

**“DISSENTING TOWARDS UNITY”**

***Philippians 2:1-13***

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Senior Pastor

Paul’s request of the church in Philippi is to make his joy complete, to “be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” Paul has good reason to hope here because, well, these were not Baptists, and this was not a Baptist church. But Paul’s hope does extend to us across space and time, and his invitation meets us here today, “to be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” And as we gather on this World Communion Sunday, especially mindful of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world, I believe it’s an opportune time for us to consider what it means to be distinctively “Baptist” while also seeking unity with the whole Christian communion

Situated as we are in the American South, we naturally have a distorted view of how many Baptists there are. Around here, Baptists are everywhere. The South is “crawling with Baptists,” a phrase you may find familiar, as if we’re some swarm of locusts that have descended and are now crawling out of every crevice. In one of my favorite passages of literature, from Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*, the protagonist describes driving through a rural southern stretch, “where the flat-footed, bilious, frog-sticker-toting, Baptist biscuit-eaters live.”<sup>1</sup> But in fact, there aren’t that many of us. We make up a miniscule fraction of the whole Church. There are estimated to be about 40 million Baptists around the world, but there are over 2 billion Christians.

Frankly, I’ve struggled with beginning this series on re-imagining Baptist identity, not only because Baptists are so few in the world, but also because....How many people, if you go into the streets and the shops and restaurants and pubs in Asheville, or sit across the table from your kith and kin, are having cracker jack discussions about denominational identity these days? Is this subject really on the top-shelf right now? In this divisive time, shouldn’t we be more concerned with more important things like unity? What’s more, a great many members of this church did not grow up Baptist, or came here from other denominations. So why should we focus on the “Baptistness” of things? Why can’t we simply focus on being Christian?

I’m very sympathetic with this way of thinking. I remember hearing the late but legendary preacher Fred Craddock tell of how, as he had grown older, he’d become less concerned with being right, or with professional success. Where before, he’d poured so much energy into being an accomplished professor, and a great preacher, now he wanted more than anything else simply to be a true Christian.

Amen, and same here. But if you would suffer me to say one very crucial truth, with which I believe Craddock would agree. There is no generic “Christianity.” For example, how do we define where the church is? A Catholic might say that the church is where the priest is. The

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *All the King’s Men* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006) 406.

priest bears in himself the continuation of the lineage of the rock, Peter, and on this rock Christ built his church, as the Scriptures say. Other denominations would say the Church is wherever the sacraments are rightly administered. But Baptists have said it differently. Baptists believe the Church is wherever people are gathered in Christ's name. God is wild and free to be present in any gathering of Christ-followers, whether any of them have been ordained or not. Though I've just named several true ways of being Christian, none of these are mutually exclusive. The Baptist way is one true way. But as hard as I've tried to wiggle out of it, I keep landing right back in it, because the Baptist way keeps challenging and enchanting me.

Recently in the local paper, I read about the progress on the renovation of the former BB&T building downtown. As you can plainly see, they've completely gutted the building to its basic concrete frame, and are renovating it from top to bottom. But I was intrigued to learn that when they knocked down some of the old walls, they found some new rooms they didn't know existed. They'd always been there, but had been revealed in a new way. What's more, they found some old treasures in these newly discovered rooms (which he said they'd reveal to the public later on). I hope you'll see our pilgrimage over the course of this month in a similar way. While we are inspecting the foundations of our identity, we are finding new rooms, and new treasures that surprise and enchant us. Is this what it means to be Baptist? I never knew!

Where did Baptists come from? If you go back to the beginning, we came from the Catholic Church, which became in England after the Reformation, the Anglican Church, which the Puritans tried their best to improve, but, after failing, became Separatists, from which the Baptists came. In linear terms, there were Catholics, then Anglicans, then Puritans, then Separatists, *then* Baptists. We finally grew out of the Separatist movement. A certain John Smyth, along with Thomas Helwys, led a determined group to Holland in order to escape persecution in England. There in 1609, they established what has become known as the first Baptist church. But we came from Catholics. Baptists did not materialize from the ether. We were—and we still are—dissenting Catholics.

But, though the “dissension” from which we were born had a true purpose, now Baptists have become more known for dissenting for the sake of dissension. So much so that today, Baptists have garnered a reputation for divisiveness. Division has become the Baptist brand. Across the country, in order to appeal to more people, Baptist churches are removing the name “Baptist” from their signs. The trend has appeared in multiple Baptist churches in our city. And if this trend continues, I'm afraid we're going to have to change our name, as well. To *Last Baptist Church*.

Because I don't believe God is done with us. I believe Baptists still have beautiful gifts to share with the whole church. I believe there is a still more excellent way to embody Baptist convictions for the world communion's sake. I'm emboldened in this conviction by the Baptist scholar, Douglas Henry, who has asked, “Is there an end to Baptist dissent?” He wonders what will happen if we continue propping ourselves up by our disagreements with other Christians. Will dissent remain both our keystone and our only touchstone? Henry concludes with a call to unity: “We Baptists,” he asserts, “must remember that our heritage of dissent is borne of a prior

commitment to Christian communion.”<sup>2</sup> Henry calls us to renew our commitment to Christian unity by re-examining the “successes and failures of our movement of renewal and reform.”

I hear in his call an echo of Paul’s summons to the Philippians to humble themselves for unity’s sake. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,” Paul says, “but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” To look not to our own interests, but to the interests of others, this is the crux of the more excellent way of being Baptist Christians.

After the Reformation, Christianity split up, division after division, and spread out. But I believe the good news is that these divisions have run their course. Now is the time for the whole global communion, with Baptists cheering us on, to turn back to the center of our faith with humility, and to see our differences as opportunities for fellowship and discovery. Perhaps we Baptists could begin by recognizing the inherent goodness of the Catholic use of incense in worship. It’s frankincense, after all. A very biblical scent. But as British Methodist Geoffrey Wainwright has said, we Baptists waft our own aromas—donuts and coffee!<sup>3</sup>

So, let the Baptist and the Catholic, the Methodist and the Presbyterian, the AME Zion church with the Episcopalian church, approach the table of our common Lord today, recognizing that at this feast we do not merely consume these elements, as if we were the primary actors. But we are *consumed* by the body and blood, joined to one Body, and, having become members one of another, made able to grow up into the head, to have the same mind, the *one* mind of Christ.

Here at this table, we empty ourselves along with Him, and humble ourselves, seeking unity even if it costs us, “seeing that the name of Jesus is above every name,

*So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
And every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Here together, may see the beginning of a new reformation, one in which the true church, seeking to embody the same mind of Christ, serves as proof to a watching world that God loves us, and is, indeed, in the midst of us all.



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<sup>2</sup> Douglas Henry, “The End of Baptist Dissent,” article in my possession, p. 21. A formal publication of this article, which I recommend to interested members of the congregation, may be found in *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, Vol. 40, no. 4, Winter 2013, pp. 367-387.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, *For Our Salvation: Two Approaches to the Work of Christ* (Eerdmans, 1997) 70.