forces him to broaden out or re-evaluate his understanding.

Secondly, I said last week that freedom is freedom with responsibility. Do not equate personal freedom in the matter of private interpretation with theological anarchy. To say that we are free to read and study the scriptures and to believe for ourselves does not mean that a man can believe just anything. That is not what is being said. We are under the leadership of the Holy Spirit and because of that we come to understand some basic kinds of truth. Remember my quoting Dr. Hershel Hobbs.

"We must get back to the basic elements of our faith the competent of every soul before God. This means, among other things, that every soul is competent to approach God for himself, to trust in Christ for himself, to pray to God through Jesus Christ directly and to read and interpret the Bible as he feels led by the Holy Spirit.

Take this last matter as an example. Even the Holy Spirit does His work through imperfect human instruments. It is in this fact that our differences in interpretation of the Scriptures lie. But with the freedom allowed, the amazing thing is not that there are differences among us but that there are so few.

However, this competency also implies responsibility. But again this responsibility is to God not to one's brethren. If a man errs from the truth God should judge him, not other finite and erring fellow-Christians. Each should declare the truth as he feels led to see it. But he should leave God to deal with himself and others as He sees fit."

The right to private interpretation involves the Scriptures before us - the Holy Spirit within us - an experience with God a basic reality.

As a church we came to summarize some of our convictions and place them in a brochure in distilled form. We believe in the Lordship of Jesus Christ and absolute obedience to His will. We believe that the Scriptures are the sole authority for faith and practice. that man's conscience is free and cannot be coerced in matters of religion--that the individual is capable of approaching God directly for himself through Jesus Christ that salvation is a real experience of God's grace obtained by personal faith in Christ. The church is a democracy composed of believers who have voluntarily been baptized as a symbol of their faith. That the church and state are to be free and separate and that every Christian has a right to private interpretation of the scriptures.

Now, I want to tell you about my personal convictions that arise from my experience with the Holy Spirit within me and my understanding of the scriptures as I have come to know them. I want to say right from the beginning that I considered the scriptures to be the inspired record of God's revelation of Himself and His way and His will for mankind, I believe that they speak with final authority about all matters of spiritual faith and moral duty. From the very beginning of my experience with Christ and from the very beginning of anything that you would like to call a call to the ministry, I have been committed to the final authority of the scripture as the complete guide and direction of all my thinking and living. I believe that a man must yield to that authority and he must be committed to that authority so that his mind is geared to believe in accordance with the revelation in that authority and that his living is to be lived in terms of what he finds in that authority. From the very beginning I learned that the scriptures were to be, in my life, the final authority the final word, the final guide. Call it what you like within your own theological framework but my whole fundamental approach to life and preaching has been situated on my understanding of what this book has to say. Where it has spoken I have tried to speak and where it has come alive in my life I have tried to share it. It has been the Holy Spirit within me, the scriptures before me, the experiences of life around me--all of them translated into practical everyday living by the grace of God.

Let every man know where I stand on this issue. I was really interested in this article that came out yesterday about Baptist banning their own volume because it got on this matter of interpreting the Bible from a conservative viewpoint and it says that some Bible scholars maintain that interpreting the Bible literally somehow magnifies it whereas others maintain that it only does the Bible justice to realize that it has many symbolic elements and that literalism downgrades it. But this is the interesting thing, that both sides of the argument, the literalist and those that find symbolic elements in it, both take their stand in defense of the authenticity of the Bible. Yet their stands are directly contrary - It is never a matter of the authority or authenticity of the scripture among Baptist - it has always been a matter of how a man has a right to approach them. Does he have to be locked within a literal framework or is he free to find other's elements of interpretation within the scripture. Concerning my own individual

right, never confuse intellectual honesty with creeping heresy, never confuse probing the depths with poisoning the doctrine, never confuse the admittance of my humanity and limitations in Biblical interpretation with the advocating of some kind of humanism. Never confuse my desire to dig and to dwell and to yield forth from the scriptures deep meaning as somehow trying to defy their simplicity. I am committed to the authority of the scriptures.

Now some other convictions I hold, and I am going to use familiar terms. First of all, I want to say that I believe that God IS and He is creator. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth .... I believe Genesis when Genesis says that God is responsible for the creation. I almost feel like an idiot saying that. What do you expect a Christian minister to say? I believe God created the heavens and the earth that God created man and that man is not unique by virtue of his physical body but he is unique by the fact that he has a mentality and a morality and a creative spirit that makes him like God and transcends him above the animals. I am committed to God having created the heavens and the earth. Now if you want to get into an argument with me as to how he did it, about what process he used, about what kind of scientific formulas were called forth, I don't have the answers, I don't know the mind of God at this point. I believe that God is creator, that he is sovereign, he is sustainer of the universe.

I believe that God is the holy one that we should worship with adoration and reverential awe and that is why the sanctuary means more to me than just another building. It means that there we will be able to stand in awe and have a worship experience in the kind of atmosphere where we can approach God in a new spirit. We need to learn to worship as a people. He is a heavenly Father: He is not a tyrant. He loves us as a father loves his children. He knows how to give good gifts. He's the one who asks of us trust, and obedience and service.

I believe in Jesus Christ - I believe that he is the eternal son of God and the Saviour of the world. I believe the scriptures when it says that In the beginning was the word and the word was etc. I believe that he died for us, that he was buried, and that he rose again and even now he sits at the right hand of the Father. He is the way, the truth, the life, the living Saviour, the all sufficient Lord.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, If there have been any doubts that I have tried to make real within my own ministry, it is the reality of the Holy Spirit as a living person. He is abiding in my own life - He is God's agent in conviction and regeneration. He is preserver and seals us so no man is able to pluck us out of God's hand. He is the one who changes our lives day by day, helps us to grow in the knowledge of our Lord. He is comforter, he is teacher; he is our ever-present helper - He is the advocate who stands between God and our lives in our prayer experience. He pleads for us. He is the one who abides within us whereby we cry "Abba, Father." (Romans 8:15) I believe in the Holy Spirit. And I believe that my message and my usefulness in this pulpit are absolutely dead unless the Holy Spirit is witnessing to what is going on and so I desire to preach with fear and trembling for I want to come to you not in the power of intellect but in the power of the spirit.

I believe that man's sinful nature is a fact of human experience and that it separates man from God. I believe that Jesus Christ was God's mighty act to bring reconciliation of man to God. I believe that salvation from this sinful nature is man's most urgent need. I believe that salvation is a revolutionary transformation wrought by the Holy Spirit by grace through faith - not of works lest any man should boast. It is union with Christ in a fellowship of love and trust expected to issue forth in our lives in holy living and service. The end of salvation is eternal life in the presence of our Lord forever and the end of rejection is eternal separation.

I believe that the new life in Christ is meant to be expressed in continuous growth and service in our lives. He died for all.

I believe that the church in its universal sense is all the redeemed of God imperishable and eternal. I believe that the church in its local sense is a body of regenerated persons that confess their faith in Jesus Christ through baptism and have voluntarily associated themselves together for serve with Him. I believe in evangelism--that is the proclaiming of the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ and I believe Paul meant it when he said 'I Beseech ye therefore brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice holy acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.'" (Romans 12:1)

I believe in missions. I believe that missions is God's program of world evangelism and we are called to go into all the world to reach all men with the message of our Lord.

I believe in the kingdom of God as God's sovereign reign in the hearts of all those who have come to

acknowledge Christ as Saviour. His kingdom is a present reality within our lives but there is a day coming when it will be consummated. There's a day coming when our Lord will return. Be it clear. I am committed to the reality of our Lord's return. Don't ask me to date it, don't ask me to chart it, don't ask me to prophesy it, just ask me to live it. His return is assured. He is coming.

Let me share something with you as I close this two weeks series. These have been difficult days for me. I returned from Denver asking myself the same questions that many of our Convention leaders were asking. Questions like what are we doing and where are we going. I have been in a long battle with myself these days, a personal battle. and about Thursday of last week I said, Lord, we are going to get together and talk some. I got a canoe, a long 17' canoe and Thursday about 11:00 I put in over at Lake Harney and I started for Sanford about 20 miles away on the St. John's River. I wanted to get to Sanford before dark and that gave me only about eight hours. As luck would have it, I had a wind in my face all the way, so I couldn't take much of any kind of a break but had to pull hard in order to reach Sanford before darkness. My real purpose was to get out there and talk with God and get some kind of understanding about my own individual life.

When I started out on that trip, I started talking and tried to work up some kind of emotional experience but I was a failure. I had the right atmosphere, everything was right for it. I had the right time and the right desire. So I said 'Okay God, now that we're out here together- let's get down to business.' So I talked loud and didn't hear anything. I'd sing awhile and I'd say, 'but I didn't come out here to do that. I came out here to have an experience with God.' And so I worked on the thing, but nothing would come. And after 8 ½ hours of fighting that wind and those waves, I found myself at the point of exhaustion and I said 'Boy, is this a waste'. No exciting experience. I got to Osteen and had only a couple of miles to go, I pulled into a Fish Camp to get a cold drink and in the conversation with the owner he made the mistake of telling me I'd never make Sanford before dark. That's all I needed. I walked back to the canoe kicked off and headed downstream.

About a mile from Sanford I entered a long canal that poured out into the lake. The water was as slick as glass and for the first time I didn't feel the wind beating against me. I was trying to wrap up the whole day in my mind, trying to make some sense out of all the events. About the time that I awoke from my mental battle I suddenly realized that I was in Lake Monroe. Further I discovered that the lake was beginning to churn up, that storm clouds were brewing - and that I was really in trouble. Now a canoe is not a play thing, they are hard to swamp but the wind started to come up and drive the canoe to the edge of the lake into cypress swamps. I knew that if I got into the swamps that I wouldn't get out for some time. Because of the intensity of the wind and the darkness closing in, I saw in the distance about a mile and half ahead a house across the lake. And decided that if I could only make that place I could be safe. I started to pull for that house but suddenly realized how really tired I was. This was complicated by the waves and the wind that continued to drive me toward the swamp. I was in one of those situations where you couldn't let up because if you missed a stroke, you lost ground.

I looked out ahead and honestly admitted to myself that there was no way possible that I could make that house so far in the distance. I reconciled myself to the fact that I was going into the swamp and I knew that I would be there the night because I certainly wouldn't be able to track my way out of that swamp or swim for solid land. It was at that moment that I yelled out in the fury of my anger, "God, I can't make it!"

Then I looked ahead of me ... I don't know what it was that put the pieces together, but I said, "But Lord, there's a lily pad. Can you give me enough strength to at least reach it?" I found strength to reach the lily pad. Then I said "Lord, you see that cypress knee about 10 feet out there? Could you give me enough strength to get to that cypress knee?" And so I started yelling into the wind "Strength, Lord, for that clump of bushes, for that large tree." As I continued to feel the fury of the wind and now the rain I said, "Lord, I don't want strength to reach the house; I just want enough strength for the next cypress knee."

When I finally got there, I pulled into a quite cove behind the home of a retired surgeon Dr. Gardner and in that moment as I bent over completely exhausted I heard God's voice as plainly as I dare want to hear it say "Dick, quit trying to lick the world, quit trying to do the impossible. But you and I can do business if you'll just ask me for enough strength for one cypress knee at a time, one obstacle at a time, one victory at a time." I learned a lesson I will never forget and that is that when I look to the impossible and cry out "Impossible" that God whispers gently, Dick, let's take it one cypress knee at a time.