

DON'T "DROWN THE DIPPERS," YET!: RE-IMAGINING BAPTIST IDENTITY

Week Eight, October 25, 2017: A More Excellent Way

The original Baptist vision was fueled by a passion for the constitution of a true, visible church. John Smyth and Thomas Helwys were erudite and zealous men willing, at whatever the cost, to establish a church constituted by contesting Roman Catholic doctrine and by authentically demonstrating church practices. They began with believer's baptism, because they believed infant baptism had given rise to a church that did not reflect the character commended to it in the Scriptures. Whatever sacred hues they might have seen in infant baptism were dissipated by the fusion of the church with the state, which they believed had reduced infant baptism to a mere bureaucratic transaction, and a means of state control. But as they searched the Scriptures, the earliest Baptists were emboldened by the New Testament pattern of baptism, which, in each case, followed a profound encounter with the God of Jesus Christ. Baptism was entrance into the kingdom of God, a joining to the Body of Christ, a moment of receiving the gift of the dynamic Holy Spirit. They believed the church's life should reflect the life-changing impact they saw in the early church's witness.

Baptists also adopted and shared the gifts that characterized the wider Reformation, such as salvation by faith alone, the authority of Scripture, and the priesthood of all believers. In this respect, the early Baptist pilgrimage toward the realization of the kingdom of God overlapped those of the Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and other denominations born out of Luther's fascinating challenge to Rome. What made Baptists most distinctive within the Reformation was their commitment to believer's baptism, congregational governance, and the separation of church and state. Thus, a persistent theme of freedom came to mark the Baptist way—freedom to confess Jesus as Lord, freedom to govern their local churches, freedom to work out their salvation apart from state interference or coercion, as well as the freedom to read and interpret Scripture as seemed right to them and the Holy Spirit.

Along with the Magisterial Reformers and other denominational communities, the Baptists were a great success. After all, we're not confronted, as the Reformers and early Baptists were, with a church sustained by the corrupt practices they endured then. No one is selling indulgences. (You will be glad to know the selling of indulgences is not part of our missions and ministries.) The church and the state—at least in the West—are not fused or conjoined. No matter how you've been baptized, whether as an infant, or as a believer, baptism is no longer a state-sanctioned practice. Government authorities are not forcing us at gunpoint (or sword-point) to make confessions of faith in Jesus. Clergy do not have a monopoly on Scriptural interpretation, or anything else, really. We might say the Reformation was an enormous success for having inaugurated such astonishing and comprehensive changes to the Church, the state, and the Western worldview. Still today, the stone that fell in the center of a massive body of water continues to send ripples toward the shores of every nation.

And yet, here we are 400 and 500 years later, doing church with an appreciation of all of these principles and convictions, but nevertheless confronted again with the monumental challenge of remaining visible in the world accustomed to overlooking the church. We have long known that even believers' baptism can be, just as infant baptism was, co-opted,

domesticated, and emptied of its power by new principalities and powers. There are more dangers, toils, and snares than the original Baptists could have perceived. They could not have imagined that one day prominent Christian minds would be grappling with how to be the church in what Bonhoeffer called a “world come of age.” The early Baptists could not have predicted Nietzsche’s declaration that “God is dead.” They could not have foreseen how general assumptions about God’s existence would cease, and the new status quo would become the assumption that, for all intents and purposes, there is no God. For all of their struggles and persecutions, the early Baptists could not be said to have contended with people who believed God didn’t exist. They struggled against some Christians who wanted to kill them, and were often successful in doing so, but they did not struggle to convince people of the basic truth that God exists. But *we* certainly do.

What re-imagining Baptist identity is about, then, is not going back to the way things were. There is no going back. That would be a fool’s errand. I believe those who continue to try by any means necessary have actually accomplished little else other than appearing to the world as foolish.

No, the task of re-imagining Baptist identity is about rediscovering the original missionary zeal not only of the early Baptists, but of the early Christians, for the sake of building up the true church. This reclamation of energetic witness cannot work through new schisms and ever-newer denominations. It will only work as an expression of the church’s ministry of reconciliation. Just as the dividing wall came down between Jew and Gentile in the work of Jesus Christ, so must we also recognize the dividing walls have come down between denominations, as well as between Reformers and Catholics. To reimagine what it means to be Baptist now will require a more open, receptive vision of the whole church’s rich treasury of life-saving gifts. While we once had the luxury of going our own way, we need each other again, now more than ever.

The gifts Baptists have to bear in this crucial work of reconciliation are many. We can share with the whole church the truth:

- that believer’s baptism by immersion is not merely ordinance, symbol, or initiation rite, but a total saturation in the Spirit, by which God in Christ seals us as living signs of new creation.
- that the Lord’s Supper is not merely ordinance, symbol, initiation rite, or remembrance, but a celebratory, communal feast that “consumes” us into the Body of Christ.
- that reading Scripture is a venture of shared discernment, through which the written gospel finds visible expression in the church’s life together.
- that we share in the high priesthood of Christ, into which we are immersed in baptism, and by which we are made priests to one another.
- that we dissent against ruling powers and authorities, in order that our gospel witness may be visible, public, and undomesticated.

But as we proceed past the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 1517, and a few years beyond the 400th anniversary of the first Baptist church in 1609, let us remember that the Baptist imagination flourished early on because it offered risk-laden but life-giving solutions to the complex problems of their time. By their life and witness together, they confronted the injustices that threatened to diminish the worth of human beings and destroy the church's spiritual authority. They did not relinquish public space to the voices of their opponents, or retreat into secluded cloisters to practice their faith, but challenged the official accounts of the way things were supposed to be, and manifested their alternatives to the status quo in their life together. They walked their talk. They sought the truth, come whence it may and cost what it will. They saw a new world coming, and sought to welcome it by the way they did church.

This is really the spirit that I hope we can continue to harness in ever-deepening and adventurous ways... that we may all drink deeply from the well of baptism, that the church may be renewed in its vigorous search for truth on the world's behalf.

Perhaps you have not been a Baptist, and you joined this church simply because you love it here for reasons other than our denominational identity. If that's the case, I challenge you to let the Baptist way be your "recessive gene," at least. That is, if you aren't as interested in being a capital B Baptist, can you come alongside us as a baptist with a lower case b, as did the great Baptist theologian James McClendon?

Or perhaps you have been a Baptist all your life, but never really thought deeply about what that entails. If that's the case, I hope these weeks have been an occasion for you to do so, and that some of the things you've learned have captured your imagination and reinvigorated your curiosity about the whole Christian faith.

Maybe you have been a dyed-in-the-wool Baptist with a deep passion for this approach to the Christian faith. If that's the case, then I hope these weeks of study have confirmed your suspicions all along, and that you now stand ready to direct your passion toward the welfare of the whole church and world.

I'd like to conclude with some gestures toward what specific complex problems we face today, which I believe Baptists are in a unique position to address creatively and fruitfully. Let these gestures constitute "a still more excellent way" of being Baptist...

- 1) Like the early Reformers, we too face economic inequalities driven not by the church, but by seemingly invincible principalities and powers that thrive on domination and humiliation. A renewed Baptist commitment to communal life will be patterned after the economic concerns of the early Baptists and the earliest Christians, who understood themselves to be establishing a new kind of economy that addressed the needs of the poor rather than the rich. For nearly all of our history, Baptists have been composed largely of the poor, lower, working, and middle classes. Remember, as Anglican theologian Daniel Featley bloviated in response to Daniel Kiffin's critiques of infant baptism, that Baptists were "Anabaptists, heretics, mechanics, and illiterate men." These are our people. And we must look for every opportunity not only to relieve them with

aid, but to address the conditions that give rise to poverty and inequality with creative, ingenious, and clever solutions.

- 2) Like the early Reformers, we too stand on the precipice of a new age, which will not be called modernity or post-modernity. We won't be alive by the time it's able to be named. And like the early Baptists, we have contributions to make to the way the world understands itself. May we, as they did, seek to be the church in such a way that we serve as incubators of new and refreshing ideas about politics, economics, theology, science, and the humanities, so that, one day, when some new republic emerges, it will be able (as our country has) to enjoy perhaps some secular version of our wisdom that makes human flourishing more likely. I am thinking, for example, of the Baptist contribution to the First Amendment, and of the Founding Fathers' attention to Baptist influences on their perceptions regarding freedom of conscience and the separation of church and state.
- 3) Like the early Reformers, we too face overwhelming odds and foreboding realities, in our case related to the issue of climate change. Just as the early Baptists renewed the meaning of freedom through their specific convictions, can we not also participate in a renewal of freedom spurred by our convictions about what it means to be creatures living in God's created order? As well, can we not use our agility as self-governing entities to maneuver more radically and more swiftly to draw on local solutions to local problems in ways that serve as model for both faithful and worldly people? Can it be said of Baptists 500 years from now, "However rancorous they were, they helped preserve the world for their great-grandchildren"?

So, please, let's not "drown the dippers," yet. We have work to do that, so far as things stand now, only Christians can do, and in some cases, only Baptists can do. So, may we continue seeking the truth, seeking the peace of the city, come whence it may, and cost what it will.