

COERCIVE CHRISTIANITY

Luke 9:51-56

Mark 2:18, 2:23, 3:1-6, 3:22

Acts 5:27-39

Revelation 3:20

A few years ago I tried to convince, persuade, sway the Christians at Wedgewood to become a dually-aligned congregation, that is, aligned with the American Baptist Church, U.S.A. and also aligned with the United Church of Christ which is perhaps the most liberal denomination on a national level in America. I also put forth the inspired idea that calling ourselves a Baptist Church wasn't exactly working for us. In fact, I argued, it was working against us. I reasoned that because of who we are and the things we believe in only a small number of people interested in Church would be attracted to Wedgewood and that of that small number of people only a very small number of that group would be comfortable with any church that had Baptist as a part of its name. To put it in math terms, I said we were dealing with fractions. If you take 100 Christians only ten of those Christians would be interested in a church like Wedgewood and out of those ten only one would not have a negative reaction to "Baptist" or would be able to overcome Baptist fears. That was the well-reasoned argument.

Well, the Wedgewoodians didn't exactly jump up and down, get excited about, or embrace the idea. In fact, only one other Christian at Wedgewood openly, enthusiastically agreed with me. It was clear cut. There was no reason to call for a run off or debate "hanging chads". And for the record, that other Wedgewoodian who agreed with me wasn't, was not my wife.

Why did Wedgewoodians shun, spurn, reject such Solomonic wisdom from a clergyperson? We found out, to our surprise, that on the state level in North Carolina United Church of Christ churches were about as homophobic as the general population. And-----a second sentiment that was expressed was that even though the name Baptist had been trampled, abused, denigrated by your average Baptists who didn't know what it meant to be Baptist, even though many Baptists had given Baptist a bad name, the sentiment was that there was something very important about being Baptist that was worth not only holding onto, but worth advertising through our church's name. And so to this day we are Wedgewood Baptist Church.

This past week I was reminded of how glad I am to be a Baptist, how glad I am we still have "Baptist" in our church name. The *Operation Save America* crowd has provided us with a good reason, an excellent rationale for wearing proudly the Baptist name tag.

This past Tuesday *Operation Save America* was scheduled to protest, among other sites and groups, McGill Baptist and Wedgewood Baptist. They didn't show at either location. But last Sunday, *Operation Save America* did show up at McGill and they put on quite a show. Around 30 people stood on the street carrying signs sending the McGillites to hell. Another fifteen *Operation Save America* individuals went to the 8:45 a.m. worship service at which my brother preached on the subject "This Is The House of God". After The Lord's Supper and the benediction, one of the OSAer's stood up and shouted, "This is not a house of God. This is a den of iniquity."

One of the eighteen police at the church asked the man to leave. When he didn't, they zapped him three times with a stun gun. I wish they hadn't done that, but they did. Anyway, after zapping the man a Policeman turned to the other fourteen OSAer's and said, "Who's next?" The other fourteen left peacefully. And the triple zapped disturber of worship was hauled off to jail.

Unlike the OSAer's, Baptists, real Baptists, have always known that faith, if it is to be real, if it is to be authentic, cannot be coerced, cannot be forced down one's throat, cannot be an in your face type of affair.

You see, it's one thing to protest on the street off the church property. It's another thing entirely to disrupt a church's worship service. That's coercive, and as we say in the south, it's also bad manners. And what I telling you today is it's very unBaptistic.

Here's a little Baptist history you need to memorize. In 1784 the Virginia legislature considered a bill establishing provision for the teachers of the Christian religion. In other words, money from taxes would be used to support religion. Baptists did not take too kindly to the idea and in fact Baptists can be credited with the defeat of the proposal. Robert Semple wrote: "the holy Author", meaning God, "the holy Author of our religion needs no such compulsive measures for the promotion of His cause. . ."

A few years later in 1791 John Leland, an outspoken Baptist in America, wrote his major treatise on religious liberty, "The Rights of Conscience Inalienable." In this treatise, Leland argued that every person should be able to "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 so doing." Pretty amazing, huh? Baptists defended even the rights of atheists. For Baptists, a corollary of freedom of religion had to be freedom from religion. For Baptists, Christianity was not to be coerced.

A company was attempting to start a new pension plan for its employees which required 100% participation. Every employee signed up except one. No amount of argument or persuasion could get this person to change his mind. Finally, the president of the company called the man into his office. "Here is a copy of the proposed pension plan and here is a pen," he said. "Sign up or you're fired." Whereupon the man immediately picked up the pen and signed his name. The president of the company then said, "I don't understand why you refused to sign until now. What was your problem?" The man replied, "You're the first person who explained it to me clearly."

That man was not a Baptist. We despise coercion, particularly religious coercion. And that is why, I repeat it again, we have supported not only freedom of religion, but freedom from religion. That includes freedom from having *Operation Save America* people disturb worship. Stand on the sidewalk and protest. Hold up your signs for traffic to see. Preach the gospel as you see it off our property and I'll support you. I'll think you are wrong, but I'll support your right to protest. And your example of protesting will make me question why I am not protesting a lot of things myself. But-----do not, do not today, do not tomorrow, do not any time in the next one million years cram your religion down my throat or the throat or any Baptist or the throat of any person.

And if you need some Biblical texts to support this idea I have several for you to consider. The desire to coerce others, the desire to strike out at those who disagree with us, is evident in our scriptures.

On his way to Jerusalem and to the cross Jesus was roundly rejected by a village of Samaritans. Just as the *Operation Save America* crowd thinks you and I are going to hell, Muslims are going to hell, gays and lesbians are going to hell, and people who perform abortions or have had abortions are going to hell, in much the same way Jews and Samaritans felt each other were not of God. But Jesus was different. After Jesus had been snubbed, James and John suggested a little fire from heaven might be in order for the snubbers, but Jesus said "No." And he rebuked, chastised, reprimanded James and John for even thinking the thought.

We don't get mad at or strike at others when they do not agree with us. We may be disappointed, but we don't last out.

Or consider Acts 5. The Apostle Paul has been taken before the Sanhedrin because he has not submitted to the Sanhedrin's prohibition of preaching Jesus. As far as Paul is concerned, he must obey God, not people. And that, for the record, is the reasoning of OSAer's. I have no problem with that. If you are a Christian, you have no choice but to obey God, instead of people. The problem is the OSAer's think they are obeying God and we think we are obeying God. One day we'll find out. I'm ready for that day. I'm ready for judgment day, not because I'm perfect, mind you, but I'm ready for it in the sense I'm confident that on the day of judgement the OSAer's will discover they have been wrong. But until the day when all is revealed, we might want to consider the rest of this passage.

When Paul before the Sanhedrin does the "we must obey God, not people" speech, it ticks everybody off and they want to kill him. But Gama-li-el, a teacher of the Bible, tells the Sanhedrin to lay off Paul, to let him go, not to worry about him, not to kill him. Gama-li-el says about Paul and his preaching, "if it is of men, it will fail. But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them." And then the wise one adds this shocker. Gama-li-el comments, "You may even discover you have been opposing God."

Good advice. Rather than coerce, rather than disrupt worship, just take a wait and see attitude, a wait and see posture.

Third text. Revelation 3:20. "Behold I stand at the door" and what? That's right, knock. Not, "Behold I stand at the door and I knock it down and barge in", but "Behold, I stand at the door and knock."

And underscore this. These words are delivered to the church in Laodicea, a lukewarm church, a church that was neither cold, nor hot. There would have been every reason to have knocked down the doors of that church, and yet,---and yet, it is just a knock. No more. No less.

Finally, I direct you to Mark's gospel. Religious people are preaching at Jesus, sending him to hell faster than a speeding bullet. Your disciples don't fast. Your disciples gather grain on the

Sabbath even though, even though the Bible---the Bibles prohibits such action. And you, you Jesus, you heal on the Sabbath, you unbiblical, ignorant, uncouth going to hell Jesus.

And finally, they said he was possessed. Called him Satan.

You know what I think. If we are being accused of being unbiblical, accused of being big sinners, accused of being Satanic, informed we are going to hell. You know what I think.-----
-----I think we are in good company. I think we are in the company of Jesus.

The name of this church is Wedgwood Baptist Church. That word "Baptist" doesn't do us any favors because more than a few Baptists don't even know what it means to be Baptist, more than a few Baptists, and this is ironic, more than a few Baptists have become coercive themselves.

The name of this church is Wedgewood Baptist Church. I tried to convince you to take Baptist out of our name, but last week I found myself very happy to be a Baptist.