

“WHOLE SOUL COMPETENCY”

Matthew 22:34-46

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Senior Pastor

On this Reformation Sunday, half a millennium since, the provocative stone Luther dropped into the sea continues sending ripples toward every shore. Without Luther’s challenge to the Church in 1517, we would not have received the gifts of his insistent emphasis on salvation by faith alone, or the authority of Scripture, or newer, more imaginative approaches to preaching. We would not have as strong a sense of the potential an individual has to change the course of history. We would probably not live in the kind of nations that we do—the Reformation’s claims having been instrumental to modern political arrangements. But most immediately important for us today, were it not for Luther’s confrontation, we would not have the church we have today. Baptists inherited a Reformation in progress. We are heirs of the consequences of Luther’s 95 theses.

But as Baptists we’ve also inherited some of Luther’s traits as “the first modern person,” who, as Richard Lischer describes, is full of “spiritual *Angst*...rage against authority and [a] preoccupation with freedom and personal faith.”¹ This could describe a great many modern people, from Luther and other Reformers all the way to James Dean or John Wayne or most rock and roll bands. It’s only a small stretch to say we could thank Luther for the Rolling Stones. A preoccupation with freedom certainly illuminates something of the Baptist spirit, with our devotion to principles of freedom: freedom to read Scripture, to organize our congregation, to minister to one another as priests, freedom from state coercion. This combination of convictions names much of the Baptist experience.

And one more, the freedom of conscience. *Soul liberty. Soul freedom. Soul competency*, which means we’re responsible to no authority but God in matters of conscience. Nothing else comes between you and God—not family, not church, certainly not the state. Faith is your responsibility. Soul liberty, freedom of conscience, has been called the most Baptist principle of all. Baptists from John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, to Roger Williams, Isaac Backus, E. Y. Mullins, Walter Shurden, and many others have promoted this idea as essential to the Baptist way.

This is good and bad. At its best, soul liberty has often made Baptists the envy of other Christians, as it compels an energetic and zealous approach to faith. It invites us to recognize one of the gifts the gospel writers give us in these face to face encounters with God in Jesus. Soul liberty puts us squarely in front of the divine council, standing directly before God in all matters of faith. But at its worst, soul liberty has often had the effect of reducing us Baptists to little more than pious Christians who see our faith as just one more aspect of our rugged individualism. At its worst, soul liberty becomes mere “license” to live untethered from communal bonds and duties to the neighbor. This is why Jesus said, wherever 2 or more Baptists

¹ John F. Thornton and Susan Varenne, *Faith and Freedom: An Invitation to the Writings of Martin Luther*, xiv.

are gathered in my name, there are at least 3 opinions. Each one of us is more accustomed to saying, “I am going to church,” than we are saying, “I’ve been called to be with the church.”

But if we hold the Baptist idea of soul freedom under the light of the Greatest Commandment, what life-saving news it might reveal? Perhaps we’ll hear today some new revelation from God that enables us to imagine a future as rich and adventurous as the one that has preceded us.

A lawyer approaches Jesus to ask, “Teacher, what commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus interprets Deuteronomy 6, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” The first means of loving God—the *heart*—means our “inner life,” our character, what we desire, and how our desires shape us. The third means of loving God—the *mind*—has to do with our reasoning faculties, our intellect, our insight.

Now the second means of loving God Jesus names—all our *soul*—has to do with our very being as creatures of flesh and blood. What is a soul? Adam is the first soul. He’s made of dust and water and God’s own breath. This is the stuff of the soul. Mud made flesh. Mud made to breathe. Flesh on bone filled with marrow. Flesh coursing with blood. That’s a soul: “a living being whose life resides in the blood.”² Flesh with pulsing heart and arteries and veins. Flesh that breathes. That’s a soul. With frosted breath rising between us and the fiery maples and oaks and hickories in the distance. Breath on breath. God-breathed breath. Our breath. This is the stuff of soul. Soul means everything about us that gives rise to life and indicates life. Soul even accounts for our passions and hopes and dreams, our past, our regrets, our heartbreaks, the longings that stir within us to furrow our brows and quicken our heartbeats. What is a soul? A soul is *you*. All of *you*.

So, if this is the biblical meaning of soul, not only in the Old Testament but also in the New, what does it really mean to say “soul competency?” It cannot mean in any biblical sense that we are isolated individuals, for the soul itself is composed of breath, which is God’s breath, which is given to us as a gift. Soul competency cannot mean in any biblical sense that we are competent unto ourselves, because the souls we have overlap with other souls in ways we cannot measure. We are who we’ve become because of other souls. Other souls gave birth to us. Other souls cradled and fed and nourished us. Other souls and taught us and reprimanded and upbraided and set us on a right path. Other souls care for us when we cannot. Were it not for other souls, what would our souls be? As Baptists, when we say soul competency from now on, we must account for the entire meaning of the word *soul*.

Which Jesus does here. Which commandment
And the second is *like* it. Love your neighbor as yourself. This is like the first because from a Jewish imagination we cannot conceive of loving with all our blood without also loving those living beings near us whose life resides in the very same blood.
I could never leave you. You’re my blood.

Whole Soul Competency is the competency of the whole Body of Christ. I believe the next Martin Luthers, and the next Martin Luther King, Jrs., and the next people who alter the course of world history may not be so many individuals as they will be *communities of faith* whose

² Strong’s Dictionary.

collective witness offers new dreams and new visions about God. Going forward, communities of faith will be the entities with the most significant capacity for true competency of the soul, because it is the nature of a community to recognize its character as inner-related, and the individuals that compose it as grafted into one another. This is the meaning of Paul's image of the church as "one body."

As I've been studying Baptist reformers this past summer, in preparation for the Wednesday night studies that we've done these past two months, I've happened upon a revelation of sorts, if you'll come along side me and grant that I might receive revelations to share with you. And that is that the power of the early Baptist witness, and of the early Reformers' witness, was their ability to address the problems that people were experiencing, especially the ways people were being dominated and humiliated by the Church and by the State, by "the powers that be," the lords, the authorities, the principalities, the powers—those in authority over the rank and file members of Christ's church. I begun to recognize in a new way how the early Reformers and early Baptist leaders saw the burdens that people were bearing, and fought to lighten them through theological solutions. And it struck me that any kind of new Reformation that comes on the heels of the old is going to be achieved for the same means. Any new reformation will come because conscientious people begin to recognize the sufferings of other people and have compassion. A new reformation will come through those whose souls are drawn together in a common effort to address the things that plague and burden us, frustrate us, and dominate and humiliate us. It will be such as these that ancestors remember as being reformers.

And we do have our burdens do we not? The burdens that so many of us, especially the younger people in our communities, face. The burdens of income inequality, and how difficult it is for some young members of our congregation, young members of our city and country, to imagine living the kind of lives that their parents and grandparents live because they are so burdened with debt, and with low wages, and with broken dreams. They look at the philanthropists of our age, and they see people that, perhaps, they admire, but who wouldn't exist if there were such a thing as true community. Think about that. We wouldn't have philanthropists if we had really true communities. I say this in the sense of the earliest church's practices, where they brought all their possessions together, sold them, and distributed the proceeds to make sure no one had need of anything.

Think about the racial inequalities that burden us, and that divide us as a nation, and think about the church's potential to address these inequalities, and these divisions as problems needing reformation. Think about the burden of climate change where, every day, we receive more news about the incremental climate changes—undoubtedly man-made—that will begin to inundate coming generations.

With God's help, what wisdom can communities that understand themselves to be bound together as one flesh bring to bear for these challenges?

These are only a few of the overarching challenges we face, that burden us today, just as things weighed on peoples' hearts 400, 500 years ago. How might God be calling us to dream new dreams—not by ourselves, not alone, but as a community bound by the indissoluble tie of the Holy Spirit?

Such a vision comes to Ezekiel. Remember the Valley of the Dry Bones. The prophet surveys the landscape, and sees nothing but broken skeletons, shattered to pieces, desiccated bones and cracked skulls. All of the sudden, the wind, the breath, the soul of God, begins to blow on the bones, and they begin to piece together. They gain structure, then posture, then entrails, blood, and sinews, and hearts, and minds. And all of a sudden, clothed with flesh, the competent spirit of God makes them into living souls. Ezekiel looks out over the whole land and sees Israel's new future.

Now consider the church in a similar way: imagine once the great community is raised that God is not finished. In light of Paul's vision of the church as the body of Christ, could we not carry forward the progress of Ezekiel's vision, such that these recreated bodies begin to be tethered together across the spaces between them by such visceral bonds as interconnected veins and flesh, sharing one blood and one Spirit, such that we begin recognizing we are truly one Body? Then the joy felt in one side of the body is experienced on the other. Likewise, the pain felt on one side is experienced on the other, because the bonds that hold us together make us one.

Yes, there is the First Commandment, to love God with all our heart, and our soul, and our mind. The second it like it, to love our neighbors as ourselves. God's new reformation will come when we can no longer tell a difference between the two.

Amen.

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