

## James Milton Dunn: An Historical Essay

“Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.”<sup>1</sup> This famous phrase characterizes the ministry of Baptists such as Thomas Helwys, Roger Williams, John Comer<sup>2</sup>, John Leland and others. In the last half of the twentieth century, James Dunn has been the loudest and most aggressive Baptist proponent for religious liberty in the United States. Dunn is best known for his leadership as Executive Director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, an organization comprised of multiple Baptist bodies that deals solely with religious liberty issues on Capitol Hill. Dunn’s defense of soul freedom, religious liberty and the separation of church and state became one of the pivotal issues in the Southern Baptist Controversy during the 1980s. He was one of the primary targets of the “Conservative Resurgence” that ultimately gained control of the Southern Baptist Convention and subsequently defunded<sup>3</sup> the participation of Southern Baptists in the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty.

### *James Dunn: A Biographical Overview*

A self-described “Texas-bred, Spirit-led, Bible-teaching, revival-preaching, recovering Southern Baptist,”<sup>4</sup> James Milton Dunn was born in Fort Worth, Texas, on June 17, 1932 to William Thomas Dunn and Edith Campbell Dunn. Dunn began his educational journey in the Fort Worth public school system where he played in his high school’s 108 member symphony

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<sup>1</sup> Wendell Phillips, in *The Home Book of Quotations*, ed. Burton Egbert Stevenson (New York: Dodd & Mead, 1964), 1106.

<sup>2</sup>For information on this lesser known but important 17<sup>th</sup> century Baptist minister, see John Comer, *The Diary of John Comer*, ed. C. Edwin Barrows (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1892).

<sup>3</sup>Pamela Schaeffer, “Southern Baptists Slash Most Funding To Liberal Lobby Group,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 14, 1993, 8.

<sup>4</sup>James M. Dunn, “Being Baptist,” in *Baptists in the Balance*, ed. Everett C. Goodwin (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1997), 219.

orchestra. After a stint at Texas Christian University, Dunn transferred to Texas Wesleyan University where he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in history in 1953. As a nineteen-year-old junior at Texas Wesleyan, Dunn accepted a “call” to vocational ministry.

Consequently, Dunn pursued graduate theological training. His educational experience at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary began in 1953. Dunn received his Bachelor of Divinity four years later in 1957 and his Doctor of Theology in 1966. While a seminary student, Dunn served Texas Baptist Churches in several ministerial roles from 1954-1961 including one four-year pastorate.<sup>5</sup> Dunn finished his long educational journey in 1978 as a post-doctoral research scholar at the prestigious London School of Economics and Political Science.<sup>6</sup>

Dunn’s work in the arena of public policy began to flourish when he served as director of the Texas Christian Life Commission (1966-1980). He attempted to “stir the consciences” of Texas Baptists regarding “applied Christianity.”<sup>7</sup> Anchored upon the influence of Thomas Buford Maston<sup>8</sup> and Joseph Martin Dawson, two of the most influential Southern Baptists of the twentieth century, Dunn was involved in developing Baptist viewpoints on issues such as gambling, race relations, Christian citizenship, hunger, and religious liberty. Regarding his approach, Dunn commented, “In some areas—gambling, liquor, pornography—this agency has been hardline conservative. In others—concerns for victims of a rotten welfare system and for bilingual education—we have been wild-eyed liberals.” Dunn was a battler: “You could be

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<sup>5</sup>John Newport, “A Texas-Bred, Spirit-Led Baptist,” in *James Dunn: Champion for Religious Liberty*, ed. J. Brent Walker (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1999), 18-26.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. In 1978, Dunn was a research scholar at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He studied economics under Ian Roxborough and the sociology of religion under Eileen Barker.

<sup>7</sup>James M. Dunn, “Christian Life Commission Report,” *Annual of the Baptist General Convention of Texas* (Dallas, TX: BGCT Press, 1971), 93-95.

<sup>8</sup>Throughout his career, T. B. Maston encouraged Dunn to do his best to “keep the church-state issue alive.” See Letter from Thomas Buford Maston to James Dunn, April 18, 1982, in Jerry Sutton, *A Matter of Conviction: A History of Southern Baptist Engagement with the Culture* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Hollman Publishing Group, 2008), 239-245.

wrong but you can't be quiet; you can't just shut up and let the other forces that would hurt people have their way."<sup>9</sup>

*James Dunn and Soul Freedom*

Ideas such as soul liberty and soul competency that had been trumpeted frequently in Baptist history found a home in the thought and rhetoric of James Dunn. Dunn became the heir of Edgar Young Mullins<sup>10</sup> and those before him who insisted that freedom of the individual conscience and the emphasis upon direct personal experience of God without reliance upon ecclesiastical leaders were at the heart of the best of the Baptist tradition. In fact, Dunn's work for an unfettered conscience, religious liberty for all, and the separation of church and state was especially rooted in his understanding of soul freedom. While prominent early twentieth century Southern Baptists E. Y. Mullins and G. W. Truett referred to "soul competency," James Dunn again used the earlier Baptist language of "soul freedom." Dunn believed, like Mullins did, that soul freedom, the key distinctive of Baptists and their greatest contribution to understanding the Christian faith, was simply the freedom, ability, and responsibility of each person to respond to God for herself or himself. This freedom implied the ability to have a personal relationship to Jesus Christ and the capacity to deal directly with God without a human mediator such as a priest or bishop. This is a gift from God.<sup>11</sup> Throughout his career, Dunn has often described soul freedom as "the fire that burns in the innards of every true Baptist." According to Dunn, since

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<sup>9</sup>Toby Druin, "Dunn – Off to Washington," December 31, 1980, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Known as "Mr. Baptist," E. Y. Mullins was a well-known Southern Baptist theologian. Princeton Seminary's J. Gresham Machen described Mullins as the "spokesman not merely for the Southern Baptist Church [sic] or for the Baptist churches of America, but also to a considerable extent for the Baptist churches throughout the world." J. Gresham Machen, quoted in Russell Dilday, "Mullins the Theologian: Between the Extremes," *Review and Expositor* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 76.

<sup>11</sup>James M. Dunn and Grady Cothen, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2000), 63-65.

Thomas Helwys' bold proclamation that "the king is not Lord of the conscience," the hallmark of the people called Baptist is that "dogged determination to be free – free and faithful."<sup>12</sup>

For religious faith to be authentic, Dunn believed, it must be free and cannot be coerced.<sup>13</sup> Citing E. Y. Mullins, Dunn declared that to deny a person direct access to God "is nothing less than tyranny." The influence of Mullins on Dunn's thought is undeniable. Dunn has credited Mullins with investing energy and meaning into the phrase "soul competency" and placing it at the center of a "coherent cluster of beliefs that define Baptists."<sup>14</sup> Like Mullins, Dunn also affirmed that the biblical revelation clearly pointed to the principle of soul freedom. He also agreed with Mullins that "the voluntary principle is at the heart of Christianity" and consequently "the right of private judgment in religion is a right that lies at the core of Christian truth."<sup>15</sup> Building on Mullins' cornerstone that religious experience was the beginning point of understanding divine revelation, Dunn asserted that soul freedom is axiomatic, a self-evident truth "that when seen needs no proof of its reality."<sup>16</sup>

Dunn's view of soul freedom is far reaching and extends beyond personal morality and personal faith. As the ultimate source of all modern notions of human rights, it is the cornerstone that precedes and demands religious liberty and the separation of church and state for all persons in the political arena. Soul freedom is the biblical and theological starting point from which

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 67-68.

<sup>13</sup>James M. Dunn, "Separating church, state, good for both," *Report from the Capital* 50, no. 11 (November 14, 1995): 2.

<sup>14</sup>James M. Dunn, "Church, State, and Soul Competency," *Review and Expositor* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 62.

<sup>15</sup>Dunn and Cothen, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry*, 64.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

religious liberty naturally follows. According to Dunn, “if we all, in some serious way, replicate God, religious liberty is a moral and social inevitability.”<sup>17</sup>

Not surprisingly, James Dunn’s understanding of soul freedom has not been spared from criticism. Like E. Y. Mullins, Dunn too has been criticized of promoting a radical form of unbounded individualism, a faith without authority. Nearly fifty years ago, American Baptist, Winthrop Hudson, stated that “the practical effect of the stress upon ‘soul competency’ as the cardinal doctrine of Baptists was to make everyone’s hat their own church.”<sup>18</sup> Other scholars have followed Hudson’s lead. Curtis Freeman has argued that James Dunn has abused individualism even further by turning “soul competency” into “sole competency.” Freeman claims that Dunn’s popular quip, “Ain’t nobody but Jesus goin’ to tell me what to believe,” quickly devolves into “Ain’t nobody goin’ to tell me what to believe” as the “me” becomes the exclusive arbiter of what Jesus is saying.<sup>19</sup> Other scholars have made sweeping claims against the excessive individualism they find in Mullins and/or Dunn in attempts to chastise Baptists for a poor social ethic or a poor doctrine of ecclesiology.<sup>20</sup>

However, Dunn has repeatedly refuted the criticism of his Baptist opponents that soul freedom leads to a hyper individualistic lone-ranger Christianity. He believed that the dichotomy of individual and community is a false one. The choice was not one over the other, but both together. Dunn contended that the desire for Christian community presupposed voluntary faith. According to Dunn, “The competence of the individual before God does not demand and in fact

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<sup>17</sup>Dunn, “The Baptist Vision of Religious Liberty,” 33. See also Dunn, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry*, 65.

<sup>18</sup>Winthrop S. Hudson, “Shifting Patterns of Church Order in the Twentieth Century,” in *Baptist Concepts of the Church*, ed. Winthrop Still Hudson (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1959), 215.

<sup>19</sup>Curtis W. Freeman, “E.Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity,” *Review and Expositor* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 41.

<sup>20</sup>Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 82-115.

precludes Lone Ranger religion...no matter what critics left and right may say, autonomous individualism...does not mean that everyone's church is one's own hat. The longing for community and social Christianity presupposes voluntarism. Without individual autonomy, there can be no authentic community."<sup>21</sup>

### *Dunn and the Separation of Church and State*

Dunn believed that the separation of church and state was the logical, theological and political consequence of a genuine uncoerced faith that springs from soul freedom and extends religious liberty to all.<sup>22</sup> Invoking the Baptist witness of Roger Williams, John Clarke, Isaac Backus, and John Leland, Dunn concluded that the Baptist experience commends church-state separation.<sup>23</sup> In his monthly column in *Report from the Capital*, Dunn often quoted Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, a fellow Baptist, who declared in the landmark decision of *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947) that the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment means at least that:

Neither a state nor the Federal Government can set up a church. Neither can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions or prefer one religion over another. Neither can force nor influence a person to go to or to remain away from church against his will or force him to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion. No person can be punished for entertaining or professing religious beliefs or disbeliefs, for church attendance or non-attendance. No tax in any amount, large or small, can be levied to support any religious activities or institutions, whatever they may be called, or whatever form they may adopt to teach or practice religion. Neither a state nor the Federal Government can, openly or secretly, participate in the affairs of any religious organizations or groups and vice versa. In the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect 'a wall of separation between

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<sup>21</sup>James M. Dunn, "Yes, I am a Baptist," in *Why I Am A Baptist: Reflections on Being Baptist in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Cecil P. Staton Jr. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1999), 46-47.

<sup>22</sup>James M. Dunn, "The Baptist Vision of Religious Liberty," in *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: Religious Liberty*, ed. Walter B. Shurden (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1997), 35.

<sup>23</sup>Marv Knox, "Soul Freedom worth saving, Dunn stresses," *Baptist Standard*, July 10, 2000. [http://www.baptiststandard.com/2000/7\\_10/pages/cbf\\_dunn.html](http://www.baptiststandard.com/2000/7_10/pages/cbf_dunn.html) (accessed September 23, 2008).

Church and State.’<sup>24</sup>

This powerful statement by Hugo Black best sums up Dunn’s Baptist separationism. Throughout his career, Dunn consistently championed full religious liberty and the Jeffersonian wall of separation of church and state as articulated by Black in *Everson*.<sup>25</sup>

After serving as Executive-Director of the Baptist Joint Committee for nineteen years, James Dunn “retired” in 1999 to his home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina where he serves as Resident Professor of Christianity and Public Policy at the Wake Forest University School of Divinity. Dunn continues to advocate for soul freedom, religious liberty, and the separation of church and state.

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<sup>24</sup>*Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S. 1 (1947), 15-16. See also James M. Dunn, “Church and State: Friends or Enemies?,” *The Baptist Student*, August 1985, 32-33.

<sup>25</sup>Dorothy Cherry Schleicher, “A History and Analysis of the Role of the Baptist Joint Committee, 1972 – Present,” (master’s thesis, Baylor University, 1993), 94-100.

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