

2nd Opinion: 'Big issues' confront Baptists today

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By Charles Deweese

Five big issues rise to the top in Baptist life in 2005. These—and all issues—challenging Baptists today both disrupt forward progress and must be measured by the plumb lines of Christ, Scripture and the historic Baptist values of freedom, cooperation and accountability:

Raw secularism. Baptists' raw secularism daily rips holes into their morality and spirituality. No facet of Baptist life is exempt from the temptation to succumb to the powerful influence of worldly enticement.

The good news is that millions of Baptists regularly fight off the secularistic impulse and its temptations through private prayer and Bible reading, corporate worship, attention to Christian ethics and massive contributions to humanity through Christ-centered discipleship, education, lifestyle evangelism, ministry and missions.



- ◆ Widespread rejection of historic Baptist views of church-state separation. Today, church-state issues dominate religious news. Faith-based grants, “Justice Sunday” telecasts, Ten Commandments cases, Supreme Court appointments, religion in public schools, religious discrimination, religious fundamentalism's cozy relationship with right-wing politics—these are just some of the topics that work their way into the news.

Early Baptists in England and America in the 1600s stated vigorously through life and writings that a state church was a mockery of New Testament teaching, an affront to infants baptized into it against their will, an endorsement of civil religion and a disservice both to the church and to the state. Those Baptists took two simple positions: Coerced faith driven by directives of the state is meaningless, but free faith driven by liberty of conscience and sheer voluntarism is the pattern taught and practiced by Christ.

- ◆ Loss of the prophetic voice in Baptist newspapers and pulpits. Many Baptist state paper editors and preachers have abandoned the prophetic element of their calling. They simply refuse to provide authentic “Thus-says-the-Lord” editorials and sermons.

Several factors account for prophetic decline. First, many Baptist state newspapers and pulpits have been converted into public relations outlets. Second, many editors and preachers are not familiar with the thousands of highly prophetic writers and preachers in Baptist history who, at whatever risk was necessary, simply told the truth. Third, job security sometimes provides a powerful motivation to keep one's pen quiet or mouth shut. Thank God for editors and preachers who boldly present the prophetic claims of Christ.

- ◆ Persistent fragmentation. Baptist fragmentation started in the early 1600s, and it never has stopped. Today, in the United States alone, there

are more than 50 Baptist groups or subgroups. Basic reason: No authority exists in Baptist life that can control how Baptists think, believe and practice their faith. The power of dissent, nonconformity and liberty of conscience drives Baptists in different directions.

Crises, however, have helped some Baptists rediscover more accurate biblical perspectives of what it means to be Baptist. They also have learned some valuable lessons through controversies. For example, championing biblical causes in the context of heated debate, even if it results in organizational fracture, can lead to spiritual progress.

- ◆ Entrenched fundamentalism. Religious fundamentalism has rigidly entrenched itself into some facets of Baptist life. Built on the need to control religious thought, faith and practice, fundamentalism constructs tactics designed to guarantee such control. It is a religion of regulation, rather than deregulation.

Despite it all, wonderful resources for Baptists result when fundamentalism systematically squeezes out of its camp Baptists who refuse to buy into its tenets and practices. New seminaries emerge. New mission programs are born. New publications find the light of day. New centers for ethics and Baptist history come into being. New life is breathed into hurting people.

My reply to these and other big issues facing Baptists is this: Being Baptist still is worth the effort.

The best Baptist principles acknowledge the lordship of Christ and are biblically based. Further, they are positive and rise above negativity. They recommend aggressive efforts to be in the world, but not of it. They urge appropriate contributions to church and state, but not a marriage between the two. They make bold calls for justice by editors and preachers, not pathetic departures from the prophetic call. They offer opportunities for conversations and joint actions among Baptist groups, not endorsements of

continuing segregation and relational breakdowns. And they endorse liberty of conscience and authentic voluntarism, not the control orientation of fundamentalism.

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