

# Mainstream Baptists cite freedom as Baptist hallmark

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**By Marv Knox**

*Editor*

IRVING—A refrain of freedom echoed throughout the [Mainstream Baptist Network](#) convocation Feb. 23-24.

About 80 participants gathered from across the South and Southwest for the sixth-annual event. The Mainstream movement is composed of Baptists who strive to preserve traditional Baptist doctrine and distinctives in the face of fundamentalism.

Seven speakers addressed “Why I am Still a Baptist.” They mentioned a broad range of issues, but freedom provided a common denominator.

“Many folks today are scared of being a Baptist and run off in fear,” acknowledged Joe Lewis, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Petersburg, Va. “I stopped counting the friends who left.”

Nevertheless, “I’m still a Baptist because I believe in freedom,” Lewis said, noting spiritual pioneers John Smyth and Thomas Helwys “began the Baptist movement demanding freedom” in the early 1600s.

Citing the research of church historian Walter Shurden, Lewis noted “four fragile freedoms”—Bible freedom, soul freedom, church freedom and religious freedom—are Baptist hallmarks.

Tyrone Pitts recalled that his appreciation for Baptists’ emphasis on religious freedom and its corollary, the separation of church and state, grew as he worked with other faith groups, such as the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches.

“Others in the ecumenical movement do not have this quality,” said Pitts, general secretary of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, one of four predominantly African-American Baptist bodies. “We are unified around soul freedom and liberty. It is our passion for freedom that other people ... try to emulate.”

A focus on freedom is Baptists’ defining characteristic, said Bill Underwood, president of Mercer University in Macon and Atlanta, Ga.

“We are free to think for ourselves, free to read the Scriptures to determine what they say—free,” Underwood insisted. Although people are accountable to God, no government and no individual have the right to tell them what to believe, he added.

Unfortunately, such a conviction “is becoming somewhat out of fashion,” not just among fundamentalists, but also among moderate Baptists, he asserted.

Underwood pointed to the Baptist Manifesto, drafted in 1997 by a group of “Baptist communitarian” scholars who have said they cannot commend the “unchecked privilege of interpretation” of the Bible.

“Who will do the checking?” Underwood asked.

“It is right to suggest we exist in community and have a responsibility to

the community. But it is wrong to insist the community can declare orthodoxy. It is wrong to deny a place for the individual in community.”

No one has a monopoly on truth, he said. And besides, sometimes the community is wrong, he added.

“What communitarian Baptists ignore is the need to acknowledge a place for that lonely, prophetic voice, the voice of dissent,” he said.

Baptists’ historic demand for religious liberty is rooted in an understanding of God and creation, said Bruce Prescott, executive director of Mainstream Oklahoma Baptists.

“God did not create androids and robots,” Prescott said, explaining the Bible teaches that God created people in order to have a loving relationship.

“You cannot coerce someone to love you,” he added. “God desires everyone to love him, but if love is a free response of faith, then to reject him must also be a possibility.

“So, if God leaves us to be free in matters of faith and religion, then what right do men have to force them upon others?”

Although government initiatives could erode religious liberty and church/state separation, Prescott said these trends can be reversed “if Christians stand up, speak out and do something ... and stand for religious liberty for all persons. Only then will the gospel be good news and not bad news.”

Freedom manifests itself in the unique nature of Baptist churches, said Suzii Paynter, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas’ Christian Life Commission.

“We live in a franchise-oriented culture, where people validate their

identity by being like others,” she observed, countering, “Church is not a franchise.”

Instead, she said, a better model for Baptist churches is a molecule—a cluster of cells that attract each other but differ in type by the way they form clusters.

Similarly, each church is free to cluster with churches, denominations and other groups as it sees fit.

Freedom is the natural characteristic of Baptist churches, said David Currie, executive director of Texas Baptists Committed, who described growing up in the Baptist church in Paint Rock.

“We did not even realize churches could not be free,” he recalled.

But such freedom never is resolved once-and-for-all, noted Scott Walker, pastor of First Baptist Church in Waco.

“I want to be part of a people who have in their hearts a dream of religious liberty,” he said. “But we must work it out in every generation. I’m excited to see what will happen.”

Texas, the BGCT, the nation and around the world.