

“Four Fragile Freedoms”

*But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20).
Acts 4:1-20 (read vv. 1-12) ¹*

The first church I served as Pastor was the First Baptist Church of Carlisle, Kentucky. On the center stained glass window in the sanctuary are these words: “Thomas Ammen, imprisoned for preaching the Gospel in Culpeper, Virginia, died in this county in 1820.”

That inscription always interested and inspired me, and I’ve made a point of finding the church outside of Culpeper where he was a member. When I found it, I discovered that either the historical marker at his church or the window in Carlisle has misspelled his name, but I don’t know which got it right.

What both did get right, though, was Rev. Ammon’s courageous commitment to freedom of religion. The reason he was put in jail was that he refused to get a license to preach the Gospel from the Church of England, which was then the state church of Virginia, and kept preaching the Gospel, anyway.

And that reminds me of what happened in Acts 4 after the place where Andrew stopped reading earlier:

*⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: “Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹ If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, ¹⁰ then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. ¹¹ Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’ ¹² **Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.**”*

¹³ When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. ¹⁴ But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. ¹⁵ So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together.

¹⁶ “What are we going to do with these men?” they asked. “Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.”

*¹⁸ Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John replied, **“Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! ²⁰ As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard”** (Acts 4:8-20).*

I could see Thomas Ammen saying that to the judge in Culpeper: **“Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judge! As for me, I cannot help speaking about what I have seen and heard.”**

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on June 28, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. For July 4th. This sermon was originally a convocation address delivered at Virginia Intermont College in Bristol, Virginia on August 27, 2002.

As you can see from the name of his church—The Crooked Run Baptist Church (it was named for a nearby stream)—Thomas Ammen was a Baptist. Now if I were to ask you why you're a Baptist or why you attend this particular Baptist church, I suspect that you might offer a wide variety of reasons—and “reasons to be a Baptist” form the theme of my remarks this morning.

My good friend, Dr. Dwight Moody, has suggested that “the church of Jesus Christ is like an orchestra. Each church and denomination plays its part. Catholics exemplify order, continuity, and loyalty. Presbyterians teach us about the sovereignty of God and the centrality of Scripture. Methodists brought to us new emphasis on revivals and spiritual disciplines. Pentecostals reintroduced healing to the modern church and embody what it means for the church to be a counter-culture to the prevailing secularism of our day. . . .²

So what part do Baptists play in the orchestra? Everybody has some opinion about Baptists, and there are so many different kinds of Baptists that nearly every opinion contains some truth! And one of the reasons there are so many varieties of Baptists is that Baptists are passionately committed to the concept of freedom.

Dr. Walter Shurden of Mercer University, an historian of Baptists and their ways, has distilled Baptist distinctives into what he calls “four fragile freedoms.”³ Those four freedoms form the skeleton for this message, and I've attached a question to each of them that may help us to drill down into their meaning. The four freedoms and their attendant questions go like this:

Religious Freedom: *What will be your Commitment?*

Church Freedom: *Who will be your Community?*

Bible Freedom: *What will be your Authority?*

Soul Freedom: *Who will be your Guide?*

First, **Religious Freedom:** *What will be your Commitment?* It may surprise you to know that religious freedom was not established on our own shores when the Pilgrims landed here. The Pilgrims came to the New World to find religious freedom for themselves, but they did not extend this freedom to others. Ten of our original thirteen colonies had some form of an established state church, as they had had in Europe. Anyone who wanted to preach or to lead a church in the New World had to have a license from the established church, and if they did not, they were often fined, or flogged, or imprisoned, as Thomas Ammon was.

It was in this way that the Puritans drove Roger Williams out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and into the wilderness, where in 1636 he founded what would become the colony of Rhode Island, the first colony in the New World where religious liberty was guaranteed for every person. In 1639, Roger Williams founded the First Baptist Church of Providence, which was the first Baptist church in the New World.

Between the years of 1767 and 1778, forty-two Baptist ministers were imprisoned in Culpeper, Virginia—Thomas Ammon among them—for preaching without a license from the state church. Growing out of this persecution, John Leland, a Virginia Baptist minister, was the driving force behind the First Amendment to the Constitution, the sixteen most influential words ever written in support of religious liberty: “**Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.**”

² Dwight A. Moody, *Free & Faithful Baptists: Christian Discipleship in the Twenty-First Century* (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 1998), pp. 2-3.

³ Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1993).

Rivers of ink have been spilled in explanation of these sixteen words, but the principles involved are simply stated: Church and State shall be separate—not hostile toward each other, but separate—and Religious Freedom shall be afforded to every person within the bounds of this Republic. Let me say that again: **Church and State shall be separate—not hostile toward each other, but separate—and Religious Freedom shall be afforded to every person within the bounds of this Republic.**

Religious Freedom means that persons in these United States have genuine freedom to worship God as their consciences direct them. Religious Freedom equally means that persons have the right not to be a part of any religious body at all, if that is their choice.

You and I do well to remember that Religious Freedom in this country has been purchased primarily through the sacrificial commitment of Baptists, and authentic Baptists continue to defend it—for themselves, and for everyone else. So what did Baptists want to do with this freedom? That question brings us to the second freedom Baptists hold dear: **Church Freedom, and its attendant question, “Who will be your *Community?*”**

As the years accumulate, most of us discover that there are really only three questions that matter in life. The first of these questions is “How can my life have **significance**—to mean something, to have mattered—when all is said and done?” The second question is “How can I develop relationships—a durable **community**—to sustain me on the journey of life?” (I’ll come to the third, and most important question, at the end.)

The Good News is that Jesus of Nazareth, God’s Messiah, gives us solid, secure, Truth-full answers to both of these questions, and His answers are the only ones that really work. So it was that when Jesus began to teach, He gathered a dozen men around Him—not academics or church leaders, but ordinary working men—and He began to show them how to become a different kind of community than the world had ever known.

Jesus’ disciples chose to follow Him, and such choice is at the root of what it means to be Baptist. Dr. Fisher Humphreys of Samford University described the very first Baptist congregation this way:

Though believer’s baptism was practiced first by Anabaptists, it was a dramatic moment in the history of the Christian church when a group of English women and men in Amsterdam, under the leadership of John Smyth, renounced the baptism which they had received as infants as no baptism at all, and submitted to baptism as adult believers. In the winter of 1608 or 1609 Smyth baptized first himself and then the members of his congregation, thereby forming the first Baptist church.⁴

The significant thing about this event was that these believers, by studying the pages of the New Testament, concluded that Jesus’ call to follow Him and to enter into the community He created was and is a commitment that must be voluntarily and intelligently undertaken. Having been baptized into the state church as children, those first Baptists began the practice known as “believer’s baptism,” which continues to distinguish Baptists from most other faith communities. Believer’s baptism means that Baptist churches baptize and count as their members only persons who have made a free and intelligent choice to commit their lives to living in the Way of Jesus.

⁴Fisher Humphreys, *The Way We Were: How Southern Baptist Theology Has Changed And What It Means To Us All*, foreword by Walter B. Shurden, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), p. 36.

This commitment has had a broad effect. Church historian Martin Marty—a Lutheran—has written about the “baptistification” of American religion, “by which he means the widespread acceptance among Americans of the idea that the only genuine religion is one that one accepts for oneself.”⁵

Now if you have any experience with churches at all, including any Baptist church we could name, including this one, you know that churches are filled with very ordinary people whose lives are imperfect and whose attitudes are frequently flawed. And you may very well have said to yourself, “What’s up with that? Who needs it?” Those are very good questions.

It’s quite true that churches are full of very ordinary, sinful people. But in our better moments, we’re also people who are doing our very best to become more and more like the kind persons and the kind of community that Jesus calls us to be.

Christian churches are composed of persons who know in our hearts that it really is possible to build community on the foundation of repentance and forgiveness, just as Jesus taught. We in the churches give our best—though imperfect—efforts to building such community, and we invite others to freely join us on this Journey.

The third freedom I want to consider with you is **Bible Freedom**: “*What will be your Authority?*” Wherever you are on your life’s journey toward significance and community this morning, how do you find your path? What provides guidance along the way?

When I was a Boy Scout, long ago, I used a magnetic compass to help me find my way on geographic adventures. It was a compass much like this one, and I’m sure you know that a magnetic compass points to magnetic North.

These days, I have GPS receivers in my watch and in my phone that that help me find my way by pointing to true North. Back in the day when I was an engineering officer on destroyers during the Viet Nam war, submariners bragged that their new GPS equipment could locate a submarine within about 350 feet. Now, nearly fifty years later, these receivers give us our position to within about five feet!

Now while *geographic* location—where my body is—is frequently very important, it’s not nearly so important as knowing my *spiritual* location—where my life is. This Bible also shows direction and location. The Bible is also a GPS—a *God Positioning System*—that shows me where my life is . . . and how to get from where I am to Jesus.

Because the Bible is so important in this way, Baptists have always been “people of the Book,” and Baptists have given themselves to making the Bible freely available to anyone who wants one. William Tyndale, an Anabaptist (forerunners of Baptists), was hanged and his body was burned in England in 1536 because he dared to translate the Bible into the language of the people so that even a plowboy could have one.

Sometimes, though, such Bible Freedom has led to freedom from the Bible rather than freedom for the Bible. Dr. Bill Tuck, a pastor with whom I served in Louisville, put it this way:

Although the Bible is still popular and continues to be a national best seller, it is not authoritative for many, because it is unread and not understood by most people. . . . How is the Bible used by most people who purchase it? It is filled with newspaper clippings of weddings or funerals; roses are pressed in it; and pictures of children,

⁵ Ibid., p. 38.

grandchildren, or other relatives are kept there. It lies on a table like a magic talisman, signifying that this family is 'religious.'⁶

Does that sound familiar? I don't know what your own experience with the Bible has been, but I encourage you to make an honest inquiry into the truth of the Bible a part of your life during this quarantine. As Linus said to Charlie Brown, "I have begun to unfold the mysteries of the Bible." "Really!" Charlie Brown said. "How?" "*I've started to read it!*" Linus replied. Because of Bible Freedom, you can do that, too.

Don't let someone else do your Bible study for you. Get a copy of a modern version of the Bible such as the *New Living Translation*, and read the New Testament. It's only about 350 pages long. But I warn you, the exploration will not be without risk. You will be changed.

Finally, I want to look with you at **Soul Freedom: "Who will be your Guide?"** Soul Freedom is the anchoring freedom that has caused Baptists to fight for *Religious Freedom*, *Church Freedom*, and *Bible Freedom*.

I've already mentioned the Baptist commitment to personal religious experience. The great Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, contended that religion without vital personal experience is lifeless and dead, "just about as genuine as tea made from a bit of paper which once lay in a drawer beside another bit of paper which had once been used to wrap up a few dried tea leaves from which tea had already been made three times."⁷

I suspect that many, if not most of us, have known persons who claimed to follow Jesus but whose lives gave little evidence of a commitment to follow Him. Unfortunately, there are quite a few folk who "talk the talk" but don't "walk the walk." As evangelist Sam Jones once said in a revival meeting in Owensboro, Kentucky, "You can be a good church member in Owensboro and not amount to much."⁸

Such insipid churchgoing is not the goal of Soul Freedom. Soul Freedom intends to develop followers of Jesus whose lives are prayer-filled, Bible-centered, virtuous, compassionate, integrated, and spiritually powerful!

The question that goes with Soul Freedom is "Who will be your Guide?" For Christians, there is no Guide but Jesus of Nazareth, the fullness of the eternal God disclosed in human flesh; and it is only in following Him as our Guide for Life that we find genuine Soul Freedom and real spiritual power.

There are many today who try to avoid following Jesus by writing Him off as a "great moral teacher." After saying this, such folk congratulate themselves on being very "open minded," "intellectual," and "inclusive"; and, after "tipping their hats" to Jesus in this way, they then feel free to ignore Him as they go about their lives.

The truth of the matter is, though, that an intellectually honest approach to the question of who Jesus is absolutely excludes the position they have chosen. Thinking of Jesus as a "great moral teacher" is not one of the options available. Why not?

⁶ William Powell Tuck, *Our Baptist Tradition* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1993), p. 29.

⁷ Malcomb Muggeridge, *A Third Testament* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 138.

⁸ Moody, p. 36 (May, 1893).

The religious leaders in Jerusalem killed Jesus for many reasons, but one reason was primary. Jesus was killed because He claimed to be God. Even a cursory reading of the four Gospels confirms beyond a doubt that Jesus said He was God.

Now there are three—and only three—possibilities if a person claims to be God. The most likely option is that the person is mentally ill. Our psychiatric hospitals have many patients who think that they are God. When I worked for a semester as a chaplain intern at Central State Hospital near Louisville, Kentucky, I talked with a number of them.

The next most likely option is that a person who claims to be God knows this to be a lie, but uses this claim to gain power and influence over persons who can be persuaded that it is true. History is full of charismatic cultic leaders who destroyed entire communities through their evil influence.

The only other choice—the only other choice—is that a man who claims to be God is who He says He is. “Great moral teachers” have many things to teach us, but they don’t claim to be God.⁹ I challenge you who are listening to this message to examine the evidence for yourselves and to decide whether the Jesus you meet in the new Testament is crazy, whether He is a manipulative liar, or whether He is in fact God in human flesh.

My friends, Baptists give themselves passionately to the causes of **Religious** Freedom, **Church** Freedom, **Bible** Freedom, and **Soul** Freedom so that you will have the opportunity to decide for yourself the answer to the third of the three questions I noted as I began.

The first of these questions is “How can my life have *significance*—to mean something, to have mattered—when all is said and done?” The second question is “How can I develop relationships—a durable *community*—to sustain me on the journey of life?” But this third question *is the only question that will really matter when all is said and done*: as Jesus once asked His disciples, “**Who do YOU say that I am?**” (Matthew 16:15).

With every other Baptist, I pray that your journey’s end will lead you to the Cross.

⁹ See C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 3rd edition (HarperOne, 2001), pp. 40-41.