

Highest freedom is freely giving self to God, Baptist historian says

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HOUSTON—Baptists must aspire to the kind of freedom that leads them to relinquish their autonomy to God, historian Walter Shurden told participants at the [William H. Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society's](#) annual meeting.

Shurden received the society's 2009 Courage Award in Houston. He recently retired as a professor and department chair of Christianity at Mercer University and as founding executive director of [Mercer's Center for Baptist Studies](#).

Throughout his career, Shurden has been a builder of significant Baptist institutions, noted Melissa Rogers, the society's president. She cited the Center for Baptist Studies and the Whitsitt Society itself, as well as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Shurden also is a "dogged defender of Baptist principles and Christian principles," Rogers added.

Delivering the annual address that Executive Director Lloyd Allen and accompanies the Courage Award, President Melissa Rogers of the Whitsitt Society present the William H. Whitsitt Courage Award to Baptist historian Shurden focused on a slate of principles and corollary weaknesses. But he also challenged Baptists to exercise one of their most cherished principles—freedom.

Walter "Buddy" Shurden.
(PHOTO/J.V. McKinney)

The principle of “voluntarism, freedom and human choice” is a historic Baptist distinctive that particularly has marked so-called moderate Baptists, Shurden said.

Baptist freedom sometimes has been mischaracterized as license when, in reality, it also involves responsibility, he noted.

Ultimate freedom comes from God, and ultimate responsibility rests in God, he added, stressing, “The highest form of freedom is the freedom to give myself away to God.”

Warning against “sorry freedom” that actually abuses freedom, Shurden urged, “You should be free to do as you ought, not as you wish.”

Moderate Baptists created both the Whitsitt Society and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, at whose annual meeting the society meets each summer, after fundamentalists gained control of the Southern Baptist Convention in the early 1990s.

“Something far more valuable than (SBC) institutions was at stake” in the struggle for SBC control, Shurden insisted.

“It was the freedom issue that was at stake. To forget that freedom was at stake is a hideous mistake, an enormous tragedy.”

But freedom is “so, so, so much bigger than our Baptist battles,” he said. Baptists should learn from “bigger and more painful” freedom issues, such as those faced by African-American Christians and by Christians the world over who endure injustice and struggle for freedom, he urged.

So, Baptists today should champion freedom, not just for themselves, Shurden challenged.

“Freedom of conscience is God’s will for the world—more than for Baptists or Christians or Americans,” he said, calling on Baptists to fight for the

world's people to enjoy the freedom to eat, drink pure water, earn a respectable wage, secure medical attention for their children and live in simple dignity.

"Being a Christian means taking seriously what Jesus of Nazareth took seriously," he said, insisting Jesus did not focus on creeds or institutions or principles, but on the "seeds of freedom."

"Jesus took freedom seriously," he said.

Jesus' life and teachings emphasize the freedom to be included and appreciated, to share resources and "live on less," to love rather than hate and to "anchor your life in and under God's reign," he explained.

"It's much easier to be a Baptist than to take Jesus seriously," he said. "I never, never, never want moderate Baptists to forget the Baptist ideals of freedom. I want very, very, very much for moderate Baptists to embrace the Jesus ideals of freedom."