

The Baptist Impulse: Notes toward a Renewal of Baptist Identity

Address by Ken Sehested

Coalition for Baptist Principles Breakfast, American Baptist Churches USA Biennial June 21-23, 2013, Overland Park, KS

You're a hardy group, I must say—to get up early on a muggy summer morning, on a Saturday, for an outrageously expensive 7:30 breakfast, to reflect on Baptist identity. To say the least, “Baptist identity” is a contested topic, sometimes a boring topic, and often an embarrassing one. (A brief aside: I have adopted the suggestion of Baptist theologian James McClendon in referring to myself as a “small b” *baptist* and for use in naming the “baptist impulse.”)

Needless to say, being a Baptist can be a confusing (and maybe a confused?) enterprise. Our tent stretches across everything from Jesse Jackson to Jesse Helms, from Marian Wright Edelman to Jerry Falwell, from Martin Luther King Jr. to John D. Rockefeller—not to mention Representative Barbara Lee, the only member of Congress to vote against the Bush Administration's Iraq War resolution in 2002.

You have to wonder if this is a confessional tradition or a three-ring circus.

Like many of you, I've had a lifelong lover's quarrel with my Baptist identity. (In Southern environs, we pronounce it *Babdist*.) For a time, I was profoundly embarrassed about my religious upbringing. In recent decades, more than a few Baptist-affiliated congregations have dropped the word “Baptist” from their name. This year's Dahlberg Peace Award winners, Revs. Steve and Mary Hammond, can tell you about their congregation's growth spurt after dropping “Baptist” from their name. Unfortunately, in many places that public relations problem isn't going away anytime soon.

Wrestling with what it means to be a Baptist was renewed seven years ago when I was invited to be an observer at a conference of progressive Baptist theologians in the Caribbean, held at the Martin Luther King Center in Havana, Cuba. Thirty-eight people from a dozen countries in the Caribbean region were present. During the three days of conversation, one moment remains especially vivid, when one participant said, “We have not yet said what is distinctive about being *Baptist* theologians.”

That question has never left me, and since then I've refined five reasons why I think Baptist heritage is important and needs to be brought to bear in the life of the church and the larger culture. This essay is my personal attempt to find more compelling language to talk about *a baptist impulse*. (Though I don't consider this list closed.) I present them for your consideration and correction.

1. The first element in a *baptist impulse* is really a prologue affirmation to the other four. Taken together, the faith-based innovations of 17th-century English and colonial Baptist emergence—things like soul liberty, or liberty of conscience, separation of church and state, regenerate or convictional church membership—represent an impulse of the Spirit, a certain matrix to interpret the work of the Spirit and order the life of the church, not a fully blown identity. I believe this impulse (with several distinct but related parts) was in fact a gift of the Spirit to the whole church. Unfortunately—remember what Peter, James, and John wanted to do on the mount of transfiguration—Jesus wasn't around to say, “Hey, building a steeple is not a proper response.”

No less an authority than the imminent American church historian Martin Marty has written about what he calls the “baptistification” of denominational life in the U.S. [\[1\]](#) By which he means that the baptist

impulse has been widely absorbed into the practices and patterns of many other denominational traditions.

The implication, of course, strengthens our commitment to ecumenical engagement with the whole church. For there are many other impulses which the Spirit has given the Tribe of Jesus. It's a gift, so we don't get to take credit; like living water, it flows or it dies. There's no cause to be chauvinistic, for ours is not the only impulse needing attention. But we do need to vigilantly shepherd these gifts, especially since many of our own kinfolk are in such a rush to abandon them.

2. The second element of the baptist impulse is "democratizing access to the holy." Which is to say, the Word of God need not be filtered through the authority of any hierarchy.^[2] Baptism is the first and foremost authority to understanding and following Jesus. ^[3]

Much of the history of the church is the story of the unfolding details of who gets to say and do what in the life of the believing community. It is the story of an increasingly complex bureaucracy detailing who gets to approach God on behalf of the people and approach the people on behalf of God. The early baptist impulse was to say that the unlettered and the unwashed also testify to the work of the Holy Spirit. The unanointed, the unlettered, the non-ordained also have access and also are called to speak to the difficult choices involved in following Jesus.

We forget that the early state-churches in the British Colonies and in the early days of our Republic—the Congregationalists in New England and the Anglicans in the Mid-Atlantic states—had harsh things to say about our Baptist forebears. One court case in the Massachusetts Bay Colony referred to Baptists as "incendiaries of the Commonwealth."^[4]

Whenever Baptists have been at our best, there is a kind of erosion of established sanction as to who can testify to the Spirit's presence in the church and in the world. This doesn't mean we give up educating and commissioning and ordaining designated leadership.^[5] It just means that . . . well, to quote my Momma, sometimes we certified masters of divinity just get too big for our britches! Designated leaders do not have copyright authority.

3. Third on my list of Baptist impulses which need conserving is this: The denial that membership in the state and membership in the church are coterminous. That's a fancy way of saying that being a citizen does not make you a believer. The interests of the imperial authorities (whether state, church, or other hierarchy) and the interests of the believing community are not always parallel and harmonious. They're often in conflict. It was King James I, who left founding Baptist pastor John Helwys to rot in prison, who complained, "It would be only half a king who controlled his subject's bodies but not their souls."^[6] Make no mistake about this: Every king, every imperial authority—whether headed by a Bush or an Obama administration—longs to control both bodies and souls of all citizens.^[7] Every such authority wants to limit what is possible to what is available. As Roger Williams wrote: People in power are seldom willing to "hear any other music but what is known to please them."^[8]

I wish you could have overheard the conversation that arose among the youth and parents in our congregation several years ago. Two of our teens refused to stand for the pledge of allegiance to the American flag ritual that begins their school days. (That ritual is a secular form of liturgy that implies sovereign obedience.) They did so on grounds that their allegiance as Christians could not be bartered for allegiance to the state. Whether or not you think that's an issue to go to the mat over, don't you wish conversations like this would break out in our churches? Lord have mercy, that's a revival worth shouting about!

4. The fourth reason we should persistently shepherd and boldly sustain Baptist convictions is because delegitimizing violence done in the name of God is among our most challenging tasks in the modern era. This work of delegitimizing sacred violence is the most effective organizing principle of interfaith dialogue and action. Such work allows people of faith and conscience, in all our diversity, to make common cause without the silly (and counterproductive) attempt to homogenize our distinctive traditions.

What we often fail to note in our celebrations of the legacy of religious liberty pioneers is that some of these very advocates were themselves the least willing to grant liberty to others. William Bradford, governor of the early Plymouth Colony, wrote of his Pilgrim community's battle with the Pequot Indians at Mystic River, beginning with the torching of the Pequot village:

It was a fearful sight to see them thus frying in the fire and the streams of blood quenching the same, and horrible was the stink and scent thereof; but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and [we] gave the praise thereof to God.^[9]

The most bloodthirsty jihadists in our day are nothing new in the history of purported divine sanction of slaughter.^[10] Roger Williams insisted that it is "directly contrary to the nature of Christ Jesus . . . that throats of men should be torne out for his sake."^[11]

One of the most egregious examples of state bribery of religious freedom comes from 1962. A group of 200 business executives and university presidents in the U.S. formed what was called the Committee for Economic Development. The report they issued from their deliberations is titled "An Adaptive Program for Agriculture." One of the recommendations from that report is this chilling statement: "Where there are religious obstacles to modern economic progress, the religion may have to be taken less seriously or its character altered."^[12]

5. My fifth and final agenda for Baptist-flavored believers is the only one of these five that does not have direct historical precedence in our peculiar history. But I believe it is a compelling one, inspired by these others. It is this: We must find a way to undertake a vigorous critique of the meaning of the word "freedom" itself.

It has been said that "patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels" (Samuel Johnson). Nowadays, it is the language of "freedom" that more commonly disguises the license of greed and self-interest. I seriously doubt freedom language can any longer carry the freight we want. Let me tell you a story.

Francisco "Paco" Rodés is a Cuban Baptist pastor I first came to know some 25 years ago. On one of his first visits to the U.S., he told me he needed a kitchen cabinet handle to replace a broken one at his home. No problem, I said, and I drove him to one of those big-box home improvement stores. I think you can imagine his eyes as we drove into the parking lot—such a massive building. And then all the more so when we stepped inside its cavernous interior.

I wasn't sure where the cabinet handles were kept, so we walked up and down several aisles before we rounded the corner and, sure enough, there was what we were looking for. Actually, there were

hundreds, maybe thousands, of different shapes, colors, and designs of cabinet handles—a whole wall of them, stretching halfway down the aisle.

Paco stared in disbelief at first. But then he turned to me, with a sly grin on his face, raised his arms and jubilantly announced, “FREEDOM!”

In our era and in our communities, the freedom language so precious to Christians—especially Baptist-flavored folk like us—has been hijacked, disemboweled, and repackaged in fraudulent and frightful ways. Militarily, in our nation, freedom is now represented by the legal justification of preemptive war, first articulated in President Bush’s 2002 National Security Strategy declaration and now assumed by President Obama. Never before in our history has our government explicitly stated the right to wage discretionary war. All the president has to do is say someone, or some entity, is a threat to national security. This is now what freedom looks like.

Economically speaking, “freedom” is the descriptive adjective we use to justify our nation’s economic institutions’ goal of penetrating and controlling the economies of other countries. Domestically, since the U.S. Supreme Court’s historic 2010 “Citizens United” decision asserting that corporations can, for legal purposes, be considered human beings, our electoral process is now inundated by a tsunami of cash, making a mockery of the notion of participatory democracy. This is done, of course, under the guise of freedom.

The corruption of freedom language has infected our congregational culture as well. How many progressive churches do you know where the common denominator most prized by members is “freedom”? What does that mean? It means nobody is asked to make serious commitments, or make covenants, or be inconvenienced by any specific disciplines or undertake costly missions.

I like the way Wilbur Rees puts this:

*I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please, not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I want ecstasy, not transformation; I want warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack.**[13]***

So these are my five reasons why I believe the “baptist” accusation is worth the embarrassment. First, because the Baptist impulse is not chauvinistic, but is meant to be a distinctive contribution to all traveling the Jesus Road. Second, the Baptist impulse involves democratizing access to the holy. The educated, the sophisticated, the articulate and socially acceptable do not have copyright authority. Third, membership in the state and in the church are not coterminous. Fourth, delegitimizing violence done in the name of God. And fifth, critiquing the contemporary use of freedom language.

Let me close with a word from Brother Will Campbell. Some of you know he died recently. In fact, his memorial service is being held today. If I had not already promised to be here this morning, I would be there in Nashville for that gathering.

*[F]reedom is not something that you find or someone gives to you. It is something you assume. And then you wait for someone to come and take it away from you. And the amount of resistance you put up is the amount of freedom you will have.**[14]***

Freedom, wrote Kris Kristofferson and Fred Foster in their song “Me and Bobby McGee,” “freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.”

[1] Martin E. Marty, “Baptistification Takes Over,” *Christianity Today* (September 2, 1983): 33-36

[2] This is not to say we are each little infallible popes unto ourselves. The Word cannot be discerned outside the context of a community struggling to follow Jesus, which is a characteristically Anabaptist understanding of Scriptural authority, different from Roman Catholicism, which lodges authority in its magisterium, and from Protestantism, which insists on the text’s own reasoned self-evidence. But that’s another topic.

[3] As Episcopalian theologian William Stringfellow suggested, for those on the Jesus Road every issue is an issue of baptism, because the issue of baptism is about questions of power. With our confidence in the Resurrection—God’s power over the realm of death—we can risk much, because we are safe. Not even death can take away anything important. This is the secret of our freedom and our joy. Nothing frightens imperial agents of any sort more than free, fearless people.

http://prodigal.typepad.com/prodigal_kiwi/files/william_stringfellow_not_vice_versa.%20Reading%20the%20Powers%20Biblically%20-%20Stringfellow,%20Hermeneutics,and%20the%20Principalities%20by%20Bill%20Wylie-Kellermann.pdf

[4] 1644 Massachusetts Bay Colony statute, quoted at http://www.pbministries.org/History/J.%20R.%20Graves/Old%20Landmarkism/old_landmarkism_15.htm

[5] The practice of communal authority (democracy) transcends the false dichotomy of mob rule versus dictatorship. This understanding of authority is one of many practical ways to practice nonviolence.

[6] Quoted in James R. Coggins, *John Smyth’s Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence, and the Elect Nation*, Waterloo, Ont., Herald Press 1991, p. 130.

[7] Modern sociologists call the process “manufacturing consent.” See *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988), by Edward S Herman and Noam Chomsky, building on the earlier work of Walter Lipmann in *Public Opinion*.

[8] Colonial Baptist Roger Williams (1603-1683), as quoted by biographer Edwin Gaustad, quoted in *THE WHITSITT JOURNAL*, Winter 1998

[9] Quoted in Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: A story of courage, community, and war*, p. 7. Can you hear in that phrase the genesis of that bipartisan bit of presidential piety: “God bless America”?

[10] Philip Jenkins’ *Laying Down the Sword: Why We Can’t Ignore the Bible’s Violent Verses* surveys the extensive assortment of texts which authorize divinely-sanctioned violence in Jewish-Christian Scripture.

[11] *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience*, p. 261

[12] Quoted in *PeaceWork*, Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, September/October 1987, p. 12

[13] *\$3 Worth of God*, 1971.

[14] Will D. Campbell, “Vocation and Grace,” in *CALLINGS*, edited by James Y. Holloway and Will D. Campbell, p. 275, Paulist Press 1974