

WHY WE CAN'T WAIT— FREEDOM, THE PROTESTANT FREE CHURCH, AND *GAUDIUM ET SPES*

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Abstract

Free Church Protestants stand to gain much by appropriating the considerable wisdom of *Gaudium et spes*, for it offers a compelling, alternative vision to the individualistic and fragmented character of moral life as experienced by twentieth and twenty-first century Baptists. In this paper, I first explore some of the effects of modernity upon Baptists in the United States. I next identify—with an eye toward *Gaudium*'s representation of “particularly urgent needs characterizing the present age”—certain liabilities within the Baptist conception of liberty that compound the challenges presented by modernity. Finally, I survey three principal options facing Free Church Protestants who, along with Roman Catholics committed to the diagnostic and prescriptive insights of *Gaudium et spes*, want to see the church in the modern world flourish.

Introduction

With the background and in the context of the papers by my colleagues, Michael Beaty and Scott Moore, I want to argue that Free Church Protestants stand to gain much by appropriating the considerable theological wisdom of *Gaudium et spes*, specifically by embracing its compelling, alternative vision to the individualistic and fragmented character of life as experienced by 21st-century Baptists. In support of this thesis, I will offer three lines of analysis.

I will begin by recalling some of the fundamental, momentous issues of late modernity that prompted the issuing of *Gaudium et spes*. In light of the universality of those issues, I will characterize their principal effects upon Free Church Protestants in the Baptist tradition—effects that while not without benefit, have regrettably redounded to the weakening of Christian vitality.

Second, I will identify a liability within the Baptist self-conception that makes resisting modernity's bad features virtually impossible. Specifically, I will maintain that Baptists embrace a theologically deracinated form of liberty that—unlike *Gaudium et spes* and the longer tradition of Christian reflection within which it stands—is easily overtaken by a kind of political liberalism generative of deleterious forms of radical individualism. Such individualism is both a cause and an effect of some of the “particularly urgent needs characterizing the present age.”¹

Finally, I will survey three chief options facing Free Church Protestants, especially Baptists. Amidst the changing cultural conditions precipitated by modernity and now postmodernity, Free Church Protestants may: (a) allow their practice of the faith—untethered from Christian tradition and without a functional *magisterium*—to die the death of continued accommodation to culture;

(b) convert to Roman Catholicism; or (c) begin a journey toward Rome that, without giving rise to full communion, nonetheless involves a critical engagement with Catholic Christianity as a touchstone of vital tradition and teaching authority about Christian faith and practice.

Part I

Gaudium et spes acknowledges genuine difficulties confronting humankind, difficulties that while continuous in many ways with the common lot of humanity through the ages, in other respects mark a precipitous shift in the character of life in the modern world. Thus, the document early on announces that “Though mankind is stricken with wonder at its own discoveries and its power, it often raises anxious questions about the current trend of the world, about the place and role of man in the universe, about the meaning of the individual and collective strivings, and about the ultimate destiny of reality and of humanity” (§2). Yet however enduring such questions may be—part and parcel as they are to the human condition—the opening pages of *Gaudium et spes* also recognize that, “Today, the human race is involved in a new stage of history” in which “[p]rofound and rapid changes are spreading by degrees around the whole world” (§4). Later, in Part II of *Gaudium et spes*, a similar acknowledgement of the portentous quality of modernity appears: “The circumstances of the life of modern man have been so profoundly changed in their social and cultural aspects, that we can speak of a new age of human history” (§54). Whatever opportunities this new stage of history presents, it also heralds significant liabilities and risks, some of which we understand more fully four decades later.

To address but one salient example, *Gaudium et spes* appreciatively notes that “industrialization, urbanization, and other causes which promote community living create a mass-culture,” just as the “increase of commerce between the various nations . . . develops a more universal form of human culture” (§54). *Gaudium et spes* allows that such outcomes bear potential for the development of a culture consonant with Christian faith and practice. Regrettably, however, the last forty years more typically have seen mass-culture contribute to a degradation of human culture, and all too often with it a flagging of the vitality of Christianity. While the problematic effects of mass-culture are sometimes overt and sometimes subtle, the more subtle effects in many respects are the most pernicious. Thus, with the rise of what Alasdair MacIntyre has called the “bureaucratic manager”—a disproportionately influential class in today’s global, multi-national corporate world—comes both the pretense of “value neutrality” with regard to “effectiveness” as well as claims to “authority, power and money . . . as scientific managers of social change.”² Morally untutored and habitually accustomed to means-end calculation rather than normative reflection, the bureaucratic manager can scarce avoid a narrowing of the properly humane scope of responsibility, and not only in the professional context but also in civic, familial and ecclesial contexts.³ Likewise, the rise of enormous multinational corporations, often controlling resources outstripping the wealth of small countries, has heightened the anxious questions to which *Gaudium et spes* is directed. For, displacing indigenous economies and cultures, such corporations cannot easily keep “from disturbing the life of communities, from destroying the wisdom received from ancestors, or from placing in danger the character proper to each people” (§56). As small rural communities are supplanted by large, urban industrial centers, the bonds of friendship, personal interdependence and civic responsibility once sustained by necessity and proximity all too easily are torn asunder, giving way to anonymity, hyper-independence and radical individualism, and spawning myriad problems of urban life.

While my jeremiad could continue in several directions, my primary aim presently is to say something about the peculiar susceptibility of Free Church Protestants, and especially of Baptists in the United States, to the afflictions wrought by modernity. Baptists, you see, at least in the Southern U.S., have proven unfortunately vulnerable to co-optation by the worst tendencies of modernity, increasingly resulting in the malformation of the Christian community.

At one level, there is a straightforward sociological explanation for Baptist inability to resist an untoward cultural captivity in the present day. In the American South until the mid-20th century, Baptists found their strength in rural backwaters, largely insulated from larger cultural pressures to conformity. While such insularity brought with it any number of dreadful shortcomings, it had the merit of helping to sustain a fervent, biblically grounded piety in the context of accountable communities of the Christian faithful. But over the last fifty years, Baptists, caught up by the seemingly ineluctable unfolding of “the new age of human history,” have found themselves more urban and increasingly urbane than they once were; more economically advantaged and able to avail themselves of the multiple, conforming temptations of consumerism; and in consequence far less insulated from the secularizing tendencies of modernity than their forbears.

At another level, there is a theological explanation for Baptists’ predisposition to a ruinous cultural captivity. In the Reformation spirit of *sola Scriptura*, prizing themselves as a “people of the Book,” Baptists have grounded their faith in a stalwart biblicism, shunning the interventions of sustained, systematic theological reflection, along with the resources of two millennia of Christian tradition. As one of my colleagues quipped about his undergraduates—in a slight exaggeration—they absurdly suppose that not much happened between John the Baptist and Billy Graham, and thus wrongly imagine that understanding and appropriating the richness of Scripture depends upon their individual efforts at interpretation. An obvious liability concomitant with such an outlook is that individuals borne along and nurtured by modernity can only avoid what C. S. Lewis called “the characteristic mistakes of our own period”⁴ with great exertion, however present may be by the illuminative ministry of the Holy Spirit. *Sola scriptura* indeed!

At a third level, there is an ecclesial explanation for the phenomenon here at issue. Committed to a polity in which the autonomy of local churches is paramount, and in which cooperation with other Baptists and Christians is wholly voluntary, Baptists lack any kind of shared *magisterium*—apart from a common commitment to the inviolable authority of Scripture—that might provide them clear and consistent direction in the face of modernity’s many challenges. Baptists’ go-it-alone proclivity, combined with the foregoing, simply compounds their openness to cultural co-optation, for any hope of faithfully resisting the cultural hegemony of modernity necessitates the binding solidarity of the body of Christ, mutually accountable one to another.

In short, with fewer and fewer exceptions 21st-century Baptists are virtually indistinguishable from the mainstream culture, however radically counter-cultural and reforming their 16th-century beginnings may have been. With notable demurral on a couple of significant social issues (homosexuality and abortion), Baptists are more or less like Americans in general, pursuing self-indulgent lifestyles; adopting habits of unrestrained acquisitiveness; ignoring the accumulated wisdom of the ages and the urgent questions of human meaning; succumbing to the

disengagement of a live-and-let-live tolerance; and yielding to an unconscionable indolence that unresponsively looks past manifest injustices evident near and far.

Part II

At the root of the Baptist malady lies an unpropitious self-understanding, one largely indebted to modernity itself. In some respects consistent with their Free Church Protestant character, Baptists' have prized commitment to Christian freedom as a primary defining characteristic. To be sure, liberty is a constitutive element and important good of Christianity. Yet Baptists too often have failed to remember that their affection for liberty is not *sui generis*, but instead stands full square within a larger Christian theological tradition within which it must be understood.

One oft-cited Baptist thinker, E.Y. Mullins, provides a good example of the historical myopia besetting Baptist regard for Christian freedom. Mullins is given habitually to overwrought claims about freedom as the “distinctive contribution of the Baptists to the religious thought of mankind.”⁵ One might suppose upon reading Mullins that Christians were unconcerned about freedom before Baptists came along, notwithstanding apostolic consideration evident in the Pauline epistles and a virtually unbroken chain of theological texts concerned with the question of Christian liberty through every subsequent century of history. Christian liberty is not a Baptist invention, but instead is rooted within centuries of prior theological reflection. Disconnecting their devotion to freedom from two millennia of Christian theorizing about freedom, Baptists at best turn this important virtue into a mere byword, and at worst render it a liability to faithful thought and practice. For, uprooted from its theological home and in thrall to modernity, liberty quickly degenerates into the hyper-individualistic form of autonomy emblematic of modernity.

Properly, of course, Christians embrace a normatively grounded understanding of freedom. By this I mean that they treasure freedom because they understand its worth to lie in relation to a morally significant conception of the human good. In contradistinction to the modern world, they do not embrace freedom as sheer autonomy, if by autonomy one means liberty unconstrained by a substantive commitment to how and for what life should be lived. Put another way, a theologically attuned understanding of freedom recognizes that it can never be a right neatly divorced from the good. The moral rights that come with freedom go hand in hand with moral responsibilities; one does not abide without the other, and for the Christian, both gravely signify God's sovereignty—over sin, over us, over all. Thus, the children of Israel were delivered from Egyptian slavery for the sake of fulfilling God's covenant with Abraham, not in order to facilitate an unqualified right to self-rule or individual autonomy. The Galatians were “called to freedom,” but in the same breath Paul cautions them against using their “freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence” (Gal 5:13). Indeed, the consistent scriptural metaphor for freedom puts it in terms of exchanging one form of bondage for another: freedom from bondage to sin and freedom for bondage to God. Without Christ, Paul is “in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin,” but he rejoices that through Christ he may become “a slave to God's law” (Rm 7:25). The same apostle who writes, “For freedom Christ has set us free,” has repeated recourse to description of himself as Christ's bondservant. In his epistle to the Corinthians, he paradoxically writes: “he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave” (1 Cor 7:22).

Precisely on matters such as these, *Gaudium et spes* provides constructive guidance in more than one place, but perhaps nowhere more clearly than when it explains that:

Only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness. Our contemporaries make much of this freedom and pursue it eagerly; and rightly to be sure. Often however they foster it perversely as a license for doing whatever pleases them, even if it is evil. For its part, authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man. . . . Hence man's dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, not under blind internal impulse nor by mere external pressure. Man achieves such dignity when, emancipating himself from all captivity to passion, he pursues his goal in a spontaneous choice of what is good, and procures for himself through effective and skilful action, apt helps to that end. Since man's freedom has been damaged by sin, only by the aid of God's grace can he bring such a relationship with God into full flower (§17).

Later, *Gaudium et spes* further notes, "Freedom acquires new strength . . . when a man consents to the unavoidable requirements of social life, takes on the manifold demands of human partnership, and commits himself to the service of the human community" (§31).

When *Gaudium et spes* clearly connects the right to freedom to the good of virtue, it hearkens to a long tradition to which Free Church Protestants must become attuned. By God's grace, Plato saw through reason that to the contrary of marking true liberty, the licentious and antinomian indulgence of the untutored desires binds one as a slave to the appetites, making one's soul "full of slavery and unfreedom" (*Republic* 577d). Similarly, the Christian martyr Boethius wrote that "Human souls . . . reach an extremity of enslavement when they give themselves up to wickedness and lose possession of their proper reason" (*Consolation* 5.2 pr.). Anselm understood the freedom of the will to reach its pinnacle precisely at the point when the will becomes incapable of sin, for "the ability to sin does not constitute either freedom or a part of freedom" (*De libertate arbitrii* 1). Dante, sublime medieval Christian poet, opined that free will "conquers all, if it has been well nurtured," (*Purg.* 16.76-78) and thus understands freedom to be the outcome of sanctification, not a precondition for it (*Purg.* 27.130 ff.). It is this understanding of freedom about which Baptists need teaching, so that they may not be laid low by a false freedom that allows one in the name of autonomy to excuse personally and socially vicious choices. And thus, Baptists need to embrace *Gaudium et spes*' instruction, that modernity's movements to secure freedom as a right "must be penetrated by the spirit of the Gospel and protected against any kind of false autonomy. For we are tempted to think that our personal rights are fully ensured only when we are exempt from every requirement of divine law" (§41).

To summarize, Free Church Protestants and especially Baptists: (a) fail to locate liberty within the theological context historically affirmed by Christians, (b) take their cues too uncritically from modernity's misguided notions of freedom, and thus (c) regard liberty as a right disjoined from the good. In consequence, they—with all of modern culture—(d) foster it "as a license for doing whatever pleases them," and thereby (e) neglect "the manifold demands of human partnership." In these ways they succumb to a radical individualism that is a hallmark of modernity and a cause of many "particularly urgent needs characterizing the present age" (§ 46).

Part III

The time for a remedy is now, for Free Church Protestants stand at grave risk of bondage to the spirit of the modern age. Christians of the sort described herein, and Baptists such as I am, seem to face a limited range of options. Amidst the changing cultural conditions precipitated by modernity and now postmodernity, we may: (a) allow our practice of the faith—untethered to a rich tradition and without the resources of a functional *magisterium*—to die the death of continued accommodation to culture; (b) convert to Roman Catholicism; or (c) begin a journey toward Rome that, without giving rise to full communion, nonetheless involves a critical engagement with Roman Catholicism as a touchstone of vital tradition and teaching authority about Christian faith and practice.

¹ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*), § 46. I will henceforth cite the document parenthetically.

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 74, 86.

³ For this effect in an ecclesial context, see Dennis W. Hiebert, “The McDonaldization of Protestant Organizations,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 29:2 (Winter 1999): 261-279. Hiebert “examines evidence that efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control have become primary principles in diverse Christian organizations and argues that this ‘McDonaldization’ must be resisted because of its alienating and secularizing effects.”

⁴ C. S. Lewis, “Introduction,” in St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 4. He writes: “Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books.”

⁵ Herschel H. Hobbs and E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (rev. ed.; Nashville: Broadman Press, 1978), 50.