

On Being a Baptist

There have been many, many attempts over the last four hundred years to list and explain the core convictions of Baptist Christians, from John Smyth's *The Differences of the Churches of the Separation* (1608) through Walter Shurden's *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (1993). Since the National Council of Churches' *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches* lists more than forty self-identified Baptist bodies on our continent alone – and many “Baptists” don't identify with anyone beyond their local congregation – this is a daunting task.

Baptists are welcoming and affirming and aggressive defenders of traditional gender roles and sexual morality; they are leaders in ecumenical Christianity and separated on principle from churches that are not of “like faith and order”; they are Calvinists and Arminians; they are among the founders and strongest supporters of the global missionary movements of the last two hundred years and they reject missionary activity as a usurpation of God's sovereignty (so-called “hardshell” or “primitive” Baptists).

The modern Baptist movement arose in England (and among English exiles in the Netherlands) when men such as Smyth and Thomas Helwys proclaimed a simple evangelical faith rooted in scripture alone, and denied – in dramatic opposition to the tenets of both the Protestants and the Catholics of their day – that rulers and governments could dictate to the conscience of believers or enforce an official religious practice. And we American Baptists to this day enthusiastically embrace Roger Williams, who founded Providence Colony and the First Baptist Church of Providence (continuously active since 1638) on principles of absolute freedom of conscience and religious practice.

How ironic that Williams' own conscience led him to separate from the little church after only a few months. And how ironic that many contemporary Baptists in the United States, having become a religious and cultural majority in portions of our society, now look to agents of government to validate and even fund their institutions and activities!

Our diversity and historical inconsistencies notwithstanding, we can still identify certain shared a distinctive among those who call themselves Baptists. My list would include:

** The personal faith relationship of each individual believer with Christ (Romans 10:8)

- ** The unique and sufficient authority of Holy Scripture in all matters of faith and practice
- ** Believer's Baptism, according to the New Testament model (Acts 2:37-39, 8:26-40; Romans 6:1-11)
- ** The Lord's Supper as a memorial celebration of Christ crucified on our behalf (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)
- ** A "Believer's Church", that is, the church as the gathered body of those who have decided to follow Jesus (Acts 2:43-47)
- ** A "Gifted Church", that is, we are not simply a religious club, but we are the supernatural unity of those who have been called together by the risen Christ, indwelt by his Spirit, and equipped with the capacities that we need, together, to represent Christ in the world (1 Corinthians 12:1-11). The "priesthood of the believer" (1 Peter 2:9), often referenced in lists such as this, is the shared task of the body of believers
- ** The autonomy of the local congregation. Baptists do not have hierarchies or mandatory connections, but we *do* form voluntary relationships for ministry and mission beyond the local setting. Historically and presently, these relationships have been for the advancement of causes, such as national and global missions, that are beyond the scope and competency of individual congregations.

In some ways, these Baptist distinctives, no matter how truly they resonate with scripture, seem to be a reflection of central themes in American history and an expression of the tenor of the times. For example, given the Lordship of Christ, what truer example of democracy is there on earth than a local Baptist congregation? And the concept of "soul competency" which appears in many lists of Baptist distinctives, is a necessary presupposition for American democracy.

Church historian Martin E. Marty described “the Baptistification of American Christianity” in a widely quoted article in *Christianity Today* in 1983; in recent years we have noted Episcopalians rejecting the authority of their bishops and Roman Catholics testifying to being born again and thousands of independent and emergent churches springing up across the land, commonly Baptist in polity and practice.

To the extent that these trends reflect genuine searching of scripture and real openness to the Spirit’s leading, we must be encouraged. But to the extent that they represent the ascendancy of religious individualism – everyone a bishop and every ABC region a denomination -- I worry. This is why I attempt to proclaim at First Baptist Church of Portland a “Whole Gospel”. We actively invite individuals to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (John 3:16, Matthew 28:16-20); at the same time we reflect Jesus’ own proclamation of the advent of God’s Kingdom of justice and mercy (Mark 1:14-15, Luke 4:14-19), and we strive to anticipate that Kingdom in works of loving kindness (Matthew 25:31-40).

As I look at the distinctives as I have enumerated them above, there are three of them in particular that give me pause for reflection. First of all, with respect to “the personal faith relationship of each individual believer with Christ”, and the associated notion of “soul competency”: I wish not to judge anyone’s relationship to Christ. It is God who judges, *and* justifies. And I am willing to grant the presumption of good faith to folk who have all sorts of opinions about the nature of biblical authority, about homosexuality – that electrified third rail of contemporary theological and cultural discourse – and many other issues. Love would have me do that. But it is hard for me to take seriously the Christian commitment of those who are **un**loving, and therefore unlike Jesus. How is this playing out in our American Baptist family?

Thinking about the “soul competency” of each believer, and each believer’s right, indeed obligation, to search the scriptures for him or herself, leads me to ponder the nature of the “unique and sufficient authority of Holy Scripture”, a principle affirmed and beloved by almost all Baptists. Here again the spectre of modern individualism intrudes. Is every individual’s idiosyncratic and perhaps uninformed interpretation on a par with the consensus positions of generations of believers?

Baptists in the Americas are the heirs of a long tradition of “confessions”, from Philadelphia in 1742 to the most recent version of *The Baptist Faith and*

Message produced by our Southern Baptist first cousins in 2000. Now a “confession” is meant to lay out the distinctive faith commitments shared by the parties to that confession. In the Baptist context, confessions are commonly understood to be abstracts of scriptural positions. But what happens when the confession does more than describe shared positions and becomes a test of fellowship? The line is not always clear, but when we include or exclude fellow believers from positions, responsibilities and even membership in the body, then our confession has become a *creed*, and the old Baptist mantra “No creed but the Bible” has become a lie.

This is exactly what happened in the wake of the adoption of *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000* by the Southern Baptist Convention, and many Godly ministers, missionaries and professors fled or were expelled from pastorates, mission posts and faculty positions and sought refuge among the American Baptists.

We presume that honesty and integrity proscribe limits to fellowship, and even to the title “Christian”. But do we American Baptists wish to become a creedal people, and look to authorities beyond scripture to define the limits of fellowship? Do we trust a simple confession of faith in Jesus by a brother or sister, accompanied by “fruit worthy of repentance” (Matthew 3:8) in their life?

This question takes me directly to the distinctive concerning the autonomy of local congregations and our voluntary association for shared mission and ministry. Again, what are the limits that we will place on this association? In my opinion, it would not be too great an exaggeration to say that we American Baptists – with our vast diversity and our often contradictory stances on the issues of the day – have persevered together because we love Jesus and we want to serve him, period. Our unity has been a unity of loving service, not of doctrinal uniformity.

In the long run, those who wish to continue serving with us will do so; those who wish too separate from us will do so. May we always be clear-sighted about this. When our life together is challenging, we must be both loving toward our vexing brothers and sisters, and resolute about our own convictions – “wise as serpents and gentle as doves” (Matthew 10:16).

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