

A Testament of Personal Freedom

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by Richard J Milham

I am angry - but more than that I am sick - sick of labelings and being labeled - weary of wrangling, whiplashings and accusations - fed up with fevered oratory filled with sound, but saying nothing.

When I came to Christ, I came out of a religious orientation that bound me -

This is what to believe, I was told, there is not other truth. This is how to act in every circumstance, I was instructed, there is no other alternative, there is no other form.

But Christ has made me free. Christ has liberated me - not only from the sting of death and the chains of sin, but Christ set me free to become all man.

He set my spirit free to soar and sing His grace and goodness.

He set my emotion free so I could taste and see what it means to feel.

He set my body free so I could yield it to be used for His glory.

He liberated my intelligence so I could soar like an eagle and revel in the magnificence of a flower and wonder at the vastness of his creation.

He set my mind free - he liberated me from becoming captive to a mind that would smother me with its smallness - by a mind that could only creep through the maze of His majesty.

He saved me from becoming a haranguing, shallow, Bible-thumping bigot, or some God-denying fanatic.

He saved my mind.

He handed it to me with all its potential and He said, "My son, soar for my sake and the sake of the Gospel - soar." For Christ has set me free - and because I am free I am a slave - a slave to the Holy Spirit within me. I have yielded my life, my strength, my mind, and my spirit to Him, and I resent men telling me they know far better than I do how I should live and act and think. I have decided what is worth fighting for - for I have come to lay my life on one premise - that my experience with Christ has made me free indeed. And I will not succumb to embodiment again. I will not die inside by yielding my spirit to the narrow confines of pre-packaged theology. I will not deny the highest reflection of God in me by mouthing cliché phrases to prove my so-called orthodoxy. I will not corrupt the image of God in my life by refusing to be creative just so I can wallow in the comforts of conformity.

I watched men die inside this past week at the Southern Baptist Convention in Denver...just as real as that old gentleman who died of a heart attack in that first session. I saw men die inside.

I saw pine trees among the shrubs out and slashed because the shrubs could not comprehend them. Volume I of the Broadman Commentary on Genesis and Exodus was to be a new day for Southern Baptists. It was to be our first attempt to produce a critical piece of scholarship. But the volume dared to be creative - not destructive, but creative. And so the motion brought to the floor, "Because Volume I of the new Broadman Bible Commentary is out of harmony with the beliefs of the vast majority of Southern Baptist pastors and people, this Convention request the Sunday School Board to withdraw Volume 1 from further distribution and that it be rewritten with due consideration of the conservative viewpoint."

Dr. Sullivan, our Executive Secretary of the Southern Baptist Convention, was first to speak. He reminded us that from its very inception Broadman Press was not to be regarded as any king of official voice

for Baptist theology. He reminded us that Dr. Criswell's books were published in spite of opposition because this man had a right to be heard as representative of a broad viewpoint of the Southern Baptist Convention and that by publishing the Broadman Commentary it also represented another yet not so large segment of Baptist life, and for that reason it had a right to be in our midst. I heard him assert with great personal conviction that his stand was firm. I saw a pine tree - but soon I also saw the shrubs at work - clawing at this man, who with deep integrity has led and loved our Convention all these years.

Dr. Clifton J. Allen, the Editor of the Broadman Commentary, tried to explain that many varying views are expressed in the Volume, as is the nature with any scholarly work, and that its author, Dr. G. Henton Davis, is a man of great personal piety and scholastic integrity. "In no sense does it attack either the inspiration or authority of the Bible...." But soon the shrubs were at work. Another tall pine who had given so much of his life in the arena of sweat for the Gospel became the target of those who find time to sit by the hour in a rocker with Granny.

Dr. Hershel Hobbs, of First Baptist, Oklahoma City, tried to speak - this man who represents the very finest in honest Biblical interpretation. I watched that gentleman with admiration. I remembered an article he wrote in our state paper just before the Convention - he called it "Southern Baptists' Greatest Danger."

"We must get back to the basic elements of our faith, the competency 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 Broadman Bible Commentary is the fruit of years of prayer and careful planning. But it has never been regarded as the official statement of our faith. When completed it will be a composite of the efforts of many dedicated people, each endeavoring to interpret given portions of the Bible as he sees it, not as every Southern Baptist sees it. No man alive could write such a book for Southern Baptists. And no human being could write an interpretation of the Bible with which every Southern Baptist would agree."

Now I watched him as he tried to turn the tide, only to be greeted by men literally shouting out from the floor that his time was up. Time! Time! Time! I watched and I heard and I got sick, but that gentleman wasn't through. For one long moment he stood there in the middle of that demonstration of infantile mentality and he rapped the pulpit. "You may shout me down but you cannot shout the truth down." I saw a pine tree.

When the vote was taken, when applause rang through that auditorium, I died a little too. I thought first of Dr. Davies. I know what blood and strength must flow out of a man to write. I thanked God I would not have to be the one to call that scholar and tell him that Southern Baptists had decided he is one pine too many in their midst. I know what it means to write your deep convictions as led by the Spirit of God only to have someone say, "Reject - you have strayed from God's corner."

Then I thought of myself, of books I wanted to write, of the joys I wanted to share, of the creativity I wanted to set free, but I grew sick, for no man wants his love rejected, no man wants to pour out his deepest emotions and most precious thoughts and then have them worked on and toyed with and destroyed by those who cannot reach those depths or comprehend those thoughts.

When a man loves deeply he hurts deeply. When he reveals what he is as a human being, he lays himself open to the danger of misunderstanding and pain. That I can take - but to be open to the whim of emotional appeal, to be susceptible to the destruction of your love and mind on the strength of sideline participants who do not contribute but only criticize – that is hell. And I died a little.

I am a Baptist because I am a free man. I am not a free man because I am a Baptist,

Christ set me free - not the denomination.

I am weary of having my orthodoxy checked out, weary of self-styled protectors of the truth nipping at my heels, weary of trying to lift a man to see a greater light, a more majestic God, only to hear him say, "Isn't that heresy?"

If you want to label me - don't call me liberal; don't call me conservative; don't call me minister; don't call me preacher. Call me Christ's son...call me Christian.

I came away from that Convention sick and I am still sick, but there is healing, I pray there is a balm in Gilead, there is an oasis in the desert, there is my people, my fellowship, my joy, my congregation, my love for you all. There is a truth that in this place we have tried to raise the standard of individual freedom and responsibility before God.

For 5 ½ years I have tried to say: "Be free men! Be mature men! Rise above the stifling confines of a narrow mind and a narrow spirit and soar with me!"

- And we have felt the heartbeat of a good fellowship
...we have witnessed the blessings of God in abundance.
...we have sung and fellowshiped and wept with the reality of what God has done for us.

But I am tired - tired because for so long I have tried to drive beyond my strength - tired because I have tried to do in my strength what ought to be the work of you, the church, but most of all - tired because I have stood and seen what destructive forces of bitterness and narrowness can be unleashed in the name of our loving Saviour.

I am not God. I am one single human being with just so much strength, strength that is drawn upon time and time again by you all. But now I am in need of your strength - I am in need of healing, for I am weary. I, too, am a member of the flock. I, too, need your prayers and concern. For you see, we are the church - we are the fellowship - we are God's family - and we, together, are to hold each other up in the work of our Lord.

In all things essential - unity
In all things doubtful - liberty
But in all things - love and healing.

Oh, Lord, give us depth of soul...

Let us not wallow in the shallow waters of superficiality...save us from the curse of the commonplace...liberate us from lethargy...

Oh, God, give us the power to think unusual thoughts...the grace to dream dreams of greatness...the courage to cry out against popular parrotings...

Oh, Lord, may we see value in loneliness...find strength in our weakness...and respond to our challenges...

Oh, Master, help us let go of social coattails...prevent our becoming doormats of compromises...set us up...let us stand...as a mountain in the desert...as lifted swords in the midst of pacifism..as towering pines among the shrubs...