

Russell Moore lauds Baptist emphasis on the personal

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DALLAS—Baptists’ emphasis on “the personal” may be the greatest gift they offer in the 21st century, ethicist Russell Moore, editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*, told a group at Dallas Baptist University.



Baptists’ historic emphasis on religious liberty for all grows out of a healthy respect for individual personhood and the voluntary response of each person to the gospel, Russell Moore told a gathering at Dallas Baptist University. (Photo / Calli Keener)

Moore—a lifelong Baptist who now worships in a nondenominational church—delivered the April 22 Baptist Distinctives Lecture, sponsored by DBU’s Center for Baptist History and Heritage.

“I am convinced that the Baptist distinctives that endure and that are most

resilient are also the ones that are most needed right now,” said Moore, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

Various denominations have contributed particular emphases to the broader body of Christ, and Baptists’ greatest contribution may be their commitment to “the nature of the personal,” he said.

Baptists’ emphasis on voluntary faith, believers’ baptism, religious liberty for all people and other distinctives “boil down to the central concern that God does not bring people into the kingdom nation by nation, family by family, village by village or tribe by tribe, but one by one.”

In an individualistic culture, the tendency often is to “over-correct into a kind of collectivism,” Moore observed.

‘My name is Legion’

“In reality, the Baptist emphasis on the personal is a corrective to individualism and is actually necessary for genuine community,” he said.

Moore pointed to Jesus’ encounter with a demoniac among the tombs, as recorded in Mark 5. Jesus asked, “What is your name?”

The demoniac responded, “My name is Legion, for we are many.”

That reply was “similar to the response of the entire world right now,” Moore observed. While isolated in many respects, people feel crowded and deprived of individual personhood.

He cited a tech specialist who has noted social media drives people into a “hive” mindset all the time. Users constantly are seeking to identify their online “tribe” and attempting to identify what they need to say to remain a part of the tribe.

“Ironically, all that connection all of the time leads to disconnection and loneliness,” Moore said.

He recalled a conversation with pastors who were speculating about why so many left the ministry in 2021 and even those who remained felt “broken” in many ways.

One of the ministers observed many people persevered through 2020, thinking things would return to “normal” after the COVID-19 pandemic ended and the election cycle was over, only to discover the old “normal” was gone.

‘Ripe for authoritarian movements’

In what passes for “normal” now, many people are trapped in a “middle-school” mentality of feeling unsure about their identity while being hypersensitive to what others think about them, Moore observed.

“The world is like that right now, and that means we are ripe for disintegration, for authoritarian movements, for personality cults, for every kind of attempt to fill that void,” he said.

To offer deliverance to an unclean and untouchable demoniac, Jesus had to “break with the community,” Moore said.

“Community is an important aspect of what it means to be human, and an important aspect of what it is God has put together in the church,” he said. “Community on its own, though, ultimately breaks down.”

Baptists’ emphasis on the “personal calling by name” as part of the gospel invitation helps create a healthier community, Moore observed. He lamented the loss of public altar calls.

“There was something about the altar call that spoke to every person in the

congregation, even if no one responded, that said: ‘Remember you are a sinner. Remember that you—not just we, but you—are redeemed. And remember that all of your neighbors—no matter how hostile you believe them to be, no matter how far gone you believe them to be—could, in an instant, be your brother and sister in Christ. You do not give up on them,’” he said.

“It was a way of merging the individual and the community together.”

Religious liberty respects personhood

Baptists’ historic emphasis on religious liberty for all grows out of a healthy respect for individual personhood and the voluntary response of each person to the gospel, he observed.

“Religious liberty is not simply an ancillary and self-protecting idea for Baptists,” Moore said. “Religious liberty comes out of that emphasis upon the personal—upon the word Jesus has given to us, ‘You must be born again.’”

The gospel depends on an individual response to God’s call, and Christian identity is not dependent on national identity, he noted.

“The gospel cannot be applied to people like a state-issued driver’s license,” Moore said. “The state cannot regenerate a person. The state cannot make a person a Christian. The state can only make a person a pretend Christian.”

He pointed to the threat of Christian nationalism in a variety of contexts, including Vladimir Putin’s use of the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as Christian nationalist movements emerging throughout Europe and in the United States.

Christian nationalism is “not Christian orthodoxy taken to an extreme,” he

asserted. “It’s instead what Christians at one time would have called ‘modernism.’ It is the idea that one can make a Christian simply by changing external circumstances, rather than having that person approach God through the mediation of the shed blood of Jesus Christ.”

Authoritarian leaders “have realized that the best way to coopt the power of personal authority is to say, ‘If you don’t obey me, you’re disobeying God,’” Moore said.

“Once you have taken a Christian understanding of reality and hollow it out, you end up with something that can be tossed aside altogether.”

‘Community needs the personal’

At their best, Baptists understand the gospel comes “conscience-to-conscience” and demands a response at the personal level, he insisted.

“Community needs the personal. You cannot refuse to see the trees for the forest,” Moore said.

Real community—where every person is viewed as a valuable contributor who is given genuine responsibility—breaks down tribalism, he asserted.

Baptists have an important message “for a 21st century that is plagued by a sense of belonging to everyone and thus belonging to no one,” he said.

“The Baptist movement has a great deal to contribute if we can remember who we are,” Moore said.