

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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Baptist Survival: What Are the Top Challenges Facing Baptists Today?

Doug Weaver

The answer to the question, “What are the top challenges facing Baptists today?” depends on who you ask, doesn’t it? Comedians might remind us that the call to have more children to buttress evangelistic efforts guarantees Baptist survival. Some Southern Baptists suggest that the resurgence of Calvinism will be a death knell to future Baptist witness, while others see it as the key to biblical fidelity. Conservative Baptists contend that openness to women in pastoral ministry and other items of liberal theology will lead to fatal stagnation, as in many mainline denominations. Moderate and liberal Baptists will continue to see fundamentalism and creedalism as quicksand to the survival of Baptist freedoms. Attacks of the Religious Right upon the separation of church and state will undoubtedly continue to muddy the Baptist waters regarding religious liberty for all persons. We recognize more than ever that Baptists are global. Baptists in your neighborhood are not simply your traditional American group—for example, they are Korean and Hispanic. This diversity is a challenge, or better said, an opportunity. These are several challenges, but let’s focus on one more: the trend toward post-denominationalism.

Increasingly, denominational identity is no longer the primary way that many Christians identify themselves. Some churches remain Baptist in terms of affiliation but have taken Baptist out of their name and most definitely off their Web page (see Rick Warren’s Saddleback Community Church). Lots of folks have opted for a generic evangelical label. Baptist congregations are increasingly identifying themselves as community churches like Saddleback. Mega-churches can be Baptist, but they often function like mini-denominations. The emerging church (see Loyd Allen’s article in this Web series) is part of the post-denominational trend. Emergents seek innovation in worship and have little interest in institutional religion or denominational distinctives. For emergents, Baptist identity is a relic of a bygone era, bureaucratic baggage, or simply bad PR in light of Baptist battles.

According to some observers, trends toward post-denominationalism are part of a larger post-Christian era. Christianity is no longer the “default” faith in the West. America is increasingly pluralistic—world religions vie for and attract greater attention. Some people now call themselves “spiritual,” abandoning organized religion but not religion itself. There are so many

more choices, and Americans, tolerant and accepting lot that they are, now move from one religious group to another without much concern for religious affiliation.

One of the underlying factors in the growth of post- or non-denominationalism is the pentecostalization of American religion. When Pentecostalism developed across denominational lines, “charismatics” tended to identify themselves more as Spirit-led believers rather than primarily as members of a denomination. Consequently, charismatic faith has influenced Baptists (and other denominations) in various ways. Contemporary Christian music and “charismatic lite” —“hands (lifting and clapping) but no tongues worship”—are rooted in the Pentecostal tradition. The question among Southern Baptists regarding the propriety of a private (tongues) prayer language for missionaries remains unsettled. Charismatic mega-churches—often characterized by the “prosperity” gospel of promises of health and wealth—have made some significant inroads into African American Baptist churches, among others. Given that pentecostal expressions of faith are the fastest growing ones across the globe, failure to understand their impact on Baptist life is myopic.

Numerous Baptists will find the pentecostalization of faith (or specific aspects of it) to be a revitalization of worship and discipleship. Some won't. Because of the impact, Baptist identity will have to be intentionally cultivated in a context that often pushes toward generic evangelical non-denominationalism. There is one issue that is especially challenging: the question of polity. Much of the Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition has allowed, even cultivated, the role of the dynamic authoritarian Spirit-led pastor or Spirit-led elders who make the decisions for the church. Combined with CEO-type organization, especially in mega-church settings, modern leaders can easily find congregational polity—a historic Baptist identity marker—a roadblock to their vision of success. In congregational polity, the local church community as a whole attempts to discern what the Spirit is saying in that particular church setting. With the lack of concern for congregational governance, how will Baptists attempt to discern the Spirit?

Whether these challenges are opportunities or problems likely depends upon perspective. Whatever the case, if Baptist identity is worth preserving, it must meet the challenges and not miss the opportunities.

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