

ABSTRACT

James M. Dunn and Soul Freedom:
A Paradigm for Baptist Political Engagement in the Public Arena

Aaron Douglas Weaver, M.A.

Chairperson: Barry G. Hankins, Ph.D.

In the last half of the twentieth century, James Dunn has been the most aggressive Baptist proponent for religious liberty in the United States. As the leader of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, Dunn's understanding of church-state separation was a battleground in the Southern Baptist Controversy of the 1980s. "Conservative Resurgence" leaders opposed Dunn and the Southern Baptist Convention eventually withdrew from the BJC.

This thesis analyzes the public career of James Dunn, especially his views on religious liberty. Dunn embodied and articulated a paradigm for Baptist political engagement in the public arena which was based upon the concept of soul freedom: voluntary uncoerced faith and an unfettered individual conscience before God. Dunn defended soul freedom as the historic Baptist basis of religious liberty against critics whom he believed had forfeited their Baptist identity by aligning with the Religious Right and its rejection of church-state separation.

James M. Dunn and Soul Freedom:
A Paradigm for Baptist Political Engagement in the Public Arena

by

Aaron Douglas Weaver, B.A.

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Church-State Studies

Christopher Marsh, Ph.D., Chairperson

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Approved by the Thesis Committee

Barry G. Hankins, Ph.D., Chairperson

Charles A. McDaniel, Ph.D.

William L. Pitts, Jr., Ph.D.

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J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACT	Anti-Crime Council of Texas
BGCT	Baptist General Convention of Texas
BJC	Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs
BSU	Baptist Student Union
CLC	Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas
ERA	Equal Rights Amendment
LIGHT	Legislative Information Group Helping Texas
PAC	Public Affairs Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention
PFAW	People for the American Way
POAU	Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State
SALT	Special Advisors on Legislation in Texas
SBC	Southern Baptist Convention

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To My Dad

CHAPTER ONE

The Early Years: Religious Roots, Intellectual Influences, and the Texas Christian Life Commission

“Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.”¹ This famous phrase characterizes the ministry of Baptists such as Thomas Helwys, Roger Williams, John Leland and others. In the last half of the twentieth century, James Dunn has been the loudest and most aggressive Baptist proponent for religious liberty in the United States. Dunn is best known for his leadership as Executive Director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, an organization comprised of multiple Baptist bodies that deals solely with religious liberty issues on Capitol Hill. Dunn’s defense of religious liberty and the separation of church and state became one of the pivotal issues in the Southern Baptist Controversy during the 1980s. He was one of the primary targets of the “Conservative Resurgence” that ultimately gained control of the Southern Baptist Convention and subsequently defunded the participation of Southern Baptists in the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

James Dunn embodied and articulated a paradigm for Baptist political engagement in the public arena which was based upon the concept of soul freedom: voluntary uncoerced faith and an unfettered individual conscience before God. His vision of religious liberty and separation of church and state was especially rooted in the doctrine of soul freedom. Dunn argued that soul freedom is the cornerstone that precedes and demands religious liberty and separation of church and state for all persons in the

¹Wendell Phillips, in *The Home Book of Quotations*, ed. Burton Egbert Stevenson (New York: Dodd & Mead, 1964), 1106.

political arena. With uncompromising intensity, Dunn defended soul freedom as the historic Baptist basis of religious liberty. Dunn attempted to so identify with the radical component of the Baptist witness to religious liberty that Baptist historian Walter Shurden has called him a modern day “John Leland,” the eighteenth and early nineteenth century’s strongest proponent of a thoroughgoing separation of church and state.² To be authentically Baptist, Dunn believed, a person must defend soul freedom.

James Dunn: A Biographical Overview

Early Life

A self-described “Texas-bred, Spirit-led, Bible-teaching, revival-preaching, recovering Southern Baptist,”³ James Milton Dunn was born in Fort Worth, Texas, on June 17, 1932 to William Thomas Dunn and Edith Campbell Dunn. William and Edith played an extremely important role in molding young James’s social conscience. Not unlike many Baptists in Texas, Dunn grew up in an extremely conservative environment. According to Dunn, he never heard a curse word and never saw a pack of playing cards or a bottle of beer or a cigarette in his house. His parents’ understanding of the social implications of the Christian Gospel was “a very rigorous and a very disciplined Christian life.” Dunn’s parents taught him from an early age to treat all people with equal dignity and respect.⁴

²Walter B. Shurden, “James (Dunn) and John (Leland), Baptist Sons of Zebedee,” in *James Dunn: Champion for Religious Liberty*, ed. J. Brent Walker (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1999), 109-122.

³James M. Dunn, “Being Baptist,” in *Baptists in the Balance*, ed. Everett C. Goodwin (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1997), 219.

⁴James M. Dunn, “Oral Memoirs of James Milton Dunn,” interview by H. Wayne Pipkin (The Texas Collection, Baylor University, June 13, 1974), 6-10.

Dunn grew up in a “borderline community” in the then segregated Fort Worth where African-Americans lived just one block away from his neighborhood. The Hispanic community was close by as well. As a milkman, William Dunn worked with African-Americans and consequently African-American friends were frequent guests in the Dunn home.⁵ Dunn related in an interview,

My parents were...not very heavily involved in a public way with their Christian experience, but they were very, very committed in a practical way. Beyond this, they were committed...in that our home was a refuge for every stray, alcoholic, homeless young person, needy neighbor, that I ever saw. Seldom a day went by that they weren't bringing someone into the home to see to it that they had something to eat, or going somewhere to do something for someone else. It was that kind of applied Christianity.⁶

Although Baptist, the Dunn family attended a nearby Presbyterian church due to convenience while James was a small child. Later, the family joined Evans Avenue Baptist Church in Fort Worth where Dunn became a Christian at the age of eleven. Under the influence of Evans Avenue's young pastor Woodrow (“Woody”) Wilson Phelps, a Th.D. graduate in ethics under Thomas Buford Maston, the prominent Southern Baptist ethicist, Dunn began to realize the social aspects of the Christian faith. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Phelps began to push the Evans Avenue congregation towards a more progressive understanding of race. In both his public and private life, Dunn struggled to reconcile his Christian faith with his stereotypical Southern racial attitudes, finally resolving this dilemma in favor of racial equality by his sophomore year in college.⁷

⁵Ibid., 8-11.

⁶Ibid., 2-4.

⁷John Storey, *Texas Baptist Leadership and Social Christianity, 1900-1980* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1987), 167-168. Storey asserts that race remained a blind spot for Dunn throughout his teen years. In high school, Dunn argued against President Harry Truman's efforts on behalf

Early Ministerial Career and Educational Journey

Dunn began his educational journey in the Forth Worth public school system where he played in his high school's eighty member symphony orchestra. After a stint at Texas Christian University, Dunn transferred to Texas Wesleyan University where he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in history in 1953. As a nineteen-year-old junior at Texas Wesleyan, Dunn accepted a "call" to vocational ministry. Consequently, Dunn pursued graduate theological training. His educational experience at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary began in 1953. Dunn received his Bachelor of Divinity in 1957 and his Doctor of Theology in 1966. While a seminary student, Dunn served Texas Baptist Churches in several ministerial roles from 1954-1961 including one four-year pastorate.⁸

While writing his dissertation on Joseph Martin Dawson, Dunn had the opportunity to study under Thomas Buford Maston, the influential Southern Baptist ethicist.⁹ Under Maston's tutelage, Dunn was drawn more intensely toward the social concerns of "applied Christianity." Dunn finished his long educational journey in 1978

of civil rights in debates with his fellow classmates. Dunn was confronted with the discrepancy between his Christian faith and racial attitudes by a visiting speaker at Evans Avenue, Ralph Phelps, Jr., one of T.B. Maston's Th.D. graduates. According to Storey, Dunn became angry and argued publicly with Phelps.

⁸John Newport, "A Texas-Bred, Spirit-Led Baptist," in *James Dunn: Champion for Religious Liberty*, ed. J. Brent Walker (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1999), 18-26. See also James Dunn, e-mail message to author, January 21, 2008. Dunn began his professional ministerial service in 1954, serving as associate pastor at a Baptist church in Celina, Texas for a year and at First Baptist Church in Weatherford, Texas, from 1955 to 1958, and then as pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Weatherford, Texas from 1958 to 1961. In an interview with Dunn, he noted that he was the first pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church which began with just fifty-eight members and grew to two hundred members in just three years. The growth at Emmanuel included twenty-one baptisms.

⁹ Maston taught Christian ethics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1922 to 1963.

as a post-doctoral research scholar at the prestigious London School of Economic and Political Science.¹⁰

During the next five years (1961-1966), Dunn served as Baptist Student Union (BSU) Director and as an instructor of religion at West Texas State University.

According to Bill Webb, Dunn's successor at West Texas State, those five years were "formative and strengthening times" for the BSU, with the expansion of programs and missions and increased respect from the university and the community. Through his experiences as pastor, BSU Director, and as an instructor of religion, Dunn developed a deeper commitment to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Reflecting on these experiences, Dunn wrote: "My years as a pastor, BSU director, evangelist, and mission volunteer have deeply imprinted my life with a commitment to experiential Christianity in which the opportunity and necessity of personal religion, volunteer commitment to Christ, and immediate access to God through Jesus Christ sum up my faith."¹¹

Formative Academic Personalities

Two pivotal influences upon Dunn's public theology and social Christianity were Joseph Martin Dawson and Thomas Buford Maston. J. M. Dawson was a highly regarded Texas Baptist pastor, social activist, and writer during the first half of the twentieth century. Dawson was best known for his work on behalf of religious liberty and the defense of the principle of separation of church and state. As the first Executive Director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs (1946-1953) and as a founder

¹⁰James Dunn, telephone conversation with author, January 21, 2008. In 1978, Dunn was a research scholar at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He studied economics under Ian Roxborough and the sociology of religion under Eileen Barker.

¹¹Newport, "A Texas-Bred, Spirit-Led Baptist," 18-26.

and first director (1946-1947) of the highly influential Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State (POAU), Dawson achieved national recognition in the arenas of church and state.¹²

Dawson was known to many for his deep commitment to social Christianity. In a letter to James Dunn, renowned Southern Baptist ethicist Henlee Barnette declared that "one cannot understand Southern Baptists and their social awareness without understanding J. M. Dawson. He has done as much as any one man to contribute to their social consciousness and concern."¹³ After reading the works of social gospel pioneer Walter Rauschenbusch, Dawson became inspired to address the social applications of the Gospel in his writings and sermons regarding such subjects as child labor, the exploitation of immigrants and women's rights. He was one of the first Texas Baptist ministers to preach on these controversial social issues. While the pastor of the powerful First Baptist Church, Waco, Texas, Dawson regularly used the pulpit to condemn racial prejudice and denounce hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁴

A turning point in Dunn's interests and subsequent career was his research on the life and writings of J. M. Dawson whom Dunn referred to as a "modern day Roger

¹²J. Brent Walker, "BJC=JMD²: The Contributions of Joseph M. Dawson and James M. Dunn to the Baptist Joint Committee," *Baptist History & Heritage* 41, no. 3 (Summer-Fall 2006): 8-20. See also Ronald James Boggs, "Culture of Liberty: History of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, 1947-1973," (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1978), 10-20. Dawson directed POAU from November 22, 1947 until September 1, 1948. Following World War II, tensions in America were heightened between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Many Protestants feared that giving in to Catholic demands for parochial aid would mean the destruction of separation of church and state. Dawson's POAU in its early years was seen as another anti-Catholic organization. While POAU's founders and leaders rejected their anti-Catholic image, they did nothing to systematically counter it.

¹³James M. Dunn, "The Ethical Thought of Joseph Martin Dawson," (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1966), 2.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 1-5.

Williams.”¹⁵ During the dissertation process, Dunn spent countless hours interviewing Dawson and reading his papers and other writings. Dunn learned from Dawson much of the Baptist heritage, its politics, and personalities. According to Dunn, Dawson was “a great man, an interesting man, a great wit—humorous and very courageous...piercingly outspoken.”¹⁶ Dunn described Dawson as an “ardent advocate of applied Christianity and sometimes solitary spokesman for a social dimension to Christianity among Southern Baptists who may have offered them the most creative and comprehensive social ethics available in the first half of the 20th century.”¹⁷ Dunn viewed the ethical thought of Dawson as a “masterful synthesis of conservative theology and progressive ethical insights.”¹⁸ Partly due to the influence of Dawson’s writings, Dunn came to realize that ethics could not be divorced from evangelism nor evangelism from social concern. Personal redemption and social concern belonged together, according to Dunn.¹⁹

The influence of Thomas Buford Maston upon the life and thought of James Dunn is immeasurable. T. B. Maston was one of the most significant Southern Baptists of the twentieth century. Perhaps more than any other figure, Maston was the preeminent shaper of Christian ethics and Christian social concern among Southern Baptists. He taught Christian ethics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1922 to 1963.²⁰ Dunn was first introduced to Maston as a teenager at Evans Avenue Baptist

¹⁵Ibid., 4.

¹⁶“Oral Memoirs of James Milton Dunn,” 16.

¹⁷Ibid., 6.

¹⁸Ibid., 3.

¹⁹“Christian Life Commission reports,” *Baptist Standard*, November 20, 1968.

²⁰Mark Wingfield, “Maston’s walking as he walked,” *Baptist Standard*, March 5, 1986.

Church. Maston spoke to the youth of Evans Avenue on finding God's will and purpose for their lives. He addressed issues important to teenagers such as love, dating, and marriage. In his memoirs, Dunn recalled being thoroughly impressed with Maston: "And when I was about seventeen or so, he came to the church; and I remember that what he said had a ring of validity about it. It made sense. He answered the questions we had been asking without our having to ask them. He spoke to real needs and I was impressed with him then."²¹

Maston continued to influence Dunn during his college years at Texas Wesleyan College. Maston was a frequent guest at the Baptist Student Union where Dunn was an active participant. Every year Maston spoke at a college chapel service. According to Dunn, although Texas Wesleyan was a Methodist school, Maston "was about as popular on that campus as any of the Methodists were because he had been visiting there for years." This influence continued during Dunn's seminary days when he became one of Maston's doctoral students. Impressed with how Maston practiced what he preached, Dunn looked to Maston as a personal role model. According to Dunn, Maston "wore the same old gray suit, and the same old patched shoes and never pretended to live any kind of ostentatious lifestyle."²² In his oral memoirs, Dunn identified Maston as the "most outstanding influence in my own experience because of not only his emphasis upon applied Christianity but his living it out in his own life by what we now call lifestyle."²³

²¹"Oral Memoirs of James Milton Dunn," 5-10.

²²Ibid., 28-32.

²³Ibid., 5.

Analysts cannot adequately understand the ethical perspectives of James Dunn without first acknowledging the pivotal influence of J. M. Dawson and T. B. Maston.

Stewart A. Newman, a professor of philosophy and religion at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1936 until 1952, also had a profound influence on Dunn.²⁴ Dunn has credited Newman with introducing him to the doctrine of soul freedom. As a sixteen-year old, Dunn took a week long study course at Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth which was taught by Newman on Baptist beliefs. According to Dunn, soul freedom and its importance was strongly emphasized throughout the ten-hour course. This intense focus on a voluntary uncoerced personal relationship with Jesus Christ and an unfettered individual conscience before God would stick with Dunn for the rest of his public career.²⁵

The Texas Christian Life Commission Era

A pivotal turning point in James Dunn's professional career was his appointment as Associate Director of the Christian Life Commission of Texas in 1966. At the time he was hired by Jimmy Allen, the director of the agency, Dunn intended to serve the Texas

²⁴Robert A. Baker, *Tell The Generations Following: A History of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1908-1913* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983), 264. See also "Dr. Stewart A. Newman," *The News & Observer*, May 12, 2001. Newman left Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary to join the faculty of the newly organized Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina in 1952. In 1966, he became professor of Philosophy at Campbell College, Buies Creek, North Carolina, then in 1974 moved to Meredith College in Raleigh, North Carolina where he taught until his retirement in 1986.

²⁵James Dunn, e-mail message to author, January 21, 2008. Though Newman is seldom mentioned in Baptist periodicals and texts, Dunn cited Newman extensively on the subject of soul freedom in a controversial article at the height of the Southern Baptist Controversy. See James M. Dunn, "Reflections," *Report from the Capital* 42, no. 6 (June 1987): 15.

CLC for only two or three years. Instead, his tenure with the Texas CLC lasted fourteen years. This position thrust him fulltime into the vocational arena of social Christianity.²⁶

Founded in 1950, the Christian Life Commission was the brainchild of four influential Texas Baptists: A. C. Miller, T. B. Maston, W. R. White, and J. Howard Williams. Realizing that Texas Baptists had failed to apply moral ideas and principles of the Gospel to all aspects of life, these men called for a program to address a broad range of ethical issues, both social and personal, and to provide leadership for Texas Baptists. In 1949, a three-man committee consisting of Maston, Miller, and White (President of Baylor University) met to study ways in which Texas Baptists could most effectively confront social problems such as race relations, gambling, communism, and persistent threats of war. At the 1949 annual meeting of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the three men issued a report which courageously declared “that an outstanding weakness of organized Christianity has been and is its failure to apply consistently the moral ideals and principles of the Christian gospel to all of life.”²⁷

²⁶“Oral Memoirs of James Milton Dunn,” 27-28.

²⁷David Stricklin, “An Interpretive History of the Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, 1950-1977” (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 1981), 72-73. A. C. Miller would become the first director of the Christian Life Commission. In 1953, Miller left the Texas CLC to serve as the director of the Southern Baptist Convention's Social Service Commission, the name of which was later changed to Christian Life Commission. W. R. White was an influential Texas Baptist pastor who was elected president of Baylor University in 1948, a position he held until 1961. After serving as executive secretary of the BGCT during the Depression, J. Howard Williams served several prominent churches as pastor and later became president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary for five years (1953-1958), until his untimely death. Out of this trio evolved the Committee of Seven with T. B. Maston serving as chairman. The following year, this committee recommended to the BGCT the establishment of an agency designed to give denominational attention to social Christianity.²⁷ Although the purpose of this new agency was to address social issues, Maston purposefully avoided including the word *social* in its name. The overriding reason for this, according to Maston, “was the prejudice of many Southern Baptists toward the so-called ‘social gospel.’” Prominent Texas Baptists such as David Gardner, editor of the influential *Baptist Standard* and W. A. Criswell, pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, were on record as strong opponents of the Social Service Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention and essentially any form of social activism. In their view, the one and only mission of the church was to evangelize the masses. As a result, the Committee of Seven chose to name the new agency the Christian Life Commission.

Since its inception in 1950, the CLC has responded to almost every important issue to trouble American society. The Commission opposed universal military training in 1952, supported the Supreme Court in desegregation and school prayer rulings, sanctioned therapeutic abortions, promoted sex education, wrestled with drug abuse and addiction, urged a settlement of the Vietnam conflict, declared that people were “more important than profit” and demanded “that businesses take the necessary steps to eliminate pollution from the air and water,” condemned “raw violence” and the exploitation of sex on television, advocated bilingual education, endorsed programs to rehabilitate Texas prison inmates, warned against “Christian” political parties, encouraged energy conservation, and recommended restraint “in wage and price increases and in our own consumption habits” as a means of dealing with inflation.²⁸

Throughout its inception, the CLC maintained contact with the consensus opinion of Texas Baptists. For instance, the CLC led campaigns against liquor, gambling and obscenity – issues that were near and dear to the hearts of many Texas Baptists. However, the CLC did not hesitate to be prophetic and take unpopular positions on issues regarding public school desegregation, equal rights in housing and support for sex education. Despite these unpopular positions, there have been no organized attempts to censure the commission or control its work. This lack of conflict is startling considering

²⁸Storey, *Texas Baptist Leadership*, 260-262. See also Storey, 135-138. Far from being a single issue interest group, the Texas CLC was assigned to address a wide range of moral issues. Between 1950-1977 the six areas receiving the bulk of attention from the Commission were family life (sexuality, adultery, divorce, birth control, and sex education), economic life (poverty and world hunger), religious liberty (Christian citizenship and church-state separation), race relations, and other moral issues (war and peace, capital punishment, prison reform, pornography, drug abuse, and abortion).

the organized attacks by Southern Baptists against the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.²⁹

Less than two years into the job as associate director, Dunn was named acting director of the Christian Life Commission when the secretary Jimmy Allen resigned to assume the pastorate of First Baptist Church, San Antonio, Texas.³⁰ Members of the agency's personnel committee soon asked Dunn to take the commission directorship. However, Dunn initially wrestled with the decision because he did not have the reputation as a public speaker that his predecessor had. In his oral memoirs, Dunn remembered, "I didn't want to do it because I couldn't see myself in the public spokesman role that Allen had done so well." Despite this reservation, Dunn accepted the offer and was elected by the Executive Board of the Baptist General Convention of Texas only a few months later in March, 1968. Ironically, Dunn gained a reputation as an articulate prophetic voice as his career unfolded.³¹

Gambling

Dunn's first item of business as director of the CLC was mobilizing Texas Baptists and others to reject a state wide referendum on legalized gambling.³² With the help of an inter-denominational organization called the Anti-Crime Council of Texas (ACT), Dunn led the CLC to defeat gambling referendums in 1968 and again in 1974.³³

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰"Dunn named acting commission head," *Baptist Standard*, January 3, 1968.

³¹Stricklin, "An Interpretive History of the Christian Life Commission," 103. See also "Dunn's nomination as secretary expected," *Baptist Standard*, March 6, 1968.

³²Stricklin, "An Interpretive History of the Christian Life Commission," 123.

³³Ibid., 157-158.

These two significant victories helped Dunn and the CLC achieve much credibility among Texas politicians in Austin and much respect from Texas Baptists.³⁴

The two political campaigns to defeat legalized gambling illustrate a shift in philosophy concerning the function of the Texas CLC. Under the leadership of the first two directors, A. C. Miller and Foy Valentine, the purpose of the CLC was limited almost exclusively to education advocacy. Miller and Valentine understood that their primary purpose was to educate Texas Baptists to have “an awareness of Christian responsibility concerning social issues.” Their CLC was definitely not “action oriented.” While the educational function of the CLC remained at the center of its work, James Dunn added a new dimension to its methodology. He believed that social change could also be effected through political action.³⁵ Although it was Jimmy Allen who initiated the formal involvement of the CLC in politics, Dunn involved the CLC much more deeply in the political process. Between 1968 and 1980 Dunn’s CLC lobbied the state legislature to increase welfare ceilings, allow abortions in some circumstances, protect consumers against advertising frauds and harassment from credit collectors, upgrade conditions among Mexican-American farm workers and improve conditions in Texas prisons. Under Dunn, the CLC began to regularly offer informed testimony before state legislative committees. Soon, many Texas legislators began to seek out the CLC as a knowledgeable source on public issues.³⁶

³⁴“Oral Memoirs of James Milton Dunn,” 67.

³⁵Stricklin, “An Interpretive History of the Christian Life Commission,” 124-125.

³⁶Storey, *Texas Baptist Leadership*, 168-169.

In addition to expanding the lobbying activities of the CLC, Dunn increased efforts to educate and inform fellow Texas Baptists on political matters. In 1970, the CLC began printing the *CLC Legislative Report* and in 1976 Dunn organized LIGHT (Legislative Information Group Helping Texas) which was composed, ideally at least, of one person from every congregation in the state. Dunn also formed SALT (Special Advisors on Legislation in Texas) which was a network of Texas Baptists whose primary task was to contact local legislators about current political concerns.³⁷

To allay criticism of such political activism, Dunn never presumed to be the official spokesman of locally autonomous Baptist congregations. When testifying before legislative committees in Austin or Washington D.C., Dunn always pointed out that he spoke only for himself and the Christian Life Commission, not the entire Baptist General Convention of Texas.³⁸ In revealing fashion, Dunn summed up the CLC's "speaking to but not for" philosophy: "No one Baptist speaks for another. The very distinctive that makes us Baptist is called 'freedom of conscience,' 'soul freedom,' 'voluntarism' or 'the priesthood of the believer.'" Each of these expressions suggests that as individuals we stand free and therefore responsible before God for our own beliefs. Dunn argued that since each individual professing Christian had "given account of himself before God," they are bound to speak to one another in brotherly love. In the 1971 report of the Christian Life Commission, Dunn declared:

No one group can be the conscience of Texas Baptists. But because we care, we may stir the consciences of those who share a common calling in Jesus Christ. No one report can bring conviction concerning moral imperatives in a confused and confusing social order. Yet, God's Holy Spirit can and does work through weak

³⁷Ibid., 169-171.

³⁸Ibid.

instruments to speak a prophetic word, to challenge injustice, to call for advance and to apply a biblical faith to all areas of life.”³⁹

Dunn’s pivotal belief that “No one Baptist speaks for another” and that as the director of the Texas CLC he could “speak to but not for” Baptists was rooted in his belief in soul freedom.

Family Planning

Each year in the CLC's report to the Baptist General Convention of Texas, Dunn addressed issues pertaining to family life. The desperate need for family planning and sex education were two constant themes in these reports. In the 1968 report, Dunn issued a clarion call upon Baptists "who respect the dignity of man and acknowledge his freedom of choice candidly to endorse the right and responsibility of family planning." Dunn argued that comprehensive "family life education" must be available to all citizens, particularly to the poor and uneducated. Continuing, Dunn declared: "An affirmative public policy regarding birth control information is required in order that the right of free choice in the private life of husband and wife has basis in fact rather than being an empty slogan. We see any system, religious or political, that supports a mandatory, state imposed ignorance of modern medical advances as dictatorial and inhumane.”⁴⁰ Again, Dunn’s position of “free choice” on the subject of birth control was rooted in his view of soul freedom, that each person was capable of making decisions in light of a personal and direct relationship to God.

³⁹James M. Dunn, “Christian Life Commission Report,” *Annual of the Baptist General Convention of Texas* (Dallas, TX: BGCT Press, 1971), 93-95.

⁴⁰James M. Dunn, “Christian Life Commission Report,” *Annual of the Baptist General Convention of Texas* (Dallas, TX: BGCT Press, 1968), 105.

Dunn promoted responsible family planning and sex education through both education advocacy and direct action. In 1969, Dunn called on Texas Baptists to lend their support to the passage of a United States Senate bill designed to expand and improve the family planning services of the Federal Government.⁴¹ The following year, Dunn successfully lobbied the Sunday School Board and Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention to develop sex education materials for use in local churches.⁴² Dunn's Christian Life Commission also distributed free sex education literature to over 4,000 Texas Baptist pastors in 1971. Believing strongly that every child has the right to be wanted and loved, Dunn continued to champion responsible, "planned parenthood" throughout the rest of his professional career.⁴³

Abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment

During Dunn's tenure at the Christian Life Commission two of the most controversial issues among Texas Baptists were the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion. The Equal Rights Amendment was a proposed amendment to the United States Constitution intended to guarantee equal rights under the law for Americans regardless of gender. Opponents of the ERA argued that its passage would have had far-reaching implications, obliterating traditional distinctions between the sexes.⁴⁴

⁴¹James Dunn, "Christian Life Commission Report," *Annual of the Baptist General Convention of Texas* (Dallas, TX: BGCT Press, 1969), 89. See also "Dunn testifies before Senate subcommittee," *Baptist Standard*, December 17, 1969.

⁴²"Dunn letter endorses sex education series," *Baptist Standard*, May 13, 1970.

⁴³Stricklin, "An Interpretive History of the Christian Life Commission," 132. See also James Dunn, "Christian Life Commission Report," *Annual of the Baptist General Convention of Texas* (Dallas, TX: BGCT Press, 1979), 29.

⁴⁴Sarah A. Soule, "The Stages of the Policy Process and the Equal Rights Amendment, 1972-1982," *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 6 (May 2006): 1871-1873. The proposed ERA simply declared, "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any

In 1974 a group of pastors opposed to the ERA helped push through a resolution at the annual meeting of the BGCT asking the state convention to review ratification of the ERA. Instead of taking a position on the ERA, Dunn instructed his staffers to produce a pro and con "white paper" on the topic to be made available to Texas Baptists.⁴⁵ However, some Texas Baptists pointed to the following statement made by James Dunn after the 1974 meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention as the "unofficial" position of the Christian Life Commission: "I don't think we can know for some years, perhaps, the great harm that was done in the rejection of the Christian Life Commission's (SBC) push for greater recognition of women. The mood of the convention is so anti-feminist, anti-woman. We will lose (them) from the denomination, and they're the very kind of people we desperately need to keep."⁴⁶

Prior to *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark 1973 United States Supreme Court decision which struck down a Texas law prohibiting abortion, Dunn's CLC had urged a reformation in abortion legislation. In Dunn's 1969 annual report to the state convention, he advocated that the state's abortion law undergo "meaningful reform" to allow doctors to play a greater role in determining the need for abortion and that the victims of rape or incest be protected and that fetal deformity be considered.⁴⁷

state on account of sex." Opponents to the ERA asserted that it would require women to register for the military draft just as men do and would require women to serve in combat alongside men. Opponents also argued that the ERA would make abortion funding a constitutional right.

⁴⁵Stricklin, "An Interpretive History of the Christian Life Commission," 260-261.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷James Dunn, "Christian Life Commission Report," *Annual of the Baptist General Convention of Texas* (Dallas, TX: BGCT Press, 1969), 89. See also James Dunn, "Christian Life Commission Report," *Annual of the Baptist General Convention of Texas* (Dallas, TX: BGCT Press, 1970), 94.

After 1973, Dunn called on Texas Baptists to support the passage of an abortion law which would demand counseling, require consent, and set a time limit. On both the ERA and abortion, Dunn felt that the Christian Life Commission should serve as a dispenser of information to equip and encourage individuals to make their own decisions instead of taking a definitive position on either issue.⁴⁸ As with his actions in the area of family planning and gambling, Dunn's approach to "applied Christianity" was rooted in his belief that each Christian had soul liberty and the right to an unfettered conscience before God. Without a doubt, Dunn's comments and efforts on the issues of the ERA and abortion raised the eyebrows of many Texas Baptists. His personal position on abortion or lack thereof would be the subject of much controversy less than a decade later when he was the Executive Director of the Baptist Joint Committee.

Race Relations

As with the previous directors of the Texas CLC, race relations was one of the most important topics that Dunn addressed during his tenure. While applauding progress made in race relations, Dunn pressed Texas Baptist pastors to end the unbiblical practice of making race a factor in church membership. Dunn encouraged pastors to reach out to local black churches by inviting their participation in all Texas Baptist programs at both the state and associational levels.⁴⁹ Dunn was a strong proponent of interracial Baptist fellowship. He concluded his 1976 report to the BGCT with a charge to Texas Baptists:

We rejoice in the progress made in our churches and in our own hearts. The road of reconciliation has been rough and long, and we are not there yet. Texas

⁴⁸Stricklin, "An Interpretive History of the Christian Life Commission," 262.

⁴⁹James M. Dunn, "Christian Life Commission Report," *Annual of the Baptist General Convention of Texas* (Dallas, TX: BGCT Press, 1968), 105.

Baptists must continue giving moral leadership in finding the solution to this moral problem. As Texas Baptists share "Good News" with Texans, may God truly grant to us a wholeness of revival in our day. As our spiritual health improves, God will give us a new power to witness to a lost world full of racial conflict the victorious message of Jesus Christ.⁵⁰

Christian Citizenship

Christian citizenship was one particular issue that Dunn regularly addressed as director of the Texas Christian Life Commission. He firmly believed that the Bible calls every Christian to responsible citizenship.⁵¹ Dunn did not make the mistake of equating “the separation of church and state” with the separation of religion from politics. In a pluralistic democracy, he fully understood that religion and politics will mix, must mix, and should mix though without merging church and state. He believed that Christian principles needed to be applied to the affairs of government, as is true of every other area of life.⁵² Thus, Dunn advocated that Christians be engaged in public policy debates. He was in agreement with his role model and former teacher T. B. Maston who often insisted that “one of the chief threats to political democracy is the poor citizenship of good people.” According to Dunn, Christian citizenship required that individuals actively participate in the political process from the local level to the national arena. Christians should be encouraged to fulfill their Christian vocational calling in the political realm.⁵³

⁵⁰James M. Dunn, “Christian Life Commission Report,” *Annual of the Baptist General Convention of Texas* (Dallas, TX: BGCT Press, 1976), 71.

⁵¹James M. Dunn, “Christian Life Commission Report,” *Annual of the Baptist General Convention of Texas* (Dallas, TX: BGCT Press, 1970), 95.

⁵²James M. Dunn, “The Christian and the State: A Constructive Task,” in *Perspectives in Applied Christianity: Essays in Honor of Thomas Buford Maston*, ed. William M. Tillman Jr. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 22-27.

⁵³*Ibid.*

Dunn asserted that every Christian should be a lobbyist. Accordingly, “biblical theology clearly calls Christians to political action, to attempts to influence legislation, to lobbying.” Democracy depends upon the participation of citizens. Without active involvement by the people the dream of democracy can never come true. Thus, in Dunn’s view “in a sense, no one can be a good Christian in a democracy without being a good lobbyist...to stay out of politics is a cheap cop out.”⁵⁴ He explained that Christians in politics must work humbly and easily in partnership with “persons of good will whatever their background.” As the salt and light to the world, Christians should form partnerships with diverse coalitions to bring about social change.⁵⁵ When supporting honest public officials and working for good legislation Christian citizens must demonstrate a loving concern for others. Citing Micah 6:8, Dunn reminded his fellow Christians that God requires that they do justly and love mercy.⁵⁶

In 1970, Dunn edited a book entitled *Politics: A Guidebook for Christians*, which contained chapters on “How to Get into Politics,” “How to Get the Church into Politics,” “How a Pastor Relates to Politics,” and “How to Preach on Political Issues.” Dunn’s chapter on “How to Get the Church into Politics” stressed that the church can respond to moral issues at the local and national levels unlike any other institution in society. Dunn offered specific ways in which the local church can get involved in the political

⁵⁴James M. Dunn, “Lobbying isn’t a dirty word.” *Eternity*, July 1975, 13-14.

⁵⁵Ibid, 29-30. Building on the good name which his predecessor Jimmy Allen had earned for the CLC, Dunn sought to open new doors of cooperation and to work in liaison with other groups. Since no organization could specialize on every issue, it was better to work together. Each organization could “quarterback” the issues in which it was most interested. Thus, Dunn eliminated duplicate effort and multiplied the influence of the CLC.

⁵⁶Ibid.

process.⁵⁷ He recommended that churches form groups to study problems facing society, take field trips to jails and impoverished neighborhoods and distribute printed materials prepared by reliable denominational or secular agencies that deal with pressing social concerns. However, Dunn believed that voter registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns among the church's members were two of the best ways a church could begin an active citizenship program.⁵⁸

Early in his tenure at the CLC, Dunn addressed the controversial subject of churches and taxation. Historically, churches in Texas had received tax exemptions. In the 1960s increased attention was given across the nation to churches who use their tax exempt status to buy and operate unrelated business enterprises. Church ownership of department stores, apartments, and television stations were scrutinized by members of the general public. In Dunn's view, the acceptance of gifts and loans from the government weakened the wall of separation between church and state and hence was a threat to religious liberty. Dunn believed that church taxation would result in an excessive government entanglement with religion. Consequently, the government could use the power to control the property and to silence the prophetic voice of religion.⁵⁹ On behalf of the CLC, Dunn recommended in 1969 continued support for tax exemption of church property that was used as a house of worship. Thus, revenue producing property owned

⁵⁷James M. Dunn, "How To Get The Church Into Politics." In *Politics: A Guidebook for Christians*, ed. James M. Dunn (Dallas, TX: The Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, 1970), 48.

⁵⁸Ibid., 50-59.

⁵⁹Stricklin, "An Interpretive History of the Christian Life Commission," 238.

by churches, benevolent institutions, seminaries, colleges, and other denominational agencies should not receive tax exempt status.⁶⁰

While opposing the taxation of church property, Dunn recommended that Texas Baptist congregations voluntarily make a contribution for governmental services such as police and fire protection in lieu of taxes. However, the Executive Board of the BGCT vetoed Dunn's recommendation so that it was never presented before Texas Baptists at their annual meeting.⁶¹ The Christian Life Commission also opposed Tuition Equalization Grants under Dunn's watch. Describing the tuition grants as absolutely unconstitutional, Dunn declared that the Texas Baptist proponents of such grants compromised the "clarity of our witness for separation of church and state...how can you expect us to be true to separation of church and state when our institutions are allowing tuition equalization grants to go to their students?"⁶²

The following year, Dunn led the Texas CLC to strongly oppose any public monies being used to fund parochial schools. Battles over parochial aid were common in the Texas legislature. In response to well-funded organized attempts by Catholic lobbyists to secure state aid for Catholic schools, Dunn helped to establish the Citizen's Association for Public Schools to counter these efforts in the Austin Capitol.⁶³ Dunn argued that parochial aid would violate each citizen's right to the "free exercise of religion" by compelling him to support religious institutions not of his choosing.

⁶⁰James Dunn, "Christian Life Commission Report," *Annual of the Baptist General Convention of Texas* (Dallas, TX: BGCT Press, 1969), 90.

⁶¹"CLC Calls for Church to Pay for Services," *Baptist Standard*, November 5, 1969.

⁶²"Oral Memoirs of James Milton Dunn," 37.

⁶³Stricklin, "An Interpretive History of the Christian Life Commission ," 235.

Parochial aid would also violate the Texas Constitution, which prohibits direct or indirect tax aid to churches, according to Dunn. In response to a court ruling upholding a parochial aid plan in 1971, Dunn adamantly asserted that, “The state does not have the right to take tax dollars from the general public and channel them, however clearly into a private school system that fosters a specific religious viewpoint.”⁶⁴

While urging Texas Baptists to stand up for religious liberty and the rights of the individual conscience, Dunn repeatedly warned his fellow Baptists of the danger of compromising their “own witness by acceptance of public funds for Baptist institutions.”⁶⁵ Dunn exhorted,

If Baptists should turn away from their distinctive doctrine of church-state separation, they would raise doubts about every position they take on matters of public concern. They would sacrifice their platform for any prophetic word to society. They would be finally joined in unholy wedlock to the culture to which they should be speaking. We Baptists had better stick by our guns on separation of church and state or face defeat at the “credibility gap.”⁶⁶

Two years after tackling church taxation, Dunn led the CLC to oppose an effort by members of Congress to pass the "Nondenominational Prayer Amendment" which was just one of many efforts to authorize government-approved, government-financed prayer. Declaring that such an amendment would infringe upon the rights of the individual conscience, Dunn urged Southern Baptists to demand that their Congressman vote against "tampering with the First Amendment."⁶⁷ According to Dunn, "no government has the right to determine either the place or the content of prayer. To

⁶⁴Stan Hasteley, “Court Ruling Upholds Ohio Parochial Aid Plan,” *Baptist Standard*, July 6, 1977.

⁶⁵James M. Dunn, “Christian Life Commission Report,” *Annual of the Baptist General Convention of Texas* (Dallas, TX: BGCT Press, 1971), 30.

⁶⁶James M. Dunn, “Defeat at the Credibility Gap?,” *Baptist Standard*, August 25, 1971.

⁶⁷Stricklin, “An Interpretive History of the Christian Life Commission,” 232-236.

authorize government to intervene in the sacred privilege of prayer makes government a judge of theology and an administrator of religious practice." Such statements reaffirm Dunn's deeply held belief that "God alone is Lord of the conscience."⁶⁸

In contrast to his later career when he was at the helm of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, while still in Texas Dunn rarely explicitly emphasized the importance of soul freedom and the value of the individual conscience before God. According to Dunn, this cornerstone Baptist distinctive was generally accepted in Texas Baptist life. During an interview, Dunn explicated that Texas Baptists in the 1960s and 1970s "did not question 'soul freedom' as basic." He noted that the Christian Life Commission spent its time "looking out to the external (social and ethical) issues" rather than focusing on the "internal" or theological issues.⁶⁹ When he was still the director of the Christian Life Commission, Dunn declared that "there is no way that we can take on any theological or biblical battles, because we've got more than our hands full just dealing with social and ethical issues and we've worked on social and ethical issues on practical and applied Christianity."⁷⁰ Dunn added that he "smothered" theological questions because they were not "germane" to the work of the Christian Life Commission. When he became the leader of the BJC, however, Dunn had to change his approach. Fundamentalist theological concerns, he believed, attacked soul freedom, the very heart of religious liberty. Theology, whether Dunn liked it or not, would no longer be a "side battle." Because of what moderates like Dunn dubbed as the "fundamentalist takeover" of

⁶⁸James M. Dunn, "Christian Life Commission Report," *Annual of the Baptist General Convention of Texas* (Dallas, TX: BGCT Press, 1971), 30.

⁶⁹James M. Dunn, telephone conversation with author, January 21, 2008.

⁷⁰"Oral Memoirs of James Milton Dunn," 34-36.

the Southern Baptist Convention, he would be forced to change his personal philosophy of staying out of theological battles in order to defend religious liberty and Baptist principles while on Capitol Hill.⁷¹

Conclusion

In 1981, at the age of forty-eight, Dunn left the Texas Christian Life Commission to head the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs in Washington, D. C. Founded in 1939, the BJC represented eight Baptist groups, comprised of over twenty-eight million members on Capitol Hill, in matters relating to church and state. As only the fourth director of the BJC, Dunn was following in the footsteps of his former mentor and the subject of his dissertation, J. M. Dawson, who served as the very first director of the agency from 1946-1953. Dunn would hold this prestigious position until his “retirement” in late 1999.

Because of Dunn’s work in the arena of “social Christianity,” the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention presented him with the Distinguished Service Award in 1979 for his “unique and outstanding contribution in applied Christianity.” Southern Baptist ethicist Foy Valentine, the head of the Christian Life Commission of the SBC, described Dunn as a “tireless practitioner of Christian ethics; a courageous champion of applied Christianity; a faithful exemplar of a Christian lifestyle; and a consistent follower of the prophetic calling.”⁷² Upon his departure from the Texas CLC, Toby Druin, a reporter for the *Baptist Standard*, remarked that Dunn’s twelve-year tenure as director helped concentrate the attention of Texas Baptists – some grudgingly in

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²“Dunn is given Commission Award,” *Baptist Standard*, September 19, 1979.

some areas – on better relationships with African-Americans and Hispanics, lessening drug and alcohol abuse, fighting liberalized gambling laws, improving family life, world hunger relief and dozens of other ethical and moral issues.⁷³

According to Druin, the CLC’s style under Dunn was characterized by a commitment to applied Christianity which emphasized “the common denominator of Christian compassion that runs through all attempts to apply the gospel to everyday life.” While proud of the CLC’s accomplishments during his directorship, Dunn acknowledged that arriving at that “common denominator” had gotten him into trouble with some groups. During an interview with Druin, Dunn explained,

In some areas – gambling, liquor, pornography – this agency has been hardline conservative. In others – concerns for victims of a rotten welfare system and for bilingual education—we have been wild-eyed liberals. And on others we may have seemed to vacillate. But from our standing point we have tried to critically evaluate each issue in light of its impact on persons. It often has been a lonely walk. Friends on one issue are enemies on the next and often you get caught in the middle you have to reject extremes in both direction and get shot at by both sides. But you have to keep on and try to do your best. You could be wrong but you can’t be quiet. You can’t just shut up and let the other forces that would hurt people have their way.⁷⁴

Between the years 1968 and 1980, Dunn had transformed from a mild mannered former Baptist Student Union minister low on confidence to a nationally known Baptist leader with a reputation for his aggressive but effective style in the public square. Dunn would later employ this same aggressive and determined style against his opponents who sought to defund the participation of Southern Baptists in the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

⁷³Toby Druin, “Dunn – Off to Washington,” December 31, 1980, 5.

⁷⁴Ibid.

Dunn's belief that soul freedom is the cornerstone that precedes and demands religious liberty and the separation of church and state for all persons was the implied foundation for his approach to applied Christianity. Dunn would continue to work tirelessly in the field of social Christianity for the rest of his public career. However, for his nearly twenty-year tenure at the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, Dunn would only officially advocate on behalf of religious liberty. Theological battles being waged in the Southern Baptist Convention would bring the doctrine of soul freedom to the forefront of Baptist life. With his aggressive and often confrontational style, Dunn would use the rhetoric of soul freedom and freedom of conscience to preserve religious liberty and defend the separation of church and state.

CHAPTER TWO

The Baptist Heritage and James Dunn's Understanding of Soul Freedom

From their earliest origins, Baptists have proclaimed that religious liberty and an emphasis on the individual conscience were vital and indispensable to their identity. This chapter will examine both the theological and theoretical foundations of James Dunn's thought. His vision of religious liberty and separation of church and state was especially rooted in the doctrine of soul freedom. An overview of the idea of "soul freedom" and its role in twentieth century Baptist thought will be followed by an exposition of Dunn's perspective. The form of voluntarism advocated by Dunn has not been without its critics. Their criticisms will be discussed as well. Further, this chapter will focus on Dunn's emphasis on soul freedom and religious liberty as the basis of a genuine Baptist identity and their foundational and fundamental roles throughout four hundred years of the Baptist heritage. A critical analysis of Dunn's interpretation of Baptist history is necessary to help understand his insistence that "real Baptists" must demand that church and state remain separate.

A Brief Overview of Baptists and Soul Freedom

From Apostolic Succession to the Priesthood of All Believers

In its earliest centuries, the Christian Church developed a hierarchical form of church leadership. Leadership became rooted in the concept of apostolic succession—Jesus passed down his teachings to his twelve apostles who passed the truth to their successors who passed it on to their successors and so on. These leaders (bishops) were

considered the arbiters of church discipline and defenders of church orthodoxy against heresy. As Christianity flourished, this focus upon bishops who could trace their pedigree back to an apostle essentially resulted in the elevation of clergy over laity. Clergy became the approved way for people to communicate with God. Looking back from a Protestant perspective, the church mistakenly insisted that the people had access to God only through the special priesthood.¹

In the early sixteenth century, Martin Luther, a devout Roman Catholic monk, said that three Roman walls had to come tumbling down: the elevation of the clergy over the laity, the assertion that only the Pope was competent to interpret Scripture, and the claim that only the Pope could convene a church council. Luther attacked these church traditions and argued that the Bible taught that all Christian believers, not merely the clergy, were free to be priests before God as well as responsible to be priests for God. According to Luther, "Christ has made it possible for us to be his fellow priests."² Consequently, Luther asserted that all individuals should be able to read the Bible on their own. Each person should be able to pray to God directly without an earthly mediator. This New Testament doctrine (1 Pet 2:5,9; Rev 1:5-6; 5:9-10; 20:6), firmly rooted in the Old Testament (Ex 19:4-6), came to be known as the "priesthood of all believers." Rediscovered by Luther and fundamental to the foundation of the Protestant Reformation, the priesthood of believers and the acknowledgement of individual

¹Martin Luther, "An Appeal to the Ruling Class of German Nobility," in *Readings in Christian Thought*, ed. Hugh Kerr (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 142-145. See also Leonore Siegele-Wensckewitz, "Priesthood of All Believers," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 350-351. Walter B. Shurden, "Priesthood of All Believers," in *Dictionary of Baptists in America*, ed. Bill J. Leonard (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 225-226. Carolyn D. Blevins, *The Priesthood of All Believers* (Brentwood, TN: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2001).

²Luther, "An Appeal to the Ruling Class of German Nobility," 142-145.

conscience became key components in the development of subsequent reformation events.³

Baptist Origins: Smyth and Helwys

In the early seventeenth century, Baptists emerged out of the Puritan-Separatist movement in the Church of England. The earliest Baptist leaders, John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, agreed with the Reformation emphasis upon the priesthood of believers and the right to individual freedom of conscience.

After leading a group of believers in England to migrate to Holland to avoid religious persecution, Smyth and Helwys founded the first Baptist church around 1608/1609. The church was constituted upon believer's baptism; infant baptism was rejected as unbiblical since the infant was not free to profess faith. In *Differences of the Churches of the Separation*, Smyth, when arguing for a genuine "believer's church," said that the church is a "kingly priesthood" and that the saints (i.e. professing Christians) are "kings and priests."⁴ Two years after Smyth's death, his followers produced a confession authored by Smyth which contained a strong affirmation of religious liberty (the first by a person of English descent). Advocating against a union of church and state that he had experienced in the Church of England, Smyth contended that magistrates should handle civil affairs only and "leave the Christian religion free, to every man his conscience."⁵

³Ibid.

⁴John Smyth, *Differences of the Churches of the Separation*, in H. Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1990), 15.

⁵Ibid.

Thomas Helwys' *Mistery of Iniquity* (1612) is best known as the first treatise in England which called for complete religious liberty. In this groundbreaking document, Helwys challenged the role of the state in the affairs of the church. Helwys lambasted the Anglican Church for requiring conformity in worship and biblical interpretation. Helwys held that believers must be free to read and understand the Bible for themselves. While acknowledging the divine right of civil government (according to Romans 13), Helwys boldly wrote, "The King is a mortal man and not God, therefore no power over the immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances for them, and to set spiritual lords over them." According to Helwys, every person regardless of religion must be free to follow God according to the dictates of his or her conscience. In radical terms for his day, Helwys contended:

For men's religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it. Neither may the king be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Jews, Turks or whatever, it pertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.⁶

Ultimately, according to Helwys, individuals ("men's") must be free to form their own beliefs "seeing they only must stand before the judgment seat of God to answer for themselves." This early Baptist focus on conscience was not simply a rabid individualism, but was integral to genuine faith and was foundational to what it meant to be an authentic believer's church: believers who voluntarily gathered together in a covenant relationship, which preserved the notion that the right to dissent was consistent with faithfulness to God who alone was Lord of the conscience.⁷

⁶Thomas Helwys, *The Mistery of Iniquity*, in McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, 72-75.

⁷Ibid. See also Blevins, *The Priesthood of All Believers*.

Roger Williams

Like Smyth and Helwys in England, Baptists across the Atlantic Ocean in America were advocates for the rights of the individual conscience and complete religious liberty. Baptists in seventeenth century America were few and generally located in New England. Militant Puritans in the leading colony of Massachusetts successfully established the Congregational Church as the official state-sponsored religion of most of New England. The union of church and state by the Puritans demanded religious conformity from its citizens. This atmosphere of coercion inevitably led to the persecution of Baptists and other dissenters.⁸

While historical records do not indicate who the first Baptist in America was, they do show that the first organized Baptist church was formed at Providence in early 1639 by Roger Williams (1603-1683) and some other believers.⁹ Williams, after an intensive examination of the New Testament, concluded that the Church of England was a false church from which the Puritans in New England should separate. He lashed out at the Puritan establishment for stealing the Indians' land and for having the civil magistrates attempt to enforce the first tablet (i.e., relationship to God) of the Ten Commandments.¹⁰

After several clashes with the government, Williams was formally banished from Massachusetts in 1636. Before the authorities could detain him, Williams fled and established the settlement of Providence in that same year. From its inception, the new colony provided for democracy, liberty of conscience, religious freedom and the

⁸Leon H. McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishing, 1987), 123-124.

⁹Ibid., 127-129.

¹⁰Leonard, "Dictionary of Baptists in America," 289-290.

separation of church and state. The work of Williams, along with Baptist John Clarke, can be seen in the charter of 1663 which provided that:

No person within said colony, at any time hereafter shall be in any wise molested, punished, disquieted [*sic*], or called in question for any differences in opinion in matters of religion, and do not actually disturb the civil peace of said colony; but that all and any persons may, from time to time, and at all times hereafter freely and fully have and enjoy his and their own judgments and consciences in matters of religious concernment.¹¹

Williams remained a Baptist for only a few months, and became a “seeker” sometime around 1640. Still, he retained many Baptist convictions until his death. The novel notion of religious liberty for all became Williams’s trademark. Almost all of his writings dealt with the radical notion that a person must be free to worship according to the dictates of his or her conscience. Williams believed that personal heart-centered religious experience must be completely voluntary to be genuine. Coercive faith was an oxymoron. Williams explicitly affirmed: “That Christ is King alone over conscience is the sum of all true preaching.”¹²

In 1644, Williams published what is now his most famous work, *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience* and declared that “an enforced uniformity of religion throughout a nation or civil state, confounds the civil and religious, denies the principles of Christianity and civility, and that Jesus has come into the flesh.” According to Williams, the only way to have conformity of belief was to commit “spiritual rape”

¹¹McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 130-136. Roger Williams successfully secured the first charter for "Rhode Island" from the British parliament in 1644. The colonial charter of 1644 incorporated the settlements of Providence, Newport, Portsmouth, and Warwick as "The Providence Plantations in Narragansett Bay."

¹²Ibid. See also Charles Dewesee, *Doing Freedom Baptist Style: Liberty of Conscience* (Brentwood, TN: Baptist History & Heritage Society, 2001). Williams left organized religion because he came to believe that no church was pure. He became a “seeker.”

against the conscience.¹³ He declared, “it is the will and command of God that (since the coming of his Son the Lord Jesus) a permission of the most paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or antichristian consciences and worships, be granted to all men in all nations and countries.” A “hedge or wall of Separation between the Garden of the Church and the Wilderness of the World” was needed to preserve the purity of the church and the freedom and integrity of the individual conscience.¹⁴ Williams argued that the only appropriate sword in matters of faith was the sword of the Spirit and its methods of persuasion and love. He lamented that “the sword may make a whole nation hypocrites, but it cannot bring one single soul in genuine conversion to Christ.”¹⁵

John Clarke

John Clarke (1609-1676), founder of the second Baptist church in America located in Newport, Rhode Island, was another intrepid advocate of the unfettered conscience. Building on the work of Roger Williams, Clarke helped secure religious liberty for Rhode Island in 1663, establishing the colony as the first purely “secular state” in the modern era.¹⁶ Clarke’s views were unmistakable in the colony’s charter which

¹³Doug Weaver, “The Spirituality of Roger Williams,” *Baptist Studies Bulletin*, July 2007.

¹⁴Roger Williams, “Mr. Cotton’s Letter Lately Printed, Examined and Answered,” in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams* 1 (1644), 108.

¹⁵William M. Tillman Jr., “Religious Liberty,” in *Has our Theology Changed? Southern Baptist Thought Since 1845*, ed. Paul Basden (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 310. See also Bill J. Leonard, *Baptists in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 158-159. Edwin Gaustad, *The Religious History of America: The Heart of the American Story from Colonial Times to Today* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2002), 65-73.

¹⁶Tillman, “Religious Liberty,” 312. See also Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2003), 76.

expressed that “all and every person...freely and fully have and enjoy his own judgments and conscience in matters of religious concernments.”¹⁷

In 1652, Clarke published a courageous defense of religious liberty appropriately entitled *Ill Newes from New-England*. *Ill Newes* detailed incidents of religious persecution in New England by the Puritans. Clarke himself was no stranger to persecution. He had been arrested in 1651 with his assistant pastor Obadiah Holmes for leading a worship service in Lynn, Massachusetts. However, Holmes refused to post bail and was publicly flogged thirty times across the back. Ultimately, Clarke’s *Ill Newes* was successful in securing British sympathy for the Rhode Island colonists.¹⁸ Unlike Williams, Clarke never left the Baptist fold. His views of religious liberty remained persuasive among many colonial Baptists.

Isaac Backus

Isaac Backus of Massachusetts (1724-1806) was another courageous advocate of religious liberty during an era when Baptists were quickly becoming the largest denomination in America.¹⁹ In the books he published as a historian of early Baptist life, Backus helped rediscover and popularize Roger Williams and viewed himself as a part of the Williams legacy. Backus applied many of the pioneer arguments of Williams to the freedom struggle in the late eighteenth century. He described the Revolutionary War as a

¹⁷Leonard, *Baptists in America*, 159.

¹⁸Gaustad, *The Religious History of America*, 68-69. See also McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 139-141.

¹⁹McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 200. The eighteenth century proved a turning point for Baptists in America. In 1700 they could count only 24 churches with 839 members. By the end of the century, Baptists had become the largest denomination in America. By 1790 they numbered 989 churches with 67,940 members.

fight on two fronts, against the British troops for civil liberty and against the American establishment for religious liberty. Backus employed the popular revolutionary language of “no taxation without representation” to tie the quest for religious liberty to the cause of political liberty. He bemoaned,

Many who are filling the nation with the cry of LIBERTY...are at the same time themselves violating that dearest of all rights, LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE.” They denounce “being taxed without their consent...(but) force large sums from (their neighbors) to uphold a worship which they conscientiously dissent from.”²⁰

During the Revolutionary War, Backus continued to fight Massachusetts’ authorities over tax support for the majority religion (Congregationalists). He repeated the calls for the freedom of the individual conscience: “As religion must always be a matter between God and individuals, so no man can be made a member of a truly religious society by force or without his own consent.” Like Roger Williams, Backus believed that Jesus’ parable of wheat and tares (Matt, 13:24-30) indicated that the wheat and tares grow together in the world—but the church is to be pure. Thus, there should be no union between church and state.²¹

Historians offer different interpretations of the radical nature of Backus’ views on religious liberty. Using contemporary church-state language, some scholars refer to Backus as an “accommodationist” rather than a “separationist.” Battling coercive established religion rather than urging a completely neutral separation between church and state seemed to be Backus’ chief interest. He did not object to the religious oaths

²⁰Leonard, *Dictionary of Baptists in America*, 36-37. See also McBeth, 259-262.

²¹McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 260-262.

required of elected officials nor did he object to “blue laws.”²² Because Christianity would provide the indispensable underpinnings of successful civil democracy, Backus desired a “sweet harmony” between church and state. His ideal was a Christian America which voluntarily obeyed the Bible as God’s chosen vessel to usher in the future end-time golden age. Nonetheless, Backus was clearly an ardent advocate of the sacredness of the individual conscience before God.²³

John Leland

Along with Isaac Backus, John Leland (1754-1841) was Baptists’ most impassioned proponent for religious liberty during the eighteenth century. These two men continued the Baptist plea for an unfettered conscience already seen in Thomas Helwys, Roger Williams, and John Clarke. While Backus was more willing to speak in terms freedom from government establishment and coercion in religion, Leland was a strict separationist in the mold of Roger Williams. Leland wrote in the context of the Enlightenment in colonial Virginia and thus echoed freely from the thought of James Madison and especially Thomas Jefferson. Leland’s focus on the individual conscience revealed his rationalism and pietistic revivalism. However, while clearly a Jeffersonian individualist, Leland was also a biblicist who like many Baptists sought to model certain

²²A blue law is a type of law designed to enforce moral standards, particularly the observance of Sunday as a day of worship or rest or prohibitions on the sale of alcohol.

²³Ibid. See also Leonard, *Baptists in America*, 160-161. Joe L. Coker, “Sweet Harmony vs. Strict Separation: Recognizing the Distinctions Between Isaac Backus and John Leland,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (1997): 241-250. See also William G. McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1967).

New Testament practices that related to the freedom of the individual relationship to God.²⁴

Leland's most influential treatise on religious liberty was *The Rights of Conscience Inalienable*, first published in 1791. In this treatise, Leland argued that the rights of conscience are inalienable, for "every man must give an account of himself to God, and therefore every man ought to be at liberty to serve God in a way that he can best reconcile to his conscience."²⁵ "Religion is a matter between God and individuals," concluded Leland, with "the religious opinions of men not being the objects of civil government, nor in any way under its control." He attacked the idea of religious establishments and instead argued for the sacredness of the unfettered individual conscience. Leland also echoed and thus affirmed the views of Thomas Jefferson (his 1786 *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom*):

Government has no more to do with the religious opinions of men, than it has with the principles of mathematics. Let every man speak freely without fear, maintain the principles that he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods; and let government protect him in doing so...it is error and error alone which needs support.²⁶

In assessing John Leland's role in securing religious liberty in America's formative years, J. M. Dawson concluded, "If the researchers of the world were to be asked who was most responsible for the American guaranty for religious liberty, their prompt reply would be 'James Madison.'" However, Dawson continued, "If James

²⁴McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 273-283. See also Leonard, *Baptists in America*, 160-161.

²⁵L.F. Greene, ed., *The Writings of John Leland* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 179.

²⁶Ibid, 184-185.

Madison might answer, he would as quickly reply, ‘John Leland and the Baptists.’”²⁷

With their support for the unfettered conscience, Baptists provided many of the ideas foundational to religious liberty and they contributed to the public agitation which led to the Bill of Rights.²⁸

Nineteenth Century Baptists: Francis Wayland and W. B. Johnson

The period between 1800 and 1900 has appropriately been dubbed by historians as the “Great Century” of advancement for Christianity.²⁹ Baptists similarly experienced radical growth. During this era, Francis Wayland and William B. Johnson were two of the strongest champions for the unfettered individual conscience among Baptists in America.³⁰

A Baptist minister and educator, Francis Wayland (1796-1865) is best known for his tenure as the fourth President of Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island from 1827 until 1855.³¹ In his book, *Notes on Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* (1857), Wayland evaluated what it meant to be a Baptist. He contended for a believer’s church, the priesthood of believers, and the independence of every local church. Like his Baptist forefathers, Wayland associated the importance of the individual conscience with the sole authority of Scripture. He borrowed the term “soul liberty” from Roger Williams

²⁷Joseph Martin Dawson, *Baptists and the American Republic* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1956), 117.

²⁸McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 282-283.

²⁹William L. Pitts, “Kenneth Scott Latourette,” *Baptist History & Heritage* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 52-71. Latourette developed the phrase “Great Century” to describe the nineteenth century expansion.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 285-287.

³¹Wayland’s administration at Brown has been referred to as the “golden age of the university.”

and used it to describe the “absolute separation of church and state” as the “peculiar glory” of Baptists. Describing the right of private biblical interpretation he wrote, “It is our essential belief that Scriptures are a revelation from God...given to every individual that he might understand them for himself, and the word that is given him will judge him at the great day.”³²

William B. Johnson who held views similar to Wayland was the most influential Southern Baptist during the mid-nineteenth century. Just a year after becoming the first President of the Southern Baptist Convention (1846) Johnson wrote *The Gospel Developed Through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ* in which he affirmed “fundamental principles” found in Baptist life. These “fundamental principles” included the “right of private interpretation” of Scripture. Like Wayland, Johnson was also anti-creedal.³³

Edgar Young Mullins and Twentieth Century Southern Baptists

Known as Mr. Baptist,³⁴ Edgar Young Mullins was the single most important shaper of Southern Baptists in the twentieth century.³⁵ Mullins’s colleague at Southern

³²Francis Wayland, *Notes on the Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* (1857; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1980), 4-14. See also Leonard, *Dictionary of Baptists in America*, 283-284.

³³Leonard, *Baptists in America*, 99-100. See McBeth, 389-391. Historians consider W. B. Johnson to be the major architect of the Southern Baptist Convention and its most important early spokesman. See also William B. Johnson, “Address to the Public,” in Robert A. Baker, *A Baptist Source Book* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966), 120. In the address, Johnson says, upon the formation of the SBC: “We have constructed for our basis no new creed; acting in this matter upon a Baptist aversion for all creeds but the Bible.” See Gregory A. Wills, “Baptists, the Bible, and Confessions,” *Southern Seminary Magazine* 68, no. 4 (November 2000). Wills notes that Johnson also opposed the use of confessions of faith.

³⁴Gaines S. Dobbins, “Men Who Have Made Seminary History,” *Quarterly Review* 18 (1958): 32.

³⁵Timothy D.F. Maddox, “E.Y. Mullins: Mr. Baptist for the 20th and 21st Century.” *Review and Expositor* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 32.

Baptist Theological Seminary, Harold W. Tribble, referred to him as “the greatest thinker produced by Southern Baptists.”³⁶ Praised by many as the “best known Baptist in the world,”³⁷ world-renowned Southern Baptist pastor G. W. Truett once assessed Mullins’s influence as “distinctive beyond that of any other Baptist in the world.”³⁸ Princeton Seminary’s J. Gresham Machen described Mullins as the “spokesman not merely for the Southern Baptist Church [*sic*] or for the Baptist churches of America, but also to a considerable extent for the Baptist churches throughout the world.”³⁹

After the formation of the Baptist World Alliance in 1905, Mullins set out to unite Baptists throughout the world with a sense of identity and mission.⁴⁰ He did this through the publication of *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith*, a book which observers contend has done more than any other single volume to define Baptist identity in the twentieth century.⁴¹ Translated into many languages, Southern Baptist theologian W.O. Carver stated that Mullins’s *Axioms of Religion* “became almost a character of Baptist orthodoxy...a touchstone by which Baptists around the world could recognize a similar heritage of faith—in no way a creed but a restatement (of historic

³⁶Harold W. Tribble, “Edgar Young Mullins,” *Review and Expositor*, 49 (April, 1952): 125.

³⁷W. O. Carver, “Edgar Young Mullins – Leader and Builder,” *Review and Expositor* 26 (April, 1929): 128.

³⁸Russell Dilday, “Mullins the Theologian: Between the Extremes,” *Review and Expositor* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 75.

³⁹J. Gresham Machen, quoted in Dilday, “Mullins the Theologian: Between the Extremes,” 76.

⁴⁰E. Glenn Hinson, “E.Y. Mullins as Interpreter of the Baptist Tradition,” *Review and Expositor* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 109.

⁴¹Fisher Humphreys, “Edgar Young Mullins,” in *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, ed. Timothy George and David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 187.

Baptist distinctives) in the language for the day.”⁴² To Mullins, the tag “Baptist” was not just another denominational brand name. Instead, “Baptist” stood for a set of distinctives—voluntarily affirmed and confessed, that Mullins cherished immensely.⁴³

Mullins argued that the most distinctive and important of all Baptist beliefs is the belief in “soul competency,” that is, in the freedom, ability, and responsibility of each person to respond to God for herself or himself.⁴⁴ He wrote: “The sufficient statement of the historical significance of the Baptists is this: the competency of the soul in religion.” This basic theological assumption serves as an underpinning to all other Baptist assumptions.⁴⁵ Mullins proposed “soul competency” as a centering point around which a broad and diverse group of Baptists could come together.⁴⁶

From this simple “mother principle” of Christian truth and cardinal doctrine of Baptists, Mullins derived six propositions which he argued were axiomatic to all who accept Christianity. The theological axiom is that “the holy and loving God has a right to be sovereign.”⁴⁷ The religious axiom is that “all souls have an equal right to direct access to God.”⁴⁸ This axiom asserts the inalienable right of every person to deal with God directly. No barriers can exist between God and a human being. According to Mullins, “It is a species of spiritual tyranny for men to interpose the church itself, its ordinances,

⁴²Carver, “Edgar Young Mullins – Leader and Builder,” 135.

⁴³Dilday, “Mullins the Theologian: Between the Extremes,” 75-76.

⁴⁴Humphreys, “Edgar Young Mullins,” 187.

⁴⁵E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Boston, MA: Judson Press, 1908), 53.

⁴⁶Maddox, “E. Y. Mullins: Mr. Baptist for the 20th and 21st Century,” 93.

⁴⁷Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, 73-74.

⁴⁸Ibid.

or ceremonies, or its formal creeds, between the human soul and Christ.”⁴⁹ Mullins referred to the church as a society in which believers voluntarily joined. Yet, the church was divinely initiated by the Holy Spirit and converted individuals were “impelled” to be a part of the church.⁵⁰ Because Christians, each competent before God, were part of the church, the ecclesiastical axiom states that “all believers have a right to equal privileges in the church.” Mullins strongly believed that democracy is the only form of church polity which is really true to this axiom. No other polity leaves the soul free. He posited that “because the individual deals directly with his Lord and is immediately responsible to Him, the spiritual society must needs be a democracy.”⁵¹ The moral axiom which is the basis of all ethics holds that “to be responsible the soul must be free.” The religio-civic axiom is “a free church in a free state.”⁵² Mullins understood that “soul competency” implies a separation between church and state. According to Mullins, “When Roger Williams founded the commonwealth of Rhode Island, a new era in man’s spiritual history began.” By rejecting mere toleration and embracing the separation of church and state, Baptists “made a real contribution to the world’s civilization.”⁵³ The social axiom, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” was Mullins’ sixth and final proposition. Since every human has worth and every individual is a social being, Christians are compelled to work for the welfare of all persons. According to Mullins,

⁴⁹Ibid., 92.

⁵⁰Mullins, quoted in C. Douglas Weaver, “The Baptist Ecclesiology of E. Y. Mullins: Individualism and the New Testament Church,” *Baptist History & Heritage* 43, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 21.

⁵¹Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, 129.

⁵²Ibid., 74-75.

⁵³Ibid., 186-187.

“The best service which Christianity can render to society is to produce righteousness in individual character and at the same time set the man free as an agent of righteousness in society at large.”⁵⁴

James Dunn and Soul Freedom

James Dunn’s Theology of Soul Freedom

Ideas such as soul liberty and soul competency that had been trumpeted frequently in Baptist history found a home in the thought and rhetoric of James Dunn. Dunn became the heir of Mullins and those before him who insisted that freedom of the individual conscience and the emphasis upon direct personal experience of God without reliance upon ecclesiastical leaders were at the heart of the best of the Baptist tradition. In fact, Dunn’s work for an unfettered conscience, religious liberty for all, and the separation of church and state was especially rooted in his understanding of soul freedom. While prominent early twentieth century Southern Baptists E. Y. Mullins and G. W. Truett referred to “soul competency,” James Dunn again used the earlier Baptist language of “soul freedom.” Dunn believed, like Mullins did, that soul freedom, the key distinctive of Baptists and their greatest contribution to understanding the Christian faith, was simply the freedom, ability, and responsibility of each person to respond to God for herself or himself. This freedom implied the ability to have a personal relationship to Jesus Christ and the capacity to deal directly with God without a human mediator such as a priest or bishop. This is a gift from God.⁵⁵ Throughout his career, Dunn has often

⁵⁴Ibid., 201-203.

⁵⁵James M. Dunn, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2000), 63-65.

described soul freedom as “the fire that burns in the innards of every true Baptist.” According to Dunn, since Thomas Helwys’ bold proclamation that “the king is not Lord of the conscience,” the hallmark of the people called Baptist is that “dogged determination to be free – free and faithful.”⁵⁶

For religious faith to be authentic, Dunn believed, it must be free and cannot be coerced.⁵⁷ Citing E. Y. Mullins, Dunn declared that to deny a person direct access to God “is nothing less than tyranny.” The influence of Mullins and *The Axioms of Religion* on Dunn’s thought is undeniable. Dunn has credited Mullins with investing energy and meaning into the phrase “soul competency” and placing it at the center of a “coherent cluster of beliefs that define Baptists.”⁵⁸ Like Mullins, Dunn also affirmed that the biblical revelation clearly pointed to the principle of soul freedom. He also agreed with Mullins that “the voluntary principle is at the heart of Christianity” and consequently “the right of private judgment in religion is a right that lies at the core of Christian truth.”⁵⁹ Building on Mullins’ cornerstone that religious experience was the beginning point of understanding divine revelation, Dunn asserted that soul freedom is axiomatic, a self-evident truth “that when seen needs no proof of its reality.”⁶⁰

Dunn believed that soul freedom was based on a biblical view of persons. In the creation account of Adam and Eve found in Genesis 1:26-27, God called the first humans

⁵⁶Ibid., 67-68.

⁵⁷James M. Dunn, “Separating church, state, good for both,” *Report from the Capital* 50, no. 11 (November 14, 1995): 2.

⁵⁸James M. Dunn, “Church, State, and Soul Competency,” *Review and Expositor* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 62.

⁵⁹Dunn, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry*, 64.

⁶⁰Ibid.

imago Dei which presupposed freedom.⁶¹ Regardless of how one reads the biblical description of creation, in Dunn's view, it clearly suggests that all humans are moral beings, capable of responding to God.⁶² According to Dunn, whatever else the classical doctrine of *imago Dei* means, it reveals that persons, made by God, can respond to their Creator. "The roots of freedom are deep within the intimate personhood of God. All true freedom is in a real sense religious freedom. It is that which replicates the Divine in all of us that makes us *response-able*, responsible and free."⁶³

God created and endowed all humankind, male and female, to be free moral agents. "We are wired up with a chooser and we live with the consequences of those decisions," according to Dunn.⁶⁴ Every freedom, every decision, every deliberate action has certain consequences and invokes some level of responsibility for the individual.⁶⁵ All freedom and responsibility are gifts of God. Although two sides of the same coin, freedom and responsibility are indissoluble.⁶⁶ Without responsibility, Dunn said, freedom is meaningless, directionless anarchy without accountability.⁶⁷ Dunn reasoned

⁶¹Genesis 1:26-27 NRSV. "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind* in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind* in his image, in the image of God created them; male and female he created them.' "

⁶²James M. Dunn, "The Baptist Vision of Religious Liberty," in *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: Religious Liberty*, ed. Walter B. Shurden (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1993), 32.

⁶³Dunn, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry*, 7.

⁶⁴James M. Dunn, "Religious Freedom Award Response," *Journal of Christian Ethics* 5, no. 5 (October 1999). http://www.christianethicstoday.com/Issue/024/Religious%20Freedom%20Award%20Response%20By%20James%20M%20Dunn_024_21_.htm (accessed October 26, 2007).

⁶⁵James M. Dunn, "The Baptist Vision of Religious Liberty," 32.

⁶⁶Dunn, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry*, 1.

⁶⁷James M. Dunn, "The Christian and the State: A Constructive Task," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 12, no. 4 (Winter 1985): 23.

that soul freedom and individual responsibility were not invented by government or manufactured by social contract. Instead, all dignity and respect afforded persons comes from God as revealed in the Scriptures.⁶⁸

Other Scriptures also affirmed voluntarism as the nature of authentic faith, according to Dunn. Jesus's call to follow him requires a free personal decision. Dunn suggested that every inclusive "whosoever will" (Revelation 2:17) found in Scripture necessitates soul freedom. Because there is only one mediator – Jesus Christ – between God and humankind (1 Timothy 2:5), the individual believer cannot be hindered by any human intermediary.⁶⁹ Dunn insisted that the value of the individual, related directly to being made in the image of God, "calls for freedom, dignity, an access to the Eternal unimpeded and unsullied by institutions, creeds or any sort of intervention."⁷⁰ While Dunn clearly focused on the human side of the divine-human relationship of freedom as he battled fundamentalism and hierarchical religion, he did not advocate an autonomy of the individual who initiated an encounter with God. Dunn found soul freedom in the image of God, a gift given by God to each individual.

Dunn's view of soul freedom is far reaching and extends beyond personal morality and personal faith. As the ultimate source of all modern notions of human rights, it is the cornerstone that precedes and demands religious liberty and the separation of church and state for all persons in the political arena. It is the biblical and theological

⁶⁸Dunn, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry*, 1. See also James M. Dunn, "Religious Liberty and Church-State Separation Go Hand in Hand," in *Defining Baptist Convictions: Guidelines for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Charles W. Deweese (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 1996), 71.

⁶⁹James M. Dunn, "Reflections," *Report from the Capital* 46, no. 12 (November/December 1991): 15.

⁷⁰Dunn, "The Christian and the State," 23.

starting point from which religious liberty naturally follows. According to Dunn, “if we all, in some serious way, replicate God, religious liberty is a moral and social inevitability.”⁷¹

Consequently, genuine faith cannot be coerced by the government. Early Christians believed that government was ordained by God (Romans 13) but could also be used for evil purposes (Revelation 13). Dunn noted that government coerced faith was challenged by the civil disobedience of Jesus’s disciples. In Acts, Peter told government officials who wanted to silence the Gospel, “we ought to obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29).⁷²

Dunn concurred with German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s conviction that:

obedience without freedom is slavery; freedom without obedience is arbitrary-self will. Obedience restrains freedom; and freedom ennobles obedience. Obedience binds the creature to the Creator and freedom enables the creature to stand before the Creator as one who is made in His image.”⁷³

Consequently, Dunn declared that “unless religion is free, voluntary, personal, intimate, and inward, it’s not worth anything anyways.” Without a truly voluntaristic faith, individuals may well be kept from an authentic “vital, visceral, life-changing faith.”⁷⁴ Thus to deny freedom of conscience to any person is to debase God’s creation. Dunn

⁷¹Dunn, “The Baptist Vision of Religious Liberty,” 33. See also Dunn, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry*, 65.

⁷²James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 46, no. 12 (November/December 1991): 15. See also James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 45, no. 8 (September 1990): 15.

⁷³Dunn, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry*, 24.

⁷⁴James M. Dunn, “Yes, I am a Baptist,” in *Why I Am A Baptist: Reflections on Being Baptist in the 21st Century*, ed. Cecil P. Staton Jr. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1999), 44.

lamented that “when anyone’s religious freedom is denied, everyone’s religious freedom is endangered.”⁷⁵

Dunn's advocacy for an uncoerced faith and truly voluntaristic religion led him to oppose creedalism because of its threat to soul freedom and religious liberty. Like Mullins and many other Baptists before him, Dunn noted that creeds were inappropriate prescriptions for what you must believe while confessions were voluntary descriptions of what a person does believe. He decried creeds as "the necessary requirement to squeeze in and squeak by some theological gate."⁷⁶ Dunn did not believe that long confessional statements were helpful because they often functioned as creeds and were used as tools to ensure doctrinal conformity. The only confession that Christians needed, Dunn maintained, was the early Christian affirmation that Jesus Christ is Lord.⁷⁷ “If we have anything remotely resembling a creed, it is the Baptist oral tradition that insists, ‘Ain’t nobody but Jesus gonna tell me what to believe.’”⁷⁸

Baptists throughout their history, Dunn exclaimed, relied on the authority of the Bible and the right of each person to interpret it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Like many Baptist proponents of religious liberty in the twentieth century, Dunn often quoted George W. Truett. In his famous 1920 speech on the steps of the United States Capitol, Truett proclaimed, “The right to private judgment is the crown jewel of

⁷⁵Dunn, “Religious Freedom Award Response.”

⁷⁶Dunn, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry*, 83-84. See also McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 656-657.

⁷⁷James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 49, no. 4 (April 19, 1994): 3.

⁷⁸Dunn, “Yes, I am a Baptist,” 46. Dunn originally made this bold statement during the height of the Southern Baptist Controversy or “SBC Holy War” as the new fundamentalist leadership was pushing to defund his Baptist Joint Committee.

humanity, and for any person or institution to dare to come between the soul and God is blasphemous impertinence and a defamation of the crown rights of the Son of God.”⁷⁹

Consequently, creeds hindered free access to Scripture and coerced believers into an artificial conformity of belief. Since Baptists lack catechistic tests for believers, Dunn argued that "repentance and faith, a personal experience of God's grace—not intellectual assent to arguments—saves." Creeds do not save; an individual's voluntary faith in God's grace does. Dunn believed that creedalism led to legalism and in Galatians 5:12, he indignantly noted, Paul suggested radical surgery for the legalist who could not live without a rulebook religion.⁸⁰

According to Dunn, one explanation for the penchant for creeds among Southern Baptists in the late twentieth century was the fact Southern Baptists viewed the increasingly pluralistic nature of America with alarm. According to Dunn, Southern Baptists sought certainty in uncertain times. Rather than impose creedal statements as his Southern Baptist opponents were advocating, Dunn said the biblical response to pluralism was to be faithful to one's identity and values—both formed by the Bible—while living with and respecting people who hold other views. As a champion for soul freedom, Dunn correctly understood that religious freedom to all would foster pluralism. However, he continued to stand up for the freedom of all, including atheists and agnostics, while advocating “mature missions” and “responsible evangelism” predicated upon the concept

⁷⁹George W. Truett, "The Baptist Message and Mission for the World Today," in *The Life of Baptists in the Life of the World*, ed. Walter B. Shurden (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1985), 114.

⁸⁰Dunn, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry*, 83-84.

of soul freedom.⁸¹ “The complexities of our pluralistic society demand a greater dependence upon the Bible, a deeper reliance upon faith and more fervent prayer than simpler times may have called for.”⁸² The biblical response to pluralism, Dunn concluded, was to be faithful rather than creedal.⁸³

Not surprisingly, James Dunn’s understanding of soul freedom has not been spared from criticism. Like E. Y. Mullins, Dunn too has been criticized of promoting a radical form of unbounded individualism, a faith without authority. Nearly fifty years ago, American Baptist, Winthrop Hudson, stated that “the practical effect of the stress upon ‘soul competency’ as the cardinal doctrine of Baptists was to make everyone’s hat their own church.”⁸⁴ Other scholars have followed Hudson’s lead. Curtis Freeman has argued that James Dunn has abused individualism even further by turning “soul competency” into “sole competency.” Freeman claims that Dunn’s popular quip, “Ain’t nobody but Jesus goin’ to tell me what to believe,” quickly devolves into “Ain’t nobody goin’ to tell me what to believe” as the “me” becomes the exclusive arbiter of what Jesus is saying.⁸⁵ Other scholars have made sweeping claims against the excessive

⁸¹Ibid., 22-23. See also James M. Dunn, “Being Baptist,” in *Baptists in the Balance: The Tension Between Freedom and Responsibility*, ed. Everett Goodwin (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1997), 220-223.

⁸²“Baptists face challenge, Dunn tells ABC board,” *Report from the Capital 50*, no. 11 (November 28, 1995): 2.

⁸³Dunn, “Being Baptist,” 220-221.

⁸⁴Winthrop S. Hudson, “Shifting Patterns of Church Order in the Twentieth Century,” in *Baptist Concepts of the Church*, ed. Winthrop Still Hudson (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1959), 215.

⁸⁵Curtis W. Freeman, “E.Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity,” *Review and Expositor* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 41.

individualism they find in Mullins and/or Dunn in attempts to chastise Baptists for a poor social ethic or a poor doctrine of ecclesiology.⁸⁶

However, Dunn has repeatedly refuted the criticism of his Baptist opponents that soul freedom leads to a hyper individualistic lone-ranger Christianity. He believed that the dichotomy of individual and community is a false one. The choice was not one over the other, but both together. Dunn contended that the desire for Christian community presupposed voluntary faith. According to Dunn, “The competence of the individual before God does not demand and in fact precludes Lone Ranger religion...no matter what critics left and right may say, autonomous individualism...does not mean that everyone’s church is one’s own hat. The longing for community and social Christianity presupposes voluntarism. Without individual autonomy, there can be no authentic community.”⁸⁷

While Dunn did not write extensively about Christian community, he believed that the Church as a “voluntary organization,” was necessary and was where the “primacy of community” was found according to biblical teaching. On one occasion, Dunn applauded the writings of Jim Wallis who advocated an intentional community of communal discipleship. Dunn wrote, “No where have I seen a Baptist church that measures up to the vision of community held up by Wallis. Nor have I known a Baptist church that wouldn’t be a bit frightened by his idealism, nor one that couldn’t use a good dose of it.” Dunn concluded by quoting Wallis in order to affirm the concept that the

⁸⁶Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 82-115. See also John Hammett, “From Church Competence to Soul Competence: The Devolution of Baptist Ecclesiology,” *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 145-163. Charles Marsh cited Douglas Hudgins’ as a minister who hid behind soul freedom to avoid addressing the issue of race during the 1950s and 1960s.

⁸⁷James M. Dunn, “Yes, I am a Baptist,” in *Why I Am A Baptist: Reflections on Being Baptist in the 21st Century*, ed. Cecil P. Staton Jr. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1999), 46-47.

Christian faith impacted a believer's whole existence rather than an autonomy of the individual that was isolated from society:

If we believe the Bible, every part of our lives belongs to the God who created us and intends to redeem us...no aspect of our lives remains untouched by the conversion that is God's call and God's gift to us. Biblically, conversion means to surrender ourselves to God in every sphere of human existence; the personal and social, the spiritual and economic, the psychological and political.⁸⁸

Dunn's emphasis on Christian experience also has been criticized as a subjective substitute for the objective authority of Scripture. But Baptists have historically held the objective-subjective balance between *Sola Scriptura* and *Sola Fide*, said Dunn.⁸⁹ This meant that the "corrective to excessive individualism was loyalty to the Lordship of Christ and to the Bible." A believer's experience was always to be guided by the Holy Spirit and anchored to the objective revelation of "facts" about Jesus Christ recorded in the Bible. Dunn consistently emphasized that Christian experience was always under the authority of Christ as revealed in Bible. Experience does not provide extrabiblical knowledge of God. As Dunn said, "real Baptists still test Scripture by Jesus Christ."⁹⁰ Of course Dunn understood that soul freedom could be abused. However, he strongly believed that the freedom inherent in biblically grounded individualism—a voluntary personal relationship with Jesus Christ—was well worth the risk.

⁸⁸James M. Dunn, "Reflections," *Report from the Capital* 36, no. 9 (October 1981): 15. See also Dunn, "Church, State, and Soul Competency," 68.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Dunn, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry*, 120. See also James M. Dunn, "Baptist Stubborn Award: Response of James M. Dunn on receipt of the Whitsitt Society Baptist Courage Award June 29, 2000," *The Whitsitt Journal* 7, no. 1 (Fall 2000), 1-4.

Dunn and the Separation of Church and State

Dunn believed that the separation of church and state was the logical, theological and political consequence of a genuine uncoerced faith that springs from soul freedom and extends religious liberty to all.⁹¹ Dunn gave three reasons why Baptists must hold to the separation of church and state to ensure an unfettered conscience. First, theology demands church-state separation. According to Dunn, biblical principles, theological presuppositions and historical examples lay the firm foundation that demands church-state separation. God's grace is experienced individually; a person comes to Jesus Christ voluntarily. The state is incompetent to judge spiritual matters. Thus, the conscience must be free from the state's coercive powers in matters of faith and religion. Second, the Christian ethic requires church-state separation. "If we do unto others as we want them to do unto us, if we believe that God loves the whole world, if we accept the image of God in every fellow human being, if we love our neighbors as ourselves, all people are entitled to real religious liberty." Invoking the Baptist witness of Roger Williams, John Clarke, Isaac Backus, and John Leland, Dunn concluded that the Baptist experience commends church-state separation.⁹² In his monthly column in *Report from the Capital*, Dunn often quoted Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, a fellow Baptist, who declared in the landmark decision of *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947) that the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment means at least that:

Neither a state nor the Federal Government can set up a church. Neither can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions or prefer one religion over another. Neither can force nor influence a person to go to or to remain away from church

⁹¹James M. Dunn, "The Baptist Vision of Religious Liberty," in *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: Religious Liberty*, ed. Walter B. Shurden (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1997), 35.

⁹²Dunn, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry*, 44-45.

against his will or force him to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion. No person can be punished for entertaining or professing religious beliefs or disbeliefs, for church attendance or non-attendance. No tax in any amount, large or small, can be levied to support any religious activities or institutions, whatever they may be called, or whatever form they may adopt to teach or practice religion. Neither a state nor the Federal Government can, openly or secretly, participate in the affairs of any religious organizations or groups and vice versa. In the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect 'a wall of separation between Church and State.'⁹³

This powerful statement by Hugo Black best sums up Dunn's Baptist separationism.

Throughout his career, Dunn consistently championed full religious liberty and the Jeffersonian wall of separation of church and state as articulated by Black in *Everson*.⁹⁴

Dunn's belief in soul freedom as the foundation for religious liberty and the separation of church and state can be seen in his reactions to recent attacks against the Jeffersonian metaphor of "a wall of separation between church and state." Over the years, Dunn has had harsh words for former Chief Justice William Rehnquist who in *Wallace v.*

⁹³*Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S. 1 (1947), 15-16. See also James M. Dunn, "Church and State: Friends or Enemies?," *The Baptist Student*, August 1985, 32-33.

⁹⁴Douglas Laycock, a respected First Amendment expert, notes that the resurgence of bigoted and vile anti-Catholicism of the 1920s associated with nativist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan faded and was replaced by "a wave of open and respectable anti-Catholicism among the American intellectual elite" in the 1940s. See Douglas Laycock, "The Underlying Unity of Separation and Neutrality," *Emory Law Journal* 46 (1997): 57-59. Catholic historian John McGreevy argues that this "intellectual anti-Catholic movement" attracted the favorable attention of Supreme Court Justices Frankfurter, Rutledge, Burton, and Black (who penned the majority opinion *Everson*). See John T. McGreevy, "Thinking on One's Own: Catholicism in the American Intellectual Imagination, 1928-1960," *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 1 (1997): 83-88. However, Laycock emphasizes that these anti-Catholic attitudes did not control the result in *Everson*, "but they influenced the dissent and they may have influenced the majority's no-aid rhetoric."

All of the scholars above point out that some Protestants' strong separationist positions were motivated to an extent by anti-Catholic sentiments. However, as Douglas Laycock notes, organizations such as the Baptist Joint Committee consistently took separationist positions "with no hint of anti-religious rhetoric." During James Dunn's tenure as Executive-Director of the BJC, he never publicly spoke negatively of Catholics. Instead, he led the BJC to coalition with Catholics on various church-state issues and worked with prominent Catholic leaders through organizations such as People for the American Way. He did, however, criticize the efforts of Catholic lobbyists on behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and other Catholic organizations to secure government aid for parochial schools. Dunn's "no-aid separationism" led him to equally criticize other religious groups clamoring for public monies including his fellow Southern Baptists in the 1990s. See Douglas Laycock, "The Many Meanings of Separation," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 70 (2003): 1683-1684.

Jaffree (1985) announced that “The ‘wall of separation between church and state’ is a metaphor based on bad history, a metaphor which has proved useless as a guide to judging. It should be frankly and explicitly abandoned.”⁹⁵ Dunn retorted, “Some of us believe that it is a metaphor rooted in good theology—‘render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, unto God what is God’s; that is has proved patently useful as the guarantor of liberty; that while it is not absolute, it is not obsolete and that it should be treated as a distinctive aspect of the American experiment.” Dunn questioned whether anyone could possibly value soul freedom without seeing the dire need for a wall of separation between church and state.⁹⁶

Dunn felt that the “utter wrong headedness” of Rehnquist was eloquently and adequately refuted in Justice David Souter’s concurring opinion in *Lee v. Weisman* (1992).⁹⁷ There Souter wrote, “Forty-five years ago, this Court announced a basic principle of constitutional law from which it has not strayed: the Establishment Clause forbids not only state practices that ‘aid one religion over another,’ but also those that ‘aid all religions.’”⁹⁸ Like Souter, Dunn believed that the Founding Fathers intended church and state to be separated and for government to be neutral regarding religion.⁹⁹

⁹⁵Wallace v. Jeffree, 482 U.S. 38, 107 (1985), (Rehnquist, J., dissenting). See also James M. Dunn, “A Threatened Heritage,” *The Whitsitt Journal* 1, no. 1 (July 1994): 6-8.

⁹⁶Dunn, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry*, 47.

⁹⁷Dunn, “A Threatened Heritage,” 6-8.

⁹⁸Lee v. Weisman, 112 S.Ct. 2649 (1992), (Souter, J., concurring).

⁹⁹Dunn, “A Threatened Heritage,” 6-8.

According to Dunn, “if American history makes any eloquent appeal, it is for the separation of church and state.”¹⁰⁰

But Dunn understood that the separation between church and state is not always neat and never absolute: “It’s messy, difficult, inconsistent, and it always has been. Today more than ever it is important to apply proper tensions between an invasive, intrusive government and religious institutions which are also concerned with all of life. Government often favors religion when it should leave it alone. Churches appeal for state assistance without counting the cost. When government meddles in religion it always has the touch of mud.”¹⁰¹

Consequently, Dunn rejected all legislative efforts by accommodationists to fund religion. Due to America’s thriving pluralistic society, Dunn believed that government funded religion was not possible or desirable even if some of the Founding Fathers such as Patrick Henry envisioned it. “Persons of conscience of all religious and non-religious hues insist that it is impossible to attain an idyllic state of governmental fairness with aid and benefits for all religions.”¹⁰² Dunn observed that “When the state gets into the missionary business, it fouls things up. When the government claims to aid all religions, it never fails to play favorites. When government tries to find an agreeable level of religious involvement, it winds up advancing an emasculated all purpose god, not the

¹⁰⁰James M. Dunn, foreword to *The Myth of Christian America: What You Need to Know About the Separation of Church and State*, by Mark Whitten (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1999), v.

¹⁰¹Dunn, “The Baptist Vision of Religious Liberty,” 36-37.

¹⁰²James M. Dunn, “Neutrality and the Establishment Clause,” in *Equal Separation: Understanding the Religion Clauses of the First Amendment*, ed. Paul J. Weber (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 55-63.

specific Deity of revealed religion.” Dunn advocated that strict neutrality, not benignity, is the proper role for government in regard to religion.¹⁰³

Dunn has stated that if Jefferson’s “wall of separation” is ambiguous or less than the ideal metaphor to describe the constitutional distance between church and state, then perhaps Stephen Carter’s “wall with many doors” or Martin Marty’s “zone” may best describe the present space between these two institutions. Gardner Taylor, the great African-American “Prince of the Pulpit,” stated that separation is desired so that the church will have “swinging room.” Taylor has vividly portrayed separation as preventing either church or state from being trapped in “the bear hug of the other.” Time and time again, Dunn has asserted that at the minimum a strand of “barbed wire” is needed “to keep either church or state from holding the other in a bearhug.”¹⁰⁴

Dunn did not equate “the separation of church and state” with the separation of religion from politics. In a pluralistic democracy, he fully understood that religion and politics will mix, must mix, and should mix. He often declared that “mixing politics and religion is inevitable but merging church and state is inexcusable.”¹⁰⁵ An advocate of responsible Christian citizenship, Dunn affirmed that the demands of conscience must address public policy decisions but emphasized that there was not a simple plan to implement the proper mix of politics and religion. Dunn viewed the principle of church-state separation as an attempt to write into public policy “the notion that there is no place for coercion in the choice, exercise, or perpetuation of religion. Separation of church and

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 34-37. See also Dunn, *The Myth of Christian America*, v.

¹⁰⁵James M. Dunn, “Religion and Politics: A Proper Mix,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 155.

state means at least that Church and State have different reasons for being, diverse functions, separate sources of funding, distinctive methods and strategies and identities.”¹⁰⁶

Dunn championed soul freedom as the basis of genuine Baptist identity and fundamental to four hundred years of the Baptist heritage. While noting that separation of church and state does not define Baptist theology, Dunn argued that it is “a logical, inextricable inevitable corollary of religious liberty...it is the plug which if pulled out of our machine, the motor dies. We go no more.”¹⁰⁷ He often stressed that “it is hard to believe that one could be a Baptist and not cling tenaciously to that baptistic doctrine.”¹⁰⁸ Dunn obviously holds key ideas in tension. He is anti-creedal regarding doctrine because of his view of freedom. Yet, he has a litmus test for good Baptist theology and thus for what he considers an authentic Baptist witness: a belief in soul freedom which leads to support for the separation of church and state.

Dunn often pointed to early Baptist leaders who rooted their religious freedom in the sovereignty of God. These Baptist “saints” such as Thomas Helwys, Roger Williams, Isaac Backus, and John Leland all displayed a deep commitment to soul freedom.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶Dunn, “Religion and Politics: A Proper Mix,” 155-156.

¹⁰⁷Dunn, “Religious Freedom Award Response.”

¹⁰⁸Dunn, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry*, 46. In his sermons and monthly column, Dunn frequently would offer ten characteristics that identify a “real” Baptist: “1) If soul liberty is important. 2) If the priesthood of all believers is more than a slogan. 3) If one insists on interpreting the Scriptures for themselves. 4) If one defends the right of each person to come to the Bible and, led by the spirit, seek its truth. 5) If one believes that one must accept Jesus Christ personally. 6) If the church functions as a democracy. 7) If in the fellowship of churches each one is autonomous. 8) If there is no pope or presbyter, president or pastor who rules over you. 9) If religious liberty is the password to public witness and the separation of church and state is its essential corollary. 10) If no mortal has the power to suppress, curtail, rule out, or reign over the will of the local congregation.”

¹⁰⁹James M. Dunn, “Church and State in Contemporary United States: A Wall of Separation?,” *Baptist History & Heritage* (Winter 1988): 31-42.

Dunn credited Thomas Helwys with setting out for the first time in English “the notion of liberty of conscience as a stackpole theological concept” and church-state separation as a basic Baptist belief.¹¹⁰ He declared that Roger Williams, Walter Rauschenbusch and Martin Luther King, Jr. “perhaps more than any other American religious leaders have been used of God to change history by focusing on freedom.” These three Baptist preachers “completely sold out to a faith voluntary and obedient, gave this country the world’s first experiment in total religious liberty (Williams in Rhode Island), the theological base for a social and economic revolution (Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel), and the nation’s change of heart about racial justice (King and the Civil Rights Movement).¹¹¹ To summarize the essence of the Baptist identity, Dunn quoted fellow Texas Baptist and leading Baptist pulpiter of the twentieth century, G. W. Truett, who hailed the competency of the soul as “the keystone truth of all Baptists.” Out of this cardinal bedrock principle, all of our Baptist principles emerge.¹¹²

But Dunn has reserved most of his praise for Roger Williams whom he describes as having “fathered philosophically the American experiment in freedom of religion.” Dunn has expressed his admiration for Williams’s willingness to pay the toll of contending that freedom is more important than toleration. “Williams despised toleration as the measure of the majority religion’s relationship with dissenters,” said Dunn.

¹¹⁰James M. Dunn, “Helwys’ demand for religious freedom for all troubles some,” *Texas Baptists Committed*, http://txbc.org/1998Journals/Dec98Jan99/Dec98_Helwys'Demand.htm (accessed November 7, 2007).

¹¹¹James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 39, no. 3 (March 1984): 15.

¹¹²James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 43, no. 4 (April 1988): 15.

Toleration is a human concession, a “weasel word.” Liberty is a gift of God.¹¹³

According to Dunn, Williams is disproportionately important “because he first challenged the old world patterns of toleration, theocracy, church-states and state-churches. He was banished, ostracized, ridiculed, and thought to have windmills in his head. He died poor and rejected, nothing much to show for his labors except the American experiment of religious liberty and the most vital churches in the world.”

Throughout his career, Dunn continued to call on Baptists churches across the country to reaffirm their dedication to providing what Roger Williams called a “haven for the cause of conscience” to ensure a healthy distance between the institutions of church and state.¹¹⁴

Conclusion

Chet Edwards, a United States Congressman from central Texas once remarked that “[James Dunn is] the Rosa Parks of the religious liberty issue.”¹¹⁵ From the Texas State Capitol in Austin to Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. and hundreds of Baptist churches in between, Dunn has been a bold advocate for the unfettered conscience and the separation of church and state for nearly forty years. Throughout his ministry, Dunn has argued that there is indeed a historical and theological starting point for Baptists. It is the biblical doctrine of soul freedom. As the ultimate source of all human rights, Dunn asserted that soul freedom is the cornerstone that precedes and demands religious liberty and the separation of church and state for all persons in the political arena. Soul freedom

¹¹³J. Mark Brown, “Dunn delivers lectures as part of Shurden series,” *BJC Online*, http://bjconline.org/news/docs/032107%20_dunn%20lectures.htm (accessed November 9, 2007).

¹¹⁴Dunn, *A Wall of Separation*, 35.

¹¹⁵John Finley, “Interview with James Dunn,” *The Whitsitt Journal* 6 (Spring 2000), 3.

is the “stackpole around which Baptist convictions develop.”¹¹⁶ According to Dunn, if there is one tie that binds Baptists together, it is the belief that each person has the freedom, ability, and responsibility to respond to God directly without a human mediator. Dunn repeatedly expressed his belief that there is no freedom for the soul with a creed imposed upon the conscience.

In his defense of religious liberty, James Dunn offered a paradigm for Baptist political engagement in the public arena grounded in a commitment to soul freedom. Despite what opponents said, Dunn believed his "freedom theology" was Christ-centered and biblically based. With Southern Baptist “conservatives” breathing down his neck, he defiantly declared, "Ain't nobody but Jesus gonna tell me what to believe." Dunn's slogan did not mean that he affirmed the popular cultural phrase "anything goes" in his approach to ethics, theology, or church-state relations. Instead, he was uncompromisingly committed to the unfettered conscience as a basis for a personal relationship to God and for dialogue in the public square. During a recent lecture to college students at Carson-Newman University, Dunn proclaimed:

If we know anything at all of history, law, Scripture, human nature, and the spirit of Jesus, then we must get off our apathies and speak up for Freedom of Conscience. When anyone's religious freedom is denied, everyone's religious freedom is endangered. When government requires religion, it makes a monster of it. If religion is not voluntary, it cannot be vital.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1993), 1-4.

¹¹⁷J. Mark Brown, “Dunn delivers lectures as part of Shurden series.”

CHAPTER THREE

The Southern Baptist Controversy Part I: James Dunn, School Prayer and Soul Freedom

The Southern Baptist Controversy

The story of Christianity is often told by focusing on conflict. The same can be said of Southern Baptists. Baptist historian Walter Shurden wrote a popular book on Southern Baptists and their apparent tendency to be perpetually in conflict. He entitled the book, “Not a Silent People.”¹ In Baptist life the noise was extremely loud and far reaching during the twentieth century conflict called the “Fundamentalist-Moderate Controversy,” better known as the “Conservative Resurgence” by those who claimed victory.² In his book, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture*, historian Barry Hankins contends that this Southern Baptist controversy was “one of the most contentious and significant denominational battles in American religious history.”³

¹ Walter B. Shurden, *Not a Silent People: Controversies That Have Shaped Southern Baptists* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1995).

²Shurden speaks of the “Fundamentalist-Moderate” Controversy. See Shurden, *Not a Silent People*, 83-112. Bill Leonard calls the conflict “The Controversy” but speaks of fundamentalists and moderates. See Bill Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Inc., 1990), 131-172. In this chapter and future chapters, both conservative and fundamentalist will be used. Fundamentalist will be used more often, however, because James Dunn viewed his opponents in this light. While scholars such as Nancy Ammerman and David Stricklin employ the term fundamentalist, others prefer the word “conservative” to describe the victors in The Southern Baptist Controversy.

³Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), 2-3. Hankins points out that this controversy was just the second time that the “conservative side” had won a major denominational battle for power. The “conservative side” prevailed in a 1970s battle in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. The major denominational fights of the early twentieth century among Presbyterians and Northern Baptists saw the “liberal side” come out on top.

While popular renditions of the “Southern Baptist Controversy” start the imbroglia in 1979, conflict over the nature of the Bible and its interpretation erupted in the 1960s with the “Elliott Controversy.” Ralph Elliott was a professor of Old Testament at the fledgling institution, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. A storm of controversy erupted when Broadman Press, the publishing agency of Southern Baptists’ Sunday School Board, published Elliott’s book, *The Message of Genesis* (1961). In the book, Elliott asserted that an affirmation of the historicity of the first eleven chapters of Genesis was not necessary to express a strong affirmation of their theological truth.⁴ Suggesting that Adam and Eve were not literal historical figures, however, was “death in the pot,” according to one Southern Baptist pastor.⁵ Consequently, Southern Baptists accused Elliott of liberalism or worse, not believing in the Bible. Elliott did not consider the book to be liberal scholarship in the field of biblical studies. Ironically, he lost his job at the seminary, but his dismissal was for insubordination rather than his affirmation of the methods of modern academic biblical study.⁶

In an attempt to calm concerns about liberalism in its ranks, the Southern Baptist Convention reacted to the conflict surrounding Elliott and Midwestern Seminary with the adoption of a confession of faith, the 1963 *Baptist Faith & Message*. Prominent convention leaders thought that a voluntary affirmation of basic biblical and Baptist principles in a revised edition of the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message would be a

⁴Ralph H. Elliott, *The Message of Genesis: A Theological Interpretation* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1961). For Elliott’s personal memoir about the controversy surrounding his book, see Ralph Elliott, “*The Genesis Controversy*” and *Continuity in Southern Baptist Chaos: A Eulogy for a Great Tradition* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1992).

⁵Elliott, “*The Genesis Controversy*,” 67-68.

⁶Ibid., 113-125. See also David Stricklin, *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the Twentieth Century* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 145.

theologically unifying presence. However, observers concluded that the confession had very little influence on convention or local church issues in the 1960s. Most Southern Baptists still asserted that they were heirs of an anti-creedal tradition that relied on the Bible rather than creeds.⁷

A second occasion of conflict over biblical interpretation occurred with the Broadman Bible Commentary controversy in 1970. Again the primary concern was the interpretation of the book of Genesis. Critics were upset that British author G. Henton Davies had denied that God had literally told Abraham to practice child sacrifice (Gen. 22). The conflict appeared to subside when Broadman Press had the volume rewritten.⁸

The Elliott and Broadman Press conflicts convinced conservatives that Southern Baptist leadership in denominational agencies and seminaries were fostering or allowing a liberal drift in the convention. While the 1970s did not have another significant theological conflict, the critics were developing conservative networks to oppose and ultimately eradicate liberalism in the convention. One such group was the Baptist Faith and Message Fellowship that was formed in 1973.⁹

Despite the critics, most Baptists across the Convention believed that the historic love for cooperative missions would hold theological infighting in check. Baptist historian Bill Leonard has argued that for most of the twentieth century the diverse constituencies which existed throughout the Southern Baptist Convention were held

⁷Grady Cothen, "Truths or Truth: Creeds or Scripture," in Grady Cothen and James Dunn, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2000), 92.

⁸Jerry Faught, "Round Two, Volume One. The Broadman Bible Commentary," *Baptist History & Heritage* 38, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 94-114.

⁹Stricklin, *A Genealogy of Dissent*, 145. David Stricklin uses the term "biblical literalists" to describe the fundamentalists that made up the Baptist Faith and Message Fellowship.

together by a “Grand Compromise.” This “Grand Compromise” was an understood agreement not to let any ideological party, whether they were on the left or the right, take control of the denomination. Instead, the Southern Baptist Convention would be held together by a large group of centrists who for the sake of missions and evangelism found unity amidst diversity. According to Leonard, “There was less a synthesis than a Grand Compromise based in an unspoken agreement that the convention would resist all attempts to define basic doctrines in ways that excluded one tradition or another, thereby destroying unity and undermining the missionary imperative.”¹⁰

As the convention was mobilizing for “Bold Mission Thrust” in the late 1970s, a missionary effort to share the Gospel with the whole world by the year 2000, a group of fundamentalists were formulating a political strategy to end the “Grand Compromise” and gain complete control (or restore order, in their view) of the Southern Baptist Convention. The designers of this planned takeover were Paige Patterson of the Criswell Biblical Institute and layman Paul Pressler, a Texas appeals court judge. Their plan focused on the role of the convention president. Presidents had generally been considered figureheads since no one person spoke for Southern Baptists. However, presidential duties included the right to appoint leaders who would select trustees to denominational agencies. According to the Patterson/Pressler plan, the men to be elected convention president had to be committed to biblical inerrancy. With a series of presidential victories, trustee boards of SBC institutions and thus the institutions

¹⁰Leonard, *God's Last and Only Hope*, 29-38.

themselves would be remolded into an orthodox, conservative evangelical Bible believing Christianity.¹¹

The fundamentalists' first victory came in 1979 with the election of Memphis pastor Adrian Rogers as the President of the Southern Baptist Convention. While several of the presidential elections in the 1980s were close, the political strategy of Patterson and Pressler worked. Each year the candidate supported by the "Conservative Resurgence" won. By 1990, the battle for the denomination was over and the Patterson-Pressler coalition had completely gained control of the SBC. Leaders trumpeted a new Reformation in religious history. America's largest denomination had turned the tide back on the evil of liberalism, and according to the victors, historic Baptist conservatism had been restored.¹²

Baptists opposed to this "resurgence" did not see the conflict as conservative versus liberal theology. These critics, who eventually became known as moderates, called their opponents "fundamentalists." In essence, the Patterson-Pressler plan was an attempted fundamentalist takeover of the convention. While theological differences were present in the convention, moderates admitted, they viewed the conflict as a political power struggle. The real issue was "control versus freedom."¹³ According to moderates, conservatives were really fundamentalists because they demanded doctrinal conformity—as they defined it—and they allowed no dissent or diversity. Throughout the controversy, moderates declared that a "galloping creedalism" was overwhelming the non-creedal

¹¹Ibid., 139.

¹²Note the title of Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000).

¹³Shurden, *Not a Silent People*, 86-87. See also Leonard, *God's Last and Only Hope*, 181.

legacy of Southern Baptists.¹⁴ Moderates asserted that the charges of liberalism in Baptist seminaries and denominational agencies were absurd. Moderates affirmed that they were neither liberals who disregarded the Bible, nor were they fundamentalists who demanded that their view of the Bible as inerrant was the only acceptable position regarding belief in the Scriptures. Moderates repeatedly affirmed the centrality of biblical authority, but they resisted inerrancy as dogmatism and objected to the increasing political connotation of the word—its use was becoming a creedal litmus test for “Baptist orthodoxy.” In contrast, moderates attempted to affirm what they considered the heart of the Baptist heritage: the authority of the Bible for religious faith and practice, soul competency, personal religious experience, the priesthood of all believers, religious liberty and the separation of church and state, local church autonomy, anti-creedalism, and unity in missions and evangelism amidst some theological diversity.¹⁵

One significant aspect of this Southern Baptist conflict was the ministry of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and its controversial Executive Director, James Dunn. He was branded a liberal with a view of church-state separation out of step with the direction of the “Conservative Resurgence.” Freedom versus control was embodied in the controversy that swirled around his leadership.

The Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs

In the spirit of John Locke’s statement that “Baptists were the first propounders of absolute liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty,” Southern Baptists

¹⁴Walter B. Shurden, “The Southern Baptist Synthesis: Is It Cracking?” *Baptist History & Heritage* 16 (April 1981): 2-11.

¹⁵Shurden, *Not a Silent People*, 86-87. See also Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope*, 149-151.

helped establish an organization founded by the principal Baptist groups (Southern, Northern, and National Baptists) in the United States whose task would be to monitor and lobby for separation of church and state, foster religious liberty, and promote the free exercise of religion.¹⁶ Since the doors of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs (BJC) swung open, there have been only five Executive Directors: J. M. Dawson (1946-1953), C. Emanuel Carlson (1954-1971), James E. Wood Jr. (1972-1980), James Dunn (1981-1999), and J. Brent Walker (2000-Present).¹⁷

As the first Executive Director, J. M. Dawson led the BJC in its opposition against several instances of government interference in religion: tax support for private and religious schools, diplomatic relations with the Vatican and government aid to sectarian hospitals. One of Dawson's greatest achievements was his role in establishing "Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State" (now known as Americans United for the Separation of Church and State). Dawson hoped that POAU would effectively speak to the larger Protestant community on the issues of religious liberty and separation of church and state.¹⁸

Under Executive Director Emanuel Carlson, the BJC was able to expand its constituency to nine diverse Baptist bodies. While continuing to face the same issues that

¹⁶Pam Parry, *On Guard for Religious Liberty: Six Decades of the Baptist Joint Committee* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1996), 3-8. Though this quote has been attributed to John Locke for many years, recent efforts have been unable to prove its authenticity.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 1-2. The BJC dates its origins to 1936 when the Southern Baptist Convention developed the Committee on Public Relations under the leadership of Rufus Weaver.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 11-14. POAU was founded in response to the Roman Catholic Church whom POAU considered to be a major threat to religious liberty. POAU pledged itself to oppose all Catholic requests for aid to parochial schools and to support public education. POAU had its share of Protestant critics who questioned the wisdom of POAU's seemingly anti-Catholic approach to Protestant-Catholic relations. See Vicki Crumpton, "An Analysis Of Southern Baptist Response To Diplomatic Relations Between the United States and the Vatican," (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1988), 76-80.

Dawson encountered, Carlson led the opposition against a constitutional amendment declaring America a Christian nation, a measure to make Good Friday a legal holiday, and a proposed question on the 1960 census asking citizens to identify their religion. The BJC also voiced its support for two highly controversial Supreme Court decisions: *Engel v. Vitale* (1962), which barred government prescribed prayer in public schools, and *Abington v. Schempp* and *Murray v. Curlett* (1963) which ruled that it was unconstitutional to require public school children to read the Bible and recite the Lord's Prayer.¹⁹

Like his predecessors, James Wood continued to oppose diplomatic relations with the Vatican, government funding of religious schools, and support for universal religious freedom. However, Wood's BJC faced new issues, including the expansion of IRS regulations related to churches, the CIA's use of missionaries for intelligence gathering, the nuclear arms race, and abortion. During his eight-year tenure, Wood was criticized for addressing social issues outside of the mission of the BJC. Consequently, messengers at the 1976 Southern Baptist Convention passed two motions in order to clarify the distinct role of the BJC and the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission. These motions maintained that the role of the CLC would be to only address moral and social concerns while the BJC would deal exclusively with religious liberty.²⁰

When James Dunn was chosen to replace James Wood as Executive Director of the BJC, he faced the immediate challenge of a new President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, who had a radically different philosophy of church-state separation than

¹⁹Ibid., 14-17.

²⁰Ibid., 18-20.

President Jimmy Carter. Unlike Reagan, Carter represented a view of church-state separation frequently (although not monolithically) found in the Baptist heritage (i.e., against government interference in religion, diplomatic relations with the Vatican, government-mandated school prayer and federal funding of parochial schools).²¹ Dunn recalled, “Seeing Mr. Carter pack his bags and head back to Georgia as Marilyn and I were unpacking ours here in Washington was not a comforting sight. Losing Mr. Carter caused me to whimper about him not being here anymore. He was my friend and a strong supporter of church-state separation.”²²

James Dunn, Southern Baptists and School Prayer

As the fighting between Southern Baptists intensified for control of the denomination, James Dunn assumed his duties on January 1, 1981 as the fourth Executive Director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. On his first day on the job, Dunn promised an “aggressive, broad-based” approach to government relations by the BJC.²³ He promised to “applaud and support” initiatives of the Reagan administration regarding church-state separation and human rights, while also pledging to “push for change where change is needed,” and to be critical when government policy ran counter to historic Baptist positions. Dunn emphatically declared that “the responsibility of [the BJC] to bear Christian witness to questions of public policy—specifically religious freedom is so consistent and so overwhelming and so overriding, that the

²¹Grady Cothen, *What Happened to the SBC? A Memoir of the Controversy* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1993), 355.

²²Michael Smith, “A Texan Goes to Washington,” *James Dunn: Champion for Religious Liberty*, ed. J. Brent Walker (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1999), 33.

²³“Executive Promises ‘Aggressive Approach,’” *Report from the Capital* 35, no. 10 (November-December 1980): 4-5.

relative difference in the way we relate to one administration or the other is not very important.”²⁴

Also in his first days as Executive Director, Dunn addressed the threat of the “New Religious Right” whose leaders he described as merely “old extremists” both religious and political.²⁵ He warned that there was a particular danger whenever powerful religious forces develop a close relationship to partisan politics. According to Dunn, such a relationship threatened to make religion “the handmaiden of a particular ideology.” Dunn declared that “God is minimized in any marriage of religion and politics” because “we wind up making God the national mascot and that’s civil religion at its worst.”²⁶

Similarly, during the 1980 meeting where Dunn was unanimously chosen as Executive Director, the Baptist Joint Committee passed a statement titled “On the Dangers of Civil Religion.” The statement began:

While the history of church-state relations in the United States reveals repeated attempts to identify the purposes of God with national objectives, and while recent history demonstrates several efforts to wed religious fundamentalism to right-wing politics, the current activities of the Religious Right may pose a more dangerous threat to the American principle of church-state separation than any previous similar movement.²⁷

While reaffirming the “constitutional right and biblical mandate” for Christians to be actively involved in the political process and to exercise the “God-given right of

²⁴“Dunn ‘realistic but hopeful’ on Church-State relations,” *The Religious Herald*, February 12, 1981, 9.

²⁵Larry Chesser, “BJC Elects James M. Dunn Executive Director; Studies Dangers in New Religious Right,” *Report from the Capital* 35, no. 10 (November-December 1980): 3-4.

²⁶James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 37, no. 4 (April 1982): 15.

²⁷“BJC Statement On the Dangers of Civil Religion,” (Resolution, Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, Washington, D. C., October 7, 1980).

freedom of conscience,” the statement echoed Dunn’s belief that the “New Religious Right” had become the handmaiden of the Republican Party. The declaration, “On The Dangers of Civil Religion,” concluded by encouraging Baptists to work for political causes and candidates in accord with their own consciences but cautioned Baptists not to judge candidates as “moral” or “immoral” on the basis of “highly selective, essentially political, rankings by the Religious Right.”²⁸ Dunn, like some other moderate Southern Baptist leaders, believed that the growing phenomenon of voting blocs of religious conservatives “damages the churches by creating a political test for religious fellowship” and “damages the state by producing a religious test for public office.”²⁹

In his early public appearances with the Baptist Joint Committee, Dunn aggressively railed against the “New Religious Right.” However, in his monthly column read by the constituents of the BJC, Dunn focused much of his attention on other threats to the Baptist commitment to religious liberty and the separation of church and state. He lamented that many Baptists had developed a poor sense of history. According to Dunn, “the voices of many among us seem to have no awareness of the precious heritage that is ours. Some seem to have forgotten the price that was paid for a free church in a free state.”³⁰ Dunn specifically believed that Baptists who supported direct or indirect use of public funds for parochial, sectarian schools, tuition tax-credits and state-sponsored school prayer lacked appreciation for “traditional Baptist theology.”³¹ He observed that,

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹James M. Dunn, quoted in “Allen, Others Issue Warning On ‘Christian Right’ Politics,” *Biblical Recorder*, October 25, 1980, 32. Allen was a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention and in 1980, president of the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission.

³⁰James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 36, no. 1 (January 1981): 15.

³¹James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 36, no. 2 (February 1981): 15.

“Baptists and a lot of other folk who cling to the name, without any hint of denominational cooperation, understanding of Baptist history, or appreciation for Baptist theology, are behaving as if they didn’t believe in church-state separation.”³² In his view, such persons were Baptists just not *real* Baptists.³³ Citing Micah 6:8, Dunn urged Baptists, as children of God, to be passionately dedicated to the sacredness of the individual conscience and to “do justice” by insisting upon religious liberty for everyone.³⁴

In his second year as Executive Director, Dunn’s fight for religious liberty for all people intensified dramatically. Early in 1982, President Reagan voiced his support for tuition tax credits to parents who send their children to private sectarian schools. Dunn had previously written that tuition tax credits for private education would be unconstitutional, regressive, and destructive to the public school system.³⁵ Pointing to the United States Supreme Court’s 1973 ruling in *Committee for Public Education and Religious Liberty v. Nyquist* which struck down a tuition tax credit plan in New York as a violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, Dunn contended that such plans forced taxpayers to subsidize religion.³⁶

³²James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 36, no. 4 (April 1981): 15. See also James M. Dunn, “Public Affairs Committee,” *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville, TN: Southern Baptist Convention, 1981), 208-212.

³³James M. Dunn, “How to recognize a ‘real Baptist’ if you see one,” Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, http://www.bjcpa.org/resources/articles/2006/0606_dunn_baptists.htm (accessed March 30, 2008).

³⁴James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 36, no. 5 (May 1981): 15.

³⁵“Dunn Criticizes Tuition Tax Credit,” *Baptist Standard*, April 21, 1982, 4. Dunn criticized Reagan’s proposal by arguing that it violated the constitutional principle of church-state separation and threatened “the public schools with two separate but unequal tax-supported systems of education.”

³⁶James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 36, no. 7 (July 1981): 15.

On May 7, 1982, President Reagan announced his intent to propose to Congress an amendment to the United States Constitution to allow school-sponsored prayer in public schools.³⁷ Reagan's Prayer Amendment read: "Nothing in this Constitution shall be construed to prohibit individual or group prayer in public schools or other public institutions. No person shall be required by the United States or by any state to participate in prayer."³⁸ Reagan declared, "No one will ever convince me that a moment of voluntary prayer will harm a child or threaten a school or state but I think it can strengthen our faith in a Creator who alone has the power to bless America."³⁹ The Prayer Amendment was seen by many as a gesture to Religious Right organizations such as Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority which had grown increasingly restless as the Reagan White House had relegated social concerns to the back burner while priority was given to budget and economic battles. For Falwell and his Moral Majority, Reagan's Prayer Amendment was a step towards returning God to the public school classroom.⁴⁰

Reagan's proposal to amend the Constitution was deemed highly controversial. Even more controversial to the growing fundamentalist movement in the Southern Baptist Convention was Dunn's vituperative attack on President Reagan's viewpoint. Described by the Washington Post as one of the most outspoken critics of the Prayer Amendment, Dunn immediately condemned President Reagan's proposal to rewrite the

³⁷Herbert H. Denton and Marjorie Hyer, "Reagan to Ask Hill for Prayer Amendment," *The Washington Post*, May 7, 1982, A1.

³⁸"The Politics of Prayer," *Time*, August 9, 1982, 39.

³⁹Denton, "Reagan to ask Hill for Prayer Amendment," A1.

⁴⁰Ibid.

Constitution.⁴¹ With blunt flair, Dunn exclaimed, “It is despicable demagoguery for the President to play petty politics with prayer. He knows that the Supreme Court never banned prayer in schools. It can’t. Real prayer is always free.” Dunn also accused Reagan of being “deliberately dishonest” by joining ranks with religious leaders who, according to Dunn, had misinterpreted the 1962 and 1963 landmark Supreme Court rulings on prayer and Bible reading in public schools. Despite these misunderstandings, Reagan knew better, retorted Dunn. “He knows that the court in those prayer rulings affirmed and encouraged studies about religion in public school classrooms. What the court has done is protect religious liberty.”⁴²

Dunn stressed that mandatory or supervised prayer is antithetical to the Baptist tradition. He believed that Reagan’s Prayer Amendment amounted to nothing more than state-sponsored prayer. Dunn colorfully proclaimed, “You hear it called ‘putting God in schools.’ It is as if the Divine could be dumped into a wheelbarrow and carted out. The charge that everything went wrong because they threw prayer out of schools is patent poppycock.”⁴³ He further argued that “to make public prayer a political football is to deny the meaning of prayer.” Pointing out that some politicians continuously make reference to the misnomer that God has been expelled from the classroom, Dunn announced, “The God whom I worship and serve has a perfect attendance record, never absent or even tardy.”⁴⁴

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Larry Chesser, “Establishing Religious Beliefs A Threat To Liberty,” *Report from the Capital* 36, no. 10 (November-December 1981): 16.

⁴⁴James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 38, no. 3 (March 1983): 15.

Implementation of Reagan's Prayer Amendment would ultimately have placed decision-making power about prayer in public schools in the hands of state legislatures and local school districts. Dunn questioned whether in an increasingly pluralistic society citizens (even fundamentalists) would really want to turn the regulation of religious exercise over to statehouses and local school boards in diverse states such as Utah, Hawaii, Alabama, and New York.⁴⁵ Rebuking as simplistic the fundamentalist perspective that many of America's problems stemmed from the Supreme Court's landmark church-state rulings in 1962 and 1963, as well as the proposal that these problems could be remedied through an amendment to the Constitution, Dunn reminded his readers that "school prayer" had not brought idealistic Islam to Iran, churchgoing to England, religious toleration to Belgium, sexual morality to Sweden, freedom of thought to Spain, nor peace to Northern Ireland.⁴⁶

Theologically, Dunn opposed Reagan's Prayer Amendment because it trivialized the sacred nature of prayer.⁴⁷ In the BJC's monthly publication, *Report from the Capital*, Dunn asserted that the amendment would actually secularize prayer. Prayer—the most intimate and inner expression of religion—would be forced to "do a civil duty, to tote the values of a common culture" of a national "pop religion" rather than be voluntarily directed toward God. Dunn believed such a watered-down school prayer written and approved by government officials was a testimony of "lowest common denominator religion" and thus a threat to authentic religion. He warned, "School 'praying' can work

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶James M. Dunn, "Reflections," *Report from the Capital* 37, no. 4 (April 1982): 15.

⁴⁷"The Politics of Prayer," *Time*, August 9, 1982, 39.

like a flu shot. An inoculation of diluted deism can make some children immune, or at least resistant, to real religion.”⁴⁸

Several months later Dunn stepped into a firestorm at the contentious 1982 meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention held in New Orleans. During his report to the Convention as Executive Director of the BJC, Dunn warned the six thousand Southern Baptist messengers present that Reagan’s Prayer Amendment “would uproot the First Amendment, radically alter the Bill of Rights, and put the government in the business of making decisions about religion.”⁴⁹ He argued it would “give sanction” to “Buddhist prayers in Hawaii, Mormon prayers in Utah, and Muslim prayers in the Bronx.” And it would “run roughshod over the consciences of the weak, young, and numbered.” Explaining that the Baptist Joint Committee values authentic prayer, Dunn asserted that Reagan’s Prayer Amendment would reduce prayer to a “lowest common denominator” and “possibly inoculate school children against authentic religious experience.”⁵⁰

Earlier in the day, a motion to censure Dunn for his controversial remarks about President Reagan had been withdrawn.⁵¹ In response, Dunn devoted a portion of his

⁴⁸James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 37, no. 4 (April 1982): 15.

⁴⁹“SBC Backs Prayer,” *Biblical Recorder*, June 26, 1982, 2-3.

⁵⁰Ibid. See also “Baptist Joint Committee explains Its Church-State Position in N.O. Report,” *Biblical Recorder*, July 10, 1982, 7.

⁵¹James C. Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis*, vol. 2 (Hannibal, MO: Hannibal Books, 1987), 8-9. Dunn’s remarks accusing President Reagan of playing “petty politics with prayer” and of being “deliberately dishonest” were not well received by more than a few Southern Baptists. In a letter to the editor of North Carolina’s *Biblical Recorder*, Harry E. Kahn, pastor of Oak View Church, stated that “the BJC may speak for some but not me. There’s something about the pottage they’re serving that don’t taste right.” In a similar vein, another pastor called on Dunn to issue an apology to President Reagan and Southern Baptists for his choice of words. See “Our Readers Write,” *Biblical Recorder*, July 19, 1982, 10-11.

report to the Convention in New Orleans to emphasize the Baptist Joint Committee's role in ensuring religious freedom for all. Dunn explained that religious liberty is "a Baptist distinctive – one of the marks that identifies us."⁵² He referred to soul freedom as "the very heart of what it means to be a Baptist" and audaciously declared that persons who reject the competency of the soul and sacredness of the individual conscience are not "real Baptists." Dunn described religious liberty and evangelism as "but different sides of the same coin." According to him, "unless we are actively engaged in Christian witness, we have not been good stewards of our freedom."⁵³

Despite Dunn's warnings, a majority of the messengers in New Orleans followed President Reagan's lead and adopted a resolution in support of his proposed prayer amendment.⁵⁴ Two prominent fundamentalist pastors, Charles Stanley of First Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia and Morris Chapman of First Baptist Church, Wichita Falls, Texas, urged passage of the prayer resolution during the Convention.⁵⁵ Stanley, a member of the national executive board of the Moral Majority, declared that the Supreme Court rulings of 1962 and 1963 were "only one step in the demoralizing of America." He portrayed Reagan's Prayer Amendment as an effort "to protect our religious freedom."

⁵²"Baptist Joint Committee explains Its Church-State Position in N.O. Report," *Biblical Recorder*, July 10, 1982, 7.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴"SBC Backs Prayer," *Biblical Recorder*, June 26, 1982, 2-3. One month before the Convention convened in New Orleans, fundamentalist leader Judge Paul Pressler and Resolutions Committee Chairman Norris W. Syndor Jr. informed the Baptist Joint Committee on two separate occasions that they did not intend to make school prayer an issue at the annual meeting. See "School Prayer Supporters Won't Push Issue at SBC," *Report from the Capital* 37, no. 6 (June 1982): 8.

⁵⁵Stan Haste, "Ed McAteer and White House Backing to Seek SBC Action," *Biblical Recorder*, July 17, 1982, 6. Observer Edward McAteer, a Religious Right leader and aide to President Reagan, said that the resolution's landslide victory was due primarily to the oratorical skills of Stanley and Chapman. McAteer also supported the Convention's decision to withdraw a resolution censuring Dunn. Noting that he hoped Dunn would "repent," McAteer said, "I'd like to impact the man for good. I'm not for overkill."

Stanley struck an alarmist chord when he warned the crowd that “if we continue to remain silent we will one day lose our freedom in our church houses as well as the school houses.”⁵⁶

Following Stanley, Chapman reasoned that Southern Baptists should support “school prayer” because atheists, humanists, and secularists had opposed prayer in schools for twenty years. He concluded, “That’s not the company we need to be keeping. It is not the company of the committed.” Both men’s remarks were greeted with approval by the crowd, especially Chapman who received thunderous applause. Several minutes later, denominational history was made and Resolution 9 entitled “On Prayer In Schools” passed by a 3-1 margin.⁵⁷ This historical action taken by the messengers made the Southern Baptist Convention the only major denomination in the United States to endorse a constitutional amendment or legislation to allow organized school prayer.⁵⁸ While the fundamentalist leaders championed Resolution 9, Dunn lamented its passage as an “incredible contradiction of our Baptist heritage.”⁵⁹

After the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in New Orleans, Dunn and the BJC frantically worked to inform its constituents and clarify the issues. Only two years before, in 1980, the Convention passed a resolution entitled “On Prayer For The Nation” which pointed out that the Supreme Court “has not held that it is illegal for any individual to pray or read his or her Bible in public schools.” The resolution also

⁵⁶Ibid. Ironically, messengers also approved a resolution during the Convention opposing President Reagan’s plan to give tax tuition credits to parents with children in private schools. See “SBC Backs Prayer,” *Biblical Recorder*, June 26, 1982, 2-3.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸“SBC Backs Prayer,” 2-3.

⁵⁹Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis*, vol. 2, 8-9.

adamantly opposed attempts “either by law or other means to circumvent the Supreme Court’s decisions forbidding government authored or sponsored religious exercises in public schools.” It pointed out that these Supreme Court decisions never forbade and even affirmed the right to voluntary prayer.⁶⁰ However, many Baptists, including Dunn, saw Resolution 9 as an attempt to do exactly what the previous resolution forbade—circumvent the Supreme Court’s decisions.⁶¹ Under sharp criticism from Dunn, SBC leaders defended their resolution in support of Reagan’s Prayer Amendment. In contrast to Dunn’s position, they argued that the government would not regulate the prayers being said in school.⁶² However, Dunn pointed to a White House document that had been prepared by the Department of Justice which emphatically declared that under Reagan’s proposal, “states and communities would be free to select prayers of their own choosing. They would choose prayers that have already been written or they could compose their own prayers.” The document further elaborated that “if groups of people are to be permitted to pray, someone must have the power to determine the content of such prayers.”⁶³

This document clearly supported Dunn’s original contention that Reagan’s Prayer Amendment would lead to government approved written prayers. As a result, Dunn stated that Resolution 9 was factually incorrect because it guaranteed that Reagan’s Prayer Amendment would not lead to government written prayers. From Dunn’s

⁶⁰“On Voluntary Prayer in Public Schools,” *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=861> (accessed, March 30, 2008).

⁶¹Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 146-147.

⁶²Derek Davis, “Baptist Approaches to Presidential Politics and Church-State Issues,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 32, no. 1 (January 1997): 28-39.

⁶³“Dunn ‘Encouraged’ by Poll,” *Baptist Standard*, December 12, 1982, 17.

perspective, the thin veil had been removed from Reagan's proposal and his intentions of mandatory government-written prayer had been exposed.⁶⁴

Less than a month after the 1982 Convention in New Orleans, an aide to President Reagan, Morton Blackwell, revealed that Religious Right leader Edward McAteer had received encouragement and support from the White House to push for a resolution endorsing the prayer amendment in New Orleans. In an interview with Baptist Press, Blackwell reluctantly admitted that he and McAteer met regularly and consulted one another before the New Orleans meeting. During the debate on the prayer resolution, McAteer never spoke. However, he played a vital role in ensuring that it passed through the Resolutions Committee by frequently advising committee chairman, Norris W. Sydnor.⁶⁵ According to Dunn, a White House staffer boasted that he had written the prayer resolution. From Dunn's perspective, this whole episode was a blatant and disgusting illustration of how secular politics had infiltrated the work of the Southern Baptist Convention.⁶⁶

Throughout 1982, Dunn continued to emphasize the centrality of soul freedom to the Baptist faith in his monthly columns published in the Baptist Joint Committee's publication, *Report from the Capital*. As fundamentalists were gaining greater control over the institutions and agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention, Dunn began to

⁶⁴"Baptist Church-State Leader Hails New Poll On Required School Prayer," *Report from the Capital* 38, no. 1 (January 1983): 8.

⁶⁵Cothen, *What Happened to the SBC?*, 353-356. Southern Baptist Edward McAteer was the founder of the Religious Roundtable, a group that mobilized evangelicals for conservative political causes. He has often been referred to as the "Father of the Religious Right." McAteer is also known for persuading Jerry Falwell to get involved in politics and for introducing Ronald Reagan to Christian activists in 1980 at a conference sponsored by his organization.

⁶⁶Bill Moyers, *God and Politics: The Battle for the Bible*, VHS (Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities, 1994).

warn his readers that “those from within” (i.e., fundamentalists) were a grave threat to the Baptist doctrine of soul freedom. Following the events in New Orleans, Dunn announced that the Baptist Joint Committee’s priorities in 1983 and 1984 would include a “back to Baptist-basics” emphasis on such Baptist distinctives as soul freedom.⁶⁷

Just a few months after the New Orleans Convention, Dunn took a huge swipe at his fundamentalist opponents:

There’s a breed of Christian with a rigid, nostalgic, labeling, negative religion that seems most interested in “dividing up sides.” A kind of fundamentalism reigns today in many of the world’s religions, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. It’s not that different from one to the other. This fundamentalism is more a matter of meanness of spirit than content of belief. This distorted zeal of which I speak is reactionary, wanting to recreate an idealized past rather than move forward fresh with faith and confidence. It’s “hung up” on facts, not faith; law not love; words not people....Before us are two contradictory approaches to the word “Christian.” The first is doctrinal, fact founded, propositional, the other vital faith-focused, incarnational. One is fated with laws and truths; the other filled with Grace and Truth. One is a categorical label that binds; the other a name for his followers that frees. They are mutually contradictory. We must choose.⁶⁸

Continuing his thinly-veiled, blistering attack on his fundamentalist opponents and their ideology that was quickly creeping into all segments of Southern Baptist life, Dunn lambasted them for “ripping out the heart of that which makes us Baptists.” Alluding to E. Y. Mullins’s *The Axioms of Religion* (1908), the book that most impacted Baptist identity in the twentieth century, Dunn asserted that “the people who mouth the extremist line that denies the axiomatic separation of church and state are breaching the Baptist bulwark for religious liberty.”⁶⁹ Dunn’s scathing criticisms undoubtedly infuriated his opponents who were beginning to realize that he needed to be silenced, and if that was

⁶⁷“Committee Affirms Free Exercise Rights,” *Baptist Standard*, October 13, 1982, 5.

⁶⁸James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 37, no. 8 (September 1982): 15.

⁶⁹Ibid.

impossible, he needed to be marginalized and ostracized.

Called the “Peace of Pittsburgh,” the 1983 annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention was relatively quiet compared to previous years. A resolution passed in Pittsburgh entitled “On Religious Liberty,” which called on Southern Baptists to “express their confidence in the United States Constitution, and particularly in the First Amendment, as adequate and sufficient guarantees to protect these freedoms (free exercise and no establishment of religion).”⁷⁰ This resolution was interpreted by Dunn and his supporters as a rejection of the 1982 prayer resolution. If the First Amendment provided an “adequate and sufficient” guarantee for complete religious liberty, Reagan’s Prayer Amendment was not needed. Consequently, Dunn rallied behind the 1983 resolution and it provided him the opportunity to proclaim the 1982 prayer resolution as an aberration of Baptist identity.⁷¹

Despite the new 1983 resolution, the 1982 resolution in support of President Reagan’s proposed Prayer Amendment caused some confusion on Capitol Hill. While testifying before a Senate Panel on the dangers of the prayer amendment, Dunn was asked by Utah Senator Orrin Hatch to address the disparity of Baptist views on the subject.⁷² Dunn told Hatch that a majority of the Southern Baptist affiliated state conventions which addressed the issue had taken positions against school prayer

⁷⁰“On Religious Liberty,” *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=953> (accessed, March 30, 2008).

⁷¹Walter Shurden and Randy Shepley, eds., *Going for the Jugular: A Documentary History of the SBC Holy War* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 110-111.

⁷²Samuel Currin, a new Southern Baptist representative to the BJC, wrote a letter to Senate Judiciary Chairman Strom Thurmond urging the panel to pass President Reagan’s Prayer Amendment. Currin’s letter cited the SBC’s 1982 prayer resolution. Twelve of the fifteen members of the SBC’s Public Affairs Committee (which relates to the BJC) responded by sending a letter to Thurmond which said that Currin did not speak for the PAC. See “New Member Bucks Stance on School Prayer,” *Baptist Standard*, July 16, 1983, 3. See also “Panel Rejects Chairman’s Letter on Prayer,” *Baptist Standard*, July 13, 1983, 5.

legislation.⁷³ He noted that nine state conventions had explicitly or implicitly repudiated the 1982 resolution. For example, messengers to the 1982 Kentucky Baptist Convention decided that “the Constitution as it now stands offers ample protection for worship” and Missouri Baptist Convention messengers opposed “any effort of government to become involved in the writing of prayers or in the religious instruction of our children.”⁷⁴ In addition, Dunn pointed to resolutions opposing Reagan’s proposal adopted in 1982 by the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. and the Progressive National Baptist Convention, both member bodies of the BJC.⁷⁵

Dunn was always quick to point out that between the years 1964 and 1983, the SBC had passed nine resolutions in support of the 1962 and 1963 Supreme Court rulings. He exhorted that “one resolution by one meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, incidentally opposite the position of three previous conventions, does not immediately and automatically supersede the established, ordered ways of doing Baptist business.” In other words, Dunn had no plans to alter the BJC’s consistent position against all forms of government-sponsored school prayer. While vehemently in opposition to Reagan’s proposal and the 1982 prayer resolution, Dunn continued to promote authentic voluntary prayer. “Any prayer that is prayer is voluntary. But any time it is prayer forced upon people, it is religious ritual and not prayer.”⁷⁶

⁷³Larry Chesser, “Dunn Asks Senate Panel To Reject Prayer Amendment,” *Baptist Standard*, May 18, 1983, 11.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Davis, “Baptist Approaches to Presidential Politics,” 28-39.

Conclusion

Dunn's first few years as Executive Director of the Baptist Joint Committee can not be described as uneventful. As the fighting between Southern Baptists for control of the denomination escalated, the fundamentalist movement turned its attention towards James Dunn. Indeed, Dunn delivered on his promise to bring an "aggressive approach" to the religious liberty scene on Capitol Hill. Dunn's vituperative language directed at a popular sitting President made him more foes than friends. Quickly, fundamentalists realized that the independent nature of the BJC made it very difficult to silence James Dunn. This infuriated the fundamentalists even further.

Unlike many moderate Southern Baptist leaders, Dunn was quick to recognize the threat his fundamentalist opponents posed to what Bill Leonard has called the "Grand Compromise." Dunn argued that Baptists who supported public monies for sectarian schools, tuition tax-credits and state-sponsored school prayer lacked an appreciation for "traditional Baptist theology." In addition to speaking out against the dangers of fundamentalism, Dunn attempted to educate his readers about the importance of such central Baptist distinctives as soul freedom. As fundamentalists continued to gain more and more control of the institutions and agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention and as the conflict between Dunn and his fundamentalist opponents continued to intensify, so did his explicit advocacy of soul freedom. In the middle to late 1980s until the BJC was defunded in 1991, Dunn increasingly would trumpet warnings that the Baptist commitment to soul freedom was in serious jeopardy if fundamentalists were allowed to continue their takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Southern Baptist Controversy Part II: James Dunn, Soul Freedom, and the Defunding of the Baptist Joint Committee

Equal Access Act

In the two decades following the infamous Supreme Court decisions of *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) and *Abington v. Schempp* and *Murray v. Curlett* (1963) more than 200 proposals were introduced into the United States Congress to pass legislation that would reinstate government-sponsored school prayer.¹ After helping to defeat President Ronald Reagan's proposed School Prayer Amendment in 1982, Dunn began to search for a piece of legislation that he could support to further free exercise rights.² Given the barrage of Establishment Clause issues that Dunn had dealt with in his early years as Executive Director of the BJC, he evidently believed it appropriate to search for avenues that would demonstrate his commitment to the preservation of the free exercise of religion.

On March 15, 1983, Senator Mark Hatfield (R-OR), who was a friend of Dunn and the BJC, introduced a bill "to provide that it shall be unlawful to discriminate against any meetings of students in public secondary schools." Hatfield's legislation, known as the Equal Access Act, proposed that secular and religious non-school sponsored student groups must be granted equal access to any limited open forum created in a public school

¹James E. Wood Jr., "Equal Access: A New Direction in American Public Education," *Journal of Church & State* 27, no. 1 (1985): 5-18. In the landmark decision of *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962), the Supreme Court determined that it was unconstitutional for state officials to compose an official school prayer and require its recitation in public schools. The Supreme Court in *Abington Township School District v. Schempp* (consolidated with *Murray v. Curlett*), 374 U.S. 203 (1963), declared school sponsored Bible readings in public schools to be unconstitutional.

²Pam Parry, *On Guard for Religious Liberty: Six Decades of the Baptist Joint Committee* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1997), 26-28.

when the students met on their own initiative and without any official encouragement or sponsorship for religious discussion and prayer.³ The Oregon Senator's bill was a "straightforward measure" to apply the Supreme Court decision in *Widmar v. Vincent* (1981) to public high schools which receive federal aid. In *Widmar*, the Supreme Court held that, absent a compelling purpose, a public university may not deny the use of its facilities to student groups who wish to meet and speak on religious subjects if it makes its facilities generally available to student groups for meetings on nonreligious subjects.⁴

Testifying in support of a companion equal access bill in the United States House of Representatives, Dunn stated that the measure would aid school officials "in making difficult decisions about the proper role of religion in the public school classroom" and would relieve some of the pressure on Congress to pass a constitutional amendment on school prayer. Dunn believed that equal access legislation was desperately needed to restore "basic fairness" to the public schools.⁵

Dunn's support for equal access legislation drew ire from some of the BJC's friends who believed the agency was kowtowing to Southern Baptist fundamentalists furious at Dunn over his attack on President Reagan's Prayer Amendment.⁶ Most

³Dan Martin, "Committee supports equal access bill; affirms opposition to school prayer," *Report from the Capital* 39, no. 4 (April 1984): 5. A "limited open forum" means that the school permits free discussion of ideas and issues. This type of forum is open only to its students, as opposed to the public at large. Under the Equal Access Act, the limited open forum exists when the school allows secular student groups or clubs to use school facilities in non-instructional time for their activities and when those activities are not related to the normal curriculum of the school. When those conditions are met, the school is required to allow religious clubs the same use of its facilities allowed other non-curriculum-related clubs. Religious clubs must be voluntary, student-initiated, and student-led, with no direction from public school employees or nonschool persons. See *Equal Access Act*, United States Department of Justice, <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/cor/byagency/ed4071.htm> [accessed May 18, 2008].

⁴Parry, *On Guard for Religious Liberty*, 25.

⁵Larry Chesser, "Dunn: Restore 'Fairness,'" *Baptist Standard*, April 4, 1984.

⁶Parry, *On Guard for Religious Liberty*, 26-27.

notable of the equal access opponents was Dunn's predecessor at the BJC, James E. Wood, Jr.⁷ Detractors of equal access legislation and specifically Senator Hatfield's Equal Access Act argued that such legislation violated the Establishment Clause by having the primary effect of advancing religion. Referring to the Equal Access Act as the "Son of School Prayer," the *Washington Post* found the legislation to be "an unfortunate precedent" and "bad policy."⁸

Though many Southern Baptist fundamentalists felt the Equal Access Act was an inadequate alternative to the Reagan Prayer Amendment, most ultimately supported the bill. Dunn's BJC alongside the National Council of Churches, Seventh-Day Adventists, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the Christian Legal Society stood firmly in support of Senator Hatfield's Equal Access Act.⁹ After nearly two years of hearings, lobbying, and negotiations, the Equal Access Act passed the Senate 88-11 and the House 337-77. On August 11, 1984, President Reagan signed the Equal Access Act into law.¹⁰ Missouri Baptist editor Bob Terry called the Equal Access Act "a victory for the Baptist Joint Committee." Terry declared:

Southern Baptists owe James Dunn and the staff of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs sincerest congratulations and heartfelt gratitude for their role in the battle for prayer and Bible study in public schools. While other players have grabbed more headlines than the Baptist Joint Committee, it should not be forgotten that equal access legislation had its birth in the Joint Committee.¹¹

⁷Wood, "Equal Access: A New Direction in American Public Education," 6-10.

⁸T.R. Reid, "House prepares for 'son of school prayer,'" *The Washington Post*, May 14, 1984.

⁹Parry, *On Guard for Religious Liberty*, 26-27.

¹⁰Ronald Flowers, *That Godless Court?: Supreme Court Decisions on Church-State Relationships* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 120-121.

¹¹Bob Terry, "Editorial," *Word & Way*, August 2, 1984, 7.

Unfortunately for Dunn, his Southern Baptist critics never publicly recognized nor fully appreciated the BJC's efforts to defend and promote a robust reading of the Free Exercise Clause.¹²

Ambassador to the Vatican

Despite their intense differences with Dunn over the Reagan Prayer Amendment, Southern Baptist fundamentalists sided with Dunn in his firm opposition to the establishment of full diplomatic relations with the Vatican. Throughout their history, both the SBC and BJC have taken a consistent stand against efforts by the White House to send a United States envoy or ambassador to the Vatican.¹³ As a result of President Reagan's move to establish full diplomatic relations with the Vatican, every living former president of the SBC (sixteen total) signed a letter in protest.¹⁴ The Executive Committee of the SBC and eleven Baptist state conventions also voiced their opposition.¹⁵

¹²Under Dunn's leadership the BJC helped develop guidelines to assist public secondary schools across the nation to implement the Equal Access Act. Six years later, the Supreme Court affirmed the constitutionality of the Equal Access Act in *Board of Education v. Mergens*, 496 U.S. 226 (1990). Dunn declared that the Mergens decision "restored a proper balance between the separation of church and state and the constitutional guarantees of free speech and free exercise of religion." See James M. Dunn, "Reflections," *Report from the Capital* 45, no. 8 (September 1990): 15.

¹³In 1983, the Baptist Joint Committee reaffirmed their opposition to diplomatic relations with the Vatican by passing a statement entitled, "Ambassador To The Vatican." See "Ambassador to the Vatican," (Resolution, Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, Washington, D. C., October 3, 1983). The Southern Baptist Convention has passed three resolutions (1969, 1984, 1993) opposing diplomatic relations with the Vatican. See <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions>.

¹⁴"All Former SBC Presidents Oppose U.S. – Vatican Move," *Biblical Recorder*, February 11, 1984, 5. Interestingly, the SBC refused to support a lawsuit filed by Americans United challenging diplomatic relations in 1984 because they did not wish to hurt Reagan's chances at re-election. See "Action on Vatican Suit is Delayed," *Baptist Standard*, September 26, 1984, 3.

¹⁵Vicki Crumpton, "An Analysis of Southern Baptist Response To Diplomatic Relations Between The United States And The Vatican," (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1988), 222. The following state Baptist conventions in 1983 passed resolutions against diplomatic relations with the Vatican: Arkansas, District of Columbia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, South Carolina and Virginia. In 1984 Georgia, Illinois, North Carolina, Pennsylvania/New Jersey, Tennessee, and Texas added their voices in opposition.

In a letter to President Reagan, Dunn urged the president to “support church-state separation and oppose the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Vatican.” He explained, “Establishing a diplomatic post with any church tramples the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution by showing preference to one religious faith over the other.”¹⁶ Dunn declared: “For the Administration to pretend that the naming of an ambassador to a church has nothing to do with religion is a ludicrous leap of logic smacking of Orwell’s 1984.” Like the living former Presidents of the SBC, Dunn maintained that the Vatican was primarily a church headquarters rather than a sovereign state. Therefore, the sending of an ambassador to a “church headquarters” confers favors on that particular church.¹⁷

After President Reagan established full diplomatic relations, Dunn was quoted in *The New York Times* calling Reagan’s action “a dumb, bungling move by an Administrator that doesn’t seem to understand the first lesson about church-state relations.”¹⁸ For the State Department to seek a relationship allowing the United States to influence the political positions of the Holy See reflected “an arrogant and blatantly volatile posture,” Dunn charged. According to Dunn, “The very idea that we would enter this relationship announcing in advance that we intend to attempt to shape the political positions of the Roman Catholic Church is contrary to everything we mean by separation of church and state.”¹⁹

¹⁶Larry Chesser, “Vatican Request ‘On Hold,’” *Baptist Standard*, January 11, 1984, 4.

¹⁷Kenneth A. Briggs, “Church Groups Denounce Reagan Move,” *The New York Times*, January 11, 1984, A4.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Larry Chesser, “Bid to Influence Vatican Draws Criticism From Dunn,” *Baptist Standard*, February 15, 1984, 5.

People for the American Way

Support for the Equal Access Act and opposition to diplomatic relations with the Vatican proved that Southern Baptist fundamentalists agreed with the position of Dunn and the Baptist Joint Committee on many religious liberty questions. However, the fundamentalists also agreed that Dunn was not going to always represent their interests on Capitol Hill. And to a group known for its demands of conformity, this was not acceptable.

After his controversial remarks regarding President Reagan and his proposed Prayer Amendment, Dunn began to be attacked by the fundamentalist leaders for his involvement on the twenty-eight member board of “People for the American Way” (PFAW). PFAW was founded by controversial television producer Norman Lear, Barbara Jordan, and a group of distinguished business, religious, and political leaders in 1981 to counter the growing clout and the divisive message they heard coming from Jerry Falwell, the Moral Majority and other Religious Right leaders such as influential televangelists Pat Robertson and Jimmy Swaggart.²⁰

Shortly before the creation of PFAW, the board of the BJC passed an official policy statement on the imminent dangers of civil religion. This statement stressed the concern and fear that “the current activities of the Religious Right may pose a more dangerous threat to the American principle of church-state separation than any previous similar movement.” It called on all Baptists to be pro-active and to work together with other concerned citizens, regardless of their religious faith or lack thereof, and to counter

²⁰“Dunn Defends Himself, BJCPA,” *Baptist Standard*, June 6, 1984, 10-11.

the political agenda of the Religious Right.²¹ Describing why he chose to serve on the board of PFAW Dunn said,

The board brought together church leaders and corporate leaders who care about religious liberty and sat them down together on the same board. That had not been true anywhere else....I am convinced that it was proper for me to know what they were doing and to participate in the activities of People for the American Way, as a citizen concerned about First Amendment issues, relating to them in the same coalition way that we relate to all the other major factors on religious liberty issues on the Washington scene.²²

While some Baptists like Dunn viewed PFAW as a broad-based national education group for First Amendment rights, many fundamentalists within the SBC viewed PFAW as an organization that attempted to undermine what they considered to be traditional Christian values. In its defense, PFAW had never taken a position or written a paper on the issues of pornography, homosexuality or abortion. Dunn argued that the strong Roman Catholic presence on PFAW's board was evidence "that we have not been involved in those myths of overheated rhetoric that have been injected into the criticism of PFAW."²³ Clearly, Dunn's critics were angered that one of the most visible Southern Baptists was involved in an organization vehemently opposed to much of the Religious Right's agenda and many of President Reagan's policies.

Consequently, those who wished to see James Dunn fired from his position as Executive Director of the BJC began to wage an aggressive campaign against him that focused on his involvement with PFAW. Paige Patterson described Dunn's involvement

²¹"BJC Statement On the Dangers of Civil Religion," (Resolution, Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, Washington, D. C., October 7, 1980).

²²"Dunn Defends Himself, BJCPA," *Baptist Standard*, 10-11.

²³"Dunn Defends Himself, BJCPA," *Baptist Standard*, 10-11.

with PFAW as, “it’s like putting Sodom together with Jerusalem.”²⁴ Patterson continued, “PFAW has been consistently espousing almost every conceivably left-wing position in the country. They oppose many things that we hold most dear.”²⁵ Even after Dunn resigned from the PFAW board the attacks continued. Russell Kaemmerling, editor of the widely read *Southern Baptist Advocate*, publicly questioned whether Dunn was “still sympathetic” with the “pornographic smut peddlers, homosexual activists and baby-killing abortionists who make up People for the American Way.”²⁶ Other critics were not mollified by Dunn’s decision to not serve a second term on the board of PFAW. One, former Alabama congressman, Albert Lee Smith, suggested that the only way to quiet the criticism would be for Dunn to resign his post as Executive Director of the BJC.²⁷ Samuel Currin, chairman of the SBC’s Public Affairs Committee which related to the BJC, described PFAW as “antagonistic to everything we (Southern Baptists) stand for.” Currin even refused to attend the BJC’s annual Religious Liberty Conference because some of the program’s participants were connected to PFAW.²⁸

²⁴Dan Martin, “Dunn Quits PAW Post,” *Baptist Standard*, January 25, 1984, 3.

²⁵Ibid. See James Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis*, vol. 4 (Hannibal, MO: Hannibal Books, 1989): 76.

²⁶Russell Kaemmerling, quoted in Dan Martin, “Dunn quits PAW Post; Criticism Continues,” *Baptist Standard*, 5 December 1984, 3. Paul Pressler was also upset with Dunn’s participation with PFAW. See James Hefley, *Truth in Crisis*, Vol. 4, 73. Research conducted for Nancy Ammerman’s book, *Baptist Battles*, suggested that two-thirds of SBC clergy read the *Southern Baptist Advocate*. See Mark Wingfield, “Texas Trustee of IMB Sent to Prison,” *Baptist Standard*, August 6, 2001, 2.

²⁷Martin, “Dunn Quits PAW Post.” Albert Lee Smith served on the Public Affairs Committee of the SBC from 1986-1990, 1990 (chairman).

²⁸Ibid. An editorial published in the *Baptist Standard* argued that both Albert Lee Smith and Sam Currin’s criticisms of Dunn and PFAW must be seen in light of their personal politics. Currin was a former aide to Senator Jesse Helms who has been supported strongly by the Moral Majority and Smith was elected to the U.S. Congress in 1980 with strong backing from the Moral Majority. Smith unseated fellow Republican John Buchanan and Southern Baptist minister who was active in PFAW and a personal friend of Dunn and the Baptist Joint Committee. See “Role of Southern Baptists in Nation’s Capital,” *Baptist Standard*, February 8, 1984, 6-7.

Dunn's opponents engaged in the tactics of guilt-by-association. They associated him with the famous television producer and one of the founders of PFAW, Norman Lear. William Henley, President of the Alabama Baptist Convention, identified Lear and PFAW as "enemies of America...a front group for the 'spiritual vacuuming' of America."²⁹ Dunn countered,

The fact that Norman Lear is associated is irrelevant, it's not his. It does not belong to him. Father (Theodore) Hesburgh (President of Notre Dame) also is on the board and that doesn't make me a Catholic. The late Ruth Carter Stapleton was also on the board and that didn't make me a charismatic.³⁰

Dunn lamented this "guilt by association with someone (Norman Lear) with whom I disagree on several things while agreeing passionately with him on religious liberty as essential to the American Way," and argued that in actuality the smear campaign against him largely rested on his strong opposition to the Reagan Prayer Amendment.³¹

According to respected sociologist Nancy Ammerman, a prominent pastor said,

When you get associated with something that's against the conservative movement in the denomination, then that's just kind of thumbing your nose [at us]....James Dunn does not represent mainstream Southern Baptists and we will never get the representation from him on moral or First Amendment issues that we as mainstream Southern Baptists desire.³²

The campaign against Dunn was partially successful. In late 1982, messengers to the Kansas-Nebraska Convention adopted a resolution stating that unless the BJC and Dunn "adopted a public posture on national issues more consistent with current state

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid. Norman Lear was the producer of the controversial satire, "All in the Family."

³¹Craig Bird, "Kansas-Nebraska Resolution Puzzles, Disturbs James Dunn," *The Religious Herald*, December 16, 1982, 15.

³²Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict within the Southern Baptist Convention* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 100. Ammerman stated that the pastor was prominent but did not identify the pastor's name.

resolutions of the SBC” then the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention should “begin the process of severing the relationship that now exists between our denomination and the BJC.”³³

The Alabama State Baptist Convention followed suit in 1983 when they passed a resolution asking that funding of the BJC be withdrawn because of Dunn’s participation in PFAW. The resolution accused Dunn of “being identified by name and title” with those who “espouse philosophies which are contrary to Biblical principles of decency and morality.”³⁴ However, the SBC Executive Committee rejected this request in an unanimous decision.³⁵

Multiple large Southern Baptist churches also passed resolutions against the Baptist Joint Committee. Several congregations even withdrew their financial support during this period. For example, Morris Chapman’s First Baptist Church of Wichita Falls, Texas withdrew its funding. Fundamentalist leader Paige Patterson described Wichita’s decision as “the shot heard ‘round the world.” Ironically, this “shot heard ‘round the

³³“Resolution #6,” *Annual of the Kansas-Nebraska Convention of Southern Baptists* (Garden City, KS: Kansas-Nebraska Convention, 1982), 12-13. See “Kansas-Nebraska: Slaps James Dunn,” *Southern Baptist Journal* 2 (February 1983): 2.

³⁴“Resolution Concerning the Executive Director of the BJCPA and the Organization PFAW,” *Annual of the Alabama Baptist State Convention* (Tuscaloosa: Executive Board of the ABSC, 1983), 86. See “Alabamans Ask BJCPA Be Defunded,” *Baptist Standard*, November 11, 1983, 11.

³⁵Grady Cothen, *What Happened to the Southern Baptist Convention: A Memoir of the Controversy* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., 1993), 183. Ed Drake, an attorney from Dallas and member of the Executive Committee, commented, “I do not question Dunn’s intellectual capacity but I think his editorial comments are frequently wrong. I get many publications...I glance at, but I read the *Report from the Capital* because I want to know what the other side is doing.” Drake claimed that the BJC’s publication often takes positions “not representative of Southern Baptists.” See Dan Martin, “Committee Refuses to Deny Funds to BJCPA,” *Baptist Standard*, February 29, 1984, 3.

world” was given little coverage by the state Baptist newspapers and the fundamentalists’ own independent publications.³⁶

Charles Stanley’s First Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia was also one of the first churches to threaten termination of their contribution to the SBC’s Cooperative Program unless funding was denied to the BJC. Both Stanley and Chapman were ardent supporters of President Reagan’s Prayer Amendment and important fundamentalist voices in the Southern Baptist Convention. During a sermon in 1982 to the First Baptist Church of Tyler, Texas, Stanley, who was one of the co-founders of the Moral Majority, warned the congregation that the “east Texas values by which you have raised your children and by which many of you were raised are in jeopardy of extinction.” Stanley elaborated that the BJC and unnamed “liberal” Southern Baptist seminary professors were among those who threatened “east Texas values.”³⁷

Despite these harsh indictments, Dunn did not blame the messengers to the Alabama and Kansas-Nebraska state conventions for the resolutions against him. He said, “A great many of the pastors, I know, respect, and believe to be honorable. That makes this situation all the more tragic—that someone could mislead them into a conspiratorial war of words.” “It is entirely unacceptable to be forced to engage in a defensive debate after the public hanging,” Dunn retorted. In fact, Dunn was never once contacted by the SBC’s resolutions committee to check the facts, offer a response or “at least [give a] warning [to] the Christian brother who has offended you.” According to Dunn, “the

³⁶Beth Spring, “James Dunn Is The Focus of a Southern Baptist Controversy,” *Christianity Today*, March 16, 1984, 44-46.

³⁷Bong Hee Han, “The Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs: A Case Study of the New Right in Denominational Conflict,” (paper, Religion and the Body Politic, J. M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, 1990).

sudden appearance of similar resolutions across the Southern Baptist Convention with identical phrases and flaws of factual error suggest a smear campaign aimed at me and the Baptist Joint Committee.”³⁸

In an attempt to quash the controversy, Dunn declined to serve a second three-year term on the board of directors of PFAW. He said, “I’ve got enough to do on religious liberty concerns without wasting time with people who are bothered about my being part of it (PFAW).”³⁹ However, this action did not pacify his critics who suggested that the only way to quiet the criticism would be for Dunn to resign from his position as Executive Director of the BJC. Dunn refused. He noted that the attacks on himself and the BJC “required a great deal of forbearance and forgiveness on our part.” He also stressed that all agencies within the SBC should realize that such attacks “may be instructive to all our agencies if we recognize the challenge to the precious right of free association, if we identify the tactics of those with a personal and political agenda attempting to use Southern Baptists, and if we determine to know the facts and not be misled by distortion and untruth.” Dunn stressed that leaving the board of the PFAW did not signal a retreat from working with groups with different levels of disagreement. He never stopped emphasizing that Christians should work with “many people with whom we do not agree on everything....I believe in the long haul it is terribly important that we continue to work in the real world.”⁴⁰

³⁸Craig Bird, “Dunn Says Action Part of Smear Campaign,” *Baptist Standard*, December 1, 1982, 5.

³⁹“Fire Dunn,” *Southern Baptist Journal* 12, no. 2 (May/June 1984): 11.

⁴⁰“Dunn Quits PAW Post; Criticism Continues,” *Baptist Standard*, December 5, 1984, 3.

Abortion

One of the earliest criticisms of James Dunn by his Southern Baptist opponents was his refusal to repudiate a pro-choice position on abortion. In 1973, the BJC voted not to join the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights.⁴¹ Dunn's predecessor, James Wood, went on record in his official capacity as Executive Director of the BJC in support of abortion rights. However, Wood is the only Executive Director in the history of the BJC to officially espouse such a view. When James Dunn became Executive Director in 1980, he redirected the efforts of the BJC to focus solely on religious liberty issues. This decision frustrated fundamentalists who demanded that Dunn repudiate Wood's position and take a strong stand against abortion. Adding to fundamentalist consternation was the fact that Dunn had an agreement with the BJC's search committee that the BJC would not publicly fight the abortion issue. Dunn concurred that the assignment for ethical concerns such as abortion rested elsewhere.⁴²

In 1983, Dunn further angered fundamentalists when he voiced a stinging rebuke of President Reagan's social agenda.⁴³ Dunn bemoaned that "the complex issue of abortion is reduced to the simple cry of 'infanticide' by Mr. Reagan, who would redress 'a great national wrong' in the name of civil religion, making it virtually impossible for mothers to make their own decisions in this very private, very religious matter." Dunn's criticism of President Reagan and his reference to mothers making their own choices sounded like a pro-choice position to conservatives. In recent years, Paige Patterson has

⁴¹Dorothy Cherry Schleicher, "A History and Analysis of the Role of the Baptist Joint Committee, 1972 – Present," (master's thesis, Baylor University, 1993), 94.

⁴²Parry, *On Guard for Religious Liberty*, 20.

⁴³Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), 44.

claimed that abortion was the key issue that led to the Southern Baptist Convention's defunding of the BJC in 1991.⁴⁴ Whatever the case, Dunn's reticence about his personal view of abortion and his refusal to publicly embrace a pro-life position was enough to convince fundamentalists that he would never promote their social-political agenda.⁴⁵

Defunding of the Baptist Joint Committee

As Southern Baptist fundamentalists implemented their "conservative resurgence" they asserted that Dunn was unresponsive to the obvious concerns of rank and file Southern Baptists. Despite the fact that the BJC represented multiple Baptist bodies, Southern Baptists carried the financial weight of the organization and resurgence leaders wanted more accountability for their conservative political concerns.⁴⁶ In 1982, fundamentalist architect Paige Patterson told a reporter that something would be done to silence James Dunn.⁴⁷ The resolutions passed by the Alabama Baptist State Convention

⁴⁴Jerry Falwell likewise said that the abortion issue was what made him enter into political activism and form the Moral Majority in 1979. See Jerry Falwell, *Strength for the Journey: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 337.

⁴⁵Ibid., 191. Hefley notes that "conservatives" were upset with the BJC about abortion. See James Hefley, *Truth in Crisis*, Vol. 1, 174. After the SBC cut their contribution to the BJC by 87 percent in 1991, a Baptist Press editor wrote an article which cited Dunn's past statement on abortion and concluded that his statement "indicated abortion should be protected by the Free Exercise Clause and anti-abortion legislation is a form of government interference in religion." BJC spokesman Larry Chesser decried that conclusion and stated that "James Dunn did not come close to saying abortion should be protected by the Free Exercise Clause or that anti-abortion legislation amounts to government interference in religion." Dunn responded, "As everyone knows, or should know, quite well, the Baptist Joint Committee since I have been here has never supported abortion as a free exercise right, nor have we addressed the issue of abortion in any fashion. Mr. Strode's story makes a leap of generalization that completely misses the truth. My 1983 quote simply acknowledges that abortion, like all serious moral and ethical decisions, has religious dimensions. Who can deny that?" See Herb Hollinger, "Dunn: BJCPA does not support abortion as free exercise right," *Baptist Standard*, July 17, 1991, 4.

⁴⁶James Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis: The Controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention*, Vol. 2 (Hannibal, MO: Hannibal Books, 1987), 131-138. For Paul Pressler's view of the SBC's battle with the BJC and James Dunn, see Judge Paul Pressler, *A Hill On Which to Die: One Southern Baptist's Journey* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 253-262.

⁴⁷Cothen, *What Happened to the Southern Baptist Convention*, 353-356.

and the Kansas-Nebraska Convention which called on the Southern Baptist Convention to sever their relationship with the BJC was but a preliminary step in the fundamentalists effort to silence Dunn.

At the 1984 annual meeting of the SBC held in Kansas City, the fundamentalists launched their first big push to withdraw all financial support from the BJC. Ed Drake, a messenger from W.A. Criswell's church, First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, moved that the SBC withdraw all funding from the Public Affairs Committee, a standing committee through which Southern Baptist contributions were channeled to the BJC (\$411,436 for the 1984-1985 budget).⁴⁸ The motion failed, however, 51.65% to 48.35%.⁴⁹ When asked by reporter Bob Terry why he and the Baptist Joint Committee had become the center of the Southern Baptist Controversy, Dunn offered two reasons. First, he explained that religious liberty and church-state separation had never received more national attention than in 1981-1984. Second, Dunn blamed the "apparent erosion or the illusion of erosion within Southern Baptist life of their historic commitment to a very dedicated stance on church-state separation." He said these two trends had converged.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, Dunn addressed the attempts to defund the BJC in his monthly column. While stressing the unique "jointness" of the BJC—an organization of nine different Baptist bodies—Dunn pointed out that about the only cooperative ministry that Baptists throughout America participate in is the work of the BJC. Dunn asserted that since seventy-five cents of every Baptist dollar is given through the SBC, "it is not

⁴⁸"Effort Fails to Reallocate PAC Funds," *Biblical Recorder*, June 23, 1984, 1.

⁴⁹*Ibid.* With 81% of registered messengers voting, 5,864 (51.6%) opposed Drake's motion. However, 5,480 (48.4%) voted in support of the motion. More than 100 votes were discarded due to improper balloting.

⁵⁰Bob Terry, "Dunn Defends Himself, BJCPA," *Baptist Standard*, June 6, 1984, 10.

terribly out of line for Southern Baptists to supply the lion's share of funding. Maybigness of spirit exceed bigness of budget.”⁵¹

Also in his monthly column, Dunn vigorously championed and defended soul freedom. After his father's death in early 1983, Dunn explained that even his “Daddy understood” the importance of soul freedom and church-state separation. He wrote,

Daddy understood. He like most of those like him, could not articulate the profound theological truths in which our insistence upon total freedom of religion is rooted. Who can say it clearly? He just knew that government had no business passing judgment on what is or isn't acceptable religion. He just boiled at the thought of tax dollars going to any church schools.⁵²

Several months later, Dunn compared his fundamentalist opponents to the “critics of Paul” or Judaizers of the New Testament who were legalists—demanding that Gentile believers follow the Jewish law of circumcision—and thus afraid of freedom. Dunn explained that the Judaizers, whom the Apostle Paul called “Stupid Galatians,” put “law over love, safety over freedom, authority over liberty, and the good ole days over the difficult present.” They were “afraid of pluralism and diversity.” Echoing E. Y. Mullins, Dunn continued, “Freedom is fundamentally religious. Religious freedom is the basic freedom of all. That's because freedom is rooted in the nature and being of God. The person of God is the font of freedom. Theology in its strictest sense, the study of God, argues for freedom.” Dunn emphasized that genuine personal religious experience is found in freedom rather than sterile religion like that of the “Stupid Galatians” which was compulsory in nature. “It's grace not law. Christ not creed,” said Dunn.⁵³

⁵¹James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 39, no. 4 (May 1984): 15.

⁵²James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 38, no. 5 (May 1983): 15.

⁵³James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 38, no. 9 (October 1983): 15.

Throughout 1984, Dunn emphasized the theme of that year's Religious Liberty Day which was "My Faith: Voluntary and Obedient." Affirming religious liberty as a gift from God, Dunn stressed the "goodness of free choice in matters of religion." However, Dunn understood that with freedom comes much responsibility. He wrote, "We accept the responsibility that rides piggyback on every freedom...faith that is voluntary is and must be obedient." According to Dunn,

If obedience is not voluntary it has the hollow echo of blind submission. If voluntariness is not obedient, it prompts the question "free for what?" A free faith without obedience can be no more than an adolescent insistence on having one's way. Freedom and responsibility are set in dynamic, creative tension in the Christian life.⁵⁴

The theme of freedom and responsibility was consistent throughout Dunn's writings. The form of faith that Dunn promoted was not based on subjective religious experience alone. In his view, subjective religious experience must always be coupled with "objective truth" found in the authority of the Bible.⁵⁵ Appealing to Baptist history, Dunn noted three well-known Baptist preachers (Roger Williams, Walter Rauschenbusch and Martin Luther King, Jr.) who embraced a faith that was both voluntary and obedient. Further evidence, Dunn explained, that Baptists have dedicated themselves to a faith genuinely voluntary is the way in which Baptists have refused to permit the government to interfere in matters of faith and practice. According to Dunn, Baptists have fought to keep the conscience "unfettered" by opposing governmental efforts to finance religious education and religious institutions. He argued that throughout their history, Baptists have affirmed church-state separation "as the only sensible way for government to

⁵⁴James M. Dunn, "Reflections," *Report from the Capital* 39, no. 3 (March 1984): 15.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

recognize that faith is voluntary.”⁵⁶ Alluding to the on-going battles being fought in the Southern Baptist Convention, Dunn stressed that “A commitment to [soul freedom] has been a golden thread binding together our fellowship.” Even as the future of his organization was in jeopardy, Dunn refused to take his eye off what he felt was most important – soul freedom. For Dunn, the voluntary principle or soul freedom was the heart of Baptist life, the cornerstone from which all other freedoms emerged.⁵⁷

Following the fundamentalists first big push to defund the BJC at the 1984 annual SBC meeting in Kansas City, Dunn launched an attack of his own against his critics whom he believed were attempting to "collapse the distinction between mixing politics and religion (which is inevitable) and merging church and state (which is inexcusable)." In his monthly column, Dunn explained that the efforts of the fundamentalists should come as no surprise because "so many among the elder generation shows so little respect for the study of history." Dunn called on Baptists to remember the words of George W. Truett who from the east steps of the United States Capitol declared, "It behooves us often to look backward as well as forward....The occasional backward look would give us poise and patience and courage and fearlessness and faith." Dunn warned that, "political manipulators" (clearly a reference to his fundamentalist opponents) are always "reading to victimize those who do not realize the importance of history." Thus, Baptists of all stripes should "give a hoot" about history.⁵⁸

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸James M. Dunn, "Reflections," *Report from the Capital* 40, no. 1 (January 1985): 15.

The following year in May 1985 the largest ever annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention was held in Dallas, Texas. There were almost 40,000 messengers in attendance. In 1985, messengers to the Dallas meeting focused on matters other than the BJC such as the appointment of a twenty-two member Peace Committee.⁵⁹ However, the Convention did pass resolutions which affirmed the Equal Access Act and opposed the appointment of an Ambassador to the Vatican.⁶⁰

At the 1986 meeting of the SBC held in Atlanta, another effort was made to defund the BJC. Alabama messenger M. G. “Dan” Daniels, a perennial critic of Dunn, moved that the convention “vote to remove the Southern Baptist Convention from participation in the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and establish an exclusive Southern Baptist presence in Washington, D.C. for the purpose of more truly reflecting our views.” The motion also asked that all budget funds designated to the BJC be transferred to the Southern Baptist organization “at the first fiscal opportunity.”⁶¹ Later, Daniels noted that his motion was given to him “by the Holy Spirit and drawn up solely by me.” Daniels explained that he made the motion because he felt that the BJC took extremely liberal positions on church-state relations. According to Daniels, the BJC’s

⁵⁹Claude L Howe Jr., “From Dallas to New Orleans,” *Theological Educator* 41 (Spring 1990): 101-103. The Peace Committee, composed of both moderates and conservatives, investigated alleged liberalism in the convention. The report of the committee was controversial. Moderates claimed that their opponents began to use its “findings” about theology as a creed. The report asked for convention politics to cease, but the request was not followed.

⁶⁰*Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville, TN: Southern Baptist Convention, 1985), 83, 104. The resolution entitled “On Equal Access” urged Southern Baptists to “work diligently for the education of our people for the purpose of understanding and implementing the provisions of the Equal Access Act in their local communities.” The resolution entitled “U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See” stated that President Reagan’s appointment of an ambassador to the Vatican was in “violation of the establishment clause of the First Amendment and denies to Southern Baptists the equal protection of the laws required by the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution.”

⁶¹“Dunn Pleased At Referral,” *Baptist Standard*, June 18, 1986, 9.

positions are “the same as that of the United States Supreme Court. It is not the position of the United States Constitution, the First Amendment, our forefathers or the vast majority of Southern Baptists.”⁶²

Though Daniels’ motion was not successful, it was not rejected outright either. The motion was referred to the Executive Committee (by a 55.6% to 44.3% vote) who created a seven-member “special fact-finding committee” to study the relationship of the SBC to the BJC.⁶³ Author Arthur Farnsley has written that the referral of Daniels’ motion to the Executive Committee was a colossal tactical mistake made by the moderates and consequently a turning point in the fight between fundamentalists and the BJC. According to Farnsley, the referral to the Executive Committee “gave the people most friendly to the motion the power to decide.”⁶⁴

However, Dunn welcomed the fact-finding committee’s investigation. He bluntly declared, “We welcome the opportunity to help [the fact-finding committee] get the facts...not opinions.” One of the committee members was the notorious fundamentalist architect, Paul Pressler. During a meeting between Dunn, his staff, and the fact-finding committee, Pressler attacked Dunn for his past remarks about President Reagan. At one

⁶²M. G. Daniels, “Messengers Explains Motion,” *Biblical Recorder*, August 30, 1986, 3.

⁶³“Baptist Joint Committee Motion Referred,” *Biblical Recorder*, June 21, 1986, 6. The four pastors of the BJC staff issued a letter decrying Daniels motion to defund the BJC. They wrote, “For Southern Baptists to withdrawn support from the BJC would be a grave error...We urge our fellow Southern Baptists to join us in affirming the value of the BJC and to continue our strong support through the CP. We urge others to let the Executive Committee know of their support as the Executive Committee considers during this year the motion to withdraw financial support of the BJC. The separation of church and state has never been more endangered than now. More than ever before, Baptists need a strong witness in Washington that is biblically sound and politically astute. We thank God that we have such a voice in the BJC. May we have the wisdom to keep it, and to make it even stronger.” See “Pastors React to Joint Committee Motion,” *Biblical Recorder*, August 30, 1986, 3.

⁶⁴Arthur E. Farnsley II, *Southern Baptist Politics: Authority and Power in the Restructuring of an American Denomination* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 31.

point he scolded Dunn, “You know we could change the executive director and that might solve all of our problems.”⁶⁵ Towards the end of the investigation, Dunn’s BJC and the fact-finding committee reached a compromise. As a result, SBC representation on the BJC’s fifty-four member board increased from fifteen to eighteen representatives. In an effort to maintain the “jointness” of the BJC, it was decided that no denomination should have more than one-third of the members on the board.⁶⁶ Paul Pressler even promised to oppose any future efforts to defund the BJC.⁶⁷

Brushing aside criticisms that his style was abrasive and counterproductive, Dunn noted that “one does not fight social and political battles [for 20 years] without being an equal opportunity offender.” When asked what would happen to the BJC if the SBC voted to stop funding it, Dunn claimed that hundreds of Baptist individuals, churches, associations and even state conventions had expressed their commitment to continue working with the BJC. Thus, according to Dunn, the question was not whether the BJC would continue to be funded by Southern Baptists but how much. He remarked, “We’re convinced enough Southern Baptists are committed to funding the committee that we could continue.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵Cothen, *What Happened to the Southern Baptist Convention*, 356.

⁶⁶Dan Martin, “BJCPA approves plan to revise representation on committee; amount of budget support a factor,” *Report from the Capital* 41, no. 10 (November-December 1986): 8. Dan Martin, “Panel Asks SBC-BJCPA Ties Be Retained,” *Baptist Standard*, May 27, 1987, 4. On May 12, 1987 while speaking to a group of pastors, Pressler said “I also pledge if the bylaw is adopted to do everything I can to keep a motion from being made to defund the BJC. And if, unfortunately, there is a motion to defund the BJC – if the bylaw is passed – I will do everything I can to defeat the motion.” See David T. Morgan, *The New Crusades, the New Holy Land: Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention 1969-1991* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 110.

⁶⁷“Pressler Opposes Defunding Baptist Joint Committee,” *Biblical Recorder*, May 23, 1987, 18.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

At the same time that the special fact-finding committee was investigating the BJC, the fundamentalist members of the SBC Public Affairs Committee (PAC) began to push for a merger with the SBC's Christian Life Commission for handling "legislative and governmental issues" in Washington D.C. The PAC's most controversial course of action occurred in 1987 when they publicly endorsed President Reagan's nomination of Robert Bork as Supreme Court Justice. This resolution adopted by the PAC urged the Senate Judiciary Committee and the Senate to confirm Bork's nomination and called on the BJC "which receives 91 percent of its subsidy from the Southern Baptist Convention cooperative funds, to issue a similar recommendation and to direct its staff to lobby on behalf of the Bork nomination."⁶⁹

Dunn condemned this unprecedented action.⁷⁰ During the entire history of the BJC, Dunn countered, "it has never endorsed candidates, dealt with personalities or approved or opposed individuals under consideration for public office."⁷¹ Moreover, in a "back door" attempt to strip the BJC of its funds, the PAC laid claim to the SBC's

⁶⁹Dan Martin, "Dispute Arises Over 'Public Affairs' Funds," *Baptist Standard*, September 2, 1987, 5. See also *Book of Reports with Recommendations for Convention* (San Antonio: Southern Baptist Convention, 1988), 175-179.

⁷⁰The SBC related to the BJC through the PAC; the PAC consisted of the SBC members on the BJC board. Dan Martin and Mark Kelly, "Public Affairs Panel Urges Bork Confirmation," *Baptist Standard*, September 2, 1987, 3. Marv Knox, "PAC, AIDS Crisis Drew States' Attention," *Baptist Standard*, December 2, 1987, 5.

⁷¹James M. Dunn, "Reflections," *Report from the Capital*, 42, no. 9 (October 1987): 15. During this period of turmoil, the General Board of the Council on Christian Life and Public Affairs of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina (BSCNC) adopted a statement of support affirming the work of the BJC. In light of the PAC's endorsement of Robert Bork, the statement called on the BJC "not to endorse or oppose candidates for either elected or appointed public office." The Christian Life Council stated, "While we cannot agree with those who say that the recent endorsement by the PAC of the SBC would endanger that Convention's tax exempt status, we nonetheless find that such involvement clearly draws the SBC into a partisan political and personal issue, an area which Baptist groups have wisely avoided in the past. See "Statement Affirms Work of Joint Committee," *Biblical Recorder*, October 10, 1987, 6.

\$448,400 allocation that had always gone directly to the BJC. Instead, the PAC claimed that the money had to be first channeled through the PAC before going to the BJC.⁷²

During the 1987 annual meeting of the SBC held in St. Louis, M. G. Dan Daniels again took aim at James Dunn and the BJC. Daniels moved that the Convention “vote to instruct the Southern Baptist Convention Public Affairs Committee to take all steps necessary, consistent with its participation in the BJC to accomplish as soon as possible changes in the personnel of the operational staff of the BJC for the purpose of more truly reflecting our views.” Daniels’ motion was referred to the PAC for further study. However, this occasion marked the first time that a Southern Baptist messenger had called for the firing of James Dunn from the floor of the Convention.⁷³

At the October 1987 meeting of the BJC, the SBC’s representatives to the PAC met privately and voted eight to four to suggest that the SBC sever ties with the BJC. The vote asked for \$485,200 to fund and staff the PAC “as the agency of the Southern Baptist Convention to deal with First Amendment and religious liberty issues beginning October 1, 1988, or at the earliest possible date.”⁷⁴

Reflecting on the heated two-day BJC meeting, Dunn noted that whatever the motives or intentions of the fundamentalists might be, “they would redefine politically the work of this fifty-one year old BJC. They would destroy the ‘jointness’ of the BJC.

⁷²Dan Martin and Mark Kelly, “Dispute Arises Over ‘Public Affairs’ Funds,” *Baptist Standard*, September 2, 1987, 5. Toby Druin, “PAC Funds, Non-SBC Exhibit Studies Ordered,” *Baptist Standard*, September 30, 1987, 3.

⁷³*Book of Reports 1988*, 178.

⁷⁴Marv Knox and Greg Warner, “The BJC Meeting,” *Report from the Capital* 42, no. 10 (November/December 1987): 4-5, 10, 16.

And they would part from the Baptist way in church-state relations. So we care about the Southern Baptist battle.”⁷⁵ Dunn reiterated,

Once again, those with a loaded political agenda have demonstrated their willingness to defy the repeated action of the SBC in its national gatherings as messengers have repeatedly voted to continue support for the budget and program of the BJCPA. In 1984, 1986, and again in 1987, the SBC resoundingly reaffirmed its support for the BJCPA, its work, its historical program assignment and its jointness with other Baptists.⁷⁶

However, Dunn remained optimistic about the future of the BJC. Predicting that the BJC would continue its work in Washington by relying on financial support from individual Southern Baptist churches, associates, and state conventions, Dunn asserted:

This probably will mean a healthy and even stronger Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, regardless of the organizations or funding approach. I am completely convinced that, one way or another, Southern Baptists will continue to have a strong voice for the separationist perspective in Washington, D.C.⁷⁷

To the chagrin of the PAC, the Executive Committee of the SBC declined to act on their vote to dissolve institutional and financial ties with the BJC. At their March 1988 meeting, the Executive Committee recommended that the SBC reduce its annual contribution to the BJC budget by \$48,400 for the 1988-1989 fiscal year. Dunn noted that “since 96 percent of the BJC budget is fixed expenses,” they would have to dismiss some staff members or find outside funding.⁷⁸ Money was not the only pressing concern on Dunn’s mind. He also advocated the importance of freedom while giving his report before the 1988 convention. Dunn declared, “Religious freedom is the foundation of all

⁷⁵James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 43, no. 1 (January 1988): 15.

⁷⁶“Baker, Elder, Dunn Criticize Proposal,” *Baptist Standard*, January 6, 1988, 13.

⁷⁷Marv Knox and Greg Warner, “The BJC Meeting.”

⁷⁸“BJC/PAC Are Given Time to ‘Work It Out,’” *Baptist Standard*, March 2, 1988, 3.

freedoms, rooted in the nature of God, essential to the way all humanity relates to the Divine, necessary to limit the power of government.”⁷⁹

Despite multiple efforts by the fundamentalists to defund the BJC, Dunn continued to stay on message in his monthly columns. In the months leading up to the 1986 midterm elections, Dunn reminded his readers of their duty as Christians to be active citizens and participate in the political process. He emphasized that it is the duty of churches to take a stand on biblical issues such as peace, justice, honesty and compassion for those in need.⁸⁰ Above all, Dunn believed that public policy must be informed and shaped by compassion. Dunn argued that any theology for politics must be based on a dedication to freedom. For Baptists and other Christians this freedom is the freedom found in Christ. According to Dunn, “Christians see the baseline doctrine that all persons are made in the image of God as indicating that freedom and responsibility are basic equipment issued by the Heavenly Creator to all humankind.”⁸¹

While Dunn advocated that it is necessary for Christians to “meddle in politics,” he was adamant that the institutions of church and state must maintain a healthy distance between one another. Urging his fellow Baptists to “continue to proclaim the twin truths of faith and liberty,” Dunn stressed that Baptists “must reclaim the theological base for religious freedom without sacrificing a passionate prophetic witness.” He said, “Baptists who *are* Baptists still believe in the separation of church and state.”⁸²

⁷⁹*Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville, TN: SBC, 1988), 258.

⁸⁰James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 41, no. 1 (January 1986): 15.

⁸¹James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 40, no. 3 (March 1985): 15.

⁸²James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 41, no. 1 (January 1986): 15.

Continuing his emphasis on both freedom and responsibility, Dunn once again stressed that “Baptists at our best have insisted upon balance between authority and experience, the objective and subjective.” Existing together in creative tension, soul freedom sits “serenely” by the side of the sole authority of Scripture as expressions of the Baptist basis for faith, said Dunn.⁸³ Like E. Y. Mullins, Dunn repeatedly emphasized that “If the Baptist tributary of Christian faith has anything at all to offer the larger church, it is the concept of ‘soul freedom.’” However, to stress individualism was not to deny community. Dunn noted that individualism was only “half of the story.” Individualism in salvation is where the doctrine of soul freedom begins but community is presupposed and needed.⁸⁴

In his monthly columns, Dunn consistently stated that the gravest contemporary threat to the doctrine of soul freedom came from the fundamentalist movement led by Paige Patterson and Paul Pressler. Alluding to these increasingly powerful fundamentalists, Dunn exclaimed, “A smug arrogance mars the mien of those who presume to sit in critical judgment on the Word of God. What a lofty perch, what a remarkable vantage point one assumed in dogmatically telling other believers what must be said of Scripture without having yet practiced it.” Like Southern Baptist statesman Herschel Hobbs, Dunn too was fearful of “creeping creedalism.” He declared,

This Baptist is unwilling to play today’s silly word games in evangelical circles over who believes the Bible the most. The spirit-led, time-tested confessions of

⁸³James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 40, no. 4 (April 1985): 15.

⁸⁴James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 43, no. 4 (April 1988): 15. Mullins focused on the individual’s relationship to God with his concept of “soul competency.” However, he said that genuine voluntary individual faith led toward life in the church: “Individual believers were inevitably drawn together by spiritual affinity in fellowship; their renewed spiritual natures then impelled them to associate themselves together as a church.” Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, 133, quoted in C. Douglas Weaver, “The Baptist Ecclesiology of E. Y. Mullins: Individualism and the New Testament Church,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 43, 1 (Winter 2008): 18-34.

the past seem to say it better. One clings to the traditional baptist view of Scripture as the sole rule for faith and practice not because it says less but because it says more.⁸⁵

Dunn described the fundamentalists' efforts to impose rigid doctrinal conformity under the banner of "inerrancy" as thoroughly "un-Baptistic." He described the conformity demanded by the fundamentalists as "paralyzing" and "mindless."⁸⁶ However, as he concluded many of his columns, Dunn pointed out that "unbridled individualism is not acceptable." According to Dunn, "Anarchistic, undisciplined, subjectivism does not go with genuine Christianity. Yet, thoughtless conformity, meek submission to a commanding pastoral figure, or mouthing the password demanded by the spiritual sentry are not marks of Christian discipleship."⁸⁷ In Dunn's Baptist eyes, a voluntary, uncoerced faith is the only valid religion.⁸⁸

At the 1988 meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in San Antonio, the fundamentalists put their own spin on the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers with the passage of "Resolution No. 5."⁸⁹ This highly controversial resolution stated that "the high profile emphasis on the doctrine of the Priesthood of the Believer is a term which is subject to both misunderstanding and abuse" and that the doctrine "has been used to justify wrongly the attitude that a Christian may believe whatever he so chooses and still be considered a loyal Southern Baptist." Resolution No. 5 also accused the doctrine of

⁸⁵James M. Dunn, "Reflections," *Report from the Capital* 40, no. 4 (April 1985): 15.

⁸⁶James M. Dunn, "Reflections," *Report from the Capital* 42, no. 6 (June 1987): 15.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸James M. Dunn, "Reflections," *Report from the Capital* 42, no. 5 (May 1987): 15.

⁸⁹Resolution No. 5 was adopted by a vote of 10,950 to 9,050 or 54.75% to 45.25%. See "Margin of Vote for SBC Resolution Is Clarified," *Religious Herald*, July 28, 1988, 4.

the “Priesthood of the Believer” of being used to justify the undermining of pastoral authority in the local church. Thus the resolution emphasized “the role, responsibility, and authority of the pastor.”⁹⁰

Before the Convention in San Antonio, W. A. Criswell laid the groundwork for the resolution’s passage in a sermon to the widely attended Pastor’s Conference. He declared, “We have taken the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer and made it cover every damnable heresy you can imagine.”⁹¹ Jerry Sutton, chairman of the Resolutions Committee and author of Resolution No. 5, explained that he felt Southern Baptists needed to go “on record affirming what the priesthood of the believer is and what it is not.”⁹²

However, the passage of Resolution No. 5 caused quite a kerfuffle. Marjorie Hyer of the *Washington Post* wrote, “The fundamentalist controlled Southern Baptist Convention, after less than 25 minutes debate, today, took a step away from the central tenet of the Protestant Reformation: that lay Christians and clergy have equal authority to interpret Scripture.”⁹³ At least eight of the leading editors of Baptist state newspapers decried Resolution No. 5.⁹⁴ R. G. Puckett, editor of North Carolina’s *Biblical Recorder*,

⁹⁰*Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville, TN: SBC, 1988), 68-69.

⁹¹Morgan, *The New Crusades*, 94.

⁹²“Resolution Redefines ‘Priesthood of Believer,’” *Religious Herald*, June 23, 1988, 4-5.

⁹³Marjorie Hyer, “Southern Baptists Vote Shift in Ministers’ Authority; Convention Resolution on Scriptural Interpretation Moves Away From a Reformation Tenet,” *The Washington Post*, June 16, 1988, A3.

⁹⁴“Resolution Redefines ‘Priesthood of Believer,’” *Religious Herald*, June 23, 1988, 4-5.

referred to the controversial resolution as “nothing short of heresy to a genuine Baptist.”⁹⁵

Julian Pentecost of Virginia’s *Religious Herald* called the resolution “a mockery of the New Testament’s repeated emphasis on the equality of all believers in Christ; and the right and responsibility of each believer to deal directly with God for himself.”⁹⁶

Resolution No. 5 was so offensive to some that it prompted Randall Lolley, former President of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, to lead several hundred messenger protestors to the front of the Alamo in San Antonio where they tore up copies of the resolution. Lolley called it “the most non-Baptist document” he had ever seen.⁹⁷

Dunn was especially angry at the passage of Resolution No. 5. When asked by a reporter how so many Southern Baptist messengers could have voted for a resolution so antithetical to Baptist beliefs, Dunn replied,

They do not know what Baptists mean [by priesthood of the believer]. We haven’t done a good job in Training Union. We have folks who are more creatures of [TV] tube theology than biblical theology. We have a success syndrome mentality that will build big churches at any cost. You can’t give bumper sticker answers to these complex questions...You can’t give curbside answers.⁹⁸

Dunn was adamant that Baptist theology cannot be determined by a vote from the floor of the Southern Baptist Convention. He reminded the reporter that authentic Baptists find their “theological moorings” from “the Word of God, interpreted by the Holy Spirit and

⁹⁵Morgan, *The New Crusades*, 94.

⁹⁶Julian Pentecost, “Editorial,” *Religious Herald*, June 23, 1988, 8-9. Pentecost continued, “The resolution suggests a second class role for women and men in their submission to dictatorial and autocratic pastors; and it contributes to possible further division in our denomination between laity and clergy.”

⁹⁷Morgan, *The New Crusades*, 94.

⁹⁸Hefley, vol. 4, 81-82.

expressed in the fellowship of the church.”⁹⁹ The priesthood of all believers is the “key doctrine,” said Dunn. He reiterated that “the regenerate church of baptized believers is built upon the notion that somebody has to be capable of choosing for themselves.”¹⁰⁰ As he often said, “The theology that fuels our missionary fires that ignites our evangelistic warmth, is predicated upon our belief that all persons come to God freely, voluntarily, one at a time or not at all.”¹⁰¹

At the annual meeting in San Antonio, the messengers also voted to affirm the SBC Executive Committee’s recommendation to reduce the SBC’s annual contribution to the BJC budget by \$48,400 for the upcoming 1988-1989 fiscal year. When asked about the first significant and successful attempt to defund the BJC, Dunn expressed his concern but stressed that he had been “powerfully reassured that the Baptist way will be heard.”¹⁰²

In 1988 a committee was appointed by the Budget and Finance Subcommittee of the Executive Committee of the SBC to study “alternatives” to the relationship between the SBC and the BJC.¹⁰³ This seven-member committee recommended the creation of a Religious Liberty Commission to represent the SBC in Washington D.C.. The study committee recommended funding for the 1989-1990 fiscal year “be reduced from the 1988-1989 funding level” of \$400,00, but did not specify an amount. With this

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹James M. Dunn, “Reflections,” *Report from the Capital* 41, no. 7 (July-August 1986): 15.

¹⁰²Hefley, vol. 4, 83-84.

¹⁰³This study committee was the third special committee appointed since 1986 to study the program of or funding for the BJCPA and its relationship with the SBC.

recommendation, Paul Pressler, a member of the study committee, broke his short-lived promise to oppose any future efforts to defund the BJC.¹⁰⁴

Dunn described the committee's recommendation as a "shocking disappointment" to him. Due to the fact that Dunn was given no chance to offer his input, he declared that the recommendation was "presented without regard for facts or fairness." He said,

Four conventions of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1984, '86, '87 and '88 have in different ways and by various margins affirmed and sustained the relationship of Southern Baptists with the Baptist Joint Committee. It has not deterred a small group of dedicated, political activists from using every tactic available including the use of smaller and smaller groups to try to destroy the effectiveness of the Baptist Joint Committee. In this most recent process of the smallest group yet, we were given no opportunity for input no participation or hearing at any point. We think that is adequate support for my suggestion that this process has taken place without regard for facts or fairness.¹⁰⁵

At their February meeting in 1989, the SBC Executive Committee heard and approved by a forty-two to twenty-seven vote the study committee's recommendation for the establishment and funding of a Religious Liberty Commission on Capitol Hill. This new commission would replace the current SBC Public Affairs Committee and would continue to relate to the BJC "on issues on which they agree." The commission's representatives from twenty-seven state conventions would provide the SBC's representatives to the BJC and would determine the amount of money from its budget to be passed on for support of the BJC.¹⁰⁶ Dunn responded by describing the Executive

¹⁰⁴Dan Martin, "BJCPA Study Panel to Propose Commission," *Baptist Standard*, January 18, 1989, 5. In his memoirs, Pressler revealed that he always desired to end the SBC's relationship with the BJC. He just chose to be "incremental" in his approach to accomplishing that task. See Pressler, *A Hill On Which to Die*, 259.

¹⁰⁵"Disappointed Dunn Says Panel Disregards 'Facts, Fairness,'" *Baptist Standard*, January 18, 1989, 5.

¹⁰⁶Toby Druin, "Executive Committee Approves Commission," *Baptist Standard*, March 1, 1989, 3.

Committee's decision as "shabby, unfair, unethical, and improper," and declared that the BJC would "not compromise historic Baptist convictions for a mess of politically-tainted pottage."¹⁰⁷ However, the study committee's proposal to create the Religious Liberty Commission never made it to the floor of the convention for a vote.¹⁰⁸

Nonetheless, there was yet another motion at the 1989 SBC meeting held in Las Vegas which called for the complete defunding of the BJC.¹⁰⁹ Later, the messengers approved the 1989-1990 budget which designated \$391,796 for the BJC, down from \$400,000 the previous year.¹¹⁰ According to James Hefley, Dunn was "visibly relieved at having escaped another attempt at defunding." Hefley stated that SBC President Jerry Vines said, "He has no reason to feel good. The vote this morning was an affirmation of the Executive Committee and its budget procedure, not James Dunn and the Baptist Joint Committee. He's like the man who fell from the 40th floor who remarked as he was passing the 30th, 'I feel good.'"¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷Julian H. Pentecost, "A Disturbing Meeting of the SBC Executive Committee," *Religious Herald*, March 9, 1989, 6.

¹⁰⁸Farnsley, *Southern Baptist Politics*, 32-35. Due to decreasing budget receipts coupled with arguments that the new commission would take funds away from both the Foreign Mission Board and the Home Mission Board, SBC President Jerry Vines requested that a decision on the proposal be postponed. Some have speculated that Vines was concerned that many Southern Baptists (especially the fundamentalists whose votes were necessary to approve the RLC proposal) would not make the trek to Las Vegas, also known as "Sin City," for the 1989 annual meeting.

¹⁰⁹Charlie Waller of Virginia moved that Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary be given \$350,000 from the BJC budget. His motion was narrowly defeated, 6,034 to 5,198. In addition to Waller's motion, Kenneth Barnett, a member of the SBC Executive Committee from Colorado, moved that \$200,000 be deleted from the BJC's budget and be reallocated with \$60,000 going to the Foreign Mission Board, \$50,000 going to the Home Mission Board, \$50,000 going to the PAC, and \$40,000 going to the CLC. However, Barnett's motion to defund the BJC was ruled out of order due to the already proposed Waller motion. See *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville, TN: Southern Baptist Convention, 1989).

¹¹⁰Toby Druin, "Dunn Answers Questions on BJCPA Funds," *Baptist Standard*, July 19, 1989, 4.

¹¹¹James C. Hefley, *The Truth In Crisis: The Controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention*, vol. 5 (Hannibal, MO: Hannibal Books, 1991), 73-75.

During the report of the PAC and BJC there was a sharp disagreement between PAC Chairman Sam Currin and Dunn. Currin claimed that the SBC provided “almost 90 percent of the fundraising of the Baptist Joint Committee.” According to Currin, the PAC was “unable to get an accounting from the BJC on something as basic as where their money is coming from and how it is being spent.” However, Dunn challenged Currin’s statement and insisted that the SBC only provided 53.7% of his committee’s funds in the 1990 budget.¹¹² Currin responded by accusing Dunn and the BJC of “circumventing the Cooperative Program in soliciting funds.” Dunn called Currin’s retort a “lie.” He explained,

There are those whose mentality is so conspiratorial, so dark and so manipulatively political that they cannot imagine the groundswell of support that has come to the Baptist Joint Committee simply because our budget was cut in San Antonio last year....But I am just like anybody who has an agency responsibility – I haven’t sent a single check back. But I have not been soliciting funds.¹¹³

With his fundamentalist critics threatening to completely cut off support from the SBC, Dunn vigorously argued before the Convention that the attempts to “stifle the voice for freedom will not long prevail in Baptist life.” Dunn urged “non-creedal, liberty-loving” Southern Baptists to insist upon “free expression.” He asked,

How does one maintain a vibrant interest in the issue of religious liberty undergirded by the principle of church-state separation? Baptists answer that question quite simply by pointing back to a day in our own nation’s history when armed solely with the truth of soul competency....Baptist interest in this arena must not be allowed to wane. Indeed we are looked upon by persons in

¹¹²According to Dunn, the SBC provided only 60% in the 1988-1989 fiscal year and 70% in the 1987-1988 fiscal year. James Hefley concedes that Dunn’s figures were accurate “as far as Cooperative Program funds go.” Hefley argues that contributions from other Southern Baptist sources brought the figure as high as 90%. See Hefley, Vol. 4, 213.

¹¹³Druin, “Dunn Answers Questions on BJCPA Funds.”

government and from other national church groups as the standard bearers for religious liberty.¹¹⁴

In February 1990, the Executive Committee for the first time explicitly recommended that the SBC defund the BJC. The Executive Committee proposed slashing funds designated to the BJC by 87% (\$341,796), from \$391.796 in 1989-1990 to a mere \$50,000 in 1990-1991, and giving nearly \$300,000 of that amount to the SBC Christian Life Commission to represent the denomination in religious liberty matters.¹¹⁵

Before the vote was held to defund the BJC at the 1990 annual meeting in New Orleans, Dunn had one last opportunity to appeal for the continued support of the SBC.

Giving his yearly report before the SBC, Dunn said:

Sticking together – we call it our “jointness” – is the best word for describing the BJC. The BJC alone is dedicated exclusively to the shared witness for all sorts of Baptists in this country to the Baptist distinctive, religious freedom. Only in the BJC do Baptists in America come together to affirm the most basic Baptist belief in soul freedom....The dedication of Southern Baptists to religious liberty must continue unabated in the noble effort to educate, to inform, to shape and to inspire future generations of Baptists – our sons and daughters. Any [budget] cut would threaten the actual work of the BJC...a budget reduction would downgrade the Convention’s emphasis upon religious liberty and church-state separation; turn away from togetherness with other Baptists, including an apparent and ultimately a rejection of a special relationship with black Baptists; and break faith with the Southern Baptists who are committed to continuing to relate to the BJC.¹¹⁶

In especially desperate times, Dunn still appealed to his theology of soul freedom as the essence of Baptist identity.

¹¹⁴*Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville, TN: SBC, 1989), 215-217.

¹¹⁵Lonnie Wilkey, “Proposal Would Slash BJC Funds 87 Percent,” *Baptist Standard*, February 7, 1990, 4. See also Toby Druin, “Joint Committee Funds Slashed; Will Go To CLC,” *Baptist Standard*, February 28, 1990, 4.

¹¹⁶“Report of the Baptist Joint Committee,” *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville, TN: Southern Baptist Convention, 1990), 251.

Despite Dunn's pleas, a majority of the messengers to the 1990 New Orleans Convention affirmed the Executive Committee's recommendation, voting to slash funding to the BJC by slightly more than 87%.¹¹⁷ Facing immediate financial difficulties, Dunn asserted once again that the BJC would "continue in the tradition of [John] Leland and [George] Truett who would not compromise on religious liberty."¹¹⁸ Dunn lamented, "Everything has changed; those who now mouth things about accommodation want to take a little tax money. We haven't changed and we're sticking by that [no compromise] agenda."¹¹⁹

Several months later, the BJC changed its bylaws at their fall meeting and reduced the SBC's number of representatives from eighteen to eleven.¹²⁰ The BJC also added a new "national member body" called the Religious Liberty Council, an umbrella organization led by moderate Southern Baptists representing state conventions, churches and the Southern Baptist Alliance.¹²¹ In addition to fundraising, the 215-member council was designed to work with the BJC to "develop, cultivate and nurture Baptists in an understanding of religious freedom and its corollary, the separation of church and

¹¹⁷Pamela Schaeffer, "Southern Baptists Slash Most Funding To Liberal Lobby Group," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 14, 1993, 8.

¹¹⁸James C. Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention*, vol. 6 (Hannibal, MO: Hannibal Books, 2005), 214.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*

¹²⁰Dan Martin, "Joint Committee Cuts SBC Delegation to 11," *Baptist Standard*, October 10, 1990, 5.

¹²¹The Southern Baptist Alliance was founded in 1986 by disaffected Southern Baptists in response to the fundamentalist takeover of the SBC. According to their statement of purpose, the Southern Baptist Alliance was founded as "an alliance of individuals and churches dedicated to the preservation of historic Baptist principles, freedoms and traditions and the continuance of our ministry and mission within the Southern Baptist Convention." See G.T. Halbrooks, "Alliance of Baptists," in *Dictionary of Baptists in America*, ed. Bill J. Leonard (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 19.

state.”¹²² Due to the perceived loss of educational emphases on Baptist distinctives, Dunn vowed to find ways to advocate more efficiently to Baptists about their core distinctives such as religious liberty and soul freedom.¹²³

Dunn’s feelings were on display in the October, 1990 issue of the BJC’s *Report from the Capital*. Reprinted in that issue was a cartoon which first appeared in *Newsday* that showed the entrance to a “Fundamentalist Baptist Church” with footprints stamped on a carpet labeled “Bill of Rights.” The cartoon’s caption was written by Dunn. It read:

There’s a ‘fundamentalism’ that is simply honest and faithful to the Bible and another ‘Fundamentalism’ that is the stuff of theological terrorism and spiritual and political tyranny. What irony, then, that the religious radicals called Baptists, who contributed so significantly to the Bill of Rights should now be represented among its detractors on the evening of the bicentennial of that document. Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Doug Marlette of *Newsday* has captured the essence of the way the world sees Baptists.¹²⁴

The following year at the 1991 annual meeting held in Atlanta, messengers to the SBC voted to completely sever financial ties with the BJC. The votes in New Orleans (1990) and Atlanta (1991) represented a short and simple end to a long and complex story. According to one analyst, the “democratic squabble” over funding the BJC simply disappeared because one of the parties finally ceased to show up. After their 1990 loss at

¹²²Ken Camp, “Religious Liberty Council will support BJCPA,” *Baptist Standard*, April 28, 1990, 5. Founding officers of the RLC included Abner McCall, president-emeritus, Baylor University; Grady Cothen, former president of the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention; and Gardner Taylor, retired pastor of the Progressive National Baptist Convention.

¹²³James M. Dunn, “Executive Director’s Report,” Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, October 1990.

¹²⁴“Cartoon,” *Report from the Capital* (October 1990): 7.

New Orleans, moderate supporters of the BJC had left the scene. The Atlanta meeting of 1991 was “a quiet return to civility.”¹²⁵

In his last address to the Southern Baptist Convention, Dunn expressed that he was “terribly saddened” by the vote to sever ties. Though saddened that the historic relationship between the BJC and its principal founder had come to an end, Dunn declared, “Baptists will not remain silent facing the destruction of the wall of separation between church and state.”¹²⁶

Conclusion

Throughout the 1980s, Dunn consistently championed soul freedom as the theological base of religious freedom. For Dunn, soul freedom was the bedrock of Baptist identity. He argued that this freedom was the cornerstone from which all other Baptist distinctives emerged. However, the uncoerced voluntary faith advocated for by Dunn was not based on subjective religious experience alone. He repeatedly emphasized that Baptists have always emphasized a balance between the authority of the Scripture and personal religious experience. With the freedom found in Christ comes much responsibility. According to Dunn, individualism was only “half of the story.” Community is presupposed and necessary. As the SBC Controversy intensified, Dunn seemed to give greater attention to his defense that soul freedom did not inevitably result in excessive individualism.

¹²⁵Farnsley, *Southern Baptist Politics*, 33-35. “Morris Chapman: President reelected by acclamation,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, June 5, 1991. One last point of conflict between the SBC and BJC arose when the SBC refused to give the BJC a capital needs fund of \$300,000 which had been earmarked to the BJC by the SBC in 1968. The CLC laid claim to the money and after much negotiation the BJC chose not to file a lawsuit and instead settled for \$100,000 of the fund.

¹²⁶“Public Affairs Director Vows Fight For Separation of Church and State,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, June 7, 1991.

Dunn believed that the gravest contemporary threat to soul freedom came from the fundamentalists who were rapidly seizing complete control of the Southern Baptist Convention. With fundamentalists at the helm of the SBC, the future of Dunn's Baptist Joint Committee was uncertain. The SBC provided at least two-thirds of the BJC's budget. Consequently, the fundamentalist-controlled PAC demanded control of an organization known for its "jointness."

Despite Dunn's support for the Equal Access Act and strong opposition to the diplomatic relations with the Vatican, Southern Baptist fundamentalists reached the conclusion that Dunn would never promote their entire conservative political agenda. To fundamentalists, his involvement with People for the American Way and his willingness to work with the American Civil Liberties Union proved their point. The fact that Dunn was willing to work with the conservative National Association of Evangelicals for the purposes of defending religious liberty did not seem to matter. The "you're either with us or against us" attitude held by many fundamentalist leaders prevailed and won the day. James Dunn either had to be fired or the SBC would defund the BJC.

With only one-third representation on the BJC Board, firing Dunn was not a viable option. Although not always transparent about their true intentions and goals, defunding was the strategy of choice for the fundamentalists. After several failed attempts beginning in 1984, the fundamentalists finally severed ties completely with Dunn and the BJC during the summer of 1991.

Some have argued that Dunn's language throughout the 1980s was unnecessarily bombastic and his personality too confrontational. Did James Dunn's rhetoric hinder him in the defense of religious liberty in the Southern Baptist Controversy? Perhaps. Surely

Dunn's vituperative language against a popular President, accusing Reagan of "despicable demagoguery," made him more foes than friends. His attacks on fundamentalism obviously did not sit well with his critics. Implying that fundamentalists were like the legalistic critics of the Apostle Paul, whom Dunn dubbed as "Stupid

Galatians,” likely angered more than a few leaders of the “Conservative Resurgence.” Nonetheless, as the memoirs of fundamentalist leader Paul Pressler reveal, he always desired to end the SBC’s relationship with the BJC. Dunn’s rhetoric was a complicating factor, as were other issues like his refusal to address the subject of abortion and willingness to work with liberal advocacy organizations such as PFAW, but his strong separationist views on church-state relations were primarily why his opponents believed he could never represent them.¹²⁷

Dunn’s language not only reflected who he was but he believed that it was also necessary to fight a vicious threat against a precious Baptist distinctive. Clearly, Dunn did not remain silent or capitulate when he was convinced that conscience was at stake. In the face of accusations that he was sympathetic to “pornographic smut peddlers,” “baby-killing abortionists,” and “enemies of America,” Dunn continued to appeal to soul freedom as the essence of Baptist identity. Dunn’s commitment to soul freedom and religious liberty was on display during his last address to the SBC where he defiantly declared, “Baptists will not remain silent facing the destruction of the wall of separation between church and state.”

¹²⁷Paul Pressler, *A Hill on Which to Die: One Southern Baptist’s Journey* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Press, 1999), 259-262.

CHAPTER FIVE

Epilogue

Without question, James Dunn has been the most aggressive Baptist proponent for religious liberty in the United States in recent decades. Especially in his role as Executive Director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs (1981-1999), Dunn articulated a view of church-state relations that was founded upon the idea of soul freedom. According to Dunn, soul freedom is a God-given gift which means that each individual can have direct access to God without a human mediator. Each individual is free to have a personal relationship with God. For Dunn, soul freedom is voluntary uncoerced faith and an unfettered individual conscience before God. Following in the footsteps of previous Baptist leaders such as E. Y. Mullins, Dunn believed that soul freedom was the essence of what it meant to be a Baptist. Building upon the cornerstone of soul freedom, Dunn believed that the Baptist tradition was true to itself when it defended complete religious liberty for all. For Dunn, religious liberty inescapably was tied to the separation of church and state. Consequently, Dunn brokered no compromise with Baptist opponents that he considered unfaithful to the Baptist tradition of religious liberty.

Dunn became exposed to “applied Christianity” and the social implications of the gospel while in high school. He had a progressive pastor on the issue of race and other social issues. Dunn eventually committed to a vocation geared toward social ministry while a college student. During his studies at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, he was significantly influenced by the thought of Baptist ethicist T. B. Maston.

Dunn learned about soul freedom and its importance to the Baptist tradition from seminary professor Stewart Newman. As a doctoral student, Dunn wrote his dissertation on J. M. Dawson, an important Texas Baptist leader and passionate expert on religious liberty as Executive Director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

Dunn’s work in the arena of public policy began to flourish when he served as director of the Texas Christian Life Commission (1966-1980). He attempted to “stir the consciences” of Texas Baptists regarding “applied Christianity.”¹ Anchored upon the influence of Maston and Dawson, Dunn was involved in developing Baptist viewpoints on issues such as gambling, race relations, Christian citizenship, hunger, and religious liberty. Regarding his approach, Dunn commented, “In some areas—gambling, liquor, pornography—this agency has been hardline conservative. In others—concerns for victims of a rotten welfare system and for bilingual education—we have been wild-eyed liberals.” Dunn was a battler: “You could be wrong but you can’t be quiet. You can’t just shut up and let the other forces that would hurt people have their way.”²

Dunn’s signature emphasis of his later career at the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs—soul freedom—was only highlighted on rare occasions during his tenure at the Texas Christian Life Commission. However, it was an assumed theological cornerstone for Dunn’s positions on ethical issues. According to Dunn, soul freedom was generally accepted in Texas Baptist life and was considered “basic” to Christian experience. Consequently, Dunn said that the Christian Life Commission was able to

¹James M. Dunn, “Christian Life Commission Report,” *Annual of the Baptist General Convention of Texas* (Dallas, TX: BGCT Press, 1971), 93-95.

²Toby Druin, “Dunn – Off to Washington,” December 31, 1980, 5.

focus on “external (social and ethical) issues” rather than “internal” theological discussions.³

Dunn’s focus on soul freedom as the defining basis for a commitment to religious liberty and the separation of church and state increased exponentially during his tenure at the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. Dunn began service as the Executive Director of the BJC in 1981; the “Southern Baptist Controversy” visibly burst onto the scene in 1979. The two were inextricably tied together. From the outset, Dunn was a vocal opponent of the leaders of the “Conservative Resurgence.” After a decade long battle over the proper view of church-state relations, the Southern Baptist Convention withdrew its participation and defunded Dunn’s BJC.

Dunn had received the ire of Southern Baptists leaders because he had opposed President Reagan’s Prayer Amendment that endorsed “voluntary” prayer in the public schools. Southern Baptist leaders were convinced that Dunn was a liberal, and that his view of the strong separation of church and state promoted secularization rather than accommodation. Dunn’s supporters believed that Dunn had correctly recognized the intolerant approach of Southern Baptist fundamentalists. Bill Moyers, popular political commentator, commented, “When he spoke out, they tried to silence him. When he would not be silenced, they tried to fire him.”⁴

Dunn accused his Southern Baptist fundamentalist opponents of abandoning soul freedom and thus church-state separation for the compromising agenda of the Religious Right. Dunn had no problem with fundamentalists being involved in the political process.

³James M. Dunn, telephone conversation with author, January 21, 2008.

⁴Bill Moyers, quoted in “Clinton, Moyers, others pay tribute to Dunn,” *Report from the Capital* 54, no. 20 (October 12, 1999): 2.

“Christians should be in politics up to their gills,” he preached. However, their attitude that their political perspective was the only biblical position often resulted in a “politics of personal destruction” and a “politics that makes political doctrine a test of faith.”⁵ Commenting on the Religious Right, Dunn said, “We are seeing in the United States today a deliberate attempt to collapse the distinction between mixing politics and religion (which is inevitable) and merging Church and State (which is inexcusable).”⁶

According to Dunn, Southern Baptist fundamentalists had abandoned the Baptist heritage of religious liberty and were not “real” Baptists. He believed that the Baptist heritage gave undeniable evidence that soul freedom was the key Baptist distinctive. He never tired of quoting Baptist heroes of the past like Thomas Helwys, Roger Williams, Isaac Backus, John Leland, E. Y. Mullins and G. W. Truett to prove his point. Real Baptists, Dunn contended, believed in church-state separation and religious liberty for all. In 2000, a decade after the Baptist battle was technically over, Dunn still fired away at Southern Baptists that he considered pseudo-Baptists: “I’ll be jiggered if a batch of neo-pharisaical, power-mad politicians, frazzling fundamentalists, trapped in a truncated theology were going to redefine religious liberty. Those limited lights were not about to destroy the witness of J. M. Dawson, take over the Baptist Joint Committee, and water down what it means to be a Baptist.”⁷

⁵James M. Dunn, “How to mix religion and politics,” *Report from the Capital* 49, no. 14 (July 14, 1994): 3.

⁶James M. Dunn, “Religion and Politics: A Proper Mix,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 155.

⁷James M. Dunn, “Baptist Stubborn Award: Response of James M. Dunn on receipt of the Whitsitt Society Baptist Courage Award June 29, 2000,” *The Whitsitt Journal* 7 (Fall 2000): 4-5.

In feting James Dunn, Bill Moyers said, “Watching him in action, I am reminded that God sends his messengers in odd shapes and sizes and from unexpected places. Who would have predicted that one of the most effective advocates of religious freedom in our time would grow up on the east side of a Texas cow town, talk like a horse-trader and dress like a trail driver?”⁸ However, some thought that Dunn’s personality was too confrontational and disrespectful. Dunn’s rhetoric was clearly colorful. His language and his aggressiveness were accepted or appreciated by his supporters because of his willingness to defend religious liberty even under severe pressure from critics. His detractors, however, were given plenty of ammunition with his acerbic quotations. Surely Dunn’s attack on President Reagan, accusing him of “despicable demagoguery,” angered Southern Baptist leaders who needed little reason to dislike the bombastic remarks from the BJC leader.⁹ Supporters have called Dunn a modern day John Leland, the radical colonial advocate for religious freedom.¹⁰ However, Dunn especially loved to quote E. Y. Mullins and G. W. Truett. It seems better to refer to him as E. Y. Mullins or G. W. Truett with an “attitude.” Dunn’s rhetoric complicated his relationship with his Southern Baptist opponents, but it was his strong stance on soul freedom and separation of church and state that made them work to oust him from Southern Baptist life.

Critics have attacked Dunn’s reliance on soul freedom. They assert that his theology can lead to excessive individualism. In particular, his slogan “Ain’t nobody but

⁸Moyers, quoted in “Clinton, Moyers, others pay tribute to Dunn,” 4.

⁹Herbert H. Denton and Marjorie Hyer, “Reagan to Ask Hill for Prayer Amendment,” *The Washington Post*, May 7, 1982, A1.

¹⁰Walter B. Shurden, “James (Dunn) and John (Leland), Baptist Sons of Zebedee,” in *James Dunn: Champion for Religious Liberty*, ed. J. Brent Walker (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1999), 109-123.

Jesus gonna tell me what to believe” is seen to define soul competency as “sole competency.”¹¹ Dunn believed that his critics misinterpreted him. He believed that his “freedom theology” was Christ-centered and biblically based. He acknowledged the dangers of excessive individualism but thought that a commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and to the Bible as the authoritative standard for religious faith and practice were the only boundaries needed. The theme of freedom and responsibility was consistently echoed in Dunn’s writings.

Dunn’s writings clearly emphasize the human side of the divine-human relationship. Soul freedom focused on the direct access of the individual. His writings can be criticized for a lack of concern about the necessary role of the individual in the life of the church. However, he was not a systematic theologian. He was an activist for religious liberty. He did not write about community at length, but he did practice it. Dunn was no “lone ranger” Christian. He was active in church life. His audience was not simply Baptist individuals, but Baptist bodies (local churches and larger Baptist groups). His writings do reveal that he believed genuine voluntary individual faith led a believer into the life of the church. He expected Baptists to use freedom responsibly and practice local church community.

Dunn’s commitment to soul freedom translated into a fierce denunciation of creedalism. He affirmed that creedalism was antithetical to Baptist history. He believed that Southern Baptist fundamentalists were creedalists in the worst way—they denied soul freedom and wanted to put restrictions upon conscience. Because of his emphasis on freedom, Dunn despised the theological litmus tests that Southern Baptist

¹¹Curtis W. Freeman, “E.Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity,” *Review and Expositor* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 41.

fundamentalists were imposing upon the Southern Baptist Convention. It must be acknowledged that Dunn had a litmus test. Dunn had a litmus test for anyone who claimed to be a “real” Baptist: a belief in soul freedom which is the basis for a commitment to religious liberty to all people and thus supports the wall of separation between church and state.

Dunn emphasized soul freedom so much that it gave his writings the appearance of imbalance. However, the context of the Southern Baptist Controversy makes this understandable. He believed that Southern Baptists were practicing a civil religion that was a dangerous threat to genuine faith and religious liberty. It should be noted that Dunn did not limit his criticism regarding church-state issues to fundamentalists. In the late 1990s, when Vice-President Al Gore endorsed “Charitable Choice,” Dunn penned an open letter to Gore informing him that he had “ripped his britches.”¹²

Throughout the 1990s, Dunn continued to stress the importance of soul freedom and the necessity of a voluntary uncoerced faith in his monthly columns, speeches, sermons, and other writings. Although the Southern Baptist Controversy essentially ended when the defunding of the Baptist Joint Committee was completed in 1991, the attacks from Southern Baptist fundamentalists such as Richard Land of the SBC’s Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission and Roger Moran of the Missouri Baptist Layman’s Association on the BJC did not cease. Nonetheless, Dunn continued to use the language of soul freedom to fight what he perceived to be a vicious threat against a precious Baptist distinctive. After his retirement from his post as Executive Director of the BJC in

¹²James M. Dunn, quoted in J. Brent Walker, *Church-State Matters: Fighting for Religious Liberty in Our Nation’s Capital* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 49. “Charitable Choice” refers to provisions in welfare reform legislation passed in 1996 under President Clinton which allows government to fund the social ministries of houses of worship and other pervasively religious organizations.

1999, Dunn took a position as an adjunct professor of Christianity and Public Policy at Wake Forest University Divinity School where he still champions soul freedom as the Baptist basis of religious liberty and the separation of church and state.¹³

In his ministerial career as an ethicist and political activist, James Dunn offered a paradigm for Baptist political engagement in the public arena. He was a fighter for freedom. Consequently, he was against anything that smacked of established religion or coercive mandated faith. For Dunn, religious liberty in the political realm was rooted in a commitment to soul freedom and the sacred regard for the individual conscience. Dunn knew that his view of freedom was controversial but he believed it was rooted in the nature of God, found in the Bible, and literally covered the historic Baptist landscape. According to Dunn, authentic Baptists were willing to model and practice freedom in church life and in the public arena. He believed it was worth the risk. Whatever one's opinion of Dunn's model of tying soul freedom, religious liberty and the separation of church and state together, most readers can sympathize with the Texas oil executive who declared about the colorful aggressive defender: "I'd rather have been Jacob wrestling with the angel than to see James Dunn walk in the door of my office."¹⁴

¹³J. Mark Brown, "Dunn delivers lectures as part of Shurden series," BJC Online, http://bjconline.org/news/docs/032107%20_dunn%20lectures.htm (accessed November 9, 2007). During a March, 2007 lecture series at Carson-Newman University, Dunn proclaimed: "If we know anything at all of history, law, Scripture, human nature, and the spirit of Jesus, then we must get off our apathies and speak up for Freedom of Conscience. When anyone's religious freedom is denied, everyone's religious freedom is endangered. When government requires religion, it makes a monster of it. If religion is not voluntary, it cannot be vital."

¹⁴Michael Smith, "A Texan Goes to Washington," in *James M. Dunn: Champion for Religious Liberty*, ed. J. Brent Walker (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1999), 34.

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