

**Four Fragile Freedoms: Religious Freedom<sup>1</sup>**  
Spilman Memorial Baptist Church, Kinston NC  
Dr. H. Powell Dew, Jr.  
May 29, 2022

Text: Matthew 22:15-22

Purpose: To help the congregation recognize one of our founding Baptist principles has been religious freedom. This is the freedom for ALL people to worship God in a manner they deem acceptable. To Baptists, it is essential that all have the opportunity to worship freely, whether it is Jew, Muslim, Hindu, or the freedom to worship neither.

A couple in their nineties was having problems remembering things, so they decide to go to the doctor for a checkup. The doctor told them that they are physically okay, but they might want to start writing things down to help them remember.

Later that night, while watching TV, the old man gets up from his chair. His wife asks, "Where are you going?"

"To the kitchen," he replies.

She asks, "Will you get me a bowl of ice cream?"

The husband says, "Sure."

She gently reminds him, "Don't you think you should write it down so you can remember it?" He says, "No, I can remember that!"

She then says, "Well, I'd like some strawberries on top. You'd better write it down 'cause I know you'll forget it."

He says, "I can remember that! You want a bowl of ice cream with strawberries."



She adds, "I'd also like whipped cream. Now I'm certain you'll forget that, so you'd better write it down." Irritated, he says, "I don't need to write it down! I can remember that! Ice cream with strawberries! And whipped cream!" He then grumbles into the kitchen.

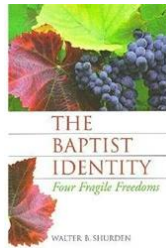
After about 20 minutes the old man returns from the kitchen and hands his wife a plate of bacon and eggs.

She stares at the plate for a moment and says, "Where's my toast?" <sup>2</sup>



I used to think this was funny! But I am finding it is getting closer to the truth! I can see that happening to me and Sharon in the years to come.

Today we conclude the four-part sermon series on Four Fragile Freedoms – Biblical Freedom, Soul Freedom, Church Freedom, and finally today Religious Freedom.



I believe the church has conveniently forgotten the difficulties of intermingling the faith of the church and the power of the government. Since the founding of the early church, there has been tension and difficulty between these two realms of influence and power.

During the early years of the Christian church, the political leaders of Rome were suspicious of anyone that held an allegiance to anyone or anything other than Caesar. Followers of Jesus Christ were tortured and killed for their faith. In 313 AD, Constantine became the ruler of the known world. It was then that the state religion became Christianity. You may have seen flags from that period of history which have a white background with a red cross in the center. Constantine claimed he saw



that symbol "a cross" in the clouds and knew that was to be the faith for the countries he ruled. His motto was: "In this sign, conquer!"

Now that Christianity was the official state religion, it was stated that anyone with a faith besides Christianity was now an enemy of the state. Two hundred years prior to Constantine coming to power, Christians were the ones hunted down, powerless, ostracized, and rejected; now the tables were turned and the church and state united together they (the church and state) became the hunter of heretics who rejected Christianity as the accepted faith supported by the power of the government.

How do we as Christians respond to our role in political life? We just went through a primary election two weeks ago where people of all different backgrounds, faiths, party affiliation, battled it out at the ballot box. For some candidates, their faith informs their decisions and aligns those that support them.



How do we as Christians respond to our role in political life? This is not just an academic question. It is one that is being played out before our very eyes in this country, day by day, and year by year. Many people promote their faith as their platform for their participation in the political realm. Their faith will inform the way they vote.

A few years ago, a judge in Alabama installed the Ten Commandments in his courtroom. He later placed an even larger Ten Commandments monument in the rotunda of the courthouse. Some said it should stay while others, including some Christians, said it should be removed. Eventually the upper courts ruled it should be removed. To this day, there are many court cases arising out of a similar situation.



A few years ago, a group of ministers decided to take up the issue of freedom of the pulpit and the freedom to publicly proclaim from the pulpit which presidential candidate they were endorsing. By doing this, it could possibly impact their tax-exempt status. Several legal groups stepped up and said they would be willing to represent any minister in court to defend their constitutional right to free speech – especially religious speech. (Do not fear, I will NOT be doing that from this pulpit!) I believe the insertion of this topic in the pulpit will only cause division, where unity is so desperately needed in the body of Christ.



Why was the posting of the Ten Commandments drawn so much attention?

Why are ministers willing to risk their churches tax exempt status for this principal?

What does the scripture have to say about things like this?

Has the political and religious landscape always been this confusing?

Let us look at scripture and history to see if we can come up with some kind of reasoned, thought-out response to this topic of religious freedom.

In Matthew 22:15-22, Jesus encounters those pesky Pharisees again. They wanted to trap him by a well thought out question. They wanted to know how Jesus felt about paying taxes. You see if Jesus answered “yes,” they should pay taxes; then they could have claimed Jesus was against God. If Jesus answered “no,” then they could have taken him to the governor to claim that Jesus was a rebel and was promoting anti-governmental activity.



Either way, they thought they had Jesus trapped in what we would call the horns of a dilemma.

But Jesus asked if they had a coin. Isn't it interesting that Jesus didn't even have one coin in his pockets to produce as an illustration? They brought him a denarius, which had the picture of Caesar, the ruler of that region. Jesus replied, “*Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and render unto God the things that are God's.*” What a profound answer!

For us today, we too could learn from that. The things in life that belong to the government, we should give them back to them. If we owe taxes, we should pay them. The tax laws in our country provide ways in which you can plan and minimize the tax burden. That is good stewardship and wise planning. But if you legitimately owe a tax, then you should pay it. Don't get mad with me – Jesus said the things that belong to the government, should be given to the government.

But the things that belong to God, we should give them back to God.

What are the things that belong to God?

Is it our time?	Our faithfulness?	Our tithe?
Our family?	Our loyalty?	Our devotion?

Yes, all of these belong to God. When we do not give God our family, ourselves, our devotion, our tithe, we are robbing God. God will not be mocked. The Lord knows us better than the IRS ever will.

There seems to be a paradox in the way Christians are to interact with the government. A paradox is an irony, a puzzle, an impossibility.

There are two passages of scripture that we need to be aware of and understand the tension we have when it comes to our

relationship with our government. These two passages are, Romans 13 and Revelation 13.

## Romans 13 vs. Revelation 13

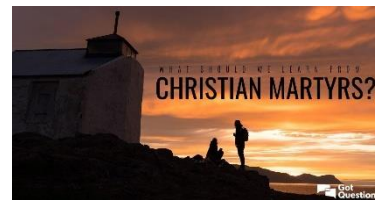
In Romans chapter 13, it tells us that God ordained government to rule and reign over us. We should work with the authorities and submit unto them.

In verse one, Paul says, *“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities.”* The question we naturally ask is, *“What if the task they are asking us to do, or accept goes against what I believe or what the bible teaches?”*

**This is where the paradox seems to become sharpest.**

If we turn and look in Revelation 13, we will find in this passage that John advocates resistance to the state even to the point of martyrdom. Some things are so important, that death is preferred over denying our faith. We are blessed right now to live in a country where we do not have to make those kinds of decisions – submit to this rule which is contrary to the word of God or denies God OR die. At least this has not come to us yet.

People around the world are giving their lives because they will not renounce their faith in God. Violence has grown in India to the point Christians are being murdered and Churches are being burned and the state is turning a blind eye to this Hindu violence. China is now bulldozing Christian Churches. Turkey imprisoned an American Missionary in 2016 after he served there as a missionary for 20 years (Andrew Brunson from NC). He was finally released in Oct. 2018.



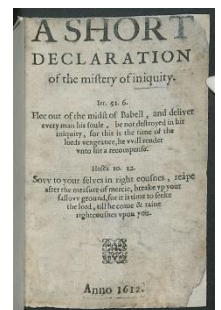
Christians are being run out of their villages in Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Believers are being beheaded in the Middle East. The Muslims have almost eliminated every Christian and Christian community in the area. They have destroyed historic landmarks and have almost totally eliminated every faith group except theirs.

This tension between submitting to the authorities and resisting their demands to renounce Jesus Christ to the point of death is always present. There has always been a tension between the church and state, and how they should relate and interact with one another. At times the church has been a Matthew 22 or Romans 13 kind of church – submitting to the authority and at times they have been a Revelation 13 people – resisting the law of the state even to the point of death.

In history, and even today, we see that the church and state are intricately united. What the church did, the state enforced. What the state wanted to do, the church blessed and sanctioned. It happened in Germany under Hitler’s rein, and it has happened many times over the centuries. If the church wanted to build a cathedral, the state taxed the citizens for its construction. If the state wanted to go to war against a neighbor, the church blessed that war and gave it God’s approval. This same pattern is being repeated today in the Soviet Union with its war with Ukraine.



In England in 1611, Thomas Helwys (who I mentioned several weeks ago) had returned from Holland with his group of Baptists and formed the First Baptist Church in England. In 1612, he published a book he had been working on. The title was, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*. Many historians have noted that this was the first plea for religious



freedom written in the English language calling for the separation of the church and the state. In the front of the book, the author wrote a personal note to King James I. This is the same king that authorized the publication of a bible in 1611 that we call the King James Bible.



The note that was written in the front of that book said, “The king is a mortal man, not God, therefore hath no power over immortal souls of his subjects.” He closes it with, “God save the King.” This book did not set too well with King James I. The concept of religious liberty is now taken for granted, but in 1612 it was a perilous and heretical concept.

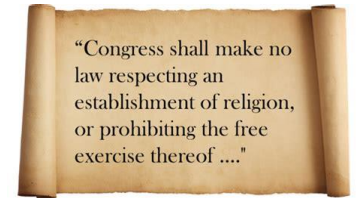
Helwys was imprisoned for publishing this book and died there in 1616. The emphasis of his book included six major concepts that we can easily identify with as Baptists.

1. Believers Baptism – a person should not be coerced into faith. It should be a choice; freedom of religion is to join the church as a believer.
2. The church should live separately from the state and survive by voluntary support.
3. Accept the legitimacy of the state and magistrate over earthly affairs. (While Christ is to have rule over the church.)
4. Freedom of the church to mind its own affairs. (Local church having local autonomy)
5. Freedom to interpret the scriptures. (Priesthood of believers)
6. Freedom of religion should be for all. All are free. “Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews or what-so-ever. Even those claiming no faith.”

Helwys went on to say, “A man’s religion should be between Man and God and should remain there. The Government should have no say in that matter.”

Where do we stand today in the United States?

The First Amendment of our Constitution says, “*Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.*” Our founding fathers saw the trouble that can occur where the government says what the official religion should be. It may come as a surprise to you that it wasn’t until the 1840’s, that the last state sanctioned religion (in Virginia) separated itself from the church. Prior to that, the state of Virginia provided funds to support the churches in that state.



Baptists have forgotten that over the centuries we have called for a separation of the church and state. We insist that a **free church** in a **free state** is in the best interests for everyone to live peaceably together. If one faith’s interests gain the upper hand politically, then they could force their faith upon the population. If the Muslim population grew and they gained control of the government, would you want Islam to be the government sanctioned faith? No.



We insist that for freedom of all to exist, it must also exist for the minority views of faith as well. We may disagree with the other faith, but we must provide a platform for them to function.

Baptists have anchored their passion for religious liberty to three points:

- 1) the nature of God, 2) the nature of humanity, and 3) the nature of faith.
1. God created us as free beings with a free will to accept or reject Him. We need to acknowledge that this freedom should be displayed in our government by advocating religious liberty.

- As we noted in the discussion of Soul freedom, the individual is of supreme importance to God. To deny freedom of conscience to any person is to debase God's creation.
- For faith to be genuine, it must be voluntary and not coercive. If we nurture faith in an environment of coercions, then it is not real freedom. It will only follow the winds of the current political leaders.

Over the years, Baptist religious freedom has taken on several dimensions.



First, freedom of religion represents a commitment to complete religious liberty and not simply religious toleration. They are not the same. Religious toleration is a concession not a right. Religious toleration is a matter of expediency and not a matter of principal.

Secondly, Baptists have insisted it is freedom for everyone, not just for a select few or for the majority. Baptists insist that freedom OF religion includes freedom FROM religion. If you choose not to believe, that is as sacred as one's right to believe.

Thirdly, religious freedom means separation of church and state and not accommodation of church with state.

Throughout Christian history, there have been four patterns of church-state relations. The first is that the Church is ABOVE the state. This was the pattern throughout the medieval era. The church told the state what to do.



The second pattern was where the church was UNDER the state. This was manifested in the twentieth century in Communist countries.

The third pattern is an accommodation of a particular church WITH the state. This is the way the Anglican Church and Government of England are linked together today.

The fourth form of church-state relationship is expressed is the SEPARATION of church and state. This is the American model. It is best expressed as a free church in a free state. The church and the state are side by side. Baptists around the world have endorsed this idea.

What are the threats to religious freedom today?

### The Supreme Court

The Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist said in 1990, "The wall of separation between church and state is a metaphor based on bad history, a metaphor that has proved useless as a guide to judging. It should be frankly and explicitly abandoned." (*Church and State*, April 1990)



### Baptist Leaders

Another threat to religious freedom comes from within the ranks of Baptist leaders. W. A. Criswell, the former senior minister of the largest church in the Southern Baptist Convention, FBC Dallas Texas, alarmed many of his viewers in a television interview in 1984. He said, "I believe this notion of the separation of church and state was the imagination of some infidel's imagination." This statement is so far from what our Baptist heritage has stated. We need to render unto Caesar what is Caesar, and unto God the things that are God's.

### Theocratic Mindset – Reconstruction Movement

Another threat to religious freedom is the theocratic mind-set of some Christians. This movement is known as the Reconstruction Movement. It is an attempt to reconstruct and

restructure American society on the basis of the Old Testament. Its plan is to replace American Democracy with Christian Theocracy. According to William Estep, if this happens, then “religious freedom will vanish.”

### Civil Religion – Citizenship and Discipleship

Another danger to our religious freedom is the confusion of citizenship and discipleship. This is sometimes referred to as “Civil Religion.” This is the call for the introduction of prayer back into schools, the channeling of public funds into the support of religious programs, and the presence of religious symbols into civic contexts. When the cross of Jesus Christ is wrapped in a flag of any nation, danger is close by. Hear me carefully; I am not against prayer in schools. I am not against the Ten Commandments in the courthouse. We need to carefully examine if we are making this opportunity available to ALL faiths.

If we advocate prayer in school, led by a teacher, which prayer should they pray? What if the school teacher leads a prayer to Allah, would you be upset? Shouldn't they have the same right as a Christian? Don't they have freedom to pray? Once you place the Ten Commandments in the courthouse, will you allow the teachings of Muhammad to be placed beside it? You see, the problem is not as simple as it appears. America needs to defend the rights of ALL people to have the right to worship as the individual deems appropriate.



When we combine nationalism and Christianity together, we create a civil religion. Our first allegiance should be to God. All our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world should put their faith in Christ first. Several churches recently have turned their flags around on the flag



poles at their churches. Where the American flag was at the top, they have placed the Christian flag higher as a symbolic statement that God comes first over their national allegiance.

Once we acknowledged Christ as first in our life, then we can have a proper relationship with our nation. Many Christians have blurred the lines so much so, that they think America and Christianity are synonymous. We need to reclaim the idea that Christ is our ultimate authority in life. It should not be confused with the partisan claims of patriotism.

What about today? Once Baptists were misunderstood and were without political clout or influence. During the seventeenth, eighteenth and the first part of the nineteenth century, Baptist's pled for religious liberty and the separation of church and state on the basis of principle. It was not simply self-serving expediency; it was **principle!** Now that Baptists and Baptist principles have become prominent and powerful, are we still committed to religious liberty? Does this liberty extend to those outside the Judeo-Christian tradition? Does it include those outside any religious tradition? This power we hold today can corrupt and blind us to our heritage. But it could work to the vitality of the church and the good of our republic.<sup>3</sup>

Baptist's need to reclaim these four fragile freedoms that I have been discussing over the past few weeks.



- We need to recognize and embrace Biblical Freedom. We need to KNOW for ourselves what the Bible says. If we depend upon the minister to interpret exclusively, then we may as well throw our bibles away.
- We need to embrace Soul Freedom. Each individual is a person of worth before God. We need to decide for ourselves who Jesus Christ is and our response to Him. Not what another person has told us.

- We need to embrace Church Freedom. A church that is free to govern the affairs of its own community of faith.
- We need to embrace Religious Freedom for all people. If we suppress another's right to exercise their faith, then one day, we may be in the minority and we will be the persecuted ones.



- 1) Sadly, today Baptists are seen as narrow minded in their expressions of faith. We need to become more understanding of who Baptist's have been, and express it in our community better. As with any freedom, it involves responsibility. Freedom is a very fragile thing. We need to guard against giving these freedoms away. Don't give away your responsibility to read the scripture.
- 2) Don't give away your right to make your decision concerning faith.
- 3) Don't give away control of your church to a dictatorial pastor or denomination.
- 4) Don't give away your religious freedom by limiting others freedom to express theirs.

Baptist democracy calls for free and responsible participation in church life. Let us be found to be faithful in this journey of faith.

## **LET US PRAY**

<sup>1</sup> Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity, Four Fragile Freedoms*, 1993, pages 45-53.

<sup>2</sup> Mikey's Funnies, July 29, 2008 – A Forgetful Funny

<sup>3</sup> For further reading, William R. Estep, *Revolution Within The Revolution: The First Amendment in Historical Context*. And Glenn E. Hinson, *Soul Liberty: The Doctrine of Religious Liberty*.