

Four Fragile Freedoms: Church Freedom¹

Spilman Memorial Baptist Church

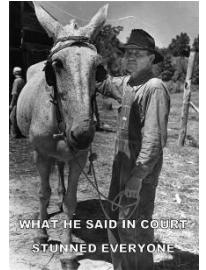
Dr. H. Powell Dew, Jr.

May 22, 2022

Text: Matthew 16:17-19

Purpose: To help the congregation appreciate the great freedom that Baptists have when it comes to “church” freedom. Many congregations today do not have these same liberties. Freedom brings responsibility – ours is to model Christ – becoming as a servant.

Farmer Joe decided his injuries from the accident were serious enough to take the trucking company responsible for the accident to court. In court the trucking company's fancy lawyer was questioning farmer Joe.



"Didn't you say at the scene of the accident, 'I'm fine,'" asked the lawyer.

Farmer Joe responded, "Well, I'll tell you what happened. I had just loaded my favorite mule Bessie into the..."

"I didn't ask for any details," the lawyer interrupted, "just answer the question. Did you not say at the scene of the accident, 'I'm fine!'?"

Farmer Joe said, "Well, I had just got Bessie into the trailer and I was driving down the road..."

The lawyer interrupted again and said, "Judge, I am trying to establish the fact that, at the scene of the accident, this man told the highway patrolman on the scene that he was fine. Now several weeks after the accident he is trying to sue my client. I believe he is a fraud. Please tell him to simply answer the question."



By this time the judge was fairly interested in Farmer Joe's answer and said to the lawyer, "I'd like to hear what he has to say."

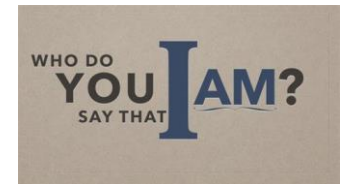
Joe thanked the judge and proceeded, "Well, as I was saying, I had just loaded Bessie into the trailer and was driving her down the highway when this huge semi-truck and trailer ran the stop sign and smacked my truck right in the side. I was thrown into one ditch and Bessie was thrown into the other. I was hurting real bad and didn't want to move. However, I could hear ol' Bessie moaning and groaning. I knew she was in terrible shape just by her groans."

Shortly after the accident a highway patrolman came on the scene. He could hear Bessie moaning and groaning so he went over to her. After he looked at her, he took out his gun and shot her between the eyes. Then the Patrolman came across the road with his gun in his hand and looked at me." He said, "Your mule was in such bad shape I had to shoot her. How are you feeling?"

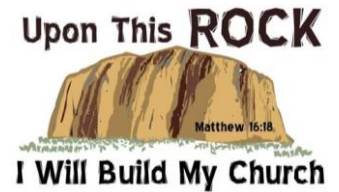
Let us turn our attention to what today's sermon is all about.

Our passage this morning taken from the Book of Matthew has become one of the pivotal passages as far as church freedom is concerned. If you have your Bibles, I invite you to turn there and follow along with me this morning.

Last week we examined the previous four verses. In that section we find that Jesus has entered into a discussion with Peter. Jesus asks him the question, "Who do you say that I am?" To that Peter replies, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus responds by saying that this revelation that Peter has made has not been given to him by any person, but by the Father in heaven.



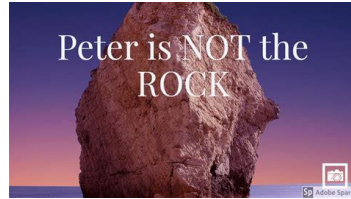
The verse I want to focus on for a few moments today is verse eighteen. "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."



Over the years, many people have examined this passage and applied MANY different meanings. The word "Peter" in the English translation literally means, "Rock Man." Peter was to become the key leaders of the Christian Church in Jerusalem. Jesus said to Peter that day, "on this rock I will build My church". What rock is Jesus talking about? Is Jesus saying that He will build the church upon Peter? Or is he saying that He will build His church upon the confession that Peter made?



VS.



Let us look at history and see how some have interpreted this. After Christ ascended back into heaven in Acts chapter one, the church was born 10 days later on the day of Pentecost. It was then that 3000 believers were added to the church the day the Holy Spirit descended upon those there in Jerusalem. This group of believers met weekly to worship on the Lord's Day, fellowshipped with each other, ministered to others, teaching each other the scriptures, and invited others to accept Christ as their Savior.

They were actively doing the five purposes of the church – **worship, fellowship, minister, teaching, and evangelism**. When I return from Alaska, beginning June 19th, we will examine these five purposes of the church.

Over the next two hundred years, the church underwent a tremendous amount of persecution. The Jews hated these Christ followers and the political leaders were suspicious of anyone that was loyal to anyone but Caesar. During those years, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem were varied and at times, it was difficult to know exactly who the “head leader” was.

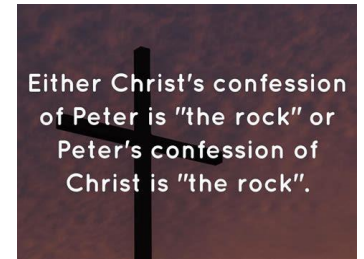
When Constantine gained control of that portion of the known world in the fourth century, he made Christianity the official religion. Now the church was not the one being persecuted; it became joined/endorsed/promoted with and by the government. The church that emerged found it necessary to establish their authority by claiming that they had received the power to rule through what was described

as Apostolic Succession. If you were to read the list of popes of the Catholic Church, you would see that the list goes all the way back to the Apostle Peter. From Peter to the present-day Pope, they claim their authority through the line of Apostles, thus Apostolic Succession.

The Catholic Church today takes great pride through the interpretation of this verse in Matthew to imply that Jesus was building the church upon Peter.

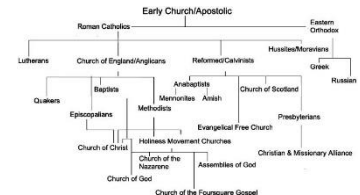


But as I have studied this passage, I believe that Jesus was trying to affirm the confession of Peter as the bedrock of Christ's church, not Peter himself. There is a link from the confession, to the blessing of that confession, to the establishment of that confession as the “Rock” that the church will be built upon.



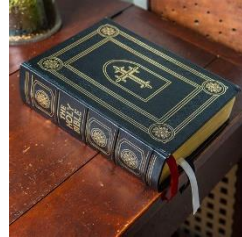
In the twelfth century, the Holy Catholic Church divided into two parts; the Greek Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. Even today, almost 900 years later the two are divided.

In the sixteenth century, many different groups began to pull themselves away from the Roman Catholic Church. As we have discussed, Baptists were one of those groups. Other groups that pulled away include



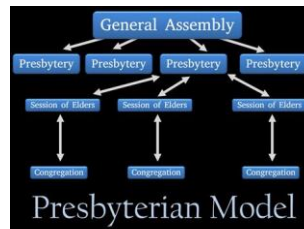
the Anglican Church, Episcopal Church, Lutheran Church, Mennonites, Quakers, Nazarenes, as well as many other smaller splinter groups. All of them sought freedom from the authoritarian view of the church. They each sought freedom to interpret the Bible, freedom of the Soul, freedom in their churches, and freedom from excessive political entanglement.

Three weeks ago, we examined the fragile freedom of the Bible. Baptists insisted that the true church should be the one that sets the scripture as the guide for all action for a church. The Bible is our sole source of authority.



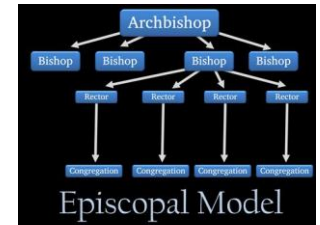
Out of that passion, came the second fragile freedom, and that was soul freedom. That was the right of the individual to come to God and “make up our own mind” about who Jesus is and if we will place our trust and hope in him. Today, we are going to examine Church freedom.

As groups began to break away from the structure of the Roman Catholic Church, the question of how to govern the affairs of the church eventually came up. There are three ways in which churches are governed. The first is to form a Presbyterian government. This form is one in which a group of elders are elected by the membership and they in turn, make decisions for the church. Issues are never brought back to the members to vote upon. This Board of Elders makes all

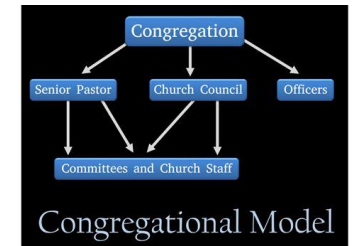


those decisions. The Presbyterian Church is organized in this manner.

A second form of government is called Episcopal. This church governance form is one in which a Bishop makes all the decisions for the church. The Elders (the local church leaders) do not have any input; the members don't have any input. The Bishop has all the authority. Bishops come together and make policy and elect a leader from their own ranks. In the Catholic Church, this person is called a Cardinal. It is out of this group of Cardinals in the Catholic Church that the Pope is selected. Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church are structured in this manner.



A third option of governance is called Congregational. This type of governance is one in which the Congregation has the final say on all matters. It is this type of church government that Baptist Churches claim. The congregation chooses their own deacons and teachers, they select their own pastors, and they decided issues through the sometimes messy, democratic process. The Methodist Church is a blend of both Congregational and Episcopal forms of governance.



I do want to point out that in the Catholic Church, Presbyterian Church, Church of God, Episcopal, and Methodist Church, the local church does not own their own property. The Conference, District, or Diocese is the one that owns the land and buildings. Because the

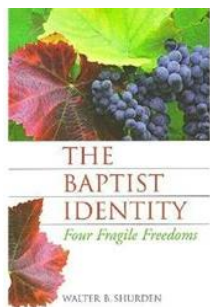
congregation does not own their own property, the members have to abide by the rules set down by the governing council. They have to accept the pastor or priest that is sent to them. They have to forward a certain percentage of their offerings to the district.

Baptist churches like Spilman make our own decisions. We elect our own deacons, order our constitution the way we deem best, select our own pastor, and buy and sell property without the permission of the district. We are free to order our affairs as we deem necessary.

If we want to build a building, we don't need to seek permission from "headquarters." If we want to hire a youth pastor, we can. If we want to ordain women as deacons, we can do that. If this church decided to call a woman as pastor, it is free to do that.

Baptists practice democratic church polity not because it is more efficient or more reliable or even more biblical than other forms. They follow it because it accents the role of the individual within community, allowing the greatest freedom for the greatest number of people to have a say.

Walter Shurden, the writer of *Four Fragile Freedoms*, asked several associational directors of missions a question. "What is the major issue you face in the churches in your association?" The answer centered on pastoral authoritarianism. That is the idea that the Pastor is the only authority in the church. That



what the pastor says is the way it should be. If a pastor comes in EXPECTING that HE is in charge, and the members are suppose to do what HE says WHEN he says it, then there will be trouble, and it will come quickly.

Over the years, I have talked with other pastors who served churches through the intentional interim program. Sometimes when a church is in a transition between one pastor to another, there are often difficulties in transitioning. It is especially difficult when one pastor is forced to leave the congregation. It is also difficult if the previous pastor has been with the congregation longer than ten years.

I remember one interim pastor was telling me a story about a young man who came as pastor in a Disciples of Christ church. He came in with the idea he was the boss and if they didn't like it, they could leave. After about nine months, the young naïve pastor was asked to leave and this interim pastor guided them through a process of healing and enabled them to select the right person for their congregation.

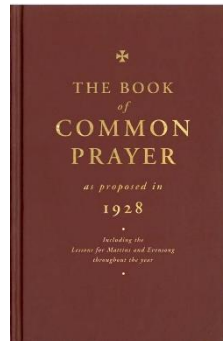


But in some instances, the pastor is so charismatic, dynamic, and enthusiastic that the church will become passive and let him run the show. This authoritative leadership style will destroy congregationalism. The church may thrive and the numbers may be there, but the principal of congregational involvement and decision making is dead. The model I have tried to exhibit is one of service. It is called servant leadership.



Our autonomy as a Baptist church does not mean that we don't want to work with other like-minded Baptist churches. That is why we have been a part of the Neuse Baptist Association in the past. We VOLUNTARILY associate with the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, the Southern Baptist Convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. If we choose to change those relationships, we can if we choose to do so.

Individuality is at the core of being a Baptist. We affirm that the church is free to worship as it deems best. No two Baptist Churches are alike. When the Baptist came out of the Anglican form of worship, the use of *The Book of Common Prayer* was the accepted format for all worship. There was an outcry to break away from that rigid structure. This freedom to worship is expressed and aims to achieve authentic spiritual worship.



In worship, Baptists have affirmed throughout the ages that there are two ordinances in the church. That is the Lord's Supper and Baptism.

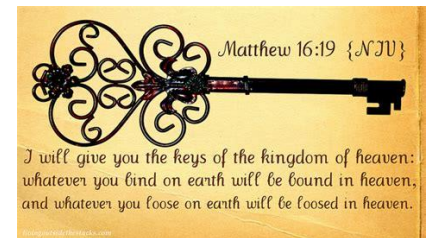


The Lord's Supper is celebrated at different times in different churches. Some churches observe it every week, others once a month (like Spilman), and others observe it once a quarter. When we serve the Lord's Supper, we practice what is called "Open Communion" we invite all individuals that have professed Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior to partake of the bread and juice, even if they are not a member of the church.

Baptism is the second ordinance of the church that Baptists affirm. As I mentioned last week, Baptist first began by pouring water over believers as an outward sign that the individual chooses to believe. The WHO was being baptized was more important than the MODE of baptism. The church's membership is comprised of Baptized Believers. It wasn't until 40 years after the first Baptist Baptism that immersion became the exclusive way in which a person was baptized.

These two ordinances, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, comprise the core of our celebration of Christ. In Baptism we identify with Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. As we go into the water, we identify with his death. As we are in the water, we identify with his burial. Coming out of the water, we identify with His resurrection and our future resurrection in Christ. With the Lord's Supper, we stop and contemplate what Christ did for us on the cross. We do this in remembrance of Christ.

If we turn back to our passage in Matthew 16:19, we see that Jesus added to this bedrock of confession. That is the issue of accountability and responsibility. The Catholic Church has interpreted verse 19 as one which gives authority to the church to dispense grace, receive confessions, grant forgiveness, and sell dispensations. To me, this verse is not saying that. The text says, "*And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*"



The church has received the inheritance of Christ. We are joint heirs with Christ according to Hebrews. We have received forgiveness and we should give forgiveness. We have received grace, and we should give grace. We will be judged in heaven by the standard in which we have judged others here on earth.

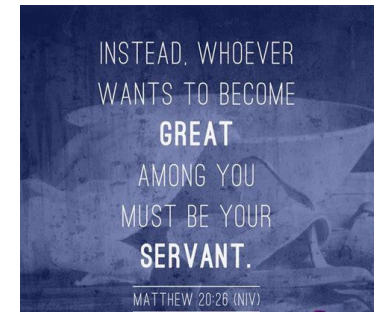
What I see this passage trying to teach us is that we have a responsibility to share this message of grace. The Kingdom of God has come, we must tell others. If we bind it here in this church building (keep it only for ourselves), the rest of the world is bound in sin and separation from God. If we set this message free upon our community – tell others the Good News of pardon and forgiveness – then our community will be free. We are responsible – we have the keys to the Kingdom. Only God can forgive through Jesus Christ – but we need to be sharing it – the unbound gospel.

As many people know all too well, Freedom comes at a great price. That price for Baptist's is responsibility. Each of us that are members of the Body of Christ, are responsible to one another. We are all accountable to one another. We are all accountable to each other. I have said on more than one occasion, my connection with God is just the same as yours. I have no “special connection” with God. I am a sinner just like you. I have been saved by grace. The ground is level at the cross. But God is faithful and just to forgive and accept us – warts and all.

Because of this fact, all of us are responsible to share this key of salvation, found only in Christ, with others. As John Newton wrote, “*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found,*

was blind, but now I see.” This freedom in Christ calls us to serve others with the words of life.

In Philippians 2:7, it says that “*Jesus emptied himself and took on the form of a slave.*” The church must now be willing to take on the role of a servant to our community. We are called to empty ourselves and not serve ourselves. The church must take that step and serve. We are to take that step and serve. Other organizations cannot tell us how to do that. We as Baptist must find that way on our own. As each of us submits ourselves to one another, we can find the way of Christ – the way of a servant.



LET US PRAY

¹ Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity – Four Fragile Freedoms*, Chapter Three, page 33-43. Many quotes and thoughts were taken from this book.

