

Each generation plays a role in preserving Baptist heritage

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Recently I have been thinking a lot about religious hostilities, what true freedom means and the things for which I would be willing to die. We have been freshly reminded that war creates an environment in which the best and worst of our humanity surfaces. Through the common thread of our humanity, we are connected to other times and other places when war loomed.

While researching the early history of church-state separation, I was drawn to the role of Anabaptists and to the novel *Will Campbell* constructed in their memory — *Cecelia's Sin* (1983). As Campbell explains in his introduction, *Cecelia's Sin* was not so much a book he decided to write as a book that found him. In my reading of it, I felt much the same way.

While news reports of an impending war hummed and security rainbows flashed yellow and orange, I delved into the soul of a book set in the 16th century about a group of people hunted down like animals for their beliefs, the same beliefs that I comfortably enjoy in America. The Anabaptists saw the European governments of the Reformation period as corrupt. The root of this corruption had to do with government collaboration with the church. Even after Martin Luther and John Calvin brought about new possibilities for faith, Protestant rulers, like many of the Catholic ones before them, wanted the royal seal to be part of what gave the church legitimacy. In turn, monarchs expected, even counted on, the holy seal of the church to give them authority. The ritual that sealed the deal was infant baptism; to be baptized into the church was to simultaneously become a citizen of the state.

Anabaptists came to believe that the only true baptism was a baptism that a person chose for himself/herself. Anabaptists refused to allow their infants to be baptized. That decision made them liable for treason. Because Anabaptists saw the damage that enforced religion inflicted on them, their families, their communities of faith and humanity in general, they became staunch church-state separationists. They understood that as long as the state could choose a favored spiritual path and make it the law of the land, individuals could never have a truly authentic relationship with God. Campbell wrenchingly reveals this history as characters Pieter, Goris and Cecelia sit around the fire, seeking to understand their faith sparked by a friend's betrayal that will finally lead to their deaths. Pieter names their plight in a sobering moment when he states, "As long as the two of them are one there can never be community. There will not be Church. There will only be State."

Anabaptist convictions and courage were seminal for many groups who came after them, including Baptists. Reading their story helped me understand how my story as a Baptist is

connected to a much larger story of believers. Many of my spiritual ancestors and cousins endured persecution and faced death as testimony not only to their own faith, but as a down payment on a promise that I would be free to testify to mine. I hope that I never take their sacrifice for granted, and I hope that if ever called on I would be willing to do the same.

The Baptist principle of church-state separation has its origin in our belief that each believer freely makes the choice to follow Christ. Our emphasis on believer's baptism is intimately connected to soul freedom, to church freedom and to universal religious liberty. A free soul in a free church in a free state: this is the vision that makes us who we are as Baptists. Others died for this vision so that I could live it.

It is in the memory of their countless numbers and nameless faces that the Baptist Joint Committee fights. We may no longer fear the literal strike of whips on our backs, but we do take lashes from those across the ideological spectrum to maintain the security of that vision. We must continue the struggle in this time and place amidst new conflicts, because we work not only for ourselves but also for those who follow.