

Why I am a Free Will Baptist

by Rev Edwin Hayes, Executive Director of Ohio Free Will Baptists

I think there are times in our lives when we should carefully evaluate what we are doing and our motive for doing it. This is not only true of our lives, but we should evaluate our church and our denomination occasionally as well.

Have you ever thought about why you are a Free Will Baptist? Is it because of tradition or friendships? Perhaps your reason is something as simple as the convenient location of a church!

Like you, I have my own list of reasons that I'll share with you as you read this article. But first, let me begin by saying this. I am a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ. Nothing supersedes my obligation to Him! With that said, a denomination should be a vehicle that allows a Christian to serve the Lord in a greater way. While one of our goals is to build a denomination that loves and serves the Lord, it is by no means our highest goal. The highest and greatest goal we as FWB have is to win souls and build the Lord's kingdom.

In this day that we live, it is popular to be "non denominational." But to be honest, I do not know what the term "non denominational" means, nor do I know what it stands for! I do know, however, what FWB's stand for! And it is our beliefs and our doctrine that draw me.

Many today are choosing the church they will attend based on which one has the liveliest programs, the most dynamic music, or the most exciting worship. But the message being preached from the pulpit and taught in the classes should be a church shopper's number one concern. For nothing is more important than that!

There are many today who believe strongly that it doesn't really matter to any great degree what the sign over a church's door reads. But I for one, believe that signs and labels are important. For example, labels on the back of food products are very important when we go to the grocery store. By reading them we can make certain the food we put into our bodies is nutritious. But shouldn't we be much more concerned about the soul food we digest?

There are a number of churches, unconnected to the Free Will Baptist, that I would consider to be good Bible believing churches. These churches preach the Gospel and hold in high esteem these basic beliefs:



Inspiration of Scripture
The Virgin Birth
The Deity of Jesus Christ
The Second Coming of Jesus
Eternity in Heaven or Hell

The Coming Judgment

But, Free Will Baptists have some distinctives that I think are very important. As we look at these, I trust they will clarify the reasons why you chose to be a part of a church in the Free Will Baptist denomination.

Our Doctrine

The Doctrine of Salvation

In order to understand where we are coming from as a denomination, we need to understand what was taking place in this country's infancy.

The doctrine of Calvinism was the predominant view of the churches in the early 1700's. This doctrine was developed by the great Swiss reformer, John Calvin. The basic beliefs of Calvinism are as follows:

- Total Depravity - Those who held this belief felt that man possessed no ability to make a choice about God.
- Unconditional Election - Because Calvinist's believed man had no ability to choose God before the world was created, they believed that God chose those who would be saved and lost.
- Limited Atonement - According to Calvin, Christ did not die for the whole world, but only for the elect.
- Irresistible Grace - People who held this belief felt that those who were chosen by God for salvation could not resist the call.
- Perseverance of the Saints - This is the belief that once you were saved you could never lose your salvation. It is, perhaps, better known as the doctrine of "Unconditional Eternal Security." There are not many five Point Calvinists today. However, many churches still teach the final point, Unconditional Eternal Security!

I'm glad at this same time there were men like Paul Palmer and Benjamin Randall. These men of God did not agree with Calvinism and thus, began preaching a different doctrine.



There were basically two ways that Palmer and Randall disagreed with Calvin:

That all men have a free will to accept or reject the Gospel

Free Will Baptists have always believed that it was God's intention and desire for all men to be saved. The following scriptures illustrate this:

- John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”
- Romans 10:13 “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”
- Revelation 22:17 “And the Spirit and the bride say come. And let him that heareth, say come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him come.”

Free Will Baptists have always proclaimed Free Will, Free Grace, and Free Salvation to all who want to accept it! As a result, men like Palmer and Randall were branded as heretics for preaching this! I am glad they were willing to accept the scorn to preach the truth!

That men in their free will can make shipwreck of their faith

First, allow me to clarify this point by saying that FWB's believe Christians have much security in Jesus Christ. It is not our intention to lead anyone to believe that God is up in heaven just waiting for an opportunity to cut us off when we fail. He is a longsuffering Father who patiently teaches, corrects and disciplines those who are His. But because we believe in free will, we hold that one cannot willfully walk away from Christ and expect to go to heaven! Let's consider a few of the many warnings in the Scriptures to believers about making shipwreck of our faith:

- II Peter 2:20-21 ”For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not have known the way of righteousness, than after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them.”
- Hebrews 3:12 “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.”
- Hebrews 6:4-6 “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.”
- Hebrews 10:26-27 “For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins.”

Free Will Baptists have always taken the position, that a man does not lose his free will after he is saved and that God will not take anyone to heaven against their own will!

I am a Free Will Baptist because I believe in free will and not predestination or unconditional eternal security.

The Doctrine of Ordinances

An ordinance is a practice of the church that we are “ordained” to perform. We can look at ordinances in one of two ways:

- We can observe them as church ordinances OR
- We can observe them as a divine ordinances

What difference does this make? The most notable difference is in the way the ordinances are practiced.

For example, there are many churches that practice church ordinances that will not accept the baptism of a convert who comes from another Bible believing church. In order to be a member of their particular church, the person must often be baptized again, because baptism is held as a church ordinance. Likewise, many churches with the same “church ordinances” beliefs, will not serve communion to a believer who is not a member of their church body. Again, it is because ordinances are practiced on a individual church level.



Free Will Baptists observe the ordinances of baptism, communion, and feet washing as divine ordinances. This is because they did not originate with the church. Rather, these ordinances originated with Christ Himself.

Baptism

Jesus gave us direction about baptism:

Matthew 28:19 “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:” All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.”

Because we recognize Jesus’ authority, a person who is baptized in the manner in which Jesus prescribed it is welcome and accepted in a FWB Church.

Communion

Participation in Communion in a FWB church follows the same logic as baptism. Free Will Baptists will welcome to the table any believer in Christ, because it was Jesus who instituted the last supper.

Luke 22:19 “And he took bread and gave thanks and brake it, and gave it unto them saying; This is my body, which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.”

Feet Washing

There is another ordinance Free Will Baptists observe - the washing of saint's feet. Why do we take part in such a peculiar practice? Very simply stated, Jesus commanded it, both Jesus and the early church practiced it, and Jesus said we would be happy if we participated in it! If that is not reason enough, consider the tremendous lessons that can be learned by observing this ordinance:

First, we can learn Humility – Just as it was lacking in Jesus' day, there is a great need for a lesson in humility today. Before the Scripture in John 13 where we find the ordinance of feet washing presented, we discover the disciples in Luke 22 having an argument over who was the greatest. Doesn't this sound just like us? Isn't it ironic that Jesus, the greatest One among them was the One who girded Himself and performed this humble task? What a tremendous lesson for us today!

In addition to humility, we can also learn Service. Jesus had sent everyone out of the room except for Himself and the disciples. All the servants who would usually wash the feet of guests were gone. Left, was a room full of disciples who had come to be served rather than to serve. How much does this sound like the modern day church?

Many come to church today looking to be served rather than serve. Oh how different it would be if we had a church full of people ready and willing, even anxious to serve? If this attitude could prevail, I believe it would revolutionize our churches!



Lastly, we learn the daily need of **Cleansing**. When Jesus approached Peter to wash his feet, Peter refused. Jesus said that if He didn't wash him, Peter could have no part with Him! Peter relented and asked Jesus to wash everything. Jesus said that it was not necessary to wash everything, but he did need his feet cleaned.

This teaches that when we come to Christ, He cleanses us completely. But because we walk in a dirty world, there are many things that will attach themselves to our feet. It may be a bad attitude, a bad habit, a grudge or host of other sins that may seek to cling to us. Feetwashing shows us that we must come to Jesus daily to keep our feet clean, thereby not allowing these stains to soil our relationship with Him.

The Doctrine of Baptism

Free Will Baptists believe that baptism is a vital part of the Christian experience. There are three major points about baptism that Free Will Baptists promote:

1. FWB's practice Believers Baptism only - Because we practice believer's baptism only, you will witness no infants baptized in a FWB Church. We believe that baptism is an outward expression that reflects an inward experience. In Acts 8, we find that Philip preached Jesus to the Ethiopian eunuch. The eunuch asked Phillip what hindered him from being baptized. "Philip said If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered I believe that Jesus is the Son of God." Only when the eunuch professed his

faith in Christ would Philip baptize him.

2. FWB's do NOT practice Baptismal Regeneration - Some churches teach that you must be baptized in order to be saved. Free Will Baptists have never accepted this, believing instead that salvation comes "by grace through faith" Ephesians 2:8-9. The thief on the cross in Luke 23 never had the opportunity to be baptized. If baptismal regeneration is an unconditional requirement to make it to Heaven, then there are places of desert on the earth where it would not be conducive for lost people to come to know the Lord. I am glad that there is not a square inch of earth where a person who cries out to the Lord cannot be saved!

3. FWB's only Baptize by Immersion - We can understand why immersion is important by studying the root words, "Baptiso" and "Baptizien." These words signify a burial. Therefore, baptism by immersion best depicts the death and burial in Romans 6.



When a person is baptized by immersion, it is a testimony that they believe in the death, burial, and resurrection, and that they are willing to identify themselves with it. Immersion is the only mode of baptism that will show this great truth.

The Doctrine of The Baptism of the Holy Spirit

FWB's believe that every Christian receives the Holy Spirit at conversion. The Holy Spirit comes to live in a believer the moment they receive Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. Look carefully at the following verse:

- I Corinthians 12:13 "For by one spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free and have been all made to drink into one spirit."

Notice the word "all" is used two times to show that every Christian has been baptized into the body of Christ. Paul teaches in the book of Romans that you cannot be a Christian without the Spirit.

- Romans 8:9 "Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his."

The Apostle Paul further states in the book of Colossians that if you possess Christ, you have the "Godhead" (Father, Son, Holy Ghost).

- Colossians 2:9-10 "For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power."

The Bible is clear - every believer possesses the Holy Spirit.

FWB's also believe in a Progressive Sanctification that will be complete when Jesus comes. Sanctification is that process, whereby, God takes weak, sinful, and mistake-prone Christians, and makes us like Him. Christ, the one who saved us will patiently work with believers.

Philippians 1:6 "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."

When will this process be completed?

I John 3:2 "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that, when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

Graduation day! On this day temptation will mean nothing. All of our failures, problems, and trials will be over. We will be like Him!

The Doctrine of the Bible

The truths of the Bible have raised vital questions in the minds of men and women for centuries. In fact, many churches and denominations are having tremendous controversy over the Bible. But I am glad to report that Free Will Baptists are not arguing over the Word of God. Here is what we believe:

The Bible is Inspired - We do not look at the Bible as being simply written by men. Instead, we believe that God wrote this book by inspiring men to write it.

II Peter 1:21 "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."

II Timothy 3:16 "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."

The Bible is Infallible and Inerrant - We do not teach that the Bible is an error filled book. The best answer I could give to the question, "How do you know the Bible is true?" would be that Jesus said it was!

Think of it. When Jesus was on earth the Old Testament was completed. If there were any errors or omissions, He had every opportunity to tell us what they were. Jesus did not do this. Rather He said:

John 10:35 "The scripture cannot be broken."



Christ went on to say:

Matthew 24:35 "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."

How true this is!

The Bible is our Authority - The authority in a Free Will Baptist Church does not rest on the leaders or in the hierarchy of the church. It rests firmly on the Word of God! We have all the authority we need when we have the Word. Our treatise says that the Bible will be our "only rule of faith and practice". When there is a clash in a FWB church between men and the Word of God, we don't get rid of the Word, we get rid of the men! The Bible is the final authority.

The Bible is Complete - We are living in a day where we have a multitude of cults and religious groups telling us that we have missed God's truth and we need their "revelation" to enlighten us. Others are working vigorously on their computers to find some secret Bible code that God left behind.

We teach that when you hold the Bible in your hand, you have the completed Word of God. In its pages you will find all you need to be saved, to live in this life, and to resist temptation. By following God's plan, one day you can look forward to stepping on Heaven's shore! When the Lord was directing John to write the book of Revelation, He came to the last chapter and proclaimed a curse for those who would add anything to His Word. In addition, He gives a warning that one's name will be removed out of the book of life for taking away from His Word Revelation 22:18-19. The Lord has made it clear. The Bible is complete!

With all the religious activity going on, not everyone is valuing doctrinal truth. But I am glad that Free Will Baptists are! I would rather stand on the God's truth alone, than to stand on error with the crowd.

Our Government

The local church holds the place of highest authority in our denomination.

All ministries are subject to the local churches. No denominational hierarchy has any power over the local congregation. Our churches are self-governing. They hold the deed to their own properties, and select their own pastors. The way I see it, this allows Free Will Baptists to enjoy the best of both worlds. Our churches have the freedom to minister to the needs in their particular area without interference from the denomination. Yet at the same time, churches have the vehicle to voluntarily unite with other local bodies to accomplish together what one cannot do alone. These joint efforts help place missionaries overseas, build Bible Colleges, and fund long-range programs.



Not many of our churches would have enough resources to place missionaries on the field, provide a Bible College, or maintain a publishing house. But 2,500 churches working together can!

In our own state of Ohio, I see churches like First Austintown, Lancaster, Zanesville, Neville, Hamilton, Ashtabula, and London that were started because the 150 churches of the state of Ohio joined together to plant them! It is a wonderful thing to work together for the cause of Christ.

Our Support

There are two ways that FWB churches fund ministries:

The Co-op Plan - The Co-op Plan is similar to tithing at your local church. Money is given and distributed according to a plan voted on by churches of the Ohio State Association each year. When a church gives to the Co-op plan, the offering is divided in this way:

70% of the offering stays in Ohio and is used to fund our state ministries. Currently, the lions share (52%) is given to our State Office which has responsibility for overseeing and funding these programs. 15% goes to our State Mission Program, and 3% to our State Youth Program. The 30% that remains is sent to our denominational headquarters in Nashville, to aid in funding ministries on a National level.

Designated Giving - Churches and individuals also have the option of designating an offering. One can give whatever percentages they decide to aid ministries close to their heart. They can give directly to the State Office, Ambassador Magazine, State Missions, State Youth or any of the National Ministries. All of these state and national ministries are worthy of support. Some churches and individuals give a combination of Co-op offerings and designated dollars.

As I stated earlier, Free Will Baptists have the best of both worlds. We do not have a denominational hierarchy that forces our churches to do what the denomination wants them to. No one comes to our churches and tells us we "have" to give to any particular ministry. We do, however, have the opportunity to voluntarily work with our sister churches to aid in furthering God's kingdom. I believe that every church should do their part to support Free Will Baptist ministries.

In Conclusion

I hope this article has given you a glimpse inside the Free Will Baptist denomination and made you feel proud that you are a part of it. Our doctrine, our fellowship, and our

common purpose united us. By working together, we are able to accomplish much more for the Lord than we could by working alone. I am thankful and proud to be called a Free Will Baptist! I hope and pray that you are too!