

7<sup>th</sup> of Easter, May 4, 2008 (Communion Sunday)  
2<sup>nd</sup> Baptist Church, Lincoln, NE; Robert C. Molby, Interim Pastor

CHURCH FREEDOM  
Acts 2:40-47; Matthew 16:13-20

The passage in Acts is in reference to the Day of Pentecost. Today is not the day of Pentecost for this year. Pentecost is next Sunday, May 11<sup>th</sup>, the same Sunday as Mother's Day. Pentecost is referred to as the birthday of the church and since today we studied about the autonomy of the local church we will use this scripture related to Pentecost.

Acts 2:41-47: So those who welcomed this message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers.

Awe came upon everyone because many signs and wonders were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as they had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the good will of the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Matthew 16:15-20: He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon, Son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 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." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

It is from these passages and others that we get the doctrine of the autonomy of the local church. What do we mean by autonomy? Autonomy comes from two Greek words that mean "self" and "law." Autonomous means self-governing or self-directing; thus, an autonomous church governs itself without any outside human direction or control. Of course, it is not absolutely autonomous, because a church should always recognize the control and authority of Jesus as Lord.

Walter B. Shurden in his book The Baptist Identity refers to the autonomy of the local church as "Church Freedom." He speaks of this church freedom in four ways:

1. Free to follow voluntarily.
2. Free to govern obediently.

3. Free to worship creatively.
4. Free to minister responsively. (This will be treated when we cover the subject of the ministry of the laity.)

I want to share on each of these areas but time does not allow this. Therefore I will share on two of them, free to follow voluntarily and free to worship creatively. If this were a hymn we would be singing only the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> verses.

### 1. Free to follow voluntarily.

“The church is a people with a double promise, freely and voluntarily made. First, they have promised to follow Jesus as Lord of their lives. They have promised, secondly, to help each other struggle to follow Jesus as Lord.” The word that covers this double promise is “covenant”. We covenant together to follow Jesus as Lord of our lives and to help one other follow Jesus as Lord. I need your help to be a follower of Jesus as Lord and you need my help to follow Jesus as Lord. We covenant to help one another.

That says something about the nature of the church. We say that the church is a fellowship of believers in Christ. We are not “born” into the church because our parents were members. We are born into the church through a spiritual birth that comes from accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Those who are born again through faith in Jesus Christ, voluntarily gather together to form a church. It is a self-conscious and volunteer decision to confess Jesus as Lord of our lives. A term most often used to describe this kind of fellowship is a “believer’s church”.

Being a believer is not just a “nod of the head” in consent to doctrinal ideas. We want a personal commitment to a Jesus way of living.

There is the local church and there is the universal church. The local church is like we who are gathered here today. The universal church is the Body of Christ that includes all the redeemed—all the followers—of all the ages. When Jesus said, “I will build my church” he is referring clearly to his one people. The letter to the Ephesians carries this theme that includes both Jew and Gentile. At the same time Baptists acknowledge that this one Body of Christ does not begin or end with the Baptist denomination or the local Baptist church.

Most of the time, however, we Baptists speak of the church in a local sense and that theme is emphasized repeatedly in the New Testament (I Cor. 1:2; Rom. 1:7; I Thess. 1:1). The church is local and it meets in flesh and blood at 525 N. 58<sup>th</sup> Street and at any other address it has.

### 2. Free to govern obediently.

Each Baptist church has the right and responsibility to run its own affairs under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. No bishop, pastor, civil leader or magistrate, religious body or convention of churches can dictate to the local church. That sounds like an independent church, separate unto itself. What Baptists want, however, is for this Jesus crowd to be obedient to the will and mind of Christ. The local church should be a Christocracy.

What this means is congregational church government. There are three types of church government and each of them is supported by scripture. One is Episcopal where authority is placed in the hands of one person. Another is Presbyterian where authority is placed in the hands of a small group; often called elders. The third is congregational where authority is placed in the hands of all the members of the church. Baptists fall into this third group.

Why do Baptists follow this third way, this congregational way? Not because it is more biblical because biblical references can be found for all three forms of church government. Not because it is more efficient because perhaps it is not and not because it is more reliable. They follow it because the accent is on the role of the individual within the community of believers. It allows for the greatest freedom for the greatest number of people to have a say in church government. Every believer in this form of church government has an equal responsibility to determine the mind of Christ.

Each church determines its own membership, decides its own pattern of worship, develops its own mission strategy and elects its own officers. Speaking of officers each Baptist church has two officers, ministers and deacons. Ministers include those who serve in special areas of music, education, youth, children, counseling as well as pastor. Deacons are laypersons who serve with the ministers on behalf of the congregation. A congregation may call whomever it wishes, women or men, to serve as ministers or deacons.

There are dangers to this kind of congregational church government. Perhaps the greatest is the danger of being passive. You can just be passive, or “go along” with what other churches are doing or saying or believing and simply refuse to be responsible for their life together as followers of Christ.

Another danger is authoritarianism where a congregation allows some one such as a pastor or a board or an association or a region to act as a hierarchy and thus destroy congregationalism and the historic Baptist idea of the equality of believers in the local church. Now a local Baptist Church body may elect or appoint someone or a board to act on their behalf but that board or person must always remember that they perform at the will of the people only. At any time they begin to act like their position puts them in charge the church body of believers should call them to their task and remind them of this principle. Jesus, the Christ, is Lord of the church as well as Lord of each individual. He is the one with all the authority.

A third danger is isolationism of Baptist churches from one another. Within less than fifty years after the formation of the first Baptist church they began voluntarily grouping themselves together into associations to strengthen their witness in the world. Later they formed conventions so that they could unify their work beyond the local and associational level.

One other important concept needs to be noted. When local Baptist churches voluntarily join together they do not thus become **the** Baptist church. There is no such thing as **the** American Baptist Church of NE or **the** American Baptist Church of the USA or **the** Southern Baptist Church or **the** Progressive National Baptist Church. There are the American Baptist churches of NE, the American Baptist churches of the USA, the Southern Baptist churches or the Progressive National Baptist churches.

When I was with the Presbyterians I learned that the larger gathering of Presbyterian churches made up the Presbyterian Church. At the local level they were the church and when the Presbyterian Churches of the MRVP came together they were also the Presbyterian Church. When they met on the synod level and the national level they are the Presbyterian Church. It is also true when they meet on a global level.

I was present at a meeting of the Presbytery when the chairperson of the Committee on Ministry spoke about the American Baptist Church. I went to him afterwards and explained that he should have said American Baptist Churches because there is no such thing as the American Baptist Church on a level beyond the local church. He knew this but in the context of his Presbyterianism he had forgotten to make that distinction. We both went to Sterling College,

though at different times and are still friends. He even invited me to preach in his church which I did.

This concept of Baptist churches instead of **the** Baptist Church does not keep us from associating with other denominations and organizations such as the National Council of Churches or the World Council of Churches. We have been a valuable partner in these organizations, participated in CROP walks for the hungry and a force for civil rights and justice in many places. Baptists have something to say and would do well to break out of any self-imposed isolationism.

### 3. Free to worship creatively.

Every Baptist church is unique. Each may have similar programs, schedules, staff, facilities and polity (or government) but there is something striking about each church. That means that there is potential for creative ministries (Rom. 12:6-8; we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness). We affirm and acknowledge that diversity in our congregations.

Baptists in the 17<sup>th</sup> century wanted freedom from a set form of Anglicanism as set forth in The Book of Common Prayer. They wanted to personalize and revitalize worship.

This emphasis on free worship does not mean anti-liturgical. Baptists are not anti-liturgical at all. The word “liturgy” means “the work of the people”. If liturgy means prescribed and imposed forms of worship than Baptists are most certainly anti-liturgical.

Baptists’ biggest concern has been with the emptiness of worship. We don’t want something that is mechanical and impersonal. Some have gone overboard on the informal type of worship that has become impersonal and very mechanical. Informality does not necessarily equal vitality. “All hip-hip hurray,” said one area minister to me, “does not mean spirituality!” On the other hand worship can be very formal, robes for the minister, choir, worship leader, beautifully written and read prayers, powerfully read sermons, beautiful affirmations of faith, congregational litanies, use of classical Christian music and be spiritually reviving for believers.

What Baptists want is authentic spiritual offerings presented to God but they do not dictate how such worship is to be structured. Each church is to have the freedom that results in different forms of worship. Some are surprising informal and some exceedingly informal. Whatever form the act of worship takes it should be that of the entire congregation and not that of the separate performance of a presiding minister. Public worship in the Free Church tradition is not a spectator’s sport. We have too long gone to church to “attend preaching” or to “take communion”. We have too long evaluated corporate worship in terms of brilliance of the sermon or the inspiration of the choir. The priesthood of the believers calls for congregational participation.

Baptists recognize baptism and the Lord’s Supper as two N.T. ordinances. They are called ordinances because it is believed that they were ordained by Christ (Matt. 28:19-20; I Cor. 11:24-25; Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. *Jesus, on the*

*night he was betrayed, took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup after supper saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."*

Many, perhaps most Baptists refer to Baptism and the Lord's Supper as ordinances but there are Baptists who refer to them as sacraments. British Baptists refer to them as sacraments and also "means of grace". There again is the church freedom being allowed and exercised.

"Baptism" and the "Lord's Supper" are thought of as for believers only and they are to be administered by believers. Baptist baptism is by immersion because it symbolizes the death, burial, and resurrection of the believer with Christ (Rom. 6:3-4; Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized unto Christ were baptized unto his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism unto death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

Our practice of baptism by immersion does not mean that someone who has been baptized by a different method in another denomination cannot be accepted in a Baptist church without re-baptism. In some Baptist churches that is true but in many, perhaps most American Baptist churches, as long as a believer is satisfied with his or her baptism, regardless of the method used, is welcome in a Baptist church. If they are not satisfied, though, usually the church is quick to say, "Hey, we will do it again—the Baptist way!"

The Lord's Supper portrays God's love for us, our communion with Him and our communion with one another. Usually it is observed on the first Sunday of the month but not always. Some observe it once a quarter. Most, if not all Baptist churches today practice "open" communion meaning that all followers of Christ, regardless of the denomination they are a part of are invited to the table of the Lord.

4. Free to minister responsibly.

In a Baptist Church the ministry belongs to the laity. Every believer is on equal footing with every other believer in a Baptist church. No pastor has official or constituted authority to rule over anybody in a Baptist church. Why? Because all Christians are priests before God; we have the right and the responsibility to minister in the name of Christ.

That means we are saddled with the freedom and responsibility of deciding, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, how the church will witness for Christ in our local community and around the world. Church freedom was never intended to be an exercise in selfishness. Our freedom does not make our faith a private possession. The gospel drives us outside ourselves and outside the fellowship of the church into a world that God loves or else the gospel has not captured our lives. God is interested in more than our personal salvation or the growth of our local church. He is interested in shaping people's lives through God's people.

That mission of the church has been interpreted in various ways. Through William Carey, a British Baptist, and through Luther Rice and Adoniram Judson in America, it was interpreted in world missions. Through Billy Graham, and others like him, it has been interpreted in

personal evangelism. Through John Clifford and Walter Rauschenbusch it has been interpreted in social issues. Through Martin Luther King, Jr. it has been interpreted in justice and equality. Through the Baptist World Alliance it has been interpreted in alleviating world hunger and related social needs. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran, inspired Baptists to become servants. The church must step down as Jesus did when he washed the disciples feet prior to the Lord's Supper, and become a servant. However, we cannot allow others to tell us how to become a servant of Christ. We must be free to design our own servant ministry. More than that it is a responsibility we have to do that very thing.

Church Freedom; or the autonomy of the local church means:

1. Freedom to follow voluntarily,
2. Freedom to govern obediently,
3. Freedom to worship creatively
4. Freedom to minister responsibly.

This is what church freedom means for those believers gathered together as Baptists under the Lordship of Jesus, the Christ.