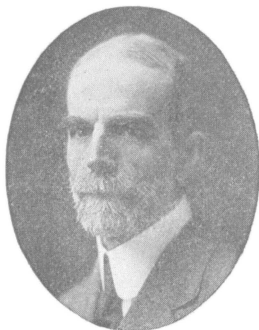


· SOUL ·
FREEDOM

— APPLIED TO —
CHURCH LIFE AND
ORGANIZATION



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Soul Freedom Applied to Church Life and Organization

*A Dynamic Discussion of the
Great New Testament Principle
of Freedom Applied to Religion.*

It is entirely clear that the New Testament church was a local body. The church at Rome, the church at Ephesus, the church at Philippi, and the church at various other places is the form of expression employed in the New Testament. As we shall see, these self-governing bodies known as churches of Jesus Christ were the seed-plot of the great modern principles of liberty and democracy.

The Baptist view as to the constitution and polity of the church is well known. Each church is a free and independent self-governing body. It is made up of regenerate men and women, believers in Jesus Christ, who have been immersed upon a profession of their faith in Him. Its officers consist of pastors or elders and deacons. It is not my purpose here to undertake to prove from the New Testament that the above description of the church is taken from the New Testament. This point is conceded by scholars with practical unanimity. My present object is to point out how the church, as

a spiritual body, is related to all forms of liberty dear to the hearts of men.

I.

Spiritual Principles Giving Rise to the Church.

Let us note some of the spiritual principles of Christianity which give rise to the church. I mention four. The first is the value of the individual person in the sight of God. Jesus revealed man to himself as of infinite worth in God's sight. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin teach us God's estimate of the lost soul. A second principle is the responsibility of the individual soul. To be responsible the soul must be free, and a free soul is a responsible soul. This principle contributes in a large measure to the constitution of the church. A third principle is the direct relation of the individual to God. This is the very heart of Christianity. Man needs no priest to approach God. Every believer is a priest with the full right of access to God in the most holy place. A fourth principle is the regeneration of the individual by the Spirit of God. It is because the individual heart is renewed by divine power of God that men become suitable material for the constitution of the spiritual body which we call the church. These four spiritual principles are cardinal in their relation to the nature and constitution of a church of Jesus Christ.

II.

How the Above Principles Result In a Church.

Taking the above principles in reverse order, I note that the regenerate life creates a spiritual brotherhood, a common faith, a common hope, while love and loyalty to a common Lord bring the group of regenerate men and women together into one body. The church therefore arises by a principle of spiritual selection, like finding like. Men and women spiritually akin unite for worship, for edification and for evangelization.

Again, the direct relation of the soul to God establishes spiritual equality in the church. All men are created free and equal religiously. There is no line of cleavage possible which sets off one group as priests, having power of "the keys," to whom other believers must come and make confession. The direct relation to God leaves all standing on the same level, all entitled to the same privileges and rights, all accessible to the inworking of the divine Spirit, all equally responsive to that Spirit, and therefore all equal in church privileges.

Again, direct responsibility to God implies and necessitates a spiritual franchise. The right to a voice in the government of the church is implied. The right of the individual to act for himself is necessarily implied. The right of any individual to act as proxy in religion for another individual

is excluded. Thus infant baptism, which violates personal responsibility, has no place in a New Testament church.

So also the infinite worth of the individual creates the need for edification and growth and for the evangelization of the parts beyond. The regenerate man or woman must grow up into the image and likeness of Christ. Unserved men and women must be brought to a knowledge of the Gospel. So the church becomes an agency for edification, for growth, for evangelization.

Finally, these principles result inevitably in a democratic church. In such a church equality of believers is the only possible rule. There is no principle for classifying believers in the church other than as spiritual equals. Pastors and deacons are not ecclesiastical superiors. They perform certain functions, discharge certain duties, but they are the servants of the church. The church is responsible directly to Christ. Within the limits of its own life the church is the final authority on all debated questions. But in all its decisions the church is directly responsible to Christ and looks to the New Testament for His revealed will.

III.

Democracy and Other Forms of Church Government.

I wish now to show how democracy in the church forbids other ecclesiastical polities. Pure democracy means direct relation to

Christ. It also means an absolute spiritual monarchy, with Christ as King. The local church is therefore the purest democracy in the world, and yet in reference to Christ it is an absolute monarchy. The congregational self-governing Baptists and the papacy of the Catholic church are exact opposites. All forms of church government other than the Baptist and the Catholic are modifications or compromises.

The results of democracy in the church in relation to other forms of church government are as follows:

First of all, it excludes a human priesthood, save as all believers are priests. No group of men can possibly have the right to hold the grace of God at their disposal under the democratic ideal of the church. Again, democracy in the church excludes episcopacy and hierarchies of all kinds. No official has a right to lord it over the conscience of the individual. Again, democracy in the church excludes sacramentalism, because sacramentalism implies that grace comes through the material elements in the so-called sacraments and at the hands of a priesthood. This idea is wholly alien to the New Testament teaching of the direct relation of the soul to Christ, and is a direct contravention of the spiritual privileges of believers. Again, democracy in the church excludes union of church and state, because the state has no ecclesiastical function and the church has no civic function. And finally, democracy in the

church necessarily excludes all use of force in support of the truth and in the exercise of discipline. The appeal of the New Testament is to the free responsibility of the individual. Coercion of the conscience or will is foreign to the very genius of Christianity. Whenever the church has used the civil power to enforce its will, it has perpetrated a crime against Christ and humanity.

From the above it follows that democracy in the church can only be realized through local self-government. There can be no general ecclesiastical authority located at a particular place and extending over a wide area. No parallel between church government and civil government holds good to any great extent. The authority in civil government must be localized, whereas authority in religion is never localized. Christ is everywhere, and His authority can be located at no particular point.

Moreover, legislation on matters of general interest must be through delegated powers, for the reason that the total citizenship cannot assemble, unite, and deliberate for this purpose. Centralized authority is also necessary in the state for the exercise of force, a function always improper for the church. On the contrary, the central authority in Christianity cannot be localized. Christ said it was expedient that He go away in order that the Holy Spirit might come. Thus He "exchanged His presence for His omnipresence." It might be a logi-

cal procedure for a given community owning a large body of real estate in common to delegate the control of its mines and the distribution of the coal to a commission. The nature of the case would require some such administration, perhaps. But it would be absurd to appoint a commission to control and distribute the sunlight. In this respect the inhabitants would only need to keep out of each other's light. Every man would simply have to avoid building his house or ordering his life so as to obscure the sun from his brother. As the Baptist sees it, papacies and episcopacies are commissions to control the sunshine.

IV.

Democracy In the Church and Human Liberty.

I wish now to indicate how democracy in the church promotes human liberty in all its forms. It does this chiefly by emphasizing the great truth that all forms of liberty spring from religious liberty. The growing child becomes conscious, first, of the world, next of himself as a distinct personality over against the world, and finally he becomes conscious of God. At the moment when he becomes conscious of God religious liberty is born in the soul, and it is the root of all other forms of liberty, because it puts God in the supreme place of authority in the life. Religious liberty carries at its heart economic liberty, because God did not give the good things of life to

any class of men, but to man as man. It carries at its heart intellectual liberty, because, since God made man's mind and the truth, the mind of man has a right to search for and proclaim the truth. Religious liberty carries at its heart a principle which overthrows every system of caste and all titled aristocracies. Civil liberty, or the right to a voice in government, is the direct outcome of religious liberty. The state dare not coerce the conscience. God is a greater power than the state. The state, therefore, has no religious function and cannot coerce man in religion.

We see thus that democracy in church government is the only way in which we can express in an institution the spiritual nature of Christianity. It is not merely a question as to the meaning of a group of words in the New Testament, such as elder, bishop, deacon, church. It is far more than this. Democracy in church government is the very heart of the meaning of Christianity itself, and whenever the state or other ecclesiastical organizations have sought to suppress freedom of worship the soul of man has always revolted. History shows this. The Montanists in the early centuries, and various other parties and sects, were movements which arose as a spontaneous protest against ecclesiastical tyranny. Luther's Reformation was essentially the return of the individual to God. Puritanism at its heart was an affirmation of this direct relation of the soul to God.

The Anabaptist movement, reaching back into the remote past, and the great Baptist movement, all these are spontaneous protests of free souls against ecclesiastical oppression in the assertion of soul liberty. So that the little democracies which surrounded the Mediterranean Sea in the early centuries were the hope of mankind, and Loring Brace was right when he said that one of the greatest disasters to the world came when these little democracies were swallowed up in great state churches.

V.

How Democracy Fosters Civilization.

I wish to show next how democracy fosters civilization in all its higher forms. I mention the following particulars: First of all, it is against infant baptism, and being against infant baptism it prevents and forestalls one of the most deadly evils Christianity has ever known. In America infant baptism does not work out all its logical results, because of the evangelical influences in the various bodies which practice it. But in countries where there are state churches and centralized church authorities, and where, at the same time, infant baptism is practiced, it becomes one of the most colossal of all dangers to spiritual Christianity and human freedom.

It is entirely clear that if church membership grows out of infant baptism there can be no emphasis upon the necessity of regeneration as a condition of church member-

ship. And if all the infants of a given country enter the church through proxy faith and infant baptism, it is the easiest kind of logic to infer the deadliest results. The church becomes filled with unsaved men and women. The world with its selfishness, its ambition, its intriguing, flows into the church and becomes the dominant influence in church life. The church thus loses its spiritual character and naturally becomes a mere political agency.

Democracy in the church which rests upon personal faith and regeneration is inconsistent with infant baptism, with centralized churches, and above all with state churches. Hence, democracy in the church is promotive of the highest welfare of civilization in that it protects the spiritual character of Christianity itself.

Again, democracy in the church is directly opposed to autocracy in the state. Being against autocracy in the church, democracy, by inevitable logic, becomes the deadly opponent of autocracy in the state. Men who are nurtured in the spiritual school of self-government of the direct approach to God, in the school of the self-governing local church, in the school of personal responsibility to God, can never be content to submit to the arbitrary will of an autocrat.

Again, democracy in the church emancipates the individual so that the Spirit of God can act through him. It emancipates him from the fear of man. In the Middle Ages men dared not speak their own mind.

The individual was suppressed. The church, the priest, the bishop, the civil ruler were the overshadowing authorities. Men lived in deadly fear of their fellow men. The world needed a democratic church to set it free of the fear of man. And when the Anabaptists of Europe began to clash with the civil and ecclesiastical authorities they were driven from the face of the earth, and the movement had to take root in England and America.

Again, democracy in the church emancipates man from ignorance. It fosters education because self-government implies intelligence. It implies the clear grasp of the principles of the gospel. It necessitates interpretation of the New Testament. It appeals to the intelligence of men in its form of preaching. It is the deadly foe of ignorance. So also democracy in the church emancipates from the peril of proxy religion. Under a democratic form of church government there is no such thing as a substitute in religion. Every man acts for himself.

Baptists have sometimes been accused of not taking proper interest in the spiritual welfare of infants in refusing to apply to them the waters of baptism, but this is an unfounded charge. Baptists take the highest possible view of the infant, and respect its personality far more than those who practice infant baptism. Baptists believe that all the great spiritual principles of the gospel are necessary to develop the infant religiously, that the infant has a right to choose Christ for himself when he reaches the proper age, and by that no one has the privilege to exercise by proxy this inalienable right.

Some one has called attention to the forces that are necessary to develop so small a flower as a daisy. The great power of gravitation which holds the universe together

helps to give it shape. The subtle principle of electricity that pervades all space exercises a vitalizing power in its growth. The great principle of ether pervades it and assists in its development. And the sun itself, many times larger than all the planets together, sends its beams ninety millions of miles across the intervening space to paint the petals of the daisy. In a word, it takes a physical universe to form and fashion and develop so small a flower as a daisy. Even so, Baptists believe that the infinite forces of the divine kingdom are necessary for the development of the child. The divine love and righteousness and grace are all required for the changing and unfolding of the character of the infant. Hence, Baptists withhold the ordinances and ceremonies of religion from the morally unconscious infant and wait until it is capable of exercising freely its own faith in God.

Again, democracy in the church emancipates from the authority of creed makers. With Baptists there is no authoritative creed except the New Testament itself. For convenience, men sometimes draw up articles of faith, but no articles of faith thus drawn up can ever be made binding upon the consciences of men. They are purely voluntary in character. The principles of the direct relation of the soul to Christ and the right of private interpretation of Scripture enter into the very genius of democracy in the church, and thus foster man's freedom in all its spheres and his emancipation from all oppressive agencies and influences.

Again, democracy in the church contributes to the well-being of the state through this principle of a regenerate church membership. The democratic church takes the citizen of the state and remakes him spiritually under God's grace, and returns him as a contribution to the state, and thus promotes civ-

ilization by giving to civilization men with hearts obedient to the will of God.

And, finally, democracy in the church contributes to the higher civilization of the world in its democratic organization of general bodies. All district associations, state and general conventions, among Baptists, are based on principles of democracy in the church. These bodies are free and voluntary associations of men and women who come together for common ends, and who, by an inward principle, are drawn together to promote the Kingdom of God on earth. No authority resides in any general body to coerce any church or other similar organization. All the powers possessed by any one organization are limited to its own membership. Baptists, who are the most pronounced democrats in church organization, become thus capable of organizing on a principle of freedom for the attainment of great ends, and because the principle of freedom controls, it is possible to attain unusual efficiency and power through such local churches as their democratic principles create, and through such freely organized democratic general bodies the Christian religion finds a medium of the highest character for the expression of itself on earth. This medium becomes a standing example and illustration of the nature of Christianity itself, and becomes for the world a living embodiment of the principles of freedom, and thus Baptist life becomes the inner principle of an ongoing civilization—the formative influence of which fosters and promotes every great cause on earth.

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