

## IS BEING BAPTIST RELEVANT FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY?

TEXT: Philippians 2:9-11

Introduction: The sign in the front of our building on the corner of 13<sup>th</sup> and Pine identifies this place as the home of First Baptist Church. We are an American Baptist congregation, which says a lot about who we are in terms of history, ministry, and identity.

Denominational affiliation is an important factor for this church. But this is not the case for many people and many churches in our society today. Denominations are seen as increasingly irrelevant in the 21st century. In fact, many historians and sociologists have predicted the demise of denominations. The most obvious expression is the fact that many churches have removed any reference to a denomination from their name, including those still affiliated with some Baptist organization. I know of a church in Denver and one in Longmont that has done this very thing. They will change their name to something more generic, like Heritage Church, or Community Church, or the Church of the Rock, or something along these lines. [This may be an attempt to appeal to a more general audience, which may be turned off to denominationalism].

So this begs the question, “Does being Baptist have any relevancy to today’s society, to the culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?” I have considered this for a number of years now. Many of the things that have held us together no longer seem relevant. Denominations often were formed as a method for programs and organizations. Baptist first united in England and in the United States to cooperate in doing missions, both international and domestic, providing common literature, establishing benevolent and educational ministries, and a variety of other things. In some cases a commitment to a particular theological stance, often expressed by a confessional or creedal statement, was a factor but in others a broad general theological identity was sufficient. Baptists are a prime example of people with a common identity who founded associations, state conventions or regions, and national organizations in order to do ministry more efficiently and effectively.

It is evident that there are great pressures on such cooperative organizations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. American Baptists at the local, regional, and national levels are not immune from these pressures. Those factors and commitments that have held us together in the past are not as important as those issues that divide us today, it seems. Issues related to leadership, finances, institutions, politics, and theological and ethical issues strain the thin threads of Baptist unity. We live in a time where one issue can be used as a wedge to divide without any consideration of all other common commitments that have traditionally held us together in the past. This seems to indicate that those commitments that held us together in the past are not as important as those issues that divide us in the present. [For example, a recent letter from a church in the region with

So again, the question is “Does being Baptist have any relevancy to today’s society, to the culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?” I would propose to you that I believe that **there is no denomination more suited to addressing the 21<sup>st</sup> century than the people called Baptist!** If there is any group that has the heritage to be relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is the Baptists.

I say this out of all of my study and experiences as a Baptist historian for over 4 decades. I believe that when we are Baptist at our best, when we clearly communicate who we are and what we offer to our community and world, we will always be relevant. Today I want to highlight some of the most important convictions, principles and practices of the people called “Baptist.” And I will try and apply these to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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In general let me say this. **Baptists are a people of faith and a people of freedom.** Our faith rests in the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It is not founded upon theological convictions, ethical principles, or political considerations, all of which are products of our faith. It is founded upon the belief that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the World, the Word incarnate, the one who came, lived, died, and rose again according to the testimony of the Scriptures. Paul in Philippians clearly teaches this and we identify with Christ through confession of who we are and belief in what God has done in Christ. It's that simple. Jesus is Lord, or he is not.

**Faith in the Lordship of Christ is the center of every important Baptist conviction.** Our responses to the Bible, theology, polity, religious liberty and church and state issues, missions, evangelism, etc. are all rooted in the Baptist and Biblical conviction that Jesus is Lord. Faith requires us to look at all of these issues through the eyes of the Lordship of Christ. Faith should make us humble, it should make us active, and above all it should make us free to respond to our world and our society. For members of First Baptist, faith requires that we seek to be God's people here in Boulder by responding to Boulder. The opposite side of the coin of faith is service and ministry in the world in which we find ourselves.

**Freedom is the result of faith (Gal. 5:1). The other side of this coin is responsibility, that expresses itself in service and ministry in our world.** Baptists are a free people in growing in our faith and in refining and practicing that faith. Let's look at some important historical Baptist characteristics and see how they relate to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Biblical authority** - Baptists, like so many others coming out of the Protestant Reformation, found justification for their views and practices in the Bible. Baptists from our beginnings have had great love and respect for the Bible. We use it to evaluate our faith, to enhance our understanding of God, ourselves, and the world. All Baptists have a great love for the Scriptures. Yet we have fought over them throughout our history. Without going into detail on these battles, let me point out a couple of things that I have observed.

One, many Baptists have succumbed to the danger often called "bibliolatry." They worship the Bible instead of the one to Whom it points. They make the Bible what it is not nor was ever intended to be. It is not a book of science. It is not a book of history, although it contains a wealth of historical information. It is not a math book, a psychology book, or a sociology book. So many Baptists have joined in on an attitude that Christians and politicians advocate that casts suspicion upon science, medicine, technology, and other realms of knowledge. I would remind you that it was the church that condemned the theories that the sun, not the earth, was the center of our universe. I would also add that many of these Baptists and others of the same persuasion also practice selective literalism. They choose passages that support their particular perspective and ignore those that go against them.

The Bible is a **book of faith!** It was written by pilgrims on a faith journey who were seeking to communicate their understanding of God, themselves, and the world in light of the culture of their time. As our knowledge of our world grows, our faith should grow with it.

Two, our message should be that Baptists are free to study, interpret and apply the Scriptures to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We are free to discover new ways of ministry, and new understandings of issues, to accept and to support new advances in science, technology, medicine. As believers who are free in Christ and free as Baptists, we encourage the pursuit of all knowledge, recognizing that it does not destroy God but increases our understanding of him and his creation.

**Congregational polity** - The highest institutional authority in Baptist life is the local congregation. It is the local church that determines who its ministers shall be, how its resources will be used, and what ministries and services will be supported. Church polity, or government, is congregational, not episcopal,

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nor independent. Baptist congregations voluntarily work with other churches in regions, associations, and national organizations. Baptist churches have the freedom to work with other religious communities and non-religious organizations as they seek to express their faith in terms of action.

One of the appealing aspects of congregational polity is that no officials of larger organizations have a right to discipline or sanction members of a local church. We saw in the most recent election church leaders who threatened individuals with specific sanctions who did not agree with their interpretation of church positions. In Baptist life this will not happen. In Baptist life the individual has a voice in who leads, how money is spent, and which ministries we support. Every Baptist has a vote and a voice.

We should clearly communicate the Baptist principle of congregational polity to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There is no organizational approach that should be more appealing to the contemporary generation.

**Confessional theology** - Baptists are not a creedal people. Creeds are authoritative theological statements that all believers of all ages must believe. Creeds are a test of faith. Accept a creed and you are orthodox. Reject any part of a creed and you are a heretic!. In the old days, the church burned heretics. In our more civilized times, we just seek to fire them!

Baptists are a confessional people. Every believer, every generation has the responsibility to express the faith doctrinally. Theology in the best sense of the word for Baptists should never be a test of faith. It should always be a result of faith. Theology is a result of freedom for Baptists. Therefore it should always be in a state of flux, growing, maturing, refining in light of a changing world to which our faith must respond.

Baptists have corporately produced confessional statements throughout our history. If you study them carefully you will see that they protect individual responsibility to confess one's faith, they reflect issues of their time, and they leave the door open for further understanding and communication of one's faith. [E.g.; the early church initially responded to Palestinian Jews with the Gospel; then the doors opened to Hellenistic Jews; then to Samaritans; then to Gentiles. It moved from emphasizing the Messiahship of Jesus to the universal idea that Jesus was the Savior of the world. What is the next step - possibly finding not differences but common ground with other, non-Christian world religions; such as a desire for peace, not war; respect, not condemnation; love, not hatred; care for the down and out, not criticism.]

What could be more relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century that the message that the theological expression of faith is always open to relevant views expressed upon historic foundations. What message could be more meaningful to the 21<sup>st</sup> century that the idea that Baptists encourage believers to think and to communicate theologically their faith as applied to the times. We learn from those who have come before us. But we are free to be responsible and relevant to the time in which we live.

**Religious liberty and church and state** - The most important contribution of Baptists to the history of man is on religious liberty and the ideal of separation of church and state. When in the early 1600s some Christians were calling for tolerance by established churches, the radical, lowly Baptists exploded on the scene demanding religious liberty not only for themselves but for all people.

One of the very first Baptists was Thomas Helwys who in 1612 wrote a magnificent little work, which he sent to King James I of England, the one whose name is identified with the most influential English translation of the Bible in history. In it Helwys wrote that it was no business of the king or civil officials to punish anyone for their religious convictions, clarifying what he said with the most radical and revolutionary teachings ever in the English language by stating that "whether they be heretics, Turkes, Jewes, or whatsoever" it "appertaynes not to the civil authorities to persecute anyone" for their religious

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beliefs. And to protect religious liberty Baptists called for the separation of church and state, realizing that established religion corrupts both the church and the state.

Baptists never, never wavered on these important convictions - at least until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Then in the eyes of many of us we began to see too many Baptists compromise our heritage on church and state issues. They looked to the OT concept of a theocracy, where God in theory ruled over the nation of Israel. And they wanted to do the same in the United States. They wanted to incorporate the theocratic ideal in our nation. And many in this theocracy want to be 'theo.'

We need to fight this tooth and nail. We need to proclaim in the historic Baptist faith that when church and state get too cozy, it's the church that gets used. If we are to have a prophetic voice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need to fight for religious liberty and we need to ferociously avoid too much entanglement with the politicians. Freedom means that every person, every movement, every denomination must stand or fall on the basis of its convictions and practices, not its relationship with government. And if it can't, it deserves to pass by the wayside. This approach makes us more diligent, more responsible, and more relevant.

I also believe that in world of wars over religion, liberty is the highest ground. It opens doors of communication. It looks for common ground, common beliefs, and common goals. Rigidity in matters of religion results in conflict. Freedom results in respect and understanding and cooperation. It is not easy and is often seen as a sign of weakness. But it is the only message that will take us through the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Missions, evangelism, social ministries, educational ministries** - Baptists have always been a ministering and serving people. So many of the good things that have happened to me is because Baptists cared about me, confronted me with the Gospel, provided places that educated me, and places that allowed me to be a part of their ministry in terms of education to young people and serving through churches to the broader world.

So many Baptists today are known for what they stand against. We attack those who disagree with us on religious issues, ethical issues, and even political issues. We need to remind ourselves and others that there is good in people and in our communities that far outweighs the shortcomings that we have. We need to have a positive message to the 21<sup>st</sup> century that starts with our understanding of who people are, our recognition of their potential, our appreciation for their good, and our awareness of their need for a sense of the spiritual.

We need to give them freedom to believe, freedom to contribute, freedom to be responsible. We need to call them to be people of faith who serve and minister to others. We need to remind them that they can make the world a better place and that FBC, Boulder is a good place to be a part of on these matters.

Conclusion: Baptists offer to the people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and opportunity to have a growing, relevant faith in a changing world. Baptists offer to these people the freedom to be creative, constructive, responsible, and alive. Faith results in freedom. And freedom leads to a relevant faith. And Baptists offer faith and freedom to the people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century better than any other heritage.