

Augusta First Baptist Church
Matthew 18:18-20
Religious Freedom and Liberty
July 22, 2007

18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Three decades ago, my predecessor, the late Dr. George Balentine once said, "Christian is a noun, Baptist is an adjective." For these next few weeks, I want to describe to you what we mean by "Baptist." Baptist describes how we live out our Christianity through this church. This is the second in the five part series of the Baptist Myth or the Baptist Story. Denominational titles do not have ultimate importance, but it matters greatly how we live out our Christian faith. What do we mean when we use our church's middle name, "Baptist?"

Last week, I introduced a word that many feel best sum up what it means to be Baptist. That word is "freedom." It has been said, that our greatest national symbols are the Statue of Liberty and the Liberty Bell. Inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty are the words, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free." Inscribed on the Liberty Bell are the words, "Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof," a quotation of Leviticus 25:10.

Baptist freedoms, according to Baptist historian, Buddy Shurden, mean four things: Soul freedom, which we explored last week, Bible freedom, Church freedom, and Religious freedom. Today, our focus will be on Religious freedom.

Religious freedom reminds me of an early memory as a student in public education. I was standing with my peers before a small US flag, and pledging allegiance. I knew very little of what it meant to be a citizen. There are few expectations, after all, for a six-year-old. I could not vote, serve in the military, and the only Presidents I could name were George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Richard Nixon. There, I have just dated myself.

I also remember, that when we stood to say the pledge of allegiance, a little girl would leave the classroom and stand in the hallway until we were finished, and then she would come back in and take her seat. Her name was Gwen, and she was a Jehovah's Witnesses. Their faith forbids them from taking pledges, oaths, or citing scripture as their defense. I always felt sorry for Gwen, who seemed so isolated because of her religious beliefs. Many made fun of her. And now, so many years later, while I strongly disagree with most of the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses, as a Baptist, I respect the religious freedom that allows people like Gwen to practice her faith openly.

We need those same freedoms as well, because there was a time in our nation's colonial history when religious freedom was not granted.

For some of you, the name Daniel Marshall is a familiar one. Along with his wife, Martha Stearns Marshall, they founded the first Baptist church in Georgia in 1772 – Kiokee Baptist Church, next door, in Appling, Georgia. Today, Kiokee has on loan our stained glass from our church sanctuary on Greene Street.

In the 18th century, however, the ministry of Daniel and Martha Stearns was illegal because the Church of England was the only recognized church in Georgia. Daniel was arrested by the parish of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Augusta, for preaching outside the authority of the state church.

Historically, Baptists were whipped in the streets, chased out of town, and arrested – all within the American colonies. In fact, the very first Baptist church in America began because Roger Williams was banished by the Puritans to a then remote location called Providence, Rhode Island. It was there in the 17th century that Baptists got their start in the American colonies. That is why Baptists have an important historical role regarding religious freedom. In Virginia, following the arrest of forty-two Baptist ministers, Thomas Jefferson became their unlikely champion in articulating for both the colony of Virginia, and later, the United States with the Bill of Rights that begins with an affirmation for religious liberty. He was so proud of this bill that the three things he wanted to be remembered by were: 1) the writing of the Declaration of Independence, 2) the father of the University of Virginia and 3) the statute of Virginia, for religious freedom. This bill served as the precursor to the First Amendment to the Constitution. Two Baptists were very influential in molding the thought of both Thomas Jefferson and the wording of the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States – Isaac Backus and John Leland. This amendment reads: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Religious freedom means essentially three things: freedom of religion; freedom for religion; and freedom from religion.

Religious freedom is uniquely American. Other nations are just now tasting this God-graced liberty. There is still a state church in such nations as England and Germany. We do not see religious liberty in Iran or Iraq or Saudi Arabia. Yes, religious freedom is uniquely American and a distinction among Baptists. There are three things that religious freedom means to you and me: Religious Freedom Believes in the Power of God not the Governments.

In the Gospel reading this morning Jesus reminds his hearers “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” The gospel reading implies, that God's power is great, but it is up to us to use it – it is not that of the government. Belief cannot be coerced. It has to come through faith. We cannot make someone else believe.

Religious Freedom is accepting that all should be free to believe or reject God's good news. The great Baptist, John Leland called for absolute religious liberty in the 1790's, when he wrote, “Let everyone speak freely without fear, maintain the principles that he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three gods, no God, or twenty gods, and let the government protect him in so doing.” This sentiment was echoed in this century by George W. Truett, former pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, when he said in 1920, “Baptists make this contention, not only for themselves, but as well, for all others – for Protestants of all

denominations, for Romanists, for Jews, for Quakers, for Turks, for Pagans, for all [people] everywhere.”

Does religious freedom mean we are not to be involved in matters of the state? Certainly not. It is not a call for apathy or a suggestion to vote or voice concerns. But we must not trade kingdoms or confuse the two. What is Caesar’s is the emperor’s, and what is God’s is God’s. God and the State are not identical. Either we trust God, and God’s way to care for this world, or we trust the world of politics.

For those whose faith is in God, we know that we do not change the world by political action. To be sure, it can be a tool. But ultimately, we do not change the world by political coercion. Emperor Augustus tried to, so did Nero, so did Napoleon, and so did Hitler. As believers, we know that the only way we can change the world is through God.

Religious freedom believes in the power of God, not the government. Religious Freedom Means Religious Responsibility.

As I stated earlier, the gospel reading implies that God’s power is great, but it is up to us to use it – it is our responsibility. Jesus remarked to the religious leaders when he inquired about paying taxes, and he looked at a Roman coin with its image of the emperor on it, and said: *“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God.”* (Matthew 22:21)

When we blend those two sides of the coin, we create civil religion which is in effect a worthless religion. In fact, it is not a religion at all. I do not want the state to get involved in matters of my faith. For example, I do not want the public schools taking on the role of teaching my children matters of faith – (whose faith is it anyway, the government’s, Christian, Muslim, Hindu). It is the church’s role to teach.

Another example is the hanging of The Ten Commandments in public places. What is to prevent predominately Mormon communities, such as Salt Lake City, from displaying a passage from the Mormon Book of Prophecy, or, maybe a copy of the Hindu Scriptures or the Five Disciplines of the Buddha, or, the Five Pillars of Islam? Religious Freedom is a reminder that we should never trust any Civil government – no matter how good and noble or how perverse – with matters of faith. Religious Freedom recognizes it is not the government’s responsibility.

Religious Liberty is a reminder that we must not blur walls between secular and sacred. There is a difference between what is holy and what is not. Do not make Caesar something that he is not - God. Religious freedom means religious responsibility.

Religious freedom places God as Subject and Object, sometimes, perhaps oftentimes, we put ourselves, or society, or the state as the subject and object of our lives. Yet, the State cannot save us and improving culture will not save us. We cannot save ourselves – not even with our best efforts. No amount of self-denial, moral efforts or muscular Christianity will do it.

I suspect we are at times like the young plumber, in The Ragamuffin Gospel, who had just received his plumber's license, and was taken to see the Niagara Falls. He studied it for a minute and then said, "I think I can fix this."

We look at the overwhelming leaks in our lives, and in our culture and in our best "do-it-yourself" mentality, we think we can fix it. And if we cannot fix it, then surely this great society can. Let's just past the right set of laws that will enforce our beliefs, at the expense of someone else's freedom to believe or reject.

The Baptist recognition of religious liberty is admitting that the answers will never be completely found in anyone or anything else, save God. It is awakening to the reality that it is God who is the subject and object – who changes us.

Only when we are changed, can we hope to bring change into the lives of others. We change the world right here. When two or more are gathered in God's name, mighty things will happen because God said he would be here. When two or more are gathered, we can pray like no other institution on earth. We do not change the world through the halls of congress, we change the world in the house of God – where two or more are gathered. When two or more are gathered, sins can be forgiven and no matter how hateful your thoughts, God can break through. When two or more are gathered in the name of Christ, hearts are broken, lives are changed, visions are seen and dreams become reality, when two or more are gathered

Drop a pebble in the pond and watch what happens. Ripples form and rings of concentric circles go forth. That spot, that point in the center where contact was first made, takes on life, and from this, energy emanates.

This is what happens when God meets with us, touches us, and changes us, transforms us, renews us, revitalizes us and saves us. At the center of our contact energy – spiritual, life-changing energy – ripples forward. It cannot be stopped. Why? It is because two or three are gathered in the name of Christ. Do not give this freedom to anyone or anything else. It is the freedom God has given us.

Bob Browning, the pastor of Smokerise Baptist Church reminded me of the time when John F. Kennedy, Jr.'s plane crashed into the ocean off Martha's Vineyard on July 16, 1999. The National Transportation Safety Board, concluded that he became disoriented while flying over the water through a thick haze. His decisions were fatal, even though he felt like he was doing the right thing. Instead of flying above the ocean, he erroneously pointed his plane directly into the water killing him, his wife, and his wife's sister. I have no doubt that Kennedy thought he was doing the right thing, but his lack of expertise and experience proved otherwise. It no doubt continues to be a sad and grievous anniversary for the Kennedy family, as they marked the eighth anniversary of this tragedy. Kennedy's fatal crash reminds me of Proverbs 16:25. "*There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.*"

I have read that John Kennedy, Jr. could have avoided this tragedy had he done one thing while in flight. His plane was equipped with automatic pilot and landing capabilities. If he had activated these, the plane would have flown directly to the designated airport and even

landed without his assistance. All he had to do, was put his confidence in the plane's computer, and utilize it. It would have saved his life.

Religious freedom means putting confidence in God and taking responsibility.