

Liberty of Conscience and the Doctrine of Scripture in the Baptist Union of Southern Africa (BUSA)¹

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Abstract

This essay examines two questions. First, what is the nature of the Baptist principle “liberty of conscience” or “religious liberty,” and how is the principle meant to be understood in the context of the church’s ongoing mandate to “defend the faith”? Second, how, if at all, has the principle of liberty of conscience impacted on the doctrine of Scripture in the BUSA? Based on the authors’ examination of the data, they conclude that formulating a doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture to defend relevantly the authority of the same, does not threaten liberty of conscience. Also, they argue that it is theologically erroneous and out of line with the historic Baptist understanding of religious liberty to assert that defining a doctrine of Scripture will undermine the latter principle. Moreover, the authors maintain that to insist otherwise is fundamentally inconsistent, as the BUSA has adopted definite views on other doctrines, such as church government.

¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

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1. Introduction

The Baptist Union of Southern Africa (BUSA) consists of over 650 churches in the Southern Africa region. The majority of churches are from South Africa, but other countries include Zimbabwe and Zambia. The 1877 Constitution of the Baptist Union included a Declaration of Principle, which states that the basis of the Union is the unique and absolute authority of Christ as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. It also states that each of the churches has liberty to interpret Christ's laws for themselves (BUSA 1989:5). This declaration highlights two cherished Baptist principles, namely, the primacy of the Scriptures and liberty of conscience.

Baptists have generally been characterized as upholding the supremacy of the authority of Scripture in all matters of life and faith (Hudson-Reed 1983:357). BUSA has historically also sought to uphold this tradition. A 1986 survey of the BUSA (a sample of pastors, ministerial students at the Baptist Theological College, and lay people) showed that the overwhelming majority of members believed the doctrine of Scripture to be of "primary importance" (Miller 1987:167). This statement reflects the belief that the doctrine of Scripture is absolutely essential to the spiritual health of the BUSA. The BUSA has, however, had to grapple with the doctrine of Scripture, and the issue of inerrancy in particular. In brief, the term "inerrancy" refers to the fact that Scripture is "wholly true and without error" in all that it speaks to (Geisler and Nix 1986:52).

Since 1930, a number of controversies have erupted in the BUSA over the doctrine of Scripture. Some of these controversies are discussed later. These controversies and debates have resulted in numerous proposals to clarify and define the doctrinal statement on Scripture. These attempts, however, have not been successful.

One of the main Baptist principles that has hindered updating the doctrine of Scripture in the BUSA is the second one noted earlier, namely, that of "liberty of conscience" (Miller 1987:68, 152). For example, during the 1957 attempt by the Executive to introduce stricter standards to be applied to ministerial applications, it was objected that it violated "the Baptist Principle of Freedom of Conscience or individual liberty" (Miller 1987:68). Again, in the 1986

survey of the Union, 16 percent of the respondents believed that requiring a particular view of Scripture would restrict the liberty of the churches in the Union to interpret the Bible for themselves (Miller 1987:101). Thus, the main issue was that some members of the Union were concerned that the proposed doctrinal formulations would restrict their liberty to interpret the Scriptures for themselves, and so violate one of the basic founding principles of the Union.

The primary subject investigated in this essay is the apparently conflicting principles in the BUSA, namely, the need to promote doctrinal orthodoxy regarding the doctrine of Scripture and yet uphold liberty of conscience. In this regard, two questions need to be explored. First, what is the nature of the Baptist principle "liberty of conscience" or "religious liberty"? Expressed differently, what are its theological and historical foundations, and how is the principle meant to be understood in the context of the churches' ongoing mandate to "defend the faith" relevantly in each generation? Second, how, if at all, has the principle of liberty of conscience impacted on the doctrine of Scripture in the BUSA? Put another way, what are the attitudes in the BUSA regarding "liberty of conscience," the doctrine of Scripture, their respective priorities, and the need to promote orthodoxy?

2. Understanding liberty of conscience

Theological discussions on religious liberty are often complicated and confused by a lack of precision. Terms are either used interchangeably or given differing meanings. The terms and definitions proposed by De Albornoz (1963, ch. 2) are adopted in this essay, as they provide clearly defined terminology for distinguishing between concepts that facilitate the complex debates raised by religious liberty.

Accordingly, "liberty of conscience" means "pure religious liberty," which is a "supreme value," and denotes man's essential relations with God (De Albornoz 1963:22). Thus, liberty of conscience is a social (or external) religious freedom that allows individuals to determine their faith freely (an activity in the inner being or soul of man, called "soul competency"). General religious liberty coupled with "basic human rights," such as right of expression, right of association, and right of corporate freedom, give rise to

“liberty of religious expression,” “liberty of religious association,” and “corporate and institutional religious freedom” (de Albornoz 1963:23-25).

These distinctions allow “pure religious liberty” (or liberty of conscience) to be seen as a supreme right that must be unlimited and unrestricted, while yet allowing for other religious liberties such as freedom of expression and association to be limited to some extent by the state to protect society from abuse (de Albornoz 1963:25). These terms and concepts were adopted in an attempt to reconcile those who saw all aspects of religious liberty as a fundamental right that should be unrestricted, and those who believed that there are necessary restrictions on some aspects of religious liberty. In the following section, the biblical basis for understanding liberty of conscience and Christian liberty will be briefly articulated. This will be followed by an overview of the early Baptist view of liberty of conscience.

2.1. Scriptural foundations

2.1.1. Liberty of conscience

Romans 14:10b-12 states that each person shall appear before the judgement seat of Christ to give an account of himself or herself to God. These verses highlight a number of points that are essential for the discussion at hand. First, the passage introduces the concept of the final judgement (Murray 1965:184), which will result in God assigning each person to either heaven or hell (Matt 25:31-46). Heaven is represented as an “eternal kingdom” prepared for God’s people, and hell as “everlasting fire.” These concepts of everlasting bliss or eternal torment stress the overwhelming, ultimate significance of the judgement seat of Christ, and thus the ultimate significance of every person giving an account of himself.⁴

Second, Romans 14:10b-12 indicates a strong individualism, namely that every person will give an account of himself to God. Regardless of whatever corporate or communal themes are also reflected in Scripture, in the final judgement every person will stand alone before their Maker. Third, at this

⁴ Because of the absence of an English common gender, third person singular pronouns, masculine forms are used where both genders are included.

final judgement, every person will give a personal account of all his deeds to God (2 Cor 5:10). No aspect of their lives will be exempt from divine scrutiny. The passage also emphasises that this account will be rendered *to God*, and not to people (Murray 1965:185). Fourth, and most importantly, those who judge believers (keeping in mind the context of Romans 14:10b-12) usurp the authority that belongs to God alone and “put themselves in the place of God” (Dunn 1988:809). Those who do this will themselves come before the judgement seat of Christ. This indicates the serious nature of people trying to interfere in the relationship between God and people.

In light of the preceding information, Romans 14:10b-12 teaches that every person has a responsibility to walk before God (termed “soul competency”) and to give an account of himself to Him. Because the issue involves the most fundamental and ultimate relationship (between God and man) and results in an ultimate destiny (heaven or hell), each person should be given the freedom by society to exercise this responsibility according to his conscience (termed “liberty of conscience”).

2.1.2. Religious liberty and the state

Romans 13:1-7 states that human governments are ordained by God and are His servants. Thus, every person is to be subject to them. However, this subservience is not unqualified. For instance, the state is the servant of God, and the Scriptures delineate its sphere of authority and function, namely, to promote “good” and punish “evil.” The latter notwithstanding, “good” and “evil” in this context must be qualified to mean maintaining general law and order (Murray 1965:151) and ensuring justice for all (Dunn 1988:771; Waldron 1989:286). The main reason for this conclusion is that the sword is the instrument the state has been given to punish “evil.” A sword is not an instrument to mould the conscience of people, but to punish external acts of evil against others (Waldron 1989:294).

The preceding statements are made against the backdrop of a complicating factor, namely, that the state exercises its function in a world tainted by sin. This is a circumstance in which rights and liberties are often perversely abused to the harm of society. Thus, the state has to impose limits on outward religious acts to provide some protection against abuse, which could obviously

deprive others of their liberties. From a Christian (and particularly a Baptist) perspective, the governing principle in the matter is that the state must "preserve civil justice and peace and protect men from violence to their bodies and property" (Waldron 1989:294).

Consequently, the state must allow not only allow full liberty of conscience for each individual, but also allow general religious liberty for all people. The latter is particularly so in terms of outward religious acts, communication, association and institutions, *as long as they do not jeopardise civil peace and justice*. Of course, "civil peace" and "justice" are terms that need to be carefully defined. From this Christian perspective, the church and state are both servants under God, and must allow each other to operate in their respective spheres, with the Word of God governing the relationship between the two.

2.1.3. Christian liberty

Galatians 5:13-14 teaches that Christians have been called to liberty. However, this liberty should not be used as an opportunity to indulge the sinful nature, but rather to serve one another in love. Importantly, this love fulfils the *law* of God. The first and most obvious point arising from these truths is that unbelievers do not enjoy the liberty spoken of in the biblical text. It is a liberty purchased by Christ (Gal 5:1), and only those spiritually united to Him by faith enjoy the benefits thereof.

The context indicates that this Christian liberty consists of a freedom from servile bondage to the law (v. 1), and by implication the legalistic teachings of people on the law (cf. 4:17). A more systematic study of Christian liberty shows that it consists (amongst other things) in freedom from the law as a means of salvation, from the doctrines of people, and from the guilt and dominion of sin (Rom 3:19-26; 1 Cor 7:23; Col 1:13).

That being the case, a careful study of Galatians 5:13-14 leads to the seemingly paradoxical view that Christian liberty is not without limits. It has clear boundaries. In particular, true liberty never leads to the indulgence of the sinful nature, but rather to serving one another in love. Thus, Christian liberty is not unrestricted. The Bible indicates that sin and error lead to bondage (John

8:32-34). Accordingly, true Christian liberty, by definition, should never lead to spiritual bondage. Expressed differently, it must never be seen as freedom to indulge in sin or to believe any doctrine.

The preceding truths have important implications for the church. The role of the state with reference to liberty of conscience and religious liberty was discussed earlier. The role of the church can now be delineated with respect to Christian liberty. To reiterate an earlier point, Christian liberty does not consist in freedom to indulge sin or believe any doctrine. Consequently, Christ has mandated the church to exercise discipline against professing believers who deviate significantly from the faith or who practice open sin. For that reason, the church is tasked to defend the faith (1 Tim 6:20) and uphold Christ's moral values (Gal 5:19-21). This does not conflict with Christian liberty, but rather protects Christian liberty, for sin and error lead people into spiritual bondage.

2.1.4. Summary

Liberty of conscience and religious liberty are issues that primarily need to be seen from the perspective of *the state*. Liberty of conscience should be seen as an ultimate value by the state and it should be extended it to every person without restriction. Liberty of conscience refers to the freedom every individual should enjoy to exercise his responsibility to walk before God as his conscience dictates. Liberty of conscience, however, finds expression in outward religious acts, which impact on society. As the state has a God-given responsibility over society, certain restrictions may be placed on these external acts. These restrictions should relate primarily to maintaining civil obedience and justice. Anything beyond these restrictions would impact negatively on liberty of conscience and religious liberty.

In light of these truths, the church has a responsibility to defend the faith relevantly and exercise biblical discipline. In doing so, Christian liberty is protected, for true spiritual liberty is undermined by sin and error. Christian liberty can never biblically be understood as the right believers have to do or believe whatever they please. In pursuing this mandate of defending the faith, liberty of conscience is not undermined, especially as long as church membership is voluntary.

Furthermore, the discipline that the church has been mandated to impose is separation, not physical punishment. Each Christian church or organisation would also need to differentiate carefully between essential doctrines and secondary issues, which allow differences of belief on issues not essential to the Christian faith. These observations indicate there is no conflict in Scripture between the state granting full liberty of conscience to every individual, and the church defending the faith and exercising discipline against those who have voluntarily joined a church and professed to follow Christ.

The following section gives a brief analysis of the early Baptist views on the relationship between liberty of conscience and promoting doctrinal orthodoxy. For the purposes of this essay, only the writings of some of the Anabaptists and the early English Baptists will be analysed.

2.2. The early Baptists

2.2.1. The Anabaptists

In 1524, Conrad Grebel wrote to Thomas Müntzer concerning church practice. He expressed the view that a church should not be formed with "command or compulsion," but by following the word of God and prayer. Scripture was sufficient to instruct and govern all types of people. Those believers that would not follow the rule of the word of God were to be admonished and then excommunicated. Grebel expressly taught that excommunication was the only form of discipline for the church, as those disciplined "should not be killed" but left alone (Bender 1970:6-7). It is important to note that Grebel saw liberty of conscience primarily in relation to the role of the state, and the maintenance of scriptural standards (either doctrinal or moral) as the role of the church.

Felix Manz held similar views. In his petition to the Zurich *Council* in 1524, he requested that those of other faiths be left undisturbed, and specifically that those holding to other beliefs (such as on baptism) should not be suppressed with force. Rather, if the word of God would be allowed to "speak of itself freely and singly," no one would be able to withstand it (Bender 1970:8).

Hans Denk, described by Bender (1970:9) as one of the gentlest and most attractive figures of the Reformation period, gives greater insight into the

theological understanding of religious liberty and liberty of conscience in Anabaptist thought. He believed that in matters of faith "everything should be voluntary and uncompelled" (Bender 1970:10). The very nature and essence of faith was that it could not be forced upon a person, but rather had to be a voluntary act. This view of faith was fundamental to the Anabaptist justification for religious liberty. However, it must be cautioned that Denk did not have a high regard for Scripture, but rather favoured the "inner word" of the Spirit as the basis for Christianity (Needham 2004:287).

Kilian Aurbacher elaborates further on the grounds of religious liberty. In a letter dated 1534, he believed that it is never correct to compel people in matters of faith, as every person would bear his own guilt before God when He came to judge (Bender 1970:10-11). This is a clear belief of the doctrine of "soul competency" upon which liberty of conscience and religious liberty rests.

Menno Simmons argued for religious liberty from three main perspectives. First, he understood faith to be a gift from God. From this understanding, he concluded that faith could not be forced, and that the *state* should therefore not use force to compel faith. Rather, he frequently pleaded for tolerance and religious liberty (Bender 1970:16-17). Second, he argued from the example of Christ. Simmons often challenged his opponents to show where Christ either taught the use of the sword or practiced it (Hudson-Reed 1989:89). Third, Simmons justified religious liberty from the fact that Christians are called to love others, even their enemies. This is incompatible with the use of the sword to compel faith (Bender 1970:15).

While upholding religious liberty, Simmons nevertheless believed in upholding orthodoxy and church discipline. For example, he believed that when a person joined the church, they were to accept the "group discipline" *according to the New Testament*. Simmons also severely criticised the state churches for their beliefs and practices, though he acknowledged that they could include many genuine believers (Bender 1970:15). It has to be noted, however, that legitimate criticism can be raised against Simmons and many of his followers for "excessive strictness" at times. They would exercise discipline for issues that had no scriptural precedent, such as details of shaving, dress codes, and the like (Vedder 1969:191-192). Nevertheless, it is

clear that Simmons did not consider maintaining Christian standards to be in conflict with liberty of conscience and religious liberty.

The pastoral covering letter of the Schleithem Confession (produced by the Anabaptists in 1527) captures many of the sentiments expressed earlier. The Confession was produced to protect the true children of God from "false brethren" among them who had turned aside from "the faith" in the way they exercised their "*freedom of the Spirit of Christ.*" According to the letter, these false brethren thought that "love and faith may permit and do everything." (Needham 2004:303-304). The Confession was therefore produced to warn and protect believers. Clearly, the Swiss Anabaptists did not believe that Christian's could believe or practice anything they pleased under the pretence of freedom. Biblical Christian freedom is bound by the truth and moral purity. Thus, the Swiss Anabaptists produced a Confession to formally express what they believed Scripture taught on various issues.

The clear conclusion to be drawn from the belief and practice of the Anabaptists is that the essence of religious liberty in their understanding was the absence of the threat of physical force in matters of faith. Faith and church membership should be uncompelled. This religious liberty, however, because it was seen primarily in relation to the state, could exist even when the *church* insists on biblical standards and exercises church discipline.

2.2.2. English Baptists

This section will be limited to the English Baptists. However, because of the influence of the English Baptists on the Baptist movement in the Colonies, the views of the English Baptists are consistent with Baptists in the Colonies regarding liberty of conscience. This section will be further limited to some general observations of the movement as a whole.

The first observation concerns the development of a distinct Baptist identity in a society already permeated by churches and denominations. The point, though obvious, needs some elaboration, as it is fundamental to the discussion. Many of the early Baptists acknowledged other churches and denominations to be essentially Christian and to contain true believers (Nettles 2001:10). Why did they not join these churches and denominations and seek to influence

them? The obvious answer is that they saw the need to maintain a distinctive Baptist witness. They saw Baptist distinctives, such as believer's baptism and the nature of the church, of sufficient importance to maintain a degree of separation from the other denominations and churches. *In other words, they believed that their distinctive witness to biblical truth took precedence over visible, outward unity with other denominations.* The latter statement is equally valid for General and Particular Baptists, and has remained true from the earliest Baptist church to the present day.

It is important to remember that some of these doctrinal distinctives, such as the administration of the ordinances and church government, though important, are not fundamental issues of the faith. This point shows that Baptists have historically stood for and insisted on scriptural belief and practice. Nonetheless, the early Baptists also argued for religious liberty in order to have the freedom to maintain this distinctive witness without persecution or harassment (Adams 1982:95, Nettles 2001:9). In practice, this distinctive witness meant that only those who professed Baptist doctrine and practice could join a local church. Importantly, they did not see this witness and insistence on Baptist doctrine as threatening religious liberty, liberty of conscience, or Christian liberty in society or in the church. Membership in Baptist churches and associations was voluntary, and people could withdraw at any stage (Meredith 2001:148). Again, these early Baptists argued for religious liberty in relation to the *state*, yet within the church insisted on maintaining biblical standards (Adams 1982:95).

A number of important conclusions can be drawn from what has been said. First, the early Baptists believed doctrine was important—certainly important enough to maintain a distinctive witness at the expense of a corporate Christian witness with the other denominations. This doctrine extended not only to issues fundamental to the faith but also secondary issues, such as the administration of the ordinances and church government. Second, the early Baptists did not see this distinctive witness and insistence on Baptist doctrine as in any way violating liberty of conscience, religious liberty, and Christian liberty. They certainly made no apologies for the fact that those who wanted to join a Baptist church must submit to Baptist doctrine and practice. Third, and most importantly, any assertion that formulating doctrine violates the principle

of liberty of conscience is at variance with the understanding and practice of early Baptist churches.

2.2.3. The testimony of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith

The main reason for exclusively focusing on the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith is due to its popularity and large influence amongst Baptists. Though it can be rightly argued that because it is Calvinistic, it only represents Particular Baptists, yet on Liberty of Conscience and the Civil Magistrate, the Calvinistic influence is much less distinctive. In terms of these two doctrines, the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith represents general early Baptist belief that adequately represents both Particular and General Baptists.

At the outset, it needs to be noted that the early Baptists saw no contradiction in formulating a detailed Confession of Faith, including a detailed doctrine of Scripture, that spoke to many contemporary errors. Also, in that very same Confession, they insisted on Christian liberty and liberty of conscience. In their minds at least, the former did not inherently threaten the latter. In conjunction with that, chapter twenty-one of the Confession contains three paragraphs that deal with the composition of Christian liberty, liberty of conscience, and the perversion of Christian liberty (Waldron 1989:254-255).

Paragraph one describes Christian liberty mainly in terms of its spiritual dimensions, such as freedom from the guilt of sin, freedom from God's wrath, freedom from the curse of the law, and freedom from bondage to Satan and sin. Both Old Testament and New Testament believers enjoyed this freedom, though the New Testament believers' enjoyment thereof is "enlarged" and "fuller."

The second paragraph describes liberty of conscience. "God alone is Lord of the conscience," and it is therefore free from the commandments of people that in any way contradict or are not contained in God's word. Those requiring blind, absolute obedience or an implicit faith destroy liberty of conscience. Though this paragraph is generally stated in the negative, its positive assumption is that people's conscience is most certainly bound by God and His word. People are not "free" to believe anything they wish.

The latter is one of the main reasons why these early Baptists believed that producing a Confession that clearly articulated biblical doctrines did not threaten liberty of conscience in the least, but rather was consistent with it. The preceding statement on liberty of conscience also needs to be seen in the context of Baptist belief that churches comprise those who “*willingly* consent to walk together” (chapter 26, paragraph 6). In other words, Christians would have the freedom to assess a particular church’s belief and practice before voluntarily joining it, or they would have the freedom to leave a church or group if they felt that the doctrine or practice was inconsistent with Scripture (Waldron 1989:14-15). Hence, the voluntary nature of Christian associations further protected liberty of conscience.

The third paragraph of chapter twenty-one deals with the perversion of Christian liberty. The latter is perverted when it is used to justify the practice of sin. The whole objective of Christian liberty (as described in paragraph one) is to free believers from the guilt and dominion of sin, not to allow them to freely indulge in it. Believers are called to a life of holiness and obedience, though this will never be perfect in this life (cf. chapter 13, paragraph 2). That being the case, this understanding of Christian liberty is entirely consistent with churches exercising discipline against those who hold to serious “error” or “unholiness of conversation” (chapter 26, paragraphs 2, 5-7).

The preceding brief historical survey of how religious liberty was understood and applied by early Baptist movements shows a general consistency. The early Baptists saw religious liberty primarily as a liberty granted by the state. They consistently called for the state to tolerate other faiths and religious views. The early Baptists argued for religious liberty in order to have the freedom to maintain a distinctive witness to Scripture without persecution or harassment. Put another way, religious liberty would provide a social and political framework within which religious groups could enjoy liberty of conscience and practice their beliefs.

Moreover, the early Baptists believed doctrine was important—certainly important enough to maintain a distinctive witness at the expense of a corporate, united Christian witness with the other denominations. In practice, this distinctive witness meant that only those who professed Baptist doctrine and practice could join a local church. Importantly, they did not see this

witness and insistence on Baptist doctrine as threatening liberty of conscience in society or in the church. This was due to the fact that people's faith was not coerced by the state, and church membership was voluntary. Thus, there was no conflict in their understanding between standing for liberty of conscience in *society*, and yet defending the faith in the *church*.

3. The doctrine of Scripture

The controversies and debates in the BUSA on the doctrine of Scripture need to be discussed and evaluated against a standard. This essay is based on the view that the original autographs of Scripture are the very word of God. They are completely inspired by God and authoritative. This inspiration and authority extends to the very words and smallest details of Scripture, so that the Scriptures are infallible and inerrant in all that they speak to, including matters of science, history, and geography. Thus, Scripture cannot contradict itself and is doctrinally consistent.

It is beyond the scope and limitations of this essay to demonstrate that the preceding view is faithful to Scripture. Be that as it may, some points require further careful elaboration, beginning with the doctrine of inerrancy. Specifically, it is limited to the original autographs, and takes into account irregularities of grammar and spelling, commonly observed descriptions of nature, rounding of numbers, and a lack of modern day technical or scientific precision. Such approximations and "vagueness" in the language of Scripture, however, far from detracting from its value, are essential for effective communication (Frame 1987, ch. 7).

Numerous arguments against inerrancy have been raised, including the following:

- The assertion that other views such as "limited inerrancy" and "conditional inerrancy" fall within the ambit of "evangelicalism," and thus any insistence on complete inerrancy is narrow and unnecessarily divisive (Railey 2001:57, 127, 175).
- The contention that modern evangelicals are too conditioned by philosophical frameworks that were foreign to the authors of Scripture.

This has led to an overestimation of the importance of a Scripture that is factually correct (Perry 2001:¶9-10).

- The concept of inerrancy is out of line with historical reformed theology, as notable Reformers such as Luther and Calvin did not hold to the form of “detailed” inerrancy that some modern evangelicals hold to.
- The argument that because the original autographs no longer exist, the debate on their inerrancy is senseless, as at the end of the day it makes no practical difference for the church.

Briefly, in response, it can be argued that the presence of errors of any kind in the original autographs require some external “sieve” that can be applied to the Scriptures to determine what the errors are and how far they extend. Practically speaking, such a sieve would be more authoritative than Scripture, as it is used to assess the trustworthiness of Scripture (Poythress 1967:100). Furthermore, errors in the original autographs, regardless of their insignificance, do detract from the authority of the Scripture. It is unconvincing to speak of the Scriptures as being “authoritative,” “completely trustworthy,” or “infallible” on the one hand and admit on the other that they contain errors. Theological truths are often rooted in real history and observable facts. If the historical or observable facts of the Scriptures can be wrong, it must cast doubt on the associated theological truths, and hence detract from their authority (Geisler 1986:59). It is only an inerrant, infallible, and sufficient Scripture that can effectively function as the completely authoritative word of God in a Christian church or group.

4. The Baptist Union of Southern Africa, liberty of conscience and the doctrine of Scripture

The 1877 Constitution of the Baptist Union includes a Declaration of Principle, which forms the basis of the Union. The basis of the Union is:

that the Lord Jesus Christ, our God and Saviour, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each church has liberty to interpret and administer His laws (Miller 1987:51).

The two Baptist principles of the authority of the Scriptures and liberty of conscience are clearly revealed in this statement. Some reflection on this statement is required. First, the Lordship of Christ and His authority over all aspects of faith and practice are mediated through the Scriptures. In other words, the Scripture is the authority for the church, because it is the word of Christ. There does not appear to be any indication in the preceding statement that Christ's authority can in any way be separated from the Scriptures. This provides the primary reason for the Baptist emphases on the primacy and authority of the Scriptures, as without the Scriptures Christ's will cannot be known with any degree of certainty. Hence, any depreciation of the Scriptures must impact on the knowledge and application of Christ's will and authority for the church.

Second, it is obvious that the liberty given to each church to interpret Scripture was not intended to be unrestricted. The Declaration of Union was after all to establish a *Baptist* Union, and therefore only Baptist churches could join. The more detailed statement of faith of 1924 was an attempt to define more precisely what it meant to be Baptist. Also, the BUSA has since its inception exercised some degree of discipline over deviating pastors or churches, indicating that some "liberties" were deemed unacceptable to the Union.

Third, and related to the second point, the fact that a Statement of Faith was required several decades later, after a few controversies, indicates an initial weakness in the formation of the BUSA. There was a lack of definition and clarity on the doctrinal standards to be applied in the BUSA. The claim of any professed Christian group to follow the Scriptures does not exempt it from clearly stating what it believes the Scriptures teach. As has already been argued, the early Baptist movements certainly did not consider it to be fundamentally "un-Baptist" to produce statements and confessions of faith to clarify what they believed the Scriptures taught (Estep 1987:602-603).

4.1. Some key historic debates

This section will focus on only a two of the most relevant historic debates on the doctrine of Scripture and liberty of conscience in the BUSA. These two debates illustrate the tensions in the Union between liberty of conscience and doctrinal orthodoxy on Scripture.

4.1.1. Standards for ministerial candidates

The first incident relates to acceptable standards for ministerial candidates. During the period 1955 to 1958, an attempt was made to include “verbal inspiration” and the 1924 Statement as a minimum requirement for ministerial candidates. After receiving numerous objections, one of which was that the liberty of conscience of the individual churches would be compromised, and a legal opinion that such a policy could not be adopted except by *unanimous* consent because of the constitution, the proposal was not upheld (Miller 1987:68). The following year, in order to at least exercise some control, the Executive of the BUSA introduced a compulsory interview for ministerial applications, as it was within their mandate to make a recommendation on every case. They were determined to protect the Union from “theological liberalism” (their words) in the area of the doctrine of Scripture (Miller 1987:69).

During this period, the claim that liberty of conscience and the autonomy of the local church would be compromised by such an act was forcefully articulated, with the result that no resolution was passed that clarified the doctrine of Scripture. A plea during this period was that liberty must prevail and churches must be able to interpret the Scriptures as the Holy Spirit guided them, and not blindly accept any “decision of a Pope or Council” (Miller 1987:68). Also, the original constitution and basis of the Union could not be undermined. Claims were made that the BUSA was behaving in an “un-Baptist” way in trying to make “verbal inspiration” mandatory (Miller 1987:68).

A number of crucial observations need to be made in this regard. First, as noted earlier, this incident highlights the real tensions that the BUSA faced with the competing principles of maintaining and defending orthodoxy, yet allowing each church liberty of conscience. On the one hand, there was extreme unhappiness concerning an earlier incident with the principal of the Baptist Theological College (in 1952), and it was acknowledged that some doctrinal clarification was required to prevent a similar occurrence. On the other hand, the BUSA was not able to achieve this due to the principle of liberty of conscience. It clearly demonstrates that unless the two principles are correctly understood and prioritised, the BUSA will never effectively progress

in relevantly maintaining doctrinal orthodoxy in an ever-changing theological world.

Second, the claim that adopting a statement that clearly articulated a doctrine of Scripture would violate liberty of conscience was spurious and inconsistent. The question that needs to be asked is why the BUSA could maintain some doctrines and not others. For example, why was it acceptable to maintain the doctrines of congregational church government and believer's baptism (even to the point of excluding churches from the Union in 1984) and yet the doctrine of Scripture could not be clarified? In what sense were the doctrines of church government and believer's baptism "guided by the Spirit," but not a biblical doctrine of Scripture? This is especially important, as the very basis of the BUSA was the authority of Christ mediated through the Scriptures. A relevant defence of the doctrine of Scripture to protect its effective authority for the BUSA could hardly be more important. The objection was clearly inconsistent, as the BUSA had adopted other doctrinal formulations.

4.1.2. Inerrancy considered (1986)

The second incident that will be mentioned concerns the Statement of Baptist Principles. In 1986, a Statement of Baptist Principles was presented to the Assembly for consideration and discussion. The first paragraph, on the subject of Scripture, read as follows:

We affirm that the Lord Jesus Christ is our God and only Saviour and that He has absolute authority. The Holy Scriptures are the inspired word of God, and their authority is inextricably linked with that of Christ; they are therefore the final authority for the Church and its members in all matters of faith and practice (General Secretary's Memorandum to Ministers and Church Secretaries, 1987:3)

Holdt proposed that the term "inerrancy" (or alternatively, a phrase such as "truth without any mixture of error") be included in the first paragraph of the Statement. Opposition to this amendment was voiced, and after some discussion, it was not included. While the rest of the Statement of Principles

was still subject to change and discussion, "the question on the inspiration of Scripture was regarded as no longer open to debate" (Miller 1987:83).

Clearly, the BUSA was not prepared to define the doctrine of Scripture beyond the fact that Scripture was "inspired." This term had already been included in the 1924 "semi-official" Statement of Belief, and had not clarified exactly what was meant by it. Thus, despite the previous controversies, and the subsequent attempts to define the doctrine of Scripture, the BUSA made little progress (if any) since 1924.

In the same Statement of Principles, a declaration on religious liberty was adopted the following year:

The Principle of Religious Liberty, namely that no individual should be coerced either by the State or by any secular, ecclesiastical or religious group in matters of faith. The right of private conscience is to be respected. For each believer this means the right to interpret the Scriptures responsibly and to act in the light of his conscience (*South African Baptist Handbook*, 1988:164).

Two points need to be made regarding this statement. First, in its wording, this principle is in agreement with the early Baptist understanding of liberty of conscience. Religious liberty is established when there is no external coercion by the state or any other body. This has, however, always existed in the BUSA, as membership was and is voluntary and no external coercion or threat of physical punishment was applied to any who left the BUSA for whatever reasons. The statement also rightly indicates that every believer must have the freedom to interpret Scripture for himself and to act in accordance with it (in other words, to enjoy full liberty of conscience).

Second, the *application* of this principle in the BUSA must be questioned. The historic debates show that some in the BUSA opposed any theological definition of the doctrine of Scripture on the basis that it would restrict liberty of conscience. Similarly, from a survey conducted in 1987 in the BUSA, 16 percent of the respondents believed that any attempt to officially adopt a particular view of the inspiration of Scripture "would be a contradiction of our

Baptist Principle of individual liberty of conscience” (Miller 1987:174). This is clearly inconsistent. In the very same Statement of Principles, congregational church government was adopted, which led to nine churches being excluded from the Union. Why could a particular view of church government be adopted, but not a particular view of the inspiration of Scripture? Why does the one and not the other violate liberty of conscience?

It could be argued that congregational church government has always been a historic Baptist principle, and “verbal inspiration” or inerrancy has not. In response, it needs to be pointed out that the BUSA has to defend the faith relevantly in every age. The early Baptist movements made stands and statements on issues that were *currently* controversial and relevant. It would be most “un-Baptist” to adopt only doctrinal formulations on the basis of their historicity. If the early Baptists only stood for what had *historic* precedence, they would never have championed believer’s baptism and religious liberty, as these were generally considered “new” ideas.

In any event, the view that inerrancy (or at least “implicit” inerrancy) was not a historic Baptist position is open to serious challenge. For example, an analysis of chapter one of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith indicates that while the term “inerrancy” was not used, it displays an implicit view of inerrancy (Waldron 1989:51-52). To illustrate, it affirms that the Scripture evidences itself to be the word of God by the “consent of all the parts,” by “incomparable excellencies,” and by its “*entire perfections.*” As a result of the debates on the doctrine of Scripture from 1930 to 2007, the BUSA was only able to assert that the Scriptures were “inspired.” This term was ambiguous in the debate on Scripture, and therefore did not settle any of the disputes.

4.2. Impact on the doctrine of Scripture

In 1986, a detailed, five-page altitudinal survey of the BUSA was undertaken by GG Miller. It mostly focused on the inspiration and authority Scripture. The survey was distributed to some “500 Baptist pastors, students at the Baptist theological colleges, laymen and laywomen throughout Southern Africa” (Miller 1987:95). A response rate of 43 percent was received, which equates to some 215 individual responses. The questionnaire was completely anonymous, and could not distinguish at all between respondents.

It should be noted that respondents were not constrained to select only one option. Consequently, Miller reported that while 93 percent of the respondents indicated that they supported full inerrancy, 15,5 percent of them also selected contradictory options. The options presented and percentage responses were as follows:

Options	Percentage responses
Full inerrancy	93,3 (but 15,5% of these selected contradictory responses)
Bible contains the word of God	6,1
Neo-orthodox view of inspiration	8,0
‘Limited inerrancy’ – spiritual message only inspired	13,2
Inerrancy futile due to absence of autographs	6,6
All Scripture inspired but not of equal value	61,3
Jesus accommodated His knowledge to error	0,47

Table 1: Responses to options regarding the inspiration of Scripture

A number of comments need to be made on these results. First, there has definitely been a negative impact on the doctrine of Scripture within the BUSA. Views that allow for errors in Scripture must impact on the veracity of Scripture as a whole, and therefore on its authority. Errors in the verifiable data of Scripture must cast doubt on the closely linked spiritual truths, which cannot be verified. The fact that in 1987 up to 30 percent of the respondents within the BUSA (i.e., the summation of options 2-5) held to errancy views is problematic for the BUSA, especially if it wants to maintain the authority of Scripture as a cornerstone and the basis of the Union.

The negative impact can also be seen in the worsening trend. For example, while in the 1950’s Barnard was dismissed for “Barthian views” on Scripture, in 1987 some 8 percent of respondents held to such views. Another example is that in 1958 the BUSA Executive wanted to ensure that “verbal inspiration” was a standard for ministerial acceptance, but in 1987 up to 30 percent of respondents (most of which were existing or future pastors) held to views incompatible with verbal inspiration.

Second, it is clear that the 1924 Statement of Belief is insufficient to protect the BUSA from unacceptable views of Scripture that will detract from its authority. The survey results conclusively show the existence of groups who hold to views that undermine biblical authority. The individual pastors would most likely have had to indicate their acceptance of the 1924 Statement of Belief before ordination. It is simply a historical reality that in the current debate on the doctrine of Scripture, many people with widely divergent views of Scripture can nevertheless subscribe to the view that the Scriptures are "inspired." The theological debate has progressed to such an extent that "inspiration" is hopelessly inadequate as a standard of orthodoxy. The experience in the BUSA has confirmed this.

5. Conclusion

There has clearly been a negative impact on the doctrine of Scripture within the BUSA. Views that allow for error in the Scripture must impact on the veracity of Scripture as a whole, and therefore its authority. The fact that in 1987 around 30 percent of the respondents within the BUSA held to errancy views is problematic for the BUSA, especially if it wants to maintain the authority of Scripture as a cornerstone and the basis of the Union.

The fact that the doctrinal formulation on the doctrine of Scripture within the BUSA has not kept abreast of theological developments, means that in practice the BUSA is tolerating "limited inerrancy" and "Barthian views." The survey results are clearly evidence of this. The *de facto* situation is that in *not* updating its doctrine of Scripture, the *BUSA has in fact adopted a position*. This position is that "limited inerrancy" and "Barthian views" are acceptable in the BUSA, as those who hold to such views are under no form of censure.

The preceding observations notwithstanding, this essay has argued that the careful formulation of a doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture to defend relevantly the authority of Scripture in the current theological climate will not threaten liberty of conscience. The assertion by some in the BUSA that defining a doctrine of Scripture will undermine liberty of conscience is theologically erroneous and out of line with the historic Baptist understanding of the term. It is also fundamentally inconsistent, as the BUSA has adopted definite views on other doctrines, such as church government.

The BUSA needs to carefully consider the recent debates on the doctrine of Scripture and define a position on inspiration that it believes will uphold the authority of Scripture in the BUSA. The views put forward in this essay are based on the belief that inerrancy is both biblical and necessary to ensure that Scripture remains the authoritative basis of the BUSA. The research has clearly shown that significant minority groups holding to errancy views already existed in 1987. Such views can only undermine the authority of Christ being exercised in the BUSA through the Scriptures, and will result in the spiritual decline of the Union.

Two errors need to be avoided. The first would be the temptation to try and reconcile all the differing positions in the Union on the doctrine of Scripture. The 1986 survey clearly demonstrates that the views are too divergent for this to happen. Certainly, it will not be possible to please everyone in the BUSA. The second error would be to try and avoid dealing with some of the contentious issues, such as inerrancy. Another ambiguous statement that does not address the current issues in the BUSA will be ineffective. Miller's warning needs to be stressed. Unless the issues are dealt with, they will always resurface in the future (Miller 1987:141).

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