

BAPTISTS AND THEOLOGY: ORTHODOXY AND ORTHOPRAXY

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April 19, 2009

Text:

Introduction: Have you ever been accused of heresy? Possibly, but probably not! Have you ever been fired for heresy? Probably not.

But **I have**. My first teaching job – at my alma mater in the controversy that sharply divided the SBC beginning in the late 1970s, I am convinced that I was probably the first teacher of religion to lose a position at a school supported by Southern Baptists. The primary issue that attracted attention was my interpretation of Genesis 1-11 on creation. I presented my students with several options for interpretation – historical, scientific, mythological, and my view, theological affirmation. I believed then, as I do now, that the account of creation in Genesis 1 is a religious document, not a scientific or historical treatment. But since Southern Baptists have been arguing over the issue beginning in 1925 and continuing in 1963 (when they adopted their first confession of faith and revised it in the 1960s), there were those who felt threatened by any view that differed from their own. So I got into trouble, and eventually became a pawn in convention politics. I might add that I went on to OBU and served there for 22 years, including a leave of absence when I served about 2 years as the final executive director of the SBC's Historical Commission, including about 15 months in Nashville. I might also add that sometimes it might be worse not getting fired than getting fired! One might call it “earn while you burn.”

Frequently, I will lecture or preach on our Baptist heritage – of course, I often address the subject of Baptists and theology; American Baptists don't talk about theology very much these days (**too divisive, too controversial, too many different opinions and interpretations** –we do debate ethical issues, but not theology very often). All of this to say that theology or doctrine is an issue that perhaps we as Baptists and Christians ought to at least have a proper understanding.

I. **The Question of Orthodoxy:** *Does it matter what you believe?* When I was teaching in Missouri there was a radio program broadcast by the minister of a huge, mega church in Springfield in which the speaker concluded every program with “Remember, it really does matter what you believe!” Of course, what he really was saying is that “I know what is true, what is orthodox, and you really need to agree with me in order to be saved or to be right with God.”

What he was proposing was that one needed orthodox (acceptable) beliefs in order to have the true faith. He was defining true faith as adherence to a set of defined theological beliefs. Put another way, he was saying that theology or doctrine is a test of one's faith. If you hold to the correct theological positions, then you will be in God's kingdom. Hold the wrong views, heretical views, and you will spend eternity separated from the love of God and exiled to the regions of hell forever.

The stance of this particular minister raises **some important questions.** **What place does theology have in the lives of 21st century Christians, 21st century Baptists? Is our theology a test of our faith? Do we need to make 100% on the theology exam in order to be right with God, or will 90%, or 80%, or 10% be sufficient?**

In my years of teaching Baptist history I found my self asking the question “How do Baptists really do theology? I concluded that we start with belief in a God who reveals Himself, and ultimately His revelation in the person of Jesus Christ.

I realized that God’s revelation demands that this be received. We receive God’s revelation through the faith experience. Our first questions to others about religion, at least from the Baptist perspective, has been “In whom do you believe?” not “what do you believe?”

I also remembered that as Baptists we look to the Scriptures for guidance in our beliefs. I learned that the pilgrimage of the writers was very important in shaping what they said.

I also realized the importance of the dialogue between the believer and the community of faith – a dialogue that is best done in an atmosphere of compassion, respect, and love; not in one of threats and intimidation.

And in recent years I realized how important the contemporary world is in terms of the issues and questions that our theology attempts to address. Theology really is a commentary upon society.

When one factors in all of these perspectives, theology is a growing, maturing journey; not adherence to a set of standards that exist out there and call for a “yes” or “no” on our part.

In the end, because of these factors, theology is confessional in nature, not creedal, for the people called Baptists.

II. The Question of Orthopraxy:

One of the important theological debates in the NT is between Paul and James. Paul in Galatians and other places says clearly with utmost conviction that we are saved by grace through faith alone. For Paul faith is a volitional response, a commitment of the will to the forgiveness and grace of God through trust in Jesus Christ. James later on will say “show me your faith, I will show you my works.” He will say that one is saved not by faith alone but by works.

James shocks many teachers. Martin Luther had a lot of trouble with James. He called the book a “right, strawy epistle.” Luther had traveled a long, dangerous journey to arrive at justification by faith alone and was troubled by what James seemed to be saying. James seems to contradict what Paul is saying. Is it faith, or is it faith plus works?

I really believe that you have to realize that the historical circumstances have changed. For Paul, he was battling the legalists who were saying that faith was fine but you also needed to keep the law, follow the rules, earn your salvation. Paul said “no way.” For freedom Christ has set us free. Period.

James is writing at a much later period when there were those who interpreted faith as adherence to a set of theological truths. Believing the truth was all that was needed to be right with God. James was saying, no, you need to show your faith by the way that you live.

This discussion about the struggle between Paul and James, who I believe really do not contradict one another but complement one another, raises the issue with Baptists. **What is true faith?** Emotion, feelings, action, theology?

In my book on Southern Baptists in the chapter on theology, I propose that genuine faith expresses itself in several different ways, and that to over-emphasize one to the neglect of others leads to a distorted faith. Here is what I proposed.

True faith expresses itself in worship – individual and corporate. How do I know that I am and you are believers through faith in Christ – because we attempt to worship God. Your very presence here in this worship service today tells me that you are a person of faith, you want to be

here with others, you may need to be here with others, you benefit being here with others as collectively we try and communicate our reliance on the Almighty through prayer, music, fellowship and study.

True faith expresses itself through theology. When we have a genuine faith experience, whatever form that might take, we have the need and the responsibility to share it with others. How do we do that? With words. We theologize. We try and tell others what has happened to us.

We draw from the Scriptures, we draw from our dialogue with other believers in the Christian community, we even draw from the world about us as we try to tell others how our faith in God is relevant. We are all theologians.

We express our faith, and as we grow in our faith we should grow in our theology. **True faith expresses itself in service.** As believers, as people of faith, we seek to serve both God and the world. We serve voluntarily in our local churches. We teach, we usher, we sing, we visit, we write, we pray, we do all kinds of things that sooner or later become so regular that we don't even think about them.

We do missions, or we support missions, or we often do both. A people of faith are a people of ministry and missions.

True faith expresses itself in ethics, the ought and the ought not of life. Ethics is both individual and corporate. We determine what is right and wrong in light of our faith. We try and identify those things that would deteriorate our faith and we try to avoid them. I also think that as we grow in the faith corporate ethics become quite important. Our concern for others, for the world, for society, all take on a new understanding and we unite with others to respond. Care for the poor, education for our children, justice and fairness in the marketplace and the political domain become issues for us.

The bottom line in terms of our views on theology is this: theology should and must be one aspect of our faith, not the whole thing. And, therefore, theology must always be a result of faith, not a test of faith.

Also, I would remind you that the true expression of your theology is the way that you live your life. Do you want to know what a person believes. Don't ask them, look at them, look at what their lives have to say in terms of their priorities. What you believe must be consistent with how you live.

Conclusions: I used to tell, sometimes shock my students by saying that "a little bit of heresy is good for the soul!" I was speaking as a historian of Christianity, and from the perspective that so many of those who had made significant contributions to the development of Christianity often were at one time or another considered "heretics" by the established church of their day. Yet, the reason that we remember them today is because eventually they convinced a significant group of followers that their beliefs and practices were consistent with one's faith in God and belief and commitment to the teachings of the Scriptures.

If you think that theology is important, if you want to communicate your "faith" with others, then make sure that you have a balanced faith that includes worship, theology, service and ministry, and ethics. Faith is a journey and those who travel it well will in the end wind up with a very good theology that is consistent with all of the other aspects of true faith.