

Baptist scholars point to tension between individualism and community life_101804

October 15, 2004

Posted: 10/15/04

Baptist scholars point to tension between individualism and community life

By Marv Knox

Editor

Do Baptists affirm the priesthood of the believer or the priesthood of believers?

To outsiders, the question may seem as esoteric as “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?”

But it's important at Baylor University these days. In a speech, Baylor Provost David Lyle Jeffrey came down on the side of believers-plural.

Supporters say he merely advocated the longstanding Protestant notion that Christians exist in community, not alone. Critics claim he traded away Baptist's birthright by diminishing their distinctive doctrine of freedom.

Historians and theologians say Baptists-particularly Texas Baptists-have championed the individualism implied by “believer.” But they also have

affirmed the sense of responsibility “believers” suggests.

Paul Powell, dean of Baylor's Truett Theological Seminary, analyzed the basic concepts between both views.

“The priesthood of the believers-plural-is the idea that our interpretation of Scripture should take into account what the church has taught through the ages, such as through creeds and statements of faith,” Powell said. “Some people interpret this as implying that if there is a conflict between what the church has taught and what we believe, we should give deference to the teachings of the church and not to our individual interpretations.

**See related
articles:**

- [Baylor provost's speech sparks debate over Baptist freedom](#)

- [Baptist scholars point to tension between individualism and community life](#)

- [Sloan: Balance demands both](#)

“The priesthood of the believer-singular-is the idea each individual Christian is capable of reading and interpreting Scripture and no mediator other than Jesus Christ stands between the believer and God. Some people

interpret this as implying each Christian individual may believe whatever he or she wants to.”

Both perspectives reflect truth, but they both can be distorted, Powell acknowledged.

"We should not ignore the distilled wisdom of Christian teachers and statements of faith through the years," he stressed. "On the other hand, the individual may have insights into the meaning of Scripture contrary to the church."

Bill Pinson, retired executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and director of the Texas Baptist Heritage Center, pointed to the “perennial struggle” between the two perspectives.

“There has always been a tension between the individual and the group or the community in almost every area of human thought,” Pinson said. “Baptists have not been immune to this struggle but have generally emphasized the individual.

“This comes from our careful study of the Bible that has resulted in 'distinctives' such as soul competency and the priesthood of all believers. However, this does not mean that Baptists have been without an emphasis on community and relationships under the Lordship of Christ.”

Pinson cited Baptist historian Walter Shurden, author of “The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms,” who wrote: “Individualism is far from the total picture for Baptists. For the most part, however, Baptists never crouch in a defensive position when the charge of individualism is hurled at them. With all its inherent weaknesses, individualism is to a great degree a Baptist badge of honor.”

And Pinson added that although Baptists have been aware that hyper-individualism could lead to subjectivism—even to the extent of anarchy—they

have always believed that some sort of collectivism under the rubric of community is also dangerous, perhaps even more so.

That danger lies in trading away freedom, he explained.

“Texas Baptists are big on individual autonomy,” noted Leon McBeth, retired professor of church history at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth and author of Texas Baptists' 150-year history.

“But in the whole Baptist family, there are certain bedrock principles we have adhered to and should adhere to,” he added. “If a person gets so set on some issue outside the norm of Baptist faith and practice, I don't know how he calls himself a Baptist.”

A root doctrine of the priesthood of the believer/believers is soul freedom, McBeth said. “We're free under the lordship of Jesus Christ, but we're not free outside of that lordship,” he explained.

“The lordship of Jesus Christ and the text of the Bible properly interpreted—these are our guidelines.”

Pinson picked up on that theme.

“Does that mean everyone has the right to interpret the Bible for himself or herself? Yes,” he said. “Is every interpretation of the Bible right? No, because there are many different interpretations of various passages and issues, and thus not all can be right.

“But does anyone or any group have the right to dictate to another what is the right interpretation? Baptists have replied, 'no.' But they have also said 'yes' to the responsibility of each believer-priest to submit interpretations to other believer-priests for insights, suggestions and challenges.”

Powell noted that if an extreme interpretation of priesthood of the believers had been followed, Baptists would not exist. Baptists' forebears had the

courage to contradict majority views of Reformed, Anglican and Congregational churches.

“True Baptists will take their stand and face the consequences when they are compelled by the Scriptures,” he said.

Pinson noted that “no Baptist distinctive really stands alone. To pick one or two without relating them to others is problematic.”

Baptist historian Bill Leonard, a native Texan and now dean of Wake Forest University's Divinity School in North Carolina, has for years spoken of the priesthood of all believers—emphasizing both individual privilege and responsibility to the community of faith.

“The bottom line is this: Every Baptist can exercise his/her priestliness, but that does not mean the rest of the Baptist community can't throw them out,” Leonard said.

“Priestly dissenters shouldn't whine when they get rejected by the community. Indeed, they should expect it.”

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.