

"About being Baptist....and other things" Message #3

Series: 5 Keys to Healthy Churches

I sat in Atlanta this past week surrounded by 15,000 Baptists and held my breath imagining what might happen.

There were 13 different groups of identified Baptists attending, but the theme was a familiar though forgotten one now, mostly due to the modern day sense of righteousness:

That is: **"Unity in Diversity!"**

In fact, all day Thursday was devoted to "Respecting Diversity."

As the choir from a white traditional church in Georgia sang, my heart leaped!

As the violinist from Eastern Europe played, I thought of all he had been through to be called Christian and to be here;

As the magnificent black soloist sang, "You must have true religion-have your soul converted- to get to the other side!" I began to feel emotion with every note;

As the dignified scholarly preacher from the Harvard Divinity School prayed, I began to weep, overwhelmed with deep humility and contrition; Then as a young white woman from California preached from I Corinthians 13, I was riveted to my chair, sometimes laughing, sometimes choked up, but always in AWE of the message that Jesus could, love me and all of us so!

When a 30 year old Middle Eastern preacher from Gaza who had lost some of his family this very week in the battering of hatred there, it was we who needed to hold him up as he lost his way through his tears.

Finally the well known author, John Grisham, stood to the microphone. He asked why many people do not like, or not trust, even fear Baptists. He answered his own question as he contrasted his current church, University Baptist in Charlottesville, VA on the edge of the UVA campus, one with a spirit of openness to the service of women, to racial differences, and to many nationalities, a place where he teaches Sunday School to young boys every week; and then he told of his home church where he was raised. This church in Mississippi was where he frequently heard preaching about the people who were not welcome in the church. His answer was that too many people had worked too long on keeping some people out. "That is not the way to follow Jesus," something he said he realized as a child.

Those speaking and those listening were **all Baptists**, all brothers and sisters in The Lord. And I found myself wishing that all of you could be right there with me. But I realized that you were! Because that is the genius of Baptist life, that as we cooperate together in His mission, we are always together even if not side by side.

Our themes, authentic through the years, have been, *Unity through Diversity, Inclusion as Jesus included us all, not exclusion, service not isolation, generosity and sacrifice, sharing what we have received.*

I know you have heard the story of the stranger in town who was looking for the Church of God. As he walked the town streets, he stopped to speak to a group of men gathered on the street corner, talking. *"Can you tell me where the Church of God is, please?"*

They scratched their heads simultaneously. *“Well, Mr. Brownlea has a church over on that corner. Mr Moncrief has a church right down that street, and old man Arnold has a church over on that side of the square. Tell you the truth, I don’t believe God has a church in this town!!”*

So I ask myself and you,....

“Does God have a church in Tryon, North Carolina?”

Is there an authentic people of God here who understand what Jesus said, about loving God with all your heart and soul, mind and strength; who simply, truly love their neighbors as much and in the same way as they love themselves? A people who follow Jesus as best they can no matter what, anywhere, any way possible?

I have thought, **“Who are we as Baptists?”**

Through the years it has been said to the world that we are the ones who take people down to the river to the waters of baptism and even that we require that experience. Since this is so unlike any other denomination, they must wonder then what we must surely think of them who do not.

Let’s be clear about our history, our theology, our practice and our priorities.....

B A P T I S M does not define us,

Our **F A I T H** defines us, and **B A P T I S M** is its picture.

(i.e. We believe this, to hear and accept the suffering love of Jesus Christ for us is to have a heart transplant! To love without strings, to be forgiving without being deserving, and to be led to fullness of life is to be washed clean of all our sins and those of

the world and to be a new creation, clean before God! It is to have a savior to whom we owe and offer our lives in childlike love, trust and belonging.

Baptism pictures what Jesus does for us and what God wants of us at the same time! It pictures more completely than.... Simple exposure to water, mere references to water, or any demand of water by any forcible means.

It is not the water, it is the faith in being cleansed.....reborn as a child of the Heavenly Father. But we love the water, all of it over all of us, because it was used by Jesus that way to show the picture of His power for new life through his cleansing forgiveness.

And the "SECOND is like unto it!"

Our **D E N O M I N A T I O N** does not define our church.

Our **C O N V I C T I O N S** define our church, and the **D E N O M I N A T I O N** is our helper to live them well.

If even the current of this river should reverse, so that instead of our grip on convictions..... an organization, a hierarchy, an institution's grip on a particular position, and its grip on us controls our minds, our hearts, the church....THEN we are no longer Baptist, not thinking, but institutionalized religious people.

Our convictions are from within as we freely seek after and are led by the Spirit of God, and together the congregation of diversity and conviction of His saving grace and the Lordship of Jesus Christ develop a RESOURCE CENTER to seek and collect the best methods and materials and possible resources to help us do our best to follow Jesus into real life, abundant life, and to share the same with ALL the people on the face of the earth!

That is a free Baptist...

Who is free in his or her **soul** to stand before God...

Who worships and serves in a **free church**.....

A **free Bible**....unencumbered by politics or prejudices...

....free of provincial biases...

.....Free of the perversion of single issues...

.....Free to be the word of life to us today...

You may have heard the old story about a Jew, a Catholic, and a Baptist who were debating a theological issue.

The Jew spoke first, and began his comments with:

" *Thus saith the Lord!....*"

The Catholic responded, *"As the church has always said....."*

When it was the Baptist's turn to speak, she began:

" *Now brethren, it seems to me....*"

Which reveals the idea that we Baptists historically have embraced: that we are free to think for ourselves, free to read the scriptures, free to interpret them for ourselves, free to be led by the Holy Spirit.

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