

ON BEING AN ECUMENICAL CHURCH IN THE BAPTIST TRADITION

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What might a progressive Baptist Church look like in the 21st century? Here is how I would describe it: “An Ecumenical Church in the Baptist Tradition.”

I think it fits with who you are. Let’s look at the three main words: Ecumenical, Baptist and Church. Try them on for size.

I

The word “ecumenical” comes from the great N.T. Greek word *ecumene* which means *the whole inhabited earth as the household of God*. What if we lived this way, as if the whole inhabited world was the household of God? What would it mean for a *church* to be ecumenical? At least three things:

1. Seeking unity among all Christians
2. Seeking friendship with all religions
3. Caring for God’s creation as faithful stewards.

First, we seek unity among all Christians. What we call “The Ecumenical Movement” began about 100 years ago. Its passion and its goal was to unify a Christianity so divided up. Jesus prayed that we be *one* (John 17.21). It addressed the scandal of our dividedness. It sought unity and cooperation on global, national and local levels.

Just think about it. We first divided into Western and Eastern churches. Then came the Protestant Reformation, and we divided up into three: Roman Catholic, Protestant and

Eastern Orthodox. By one count, there are today 23,000 denominations in Christianity! And Jesus prayed that we be one.

The second dimension of ecumenical is friendship among religions, a deeper ecumenism than unity among Christians. There is an urgency here in the 21st century. As Hans Küng said, “The prerequisite of peace among the nations is peace among religions.”

In today’s global village, we are living closer to people of other religions than ever before. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, “No religion is an island.”

There is a counter-movement against ecumenical friendship among religions. It is a growing fundamentalism found in most religions. These fundamentalisms emphasize the separateness and superiority of their own religion. It is a weakness in human nature to want to be separate and superior. We do it all the time. How terrible when this spirit infects religion! That is why we need ecumenical churches which are ecumenical in spirit and progressive in theology, who encourage respect and understanding among the religions of the world.

The third dimension of ecumenical is the care of God’s creation as faithful stewards of God’s world. If the whole inhabited earth is the household of God, we need to be good “householders,” as the word “steward” means in the N.T. The prophet Isaiah pictures the world as the good vineyard God made and gave to us. What we witness today is a world despoiled by greed, power and ignorance. We can do better. We must, lest our children and grandchildren suffer for our plundering of it.

II

The second word is *Baptist*. Because of what “Baptist” often means in America today, we are tempted to give up on the word. But I believe the Baptist way is an important

witness in our world today. James Forbes – who later became pastor of Riverside Church in New York City and one of America’s great preachers – was told as a young minister by Carlyle Marney, “Jim, no one grows up to be what God made them to be unless they learn to bless their roots.” (Forbes grew up a black Pentecostal.)

What are the Baptist roots we can bless? I name five Baptist convictions.

1. *Believers’ Baptism* – a radical notion in the 16th and 17th centuries. Baptism is reserved for those who have made a decisive choice to be followers of Jesus. We can respect other baptism traditions, such as infant baptism, and still hold to this conviction.
2. The radical notion of what was called “*soul competence*” and “*soul freedom*.” Every person has the God-given competence to open the Bible and, led by the Spirit, interpret scripture for his or her life and faith. And if *competent*, the soul must be *free*.
3. *Local church autonomy*. This conviction is that every local church is competent to open scripture and, led by the Spirit, interpret the Bible for its own life and faith as a community. We govern ourselves by congregational democracy. No higher ecclesiastical authority can determine our life together in Christ.
4. The importance of *community*. Church is experienced in the local community where we are “members of one another” and “priests to one another.” Generally, Baptist churches have church covenants rather than creedal statements which govern their life.
5. *Religious freedom* and the *separation of church and state*. We began as a persecuted religious minority fighting for our religious freedom and for the

religious freedom of others. We oppose church/state entanglement, which is a danger to both church and state.

Now, a brief historical sketch. We begin as European *Anabaptists* in the 16th century. We stood for believers' baptism and the separation of church and state. Most were pacifists in their close following of Jesus. Many were persecuted and killed. Today, Mennonites are closest to what Anabaptists were.

Our most direct forbears were the English Baptists of the 17th century. They also believed in believers' Baptist and the separation of church and state. They separated from the Church of England and were called dissenters, separatists and non-conformists. They too were persecuted. We have much to learn from them.

The father of the Baptist way in America was Roger Williams who was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for his irregular preaching. He also befriended Native Americans and defended their land rights.

Cast out into the howling wilderness in winter, 1635, he traveled to what is now Providence, Rhode Island and established Rhode Island as the first American colony of religious freedom. By charter they welcomed, in the words of the charter, "Protestants, Papists (or Catholics), Jews and Turks (or Muslims)." The first Jewish synagogue in America was established there. And there, Williams established the first Baptist church in America.

It is a noble and stirring heritage – one in danger of being lost. If Roger Williams were alive today, and were to go to any number of Baptist churches, I think he'd say: "These look more like the bunch who threw me out than the Baptist people I had in mind."

So let's stand for what is truest and best in the Baptist tradition and keep it alive for today. We began as courageous dissenters who sought to follow Jesus as purely as they

could, who protected the religious freedom of all people, and who fought against what has been called “Constantinian Christianity,” a Christianity too captive to the State and to culture.

III

The third word is *Church*. We are those who center their lives in Jesus Christ, his life, death, resurrection and living spirit, and seek as closely as possible to follow him in the world. Though certain beliefs are important, faith is less a set of beliefs than a quality of trust, “trust, confidence, loyalty and engagement.” (Karen Armstrong).

It is possible to hold firmly to our Christian identity and be respectful of other religions? That is, to be Ecumenical *and* Church? I think so. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who spent her life ministering to the poor of India, said, “I love all religions; I am in love with my own.”

A bright young adult at Myers Park Baptist Church came to me and said, “I’ve got the *ecumenical* part down. I want to know more about the *Christian* part!”

Which reminds me of a joke a Reform rabbi told me, poking fun at his own liberal Jewish tradition? Let me set it up. In Judaism, there are three main branches. The first is *Orthodox Judaism*. Orthodox Jews are the most conservative. They seek to keep the faith of the ancient tradition as purely and strictly as possible. They guard against an assimilation into the culture which dilutes their Jewish identity.

The most liberal branch is *Reform Judaism* which is the most adaptive to the culture and to modern ways of thought. They are progressive in theology and hold a bit looser to tradition.

The moderate group in the middle is *Conservative Judaism* which seeks to be true to Jewish tradition and rituals, but are more assimilated, more adaptive to culture, than Orthodox Judaism.

Here's the story. A Jewish boy in the Orthodox tradition was preparing for his Bar Mitzvah. His father asked him what he wanted as a gift. The boy said, "a Honda." The father didn't know what a Honda was, but didn't want to admit it to his son. So he went to his Orthodox rabbi and said, "My son's having his Bar Mitzvah and wants a Honda. What's a Honda?" The Orthodox rabbi said, "I don't know. Go ask the Conservative rabbi. He will know."

The father went to the Conservative Rabbi and said, "My son's having his Bar Mitzvah and wants a Honda. What's a Honda?" The Conservative rabbi said, "I don't know, go ask the Reform rabbi. He will be sure to know."

The father went to the Reform rabbi and said, "My son's having his Bar Mitzvah and wants a Honda. What's a Honda?" The Reform rabbi said, "Oh, that's easy. A Honda is a motorcycle. But, Bar Mitzvah – what's this Bar Mitzvah you're talking about?"

We want our young people to have respect for and understanding of other religions, but we wouldn't want a graduating senior to say, "I know what a *zazen* is, the sitting of meditation in Zen Buddhism, but *baptism*, what's this Baptist you guys are talking about?"

So we need to be intentional about shaping Christian identity, about the spiritual formation of making disciples of Jesus. Philosopher George Santayana wrote:

... every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy.

Its power consists in its special and surprising message and the bias that revelation gives to life.

Our marked idiosyncrasy, our still surprising message, the bias we've been given and which we offer the world is bound up in Jesus of Nazareth, whom we call Christ and Lord. Following him is not just a matter of the mind – believing certain things. It is not just a matter of the heart – trusting in God, in Christ. It is a certain way of living your life.

The first step is this: *to give as much of yourself as you can to as much of Christ as you know*. The exciting part of following Jesus is that there is growth on both sides of that formula. There will be more and more of yourself you can give, and there will be more and more of Christ you can give yourself to.

We follow a Galilean Jew who was executed by the Romans. We follow one who said the whole thing about religion was loving God and loving your neighbor, in doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.

We follow one who disavowed violence as a way of changing the world and commanded us to love our enemies.

We follow one who welcomed sinners and outcasts, who called women along with men to be disciples, one who took children in his arms and said, "If you receive one such child as this, you receive me and if you receive me, you receive the One who sent me."

He showed us a God of love and blessing, a God of grace, not a God of judgment and curse. He said God was like a Father running, running down the street to welcome us home. He said that the way to love him was to love the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, stranger and prisoner.

That's a most peculiar and powerful and beautiful way to live.

We cannot live it alone, all by ourselves, so he has given us a community; he gave us *one another* to give us strength, comfort and guidance. And he gave us himself, promising to be with us always, as the risen and living Lord.

G.K. Chesterton wrote:

The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It
has been found difficult and left untried.

Let's get on with the adventure of *trying it*! Trying it with Christ by our side and a community to befriend us along the way.

That's how to be an Ecumenical Church in the Baptist Tradition.