

HISTORY SPEAKS

To Hard Questions Baptists Ask

The year 2009 is the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Baptist tradition. To help celebrate this big year, the Baptist History and Heritage Society has created a new 24-article series, HISTORY SPEAKS.

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Baptists and Worship: How Can We Improve the Experience?

Emmanuel L. McCall

I once worshipped in an African American community that had three churches on the same intersection and a fourth nearby. One church was Seventh Day Adventist, and one was Presbyterian. The church I attended was Baptist. The fourth, also Baptist, was a couple of blocks away.

Each church was different. Being African American did not mean sameness. The Adventist church was distinguished by its worship on Saturday. The Presbyterian church was "high church," very liturgical and flavored by a class consciousness. Our Baptist church also had a class consciousness. Many of its members were college/university graduates and professionals at various levels. Even those who might be classified as "blue collared" owned their businesses. The fourth church (Baptist) referred to itself as the "Holy Ghost Headquarters," meaning that the worship style was emotionally charged. Its services were usually much longer and drew people wanting a different style than the other three.

It was interesting to see members of a same family with different worship preferences for churches on the same corner. Some who parked in our lot walked across the street to the Presbyterian church while other family members came to our worship. The Presbyterian worship lasted about forty-five minutes to an hour. Our Baptist worship was about an hour and forty-five minutes. Often, the Presbyterian members slipped into the back of our church to wait for their family members. Some of our members with family at the "Holy Ghost Headquarters" sat around our church until they thought the other worship was nearing completion.

The experiences of this scenario over a period of twenty-three years taught me several lessons that I bring to this conversation:

1) A wise person understands that people acquire a variety of different worship preferences.

Those preferences meet particular personal or cultural needs for those who practice them. They need not be "right or wrong," just different. Baptist heritage opens itself to varieties of worship styles. Some may be more widely practiced, but since we have no "code of conduct" or

manual of worship, none is considered illegitimate. Baptist worship spans the distance of “high church” (great formality) to expressively emotional (Pentecostal) where you do “what the Spirit says do.” Baptists are rural/urban, mountain/low country, city/village, and all shades in between. Each style is to be valued for its own uniqueness. The histories of the locations help determine each church’s uniqueness.

2) A wise person will get to know and learn the differences in order to understand why others worship as they do.

This involves more than one casual visit. Conversations with the practitioners (adherents), gathering information about particular styles, and worshipping with those who are different will help our understandings. This may also help to avoid searching for cultural generalizations or looking for the amusement in other’s styles.

3) A wise person will refuse to repudiate another’s worship style without first understanding what is there.

One should raise such questions as: What is it? How did it come to be? Is it biblical? God-centered? Theological? Does it edify? What needs does it meet for those who worship?

4) A wise person will ask: Are there aspects that could improve the way I worship?

Could some things be synthesized into newer expressions of worship? How could I share these with others who might be interested?

Having worshipped in a vast number of churches of many denominations and cultures in America, and having worshipped in many cultures abroad, I am deeply appreciative of what these experiences have given me. I have learned to appreciate and value the experiences of others. I have become less provincial and judgmental. I feel more open to others and am able to share my faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is God’s mission.

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