



IS SOUL COMPETENCY THE BAPTIST DISTINCTIVE?



"Choose ye this day whom ye will serve." Joshua 24:15

Is soul competency the primary Baptist distinctive? Some very outstanding Baptist leaders, past and present, seem to indicate that it may be.

"...the principle of the competency of the soul in religion under God is a distinctive Baptist contribution to the world's thought...."

E. Y. Mullins (b.1860 — d.1928)
Baptist educator/theologian

"Out of this principle flow all other elements of Baptist belief...."

Herschel H. Hobbs (b.1907 — d.1995)
Baptist pastor/theologian

"The concept of the soul's competency is more than a single doctrine; actually, it undergirds all the other doctrines of the faith."

H. Leon McBeth (b.1931)
Baptist educator/historian

The Meaning of Soul Competency

What does "soul competency" mean? Various terms have been used for this concept, such as soul freedom, freedom of conscience and soul competency. Basically it means the God-given freedom and ability of persons to know and respond to God's will. Baptists believe that God gives people competency — that is ability — to make choices. Human beings are not puppets or machines.

Baptists emphasize that this ability is not a mere human characteristic, but a gift from God. In creation, God gave to persons the freedom to make choices. The Genesis account of creation makes crystal clear that this freedom carried with it awesome responsibility. We are responsible for our choices. God sets forth the consequences of good and bad decisions. If we exercise our freedom to obey him, we have life. If we use our freedom to deny him, the result is death (Genesis 1—2).

The Bible and Soul Competency

The Bible is filled with examples of soul competency. The Bible considers it a fact that people have freedom of choice. The Bible also teaches that people are accountable to God for their choices.

For example, God's gift of the Ten Commandments assumed the competency of human beings to understand them and the freedom to accept or to reject them. With acceptance came blessing, and with rejection came punishment. But in any case, competency and freedom of choice were assumed (Exodus 20:1-17).

The people of Israel were given choices, indicating a competency to make decisions. Joshua declared, "Choose ye this day whom ye will serve" (Joshua 24:15). This challenge would have been meaningless if the people had no competency or freedom to choose.

The heroes of the faith in the Old Testament, such as Elijah, Jeremiah and Isaiah, refused to give up their freedom of conscience to government rulers.

In various ways, the New Testament affirms soul freedom. Jesus assumed that individuals had a God-given competency to decide to follow him or not. He indicated that persons were free to believe or not to believe but were held accountable for their choice (John 3:16-21). Some believed and followed, but some did not (Matthew 19:16-22).

Jesus never coerced or forced persons to follow him and thus never violated the soul freedom of individuals.

Writers of the New Testament consistently set forth the concept of soul freedom. For example, the Apostle Paul wrote, "For why should my freedom be judged by another's conscience?" (I Corinthians 10:29 NIV). And he pleaded with the Galatians, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1 NIV).

Furthermore, leaders in the New Testament churches modeled soul competency. They never forced anyone to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior. In fact, they resisted religious and governmental authorities who tried to force them not to believe and speak for Jesus (Acts 5:17-42).

Attacks on Soul Competency

The concept of soul competency has been attacked for various reasons. Some persons contend that such freedom would limit God's sovereignty. A Baptist response to this challenge has been that the sovereign Lord of the universe chose

to create human beings with freedom of choice. The Bible clearly supports this view of human creation, holding forth as truth both the sovereignty of God and the soul freedom of humans.

Others have charged that the idea of soul competency leads to human arrogance and pride. It can, of course, but correctly understood, it should lead to humility. All human ability is a gift from God, including freedom of choice.

Another accusation is that the concept of soul competency results in subjectivism and hyper-individualism with the accompanying neglect of the importance of the community of believers. Of course, doctrines have the potential of being carried to an extreme that is harmful. But properly understood, soul freedom is exercised in the context of a community of believers.

Soul Competency and Other Baptist Beliefs

Although soul competency may not be **the** Baptist distinctive, it is certainly foundational to other Baptist beliefs. The Baptist distinctive is the **total** of several precious beliefs and practices based solidly on the Bible.

However, soul competency does relate to most of the other beliefs of Baptists and indeed is foundational. For example, in regard to the authority of the Bible, Baptists insist that although Bible scholars, teachers and pastors can provide helpful insights, the individual is competent and responsible to read, interpret and apply the Scriptures for herself or himself under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Baptists believe that the Bible teaches that salvation from sin and death to forgiveness and eternal life comes only by a faith response to God's grace gift of his Son. Baptists further insist that persons are competent to respond to God's grace by faith and that such faith must be a free choice. Therefore, persons ought to be free from attempts by government or church officials to coerce faith or to hinder faith.

Believer's baptism, another major Baptist emphasis, assumes soul competency. Baptism is only for those who have freely responded by faith to God's grace gift of salvation. Baptism should never be forced on a person. Such an action would violate that person's God-given freedom of choice.

Conclusion

One of the reasons why both secular and religious despots have persecuted Baptists heavily through the centuries is that these persons despise freedom. Fearing freedom, they attempt to force everyone into their religious mold.

In the face of such efforts, most Baptists have exercised their soul competency and responded positively to Paul's admonition: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty where-with Christ hath made us free and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage" (Galatians 5:1).

Baptists will also do well to always emphasize that freedom carries responsibility. We are free in Christ to serve others in love: "For brethren ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13).

For further information about Baptists and soul competency, see www.baptistdistinctives.org.