

## **The Meaning of the Baptist Experience: Baptist Faithfulness**

A sermon preached on Isaiah 54:2-3 and Hebrews 12:1-2 by Emily Hull McGee at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on July 8, 2018

You could say there was nothing inherently Baptist about my response to the nudging of Christ in my heart. The simple prayer I had prayed with my dad some nights before wasn't particular to the Baptist tradition, the I responded like millions of others to a inescapable sense of being known, and forgiven, and *found*, and because so, I then was compelled to follow.

I was a young pastor's kid, you see, who could never remember a time when I didn't know the stories of Jesus and the songs of faith. Every day, my parents told me of Jesus's love for me and for all the children of the world, modeling that truth in their full, unconditional, and active love for me and my brother. Every Sunday and Wednesday, my teachers and leaders reinforced what my parents had been telling me each day. In the end, these guides in my life of faith didn't mediate God to me, but rather bore witness to God's activity in my life.

So you could also say my decision to follow Christ was wholly Baptist in its expression. For just as my understanding of God and God's love filled my days, the decision to follow Jesus was wholly my own. I had read the words of the gospel on my own, been both confused and heartened by the stories of the gospel on my own, and prayed to God with my own lips. So on that concluding Sunday of our church's weeklong spring revival, no one pushed me into the aisle to make public my profession and confession of faith. Uncoerced and unaccompanied in person but surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses in spirit, I stretched my seven year-old legs into the Sanctuary

aisle to share with my church family how I had fully and freely claimed Christ as my source of life and salvation. The words that filled the air in that moment were fitting: “my faith has found a resting place, not in device or creed; I trust the ever-living One, his wounds for me shall plead. I need no other argument, I need no other plea; it is enough that Jesus died, and that he died for me.”<sup>1</sup> My Christian journey and Baptist faithfulness had begun.

I suppose my story may be like some of yours – a faith you claimed that felt as familiar as your family. Or perhaps for you, your moment of transformation was one you could nail to the wall – a particular instant that changed everything, where life on the other side was completely new. But as we return again today to the stories of our Baptist heritage to discern the meaning of our Baptist experience, we’re reminded that for Baptists (unlike our Methodist or Catholic or Jewish brothers and sisters), religion is a ‘reality to be experienced.’ Thus, one’s understanding of faith is rooted in a wholly personal and particular encounter with God.

Our worship last week gave us a glimpse into our shared Baptist heritage and its bent towards freedom: Bible freedom, soul freedom, church freedom, and religious freedom. And our ongoing conversations as a church about making sense of the Bible are making clear to us several strong themes that illuminate the content of a faithful life: active love of God and neighbor, lived fruitfulness of the Spirit, conscious turning away from that which deprives life and turning towards the Source of all life, all the while following Jesus to bring about the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Assuming we have clarity about **why** freedom in faith matters, and **what** one’s life of

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<sup>1</sup> “My Faith Has Found a Resting Place,” text written by Eliza Edmunds Hewitt.

faith might entail, we still might wonder **how** it may unfold. *What does a free and faithful Christian life look like, we ask?* Does Baptist faithfulness have a distinct expression?<sup>2</sup>

## II.

Among the many about what it means to be a faithful follower of Christ, two texts suggest for me what a particular Baptist experience of faithfulness might encompass, faithfulness that is at its core both *deeply personal but never individual*, and *intrinsically communal but fiercely free*.

The first from Hebrews 12: “therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...” Here we hear an exhortation to new followers of Jesus, encouraging those who were faltering or failing or fearing with the sure truth that faith is never lonely. For those who have gone before stand at the proverbial sidelines to cheer you on the way.

One of my family’s new favorite movies is a Pixar animated instant classic called “Coco.” Set in Santa Cecelia, Mexico, the movie follows 12 year-

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<sup>2</sup> My Baptist faithfulness has been shaped most significantly by my participation within the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, our church’s imperfect-yet-hopeful denominational family. Much could be written about CBF’s impact on multiple generations of free and faithful Baptists, but here is one helpful quote I found in researching for this week’s sermon from former CBF Executive Coordinator Daniel Vestal, who said the following in the 2001 General Assembly about Baptist faithfulness expressed through CBF: “Our identity and our mission are tied to being Baptist. And being Baptist is not just being a dissenter .... It is being passionate about the free experience of the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. It is being committed to the church as a body of baptized believers and then finding ways for believers and churches to connect and cooperate for the eternal Kingdom of God. The longer CBF is a movement of faith and freedom, a grassroots fellowship of churches and individuals, the more we will be an instrument of renewal.” <https://baptistnews.com/article/at-25-cbf-still-building-something-new/#.W0HLLC2ZO1s>

old Miguel, a curious and thoughtful young boy whose love for music runs counter to his family's multi-generational mistrust of musicians. Miguel's great-great-grandfather was a guitarist, you see, who — as the story goes — abandoned his wife Imelda and young daughter Coco for a rousing career in music. Everyone from Miguel's mother (*mama*), grandmother (*abuelita*), and great-grandmother Mama Coco herself help to pass down this and others of their family stories to Miguel by showing him their ancestral pictures on the *ofrenda*. Assembled in observance of the holiday called Day of the Dead, the *ofrenda* is a deeply-personal display of meaningful artifacts and portraits of all in Miguel's family who have gone ahead. Those portraits, the people, and their stories become central in the movie's plot, the 'great cloud of witnesses' cheering Miguel on in his authentic discovery of identity and vocation.

In much the same way, Baptist faithfulness is *deeply personal but never individual*. Each one of us enter into the race of faith and pick up the baton from the runners in front of us — from our family of origin and our family of faith — those who have gone ahead and now line the streets as we run the race of faith set before us. Like the writer of Hebrews made clear, we are always looking to Jesus as we go, training our eyes and our very lives on his. But as we go, we do not travel alone, for we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

So in the spirit of the *ofrenda* and that great cloud of witnesses, let's hang some portraits of those Baptist witnesses that have hollowed out a path upon which we tread, so that we might be encouraged as we go.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> With credit to Dr. Walter B. (Buddy) Shurden for sharing this image of "hanging the portraits" in preaching Baptist History. He described this method in his helpful booklet called *The Crafts of Preaching and Writing Baptist History*, p21. Stories of these Baptist heroes and heroines of the faith are culled from Bill Leonard's treatise on the Baptists called *Baptist Ways*.

I told you last week of John Smythe and Thomas Helwys, the first agitators so captivated by the conviction of a free and uncoerced conscience that they gave it all up to plant that stake in the ground.

There were those 17th century saints who helped to discover how a Baptist conviction might interact with the long-standing rituals of the church, folks like Edward Barber who championed baptism by ‘dipping’ or immersion, and John Bunyan who insisted that baptism wasn’t a prerequisite for communion or church membership.

There were Roger Williams, John Clarke, Obadiah Holmes, Isaac Backus, and John Leland, pastors and founding fathers of American Baptists whose commitment to religious liberty encoded this bedrock Baptist principle into the Constitution of the United States.

There were Benjamin Keach, Katherine Sutton, Anne Steele, and John Sutton, who encouraged a robust Baptist hymnody and music-making; Charles Spurgeon, Abraham Marshall, and Martha Stearns Marshall whose preaching made it clear that Baptists weren’t ‘just people of the Book’ but ‘people of the pulpit’ too;

There were the educators like Boyce and Broaddus, Whitsitt and Williams, whose commitment was to institutions of higher learning through which to educate Baptist ministers who would have had limited access otherwise.

There were the prophets like Walter Rauschenbusch, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Harry Emerson Fosdick, James Dunn, and Gardner Taylor, who understood the profound impact an individual’s faith has on the life of a

community and thus embodied the biblical mandate to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.”

And then there were all our extraordinary ordinary saints that shaped you and me: our Sunday School teachers and small group leaders, preachers and advocates, missionaries and friends whose Baptist lives of faithfulness cheered us on for the running of the race of faith.

These are the portraits we hang, looking to those who have gone before and modeled Baptist faithfulness for generations to follow. But no exploration of Baptist faithfulness or cloud-gazing into those witnesses of our faith would be complete without noting the widespread Baptist conviction of sharing the gospel and meeting the needs of people all around the world. For one of the first Baptists to insist upon such an expression of faith was William Carey.

At the time that Carey was coming into his sense of calling among British Baptists in the late 1700s, the lot of them were rather self-focused: “an inward-looking sect in an insular nation in an unstable continent,” one scholar says, “hardly the most likely candidates for originating a movement which was to transform world history.”<sup>4</sup> Along with his colleague Andrew Fuller, Carey’s imagination hung on the possibility of mission work, of traveling around the world using, in his words, “every possible exertion to introduce the Gospel among them.”<sup>5</sup> And in a sermon that changed the course of human history, Carey reached back to that second great text describing Baptist faithfulness, Isaiah 54: “enlarge the site of your tent,”

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<sup>4</sup> Bill Leonard, *Baptist Ways*, p103.

<sup>5</sup> As quoted in *Baptist Ways*, p104.

proclaims the prophet, “and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes, for you will spread out to the right and the left...” For to William Carey, the directive to broaden, to stretch, and to reach beyond was clear, and this expansive vision of the gospel at work in the world called to him. He shared his stirrings with the British Missionary Society in 1792, ending with this call: “expect great things, attempt great things.” A year later, William Carey, his wife Dorothy, and their four children set out for Calcutta, India as the first Baptist missionaries.

So many other saints followed in their footsteps to enlarge the gospel tent: sisters Edmonia and Lottie Moon who served faithfully in China; Ann and Adoniram Judson whose ministry in Burma more than 200 years ago is still making an impact today; Annie Armstrong whose fierce advocacy for the place of women in leadership and a heart for missions led to the creation of the Women’s Missionary Union, and the list goes on and on into the hundreds of CBF field personnel your dollars are supporting right this very minute and the hundreds of you who have served your neighbor across the street and across the world in the name of Jesus. At its best, this call to enlarge and extend captured the imagination of Baptists who exercised such calling that was *intrinsically communal but fiercely free*.

Not all in our cloud, however great, or our tent, however large, are saints free from error or complication. For as we all know, in every family story is some measure of dysfunction and challenge. For every John Leland and David Barrow vehemently rooting their opposition of slavery in the New Testament, there was a Richard Fuller and a Richard Furman, passionately

advocating for slavery from those same books. For every exercise in Baptist freedom, there has been a Baptist worried about what that freedom will unleash. The *ofrendas* and portraits of our story show missteps and egregious errors, shadows cast on these ancestral faces, times when we Baptist were not at our best.

And yet, we who sit here today bearing witness to those gone ahead and proclaiming the beauty of our particular Christian community in a big tent, all the while seeking forgiveness for where we have failed as individuals or Baptist communities, we are reminded that this imperfect yet hopeful faithfulness — *deeply personal but never individual, intrinsically communal but fiercely free* — proclaims that we are neither the first nor the last to live out the gospel within our Baptist lives. This faithfulness drives its stakes into God's beloved creation, where we are 'rooted and grounded in Love.' Most profoundly, it has trained our eyes on Jesus, in whom our faith has found a resting place. Amen!