

Baptist Pavement, Baptist Potholes, and a P.S. Concerning Baptist Freedom

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I became a Christian when I was eighteen years old and a first-year college student. My church background was sparse indeed. Because my parents were active in the Second Baptist Church of Greenville, Mississippi, I ended up in that local congregation as a new Christian. If my parents had been Presbyterians or Methodists or Pentecostals, I would have probably ended up there. And today I would probably be defending the Presbyterian or Methodist or Pentecostal vision of the Christian faith. But I ended up as a Baptist.

I am not numbered among those Baptists who could *never* be a member of another Christian denomination, but I am a Baptist who is very, very glad to be a Baptist.

I am both enthusiastically ecumenical, unapologetically denominational, and a committed Baptist. I gladly follow the traditional Baptist vision of Christianity. But since Claude L. Howe, Jr., introduced me to "The History of Baptists" in 1959 during my second year of seminary, I have also attempted to be keenly aware of our denominational weaknesses. I choose to celebrate here what I call "Baptist Pavement" or "Baptist Strengths," while knowing well and trying hard to avoid some "Baptist Potholes" or "Baptist Weaknesses."¹ Let me enumerate what I mean by Baptist Pavement and Baptist Potholes.

Our emphasis on **personal religious experience**, so absolutely essential to vital and dynamic religion of any kind, can become, if we are

not careful, spiritual narcissism. The faith is not all about me; God so loved the world. The Baptist strength? A personal and transformative experience with the Holy in life. The Baptist weakness? A tendency toward “me-ism” or spiritual narcissism. In spite of the potential pothole, I celebrate the Baptist pavement, the role of personal experience in matters of faith.²

Our emphasis on **biblical authority**, so necessary to the renewal of the church in any age, can become, if we are not careful, a slouchy primitivism. We cannot jump over 2,000 years of Christian history and blissfully sail into the biblical world. I learned in my first church history course in my first semester of seminary that much of what I had been taught to be Bible was not Bible at all. It had come from the accretions of Christian tradition. I also learned that much that was good in the Christian tradition came from the Catholics, the Orthodox, the Lutherans, the Methodists, the Charismatics, and hosts of others. The Baptist strength? Biblical authority. The Baptist weakness? A tendency to ignore 2,000 years of the Christian tradition. In spite of the potential pothole, I celebrate the Baptist commitment to biblical authority.

Our emphasis on **believer's baptism by immersion**, designed to lead us to a believer's church, is an idea critical for a spiritual community. But it can, if we are not careful, lead us to an ugly tribalism. We are not the only ones God has. I don't know of any Baptist at this gathering who believes that we are. And I don't know of any Baptist anywhere who believes that the concept of a regenerate church has guaranteed Baptists a regenerate church. We know better. Likewise, simply because a non-Baptist group does not espouse the idea of a regenerate church does not mean that his or her church will not be composed of devout Christians. We know better than that, and we would do well, therefore, to re-examine, as our friend John Tyler has urged us, our view of baptism by immersion as a litmus test for membership in our churches.³ The Baptist strength? The sincere reach for a genuinely converted and obedient spiritual community. The Baptist weakness? The tendency toward an arrogant tribalism. In spite of the potential pothole, I gladly stand on the Baptist pavement of the goal and purpose in the practice of believer's baptism by immersion.

Our emphasis on **local church autonomy**, so absolutely critical for a local body of believers desiring to live in obedience under Christ alone, can, if we are not careful, lead to a tragic isolationism. Except for a few extremists in our history, local church self-rule never meant for Baptists a refusal to acknowledge believers in other communities as sincere Christians, nor did it

mean that Baptists were to remain aloof from other Baptists or other Christians. The Baptist strength? A local group of believers seeking to live under the authority of the Living Christ as expressed in the Bible. The weakness? A tendency toward isolationism and self-righteousness. In spite of the potential pothole, I feel ecclesiologicaly secure on the Baptist pavement, the idea of the independence of local churches. And by the way, one may see today, and throughout Christian history, churches of a hierarchical nature retreating to forms of congregationalism when threatened by their parent bodies!

Our emphasis on **freedom of conscience**, so indispensable for the whole human race, can, if we are not careful, morph into a kind of theological relativism. Freedom of conscience, for Baptists, never meant that one idea is as good as another; rather it has meant for Baptists that every idea has the right of access to the marketplace of debate. The Baptist strength? An unfettered conscience! The Baptist weakness? It can lead to the false conclusion that one idea is as good as another. In spite of the potential pothole, I am a cheerleader for the Baptist conviction of freedom of conscience.

Our emphasis on the **separation of church and state**, so helpful for the health of both religion and government, can, if we are not careful, wiggle into a quack quietism that sees no role for religious influence on the broader public life. The Baptist strength? Free religion in a free state. The Baptist weakness? The temptation to interpret "separation" in a way that Baptists never meant and that barter away our religious voice in the public square. In spite of the potential pothole, I celebrate and advocate the Baptist stand on separation of religion and government.

Our emphasis on the **priesthood of all believers**, so fundamental and basic to the revitalization of the Christian laity and to the mission of the church, can, if we are not careful, lead to a sloppy egalitarianism. We need leaders, not simply facilitators. Those of us in CBF, maybe more than other Baptists, need to remember that every Christian does not have the gift of leadership. The Baptist strength? A vital laity. The Baptist weakness? A potentially enervated clergy. In spite of the potential pothole, I celebrate the Baptist idea of believers' priesthood.

Our emphasis on **God's grace**, so critical for our salvation, can, if we are not careful, undercut the role of discipleship and the need for human effort. Martin Luther notwithstanding, the book of James is still gratefully in the New Testament canon. And so is the Sermon on the Mount. God's work is not God's alone. The Baptist strength? An unequivocal stress on God's grace.

The Baptist weakness? A tendency to minimize human effort. In spite of the potential pothole, I celebrate the Baptist emphasis on God's grace.

Our emphasis on **world missions**, so central to the propagation of the gospel and of the mission of the church, can, if we are not careful, instill a truncated sense of evangelism. Human beings need social justice as well as personal forgiveness. The Baptist strength? Telling the old, old story in a way that causes the individual soul to seek a haven of rest. The Baptist weakness? Telling the old, old story without healing/helping/empowering/restructuring. In spite of the potential weakness, I still celebrate William Carey and Adoniram Judson and the Baptist stress on world missions.

Certainly more could be said about Baptist pavement, solid Baptist convictions and Baptist potholes, potential Baptist weaknesses, but I have said enough to make my point. I need only repeat: Baptists have potential potholes that we must not forget and that we must avoid. But we also have some really thick and solid convictions beneath our feet, some solid pavement that we need constantly to fortify and to give thanks for.

For good reason, I have become identified over the last several decades with the "freedom" side of the Baptist tradition, though I am grateful that some have noticed that I also stressed responsibility.⁴ I remain, as of this moment, unrepentant, unapologetic, and somewhat intractable about my emphasis on freedom. I am aware, of course, that there is an "authority" side to the freedom argument, but I have been and remain convinced that the freedom side of the argument is more Baptist, more biblical, and more humane than the "authority" point of view. At the center of my being there is something about being Baptist, as I understand it, that is both freeing and fulfilling. What is that?

It is the principle of **voluntarism**, the principle of **freedom**, the principle of **human choice**. Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest who directs the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, is correct I think when he says that "the primal freedom is the freedom to be the self, the freedom to live in the truth despite all circumstances."⁵ And I think that the highest form of freedom and the perfect act of freedom is the freedom to give myself away to God and God's Kingdom as I understand that reality.

I know, as all moderate Baptists know, that there is such a thing as "sorry freedom." Barack Obama reminded us of it in his autobiography.⁶ And no one needs to lecture us that genuine freedom is the freedom to do as you ought, not simply the freedom to do as you wish.⁷ But the pothole of "sorry freedom" should never keep us from being trumpeters for genuine freedom.

As I interpret the fundamentalist-moderate controversy within the SBC, it was the “freedom” issue that was at stake. The Bible was not at stake. Fisher Humphreys is certainly correct when he says that both fundamentalists and moderates came out of the denominational inferno with the Bible safely tucked under their arms,⁸ though the fundamentalists were also waving a fiery new edition of the Baptist Faith and Message. And it must be said again and again that we were not simply arguing over the amount of desk overhang or who would have the office with the corner windows. It grieves me to this day that sincere and honest people do not recognize that something far more valuable than institutions was at stake. For my generation of moderate Baptists to forget that freedom was the issue would be a hideous betrayal. For the generations that come after my generation to forget that freedom was the issue will be an enormous tragedy for them and for the Baptist vision itself.

But what I really want to say today more than anything else is that the freedom issue is so, So, SO much more than an umbrella for Baptist distinctives, which is the way that I have used it. And maybe this is what my generation needs to learn and the younger generation, if they will fix on it, can wisely teach us. It is doubtless something that African-American Baptists can teach us white Baptists, if we can only listen. They can teach us that the issues of freedom play against the backdrop of bigger and more painful issues than the ones moderate Baptists have known.

Years ago when I was a yearling professor at Carson-Newman College, I became involved as a faculty sponsor of Alpha Chi, an academic honor society. On one occasion I went to Jackson State College, a predominantly African-American college in Jackson, Mississippi, to help establish an Alpha Chi chapter. On the night of the inaugural meeting the audience sang James Weldon Johnson's famous hymn, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” commonly known as the Negro national anthem. I was embarrassed. I did not know the words. More importantly, I did not know the music. I, and every other white Baptist who cherishes freedom, have a responsibility to learn the words and the music, and we will need to learn to sing that glorious song with as much sway and celebration as do African-American Baptists. And both of us, white and black Baptists, will have to learn freedom songs of all the people of color of the world; indeed, we will have to learn the freedom songs with *all* people of the world—whatever their color, whatever their faith, whatever their native land.

Freedom of conscience is, I believe, God's will for creation. Freedom is far, far more than a Baptist or Christian or American thing. Could we bring

to the witness stand Neda of Iran, the beautiful young lady who was shot like a deer on the streets of Tehran because she protested for the freedom for her vote to count? And what about liberation and freedom for the person who pulled the trigger that slaughtered her in front of the entire world? That gunman needs to be set free as much as maybe more than, Neda.

I repeat: freedom is so, So, SO much bigger than Baptist fights.

The freedom to eat and not to starve.

The freedom to drink pure water.

The freedom to earn a respectable wage.

The freedom to get my child health for her sickness.

The freedom to be addressed with dignity.

Some of you have heard me say this before, but it is important to me and so I need to say it again: Being a Christian means taking seriously what Jesus of Nazareth took seriously. Being a Christian is not about signing a creed. That's easy church. It's not about identification with institutions. That too easily becomes idolatrous church. And it is not about denominational distinctives. That may sidetrack us from Christ's church.

What did Jesus take seriously? What Jesus took seriously was not believer's baptism by immersion, congregational church government, the priesthood of all believers, or the symbolic view of the ordinances. I hope you know me well enough to know that I do not intend in any way to trivialize those issues, but only to say that those issues contain the seeds of freedom within our Baptist tradition that blossom into much larger issues in our world.

Jesus took freedom very seriously. He took seriously
the freedom to be appreciated rather than exploited,
the freedom to share rather than to hoard,
the freedom to live on less so that others could live on more,
the freedom to love rather than hate,
the freedom to anchor your life in and under God's reign.

It is much easier to be a Baptist than it is to take Jesus seriously.

I, and maybe some of you, have walked much closer to the Baptist ideals than to the Jesus ideals. I never, Never, NEVER want moderate Baptists to forget or to minimize the Baptist ideals of freedom. I want very, Very, VERY much for moderate Baptists to embrace the Jesus ideals of freedom. Not only our Baptist institutions, but also our Baptist souls depend on it. **BH&HS**

Notes

1 H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists* (London: Kingsgate Press, 1946), 139-151. Robinson made a similar presentation on the strength and weaknesses of the Baptists in his little book. Robinson's *Appendix 1* is also related to Baptist strengths and weaknesses.

2 The best exposition that I know of concerning the role of personal experience in the life of Baptists is the brilliant little booklet by William E. Hull, *The Meaning of the Baptist Experience* (Atlanta: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2008). While he did not have in mind the idea of personal experience in religion, William Sloane Coffin made something of the Baptist point on individual faith when he said, "So all over the world, people are asserting the particular over and against the universal. It's something we simply have to accept, for people cannot be asked to serve a greater whole until they have been acknowledged as individually significant." The Baptist emphasis on personal and individual faith never minimized the "greater whole" of the church. See Coffin's *The Heart Is a Little to the Left* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 70.

3 John R. Tyler, *Baptism: We've Got It Right and Wrong* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2003). John Tyler, one of our most biblically and theologically literate lay persons, has written a challenging book on this issue that deserves study by every local congregation of Baptists.

4 Fisher Humphreys, *The Way We Were*, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2002), 116.

5 Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1999), 108.

6 Barack Obama, *Dreams From My Father* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995), 134.

7 Coffin, *The Heart Is a Little to the Left*, 70. No white minister in the United States showed more courage in the face of unjust authority in the latter part of the twentieth century than did Coffin. Yet no person knew better that "small freedom" sought freedom for itself while "big freedom" sought freedom to serve the larger good.

8 Humphreys, *The Way We Were*, 112.

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