

Augusta First Baptist Church
Ephesians 1:20-23
Church Freedom and Our Autonomy
Baptist Distinctives
August 5, 2007

Ephes. 1:20-23

“God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, [21] far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. [22] And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, [23] which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

Many years ago, I was invited to speak at a high school civics class. It was Career Day, and the Rotary Club I was a member of, had asked for volunteers. Believe it or not, I had never before had the opportunity to speak to a “secular” audience about my vocation as a minister, so I eagerly looked forward to my time with a class full of sophomores. The talk went well enough. Most of the students had attended a church at some point in their lifetime and they asked some fairly predictable questions like, “What do you do all day,” and “Do you ever run out of things to say on Sunday?” One student asked a question that I did not expect. She wanted to know who paid me and how much I made. By way of clarification she followed up, “Does the government hire you to work at the church?” I explained to her that the government has no role in supporting any church in the United States. And as to my salary, they would just have to guess – and I heard numbers ranging from that of a garbage collector to a Microsoft executive.

Career Day became an opportunity to speak, not just about separation of church and state, but for me to address an important Baptist distinctive, Church Freedom. Church Freedom is my focus this morning, as we continue this series on the Baptist Myth or the Baptist Story.

By way of explaining Church Freedom as a Baptist distinctive, let me contrast this with other denominations. If one belongs to the Roman Catholic community, decisions impacting their local churches and members are made ultimately by the Pope, who resides in Rome. Of course, he is surrounded by Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops who advise, guide and counsel, but make no mistake, the hierarchy leads to Rome. Methodist churches, on the other hand, are governed by Districts of churches, which belong to larger conferences, which are each headed by a Bishop. The Bishop decides who will pastor what church and for how long. In the early days, the rotation for a Methodist pastor was annual, then three years and later four years. Now, many Methodist ministers are appointed much longer. Still, the individual church is not autonomous to the larger denomination. Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Lutheran churches, to name a few, while distinct in their own polities, are nonetheless tightly connected to the larger denomination.

Baptists are different. We believe in the autonomy of every local church. We believe Baptist churches are free, under the Lordship of Christ, to determine their membership and leadership, to order their worship and work, to ordain whomever they perceive as gifted and

called for ministry, and participate as they deem appropriate with other churches and agencies whose mission we share.

In other words, no one tells, instructs, or directs First Baptist Church of Augusta how we must give to missions (or, even if we give!), who we will call to serve as a minister, who we will ordain, or who will participate on the deacon body, except, and only the people of First Baptist Church.

This means that Baptist Churches are congregational. Church freedom means that every voice must be heard as part of church direction. Baptist churches can voluntarily associate with other churches, denominations, agencies, but ultimately, you and I as members of this church, determine the direction we feel God is taking us and who we will cooperate with to accomplish the mission. Therefore, we support the Augusta Baptist Association, The Georgia Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Georgia Baptist Convention, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Southern Baptist Convention to help us further our mission locally and globally.

Let's do a little work regarding what the Bible means by church. The Bible does not give us much in the way of definitive clarity on the subject of church. Matthew is the only one of the four gospels, that even mentions church and only does so in two passages. The rest of the New Testament is quite focused on churches. Eight - that is over half - of Paul's epistles are written directly to churches. Today's text, for example is a letter to the church or churches of the Roman seaport city called Ephesus.

In the book of Acts, we have a picture of the very first church of the believers and followers of Christ. In Acts 2:42 we read: *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."*

We know four things about the early church: first, they were committed to learning, second they were committed to fellowship, third they were committed to worship, fourth they were committed to prayers. In the first chapter of Acts, we find another responsibility of the early church – sharing their relationship, that is, missions.

Reading through the New Testament, one would think, would give us a clear picture of what the church looked like, but it does not. Some churches in the Bible had deacons, like we do here at First Baptist. Some churches in the Bible had elders, but we do not. I know of a couple of Baptist churches in the Atlanta area that have elders, but most do not. Elders are, however, an official office of Presbyterians. Bishops are mentioned in the Bible, but I do not know of any historic Baptist church that has a Bishop. Churches are as diverse in the Bible as they are today. Do you know how many times the position of pastor is mentioned in the entire Bible? It is mentioned just once, in Ephesians 4:11. It would seem that amidst all the church positions mentioned in the Bible, the one of pastor is the most expendable!

The Greek word for church is *ekklesia* – and literally translated it means, "called out ones," as in an assembly or congregation. Paul, the apostle, uses the body as an image of the church. Just as the body has many members with various functions, so it is with the church

(Romans 12:4 “*For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function.*”)” In the text read this morning, we are reminded that Christ serves as the head. Ephesians 1:22-23 - “*And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*” This is why Baptists are fond of saying, we are autonomous, but not independent. Christ is head.

Another word often used to describe the church in the Bible is, *koinonia*, and it is most often translated as fellowship or sharing. The image that comes to mind, is that the church is a relationship where we “put up” with one another.

A couple of weeks ago, Amy and I celebrated our 19th wedding anniversary, by hosting a family at our house for dinner. In other words, Amy had to cook on our anniversary. I plan to make it up to her by taking her someplace real nice, like Chick-fil-a, or, maybe even some place with tablecloths. Actually, we will celebrate it sometime this fall, complete with a night out – right now, there just doesn’t seem to be the time. I know I will have to make this up when we celebrate our 20th next year. We did not get around to celebrating our 10th anniversary until nearly twelve months later, with a weekend getaway. The reason we were so late is, that other things got in the way. First, we had a family member go through unexpected surgery. We rescheduled. Two days before we were to leave again, one of our children got sick. Well, there was no way we were going to leave him with someone else when he was not feeling well. So, we rescheduled again. Three weeks before we were to leave, it was brought to my attention that I had “verbally” agreed to take part in a church-related function on a certain Friday night. After discussing the matter over with Amy, we resolved that it would be easier to reschedule the trip than to go back on my commitment. Finally, after eleven months, we got away to celebrate our 10th anniversary.

Now, why would a reasonably young couple put up with so many interruptions and interferences and disappointments in planning a trip? I suppose we could have told our sick child “tough break, here’s the insurance card. Try not to go to the hospital unless the fever breaks 105.” Maybe, we could have mentioned to the church leaders who were expecting us, “So sorry, but something better has come up. Hope you can find a replacement.” Well the reason is simple – Amy and I put up with the interferences, interruptions, and disappointments in our marriage because we love each other, and are committed to the relationship.

What about church? What are you willing to put up with in church? I have known people who get their feelings hurt and basically stop coming. They are angry – sometimes for good reasons – and they have decided that the relationship with the church is not worth it. Take my word for it – the commitment to the relationship is worth it.

At an early age, and I don’t really know why, I discovered that I loved the church. I loved the church sanctuary, with the smell of pews freshly cleaned with pine-sol and the pulpit and communion table covered with its vestments. I fondly remember the church building of my first pastorate. It was a simple white frame structure complete with a floor furnace that rumbled in the winter. I can still smell the flower arrangements that each Sunday came from a church member’s yard.

What I love most about church, is not about its building – be it a one room house or a sprawling campus like our own. I love the church, because of people who are trying to love God and who want to be loved by God. I love the church, that is the people, because we are koinonia – a community of people called by God and commissioned by God.

It is people who will call you when you have gone missing. Church is a casserole left at the doorstep when you are recuperating from the hospital. Church is a hug and kiss, when you have cried so hard because your heart is broken. Church is a bold confession of your faith in God, and church is where you can sit quietly, because you don't have strength and need others to pray for you. To be sure, the church on earth is not perfect, because people are not perfect.

Ken Medema, one of the most talented and insightful Christian musicians of our day, who also happens to be blind, wrote a song of great vision about the church:

*If this is not a place
Where tears are understood,
Where can I go to cry?
And if this is not a place
Where my spirit can take wings,
Where can I go to fly?
If this is not a place
Where my question can be asked,
Where shall I go to seek?
And if this is not a place
Where my heart cries can be heard,
Where shall I go to speak?*

Do you think we the church, can be that kind of place – place where we go to fall apart? Can we be the place where we can see a fresh vision from God, that will lift us into a different way of living and relating? Do you think we can be the kind of place where we can search and ask questions and even wonder out loud, all the while knowing we are loved, because we are family? Can we be the place where second chances are lived, because while we may be a communion of saints, we are also a fellowship of sinners? Do you think we can be a place where we put up with each other?

In order to be that kind of place, that kind of Church, we must be that kind of people. One thing the Bible is clear about: the church has nothing to do with bricks and mortar. Yes, buildings can be important, for they are tools of ministry. Sure, we have an address, but this just tells you where we meet. But, this is not the only place we meet. We meet in the board room and the classroom, we meet in the hospital, and nursing home and living room. Anytime we gather in the name of Christ, proclaiming his Lordship – our kinship - and living in his grace we are the church.

Now I ask you, is this Biblical picture of the church something you are willing to invest in? Like a healthy marriage, are you willing to see it through the difficulties, imperfections and disappointments that inevitably come?

This morning, I invite you to be a part of this local congregation's quest to become God's church. It is not enough to proclaim church freedom – we are called to live it. First, I invite all of us who call ourselves members to commit or recommit to this gathered congregation. I also invite those of you who are not members here, to consider becoming a part of this church family. Should every church be like First Baptist? No. Our goal is to be like God's community. If your desire is to be a part of such a community, then we invite you to join us in this journey. Finally, for those who have never professed their faith in the risen Lord, you are invited to make your decision public this morning.