



A THIRD WAY

Curtis Freeman's
journey as an
"Other Baptist"

By Jonathan Goldstein

Standing before his small congregation in Waco, Texas one Sunday morning in 1985, Curtis Freeman encountered a preacher's nightmare: he didn't know what to say.

Although he had spent a lifetime studying scripture, Freeman was lost. Isaiah 53, the passage he had chosen for that day's sermon, filled him with doubt.

*He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

Questions that had simmered in his mind for some time finally demanded answers. How could he preach on this Old Testament passage in a way that would deliver the gospel? How could he be true to the text and still be true to the congregation?

The conservative theology he had embraced in his youth oversimplified connections between Jesus Christ and the Old Testament. Yet the critical model he later adopted seemed unable to read this text as a witness to Jesus.

"That really threw me," says Freeman, who remembers that day as a turning point in his life. "I didn't know how to preach this text as a Christian sermon. It really pushed me to reevaluate the theological trajectory I was on. Suddenly, neither of the ways I had learned to interpret scripture was satisfying."

On that day, said Freeman – now research professor of theology and director of Duke Divinity School's Baptist House of Studies – he managed to plow through the sermon. To be honest, he says, he's no longer even sure of what he said to that congregation. What he remembers clearly, though, is that he knew he had to find a way to resolve these questions.

So began Freeman's quest to find another way; a "third way" that is neither liberal nor conservative, neither left nor right. The journey lasted more than 15 years and involved intense research, reflection and intellectual struggle. Eventually, it led him from Texas to Duke, where he now guides others, particularly students

involved with Baptist House, through similar issues.

"I had a lot of assistance when I was struggling, especially from [Duke Professor] Stanley Hauerwas," Freeman says. "Now I feel like it's my turn to try to help others find their way and negotiate some of these complicated paths."

Freeman's life in the church began when he was a child – the oldest of four siblings – in Denton, Texas, a small town about 35 miles north of Fort Worth. His family was Episcopalian, and Freeman came to deeply appreciate that church and its traditions.

"The Episcopal Church gave me a strong grounding in history and love for liturgy," he says. "That's something I've always carried with me."

He became a lay reader, and the rector of his family church was sure Freeman would become a priest. In high school, though, Freeman encountered the vibrant youth culture associated with the Baptist Church, and he was taken with the sense of personal discipleship it offered. In the 10th grade, he became a Baptist. The rest of his family eventually followed.

"I found the idea that the faith must be owned very compelling," Freeman said. "That was something I had never experienced before."

Freeman's early track led him directly into theology and the pulpit. He attended Baylor University and then Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, graduating in 1980. He completed a Ph.D. at Baylor in 1990 while also serving as pastor of several churches in and around Waco. From 1987 to 2001, Freeman taught in the Department of Christianity and Philosophy at Houston Baptist University.

Never static in his beliefs or his style, Freeman often found himself in tension with established practices in the church. Although he was a Baptist, he continued to appreciate the history, structure and liturgy he had learned in the Episcopal Church. And as his scholarship and reading of the Bible changed, Freeman saw that he didn't fit neatly into the Baptist Church – especially in the South.

The fit became even less comfortable in 1988 as political divisions in the Southern Baptist Convention took the national stage in San Antonio, Texas.

W.A. Criswell, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas and an influential voice among Southern Baptists, preached at a pre-convention pastor's conference on "the curse of liberalism" in America and among Baptists. "Because of the opprobrious epithet 'liberal,' today they call themselves 'moderates,'" Criswell said to the gath-

ering of thousands of Baptists. “A skunk by any other name still stinks.”

“I was horrified,” says Freeman, who attended the conference with a small group from a church in Eagle Lake, Texas. “I realized that there was no point trying to fight a political battle between left and right. I wanted to find a direction that articulated the faith in a positive way that wasn’t just the negation of fundamentalism.”

Realizing that neither his theology nor his politics would be welcomed in the Southern Baptist Convention, Freeman took to calling himself an “Other Baptist” as he continued to explore his beliefs. Although he has refined the idea of what it means to be an Other Baptist, much of his initial premise has remained intact.

“I find myself happy with neither lukewarm liberalism nor hyper-fundamentalism,” Freeman says of the Other Baptist perspective. “I am committed to following the teachings of the Bible that I understand, but I am also open to receive more light and truth that I don’t yet understand.”

Freeman practiced what he preached at West End Baptist Church, a small, racially diverse congregation in Houston where he held the misleading title of interim pastor for eight years.

Church members were rich, poor and middle class. Some were Republicans, some were Democrats and some had no political affiliation. But all worked together to support a thriving food pantry that, at its peak, served 400 families a week; to develop a strong youth ministry and mentoring program that helped prepare 13 Hispanic youths for college; and to revitalize worship services to the point where Freeman was preaching four times each week.

“We saw ourselves as a kind of colony of heaven,” he says. “Whatever it was about, it was about the church.”

Even before he became pastor at West End, Freeman was corresponding with Hauerwas. After reading Hauerwas’ 1984 book “Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer on Christian Ethics,” Freeman sought help from the well known theologian. As is his practice, Hauerwas responded without hesitation.

Through dozens of letters, phone calls and face-to-face meetings at conferences, Hauerwas, Gilbert T. Rowe Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke Divinity School, helped Freeman reconcile some of his conflicting ideas and further shape his theological perspective.

One point the two discussed at length was the question of whether people should read the Bible as individuals or as part of a community. On the one hand, Freeman understood the imperative among Baptists for freedom and individuality in worship. On the other, he saw a need

for the reading of scripture to take place as part of a church whole.

To Hauerwas, the answer was clear, although it also was distasteful to many Baptists.

“You read the text as part of the ongoing life of the church across centuries,” Hauerwas said. “The meaning is always to be tested by other readers.”

For more than a decade, Freeman and Hauerwas talked and wrote to each other, with Hauerwas eventually serving on Freeman’s doctoral dissertation committee. In fact, Hauerwas suggested the subject of Freeman’s dissertation: Augustine of Hippo, who also famously found himself caught between distinct theologies. Freeman adopted as his own confessional statement the Augustinian maxim: “Unless you believe, you will not understand.”

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In the mid-1990s, Freeman and a group of like-minded Baptist theologians came together to draft a document encapsulating their vision of Baptist identity. It imagined a new course for those who would embrace it. The “Baptist Manifesto” was published in 1997, drawing praise and criticism. Among the manifesto’s theses are:

- We affirm Bible study in reading communities rather than relying on private interpretation or supposed “scientific” objectivity.
- We affirm following Jesus as a call to shared discipleship rather than invoking a theory of soul competency.
- We affirm baptism, preaching and the Lord’s table as powerful signs that seal God’s faithfulness in Christ and express our response of awed gratitude rather than as mechanical rituals or mere symbols.
- We affirm and renounce coercion as a distinct people under God rather than relying on political theories, powers, or authorities.

“It was kind of a statement for the times,” Freeman says. “It stimulated a lot of conversation.”

The conversation continues even now, with articles – some supportive and some heavily critical – appearing regularly in journals and on Web sites. It has been characterized as liberal and conservative, Catholic and Calvinist, Anabaptist and Anti-baptist. But to many readers, the document describes common ground.

“Curtis fills the important role with this of trying to



Curtis Freeman, research professor of theology and director of the divinity school's Baptist House of Studies, talks to students and guests at a recent school presentation on the Baptist Manifesto, which he helped author.

find a medium ground,” says Randall Lolley, who was president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1974 to 1988 and now serves on the board of directors for Baptist House. “These issues can and should be hammered out by people with the ability to see and to synthesize. I’m glad that Curtis embraces the vision to see this sort of thing through.”

In 2001, Dean L. Gregory Jones recruited Freeman to join the Duke faculty and lead Baptist House, a program begun in 1989 to support the growing number of Baptist students attending the divinity school.

Freeman plunged into his new work with energy and skill, advancing scholarship – especially into Baptist practices from centuries ago – developing a strong network of academics and practitioners to aid Baptist House, and teaching students through classes, mentoring and special events.

“One of the things that is most impressive about Curtis is his thinking about the future, about where Baptist professors and church leaders are going to come from,” says Stephen Chapman, assistant professor of Old Testament at the divinity school and another member of the Baptist House board. “There is a need to encourage and support people to take the bold step of going into those ministries, and Curtis is absolutely committed to that.”

Fellow Baptist teachers from across the political spectrum affirmed Freeman’s work two years ago by electing him vice president of the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion. This year he became president of the professional organization, and he has used the office to establish a scholarship for Baptist doctoral students, among other initiatives.

He also has worked with other Baptist clergy and pro-

fessors to create the Shiloh Network. More than 40 Baptist churches across the country have joined the network, pledging to help recruit and encourage young people to enter Baptist ministry.

Faculty and clergy note that Baptist House, under Freeman’s leadership, is well positioned to influence the Baptist Church for decades to come by forming students who are prepared for faithful service in the church and the academy.

“The divinity school is certainly enriched by the 100-or-so students in the Baptist House orbit, and Baptist House is helping to form the future of ministry,” Lolley says. “In forming the church of the future – certainly in the southern United States – this is a mighty important group. I think Curtis sees as clearly as anyone what these students can do for the church.”

And where that begins, Freeman says, is with helping students ask questions and guiding them toward answers, just as he was guided early in his career.

“We’re helping to do for these students what others have done for us,” he says. “We’ve made some progress, and it doesn’t end with the school or with me. These students will see things more clearly than I do, and they will find a way to be positive and move the church forward.” ■

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To read the complete Baptist Manifesto, visit <http://home.sprintmail.com/~masthewitt/baptists/manifesto.html>