

Editorial: What happens when Baptists split?

November 30, 2016

One of the great tragedies of Baptists' predisposition to divide is our loss of voice.

Of course, our dire debacles of division damage our public voice. Think about the schism that tore apart the Southern Baptist Convention from the late 1970s through the '90s and a related split that resulted in a competing state convention here almost 20 years ago, as well as the recent casting-off of LGBT-supportive congregations in Texas. For generations, Baptists have cultivated a reputation as feuding family. This undermines our proclamations about God's love. How can we love others when we don't even love our own Baptist family?

But we lose a similarly important—and even more formative and impactful—voice when we part company. It's the voice by which we speak to one another. When an aspect of that voice is silenced, we are weaker, poorer, diminished. Two examples illustrate the point:

Call for evangelism

First, when the Baptist General Convention of Texas split about two decades ago, we lost—or, at least, we certainly quieted—a persistent voice that advocated for evangelism.

Many of the congregations that left for the competing convention, as well as many that dually aligned but cast their primary affections on the other convention, were among our most evangelistic. We lost their ongoing, day-in/day-out emphasis on leading people to faith in Jesus Christ.

That's not to say many, probably most, remaining BGCT congregations do not try to save souls. We're still sharing the gospel. And many of our churches not only are reaching children and youth, but also leading adults to follow Jesus.

It's also not to say all their methods were best. Sometimes, their approaches made many of us uncomfortable because sometimes (a) they seemed manipulative and almost coercive, (b) they focused on a one-time "fire insurance" transaction and not ongoing discipleship and/or (c) they so focused on the sweet by-and-by, they failed to attend to the physical and emotional needs of people in the here-and-now.

Still, we lost their persistent drumbeat of evangelism that, even if it sometimes sounded like an annoyingly repeated note, kept us all thinking about the salvation of lost souls.

Compassion for outsiders

Second, the BGCT's recent vote determining "any church which affirms any sexual relationship outside the bonds of a marriage between one man and one woman be considered out of harmonious cooperation" will still a vital voice of advocacy for people who feel disenfranchised from the church and, more importantly, Jesus.

Congregations that are cast out, as well as those that will leave out of sympathy, are among our most caring churches. The Christian compassion that made them sympathetic to the LGBT community also compels them to provide leadership in meeting the spiritual and physical needs of people Jesus called "the least." For example, Wilshire Baptist Church was pivotal in founding the Texas Baptist Hunger Offering. With these congregations gone, we will lose a persistent voice that reminds us to care for people on the margins of both society and God's kingdom.

Again, that's not to say many BGCT congregations are not compassionate

and do not reach out in love to hurting people. They do. In fact, Texas Baptists are among the leaders in providing caring ministries in neighborhoods and cities across our state and far beyond.

But we will lose these cast-out congregations' persistent call—sounded by word and modeled by deed—to serve those who suffer. Reaching gays and lesbians with the gospel will be almost impossible. They have heard Texas Baptists and interpreted the convention's vote to mean we don't care for them.

Lousy at relationships

For generations, even for centuries, Baptists have been among Christianity's worst at developing ecumenical relationships. Sure, we can cite involvement in ministerial alliances and point to interreligious friendships. But we're really not very good at it. Fear of diluting "the truth" is part of the reason. Fear of other Baptists' criticism also accounts for it. Self-satisfaction and a preference for comfortable encounters are huge factors.

Sadly, however, we're even lousy at relating to Baptists who don't agree with us. This goes back to 17th century England. It certainly includes 19th century America, and slavery, and the founding of the SBC. We also can't overlook the "Baptist battles" of the late 20th century.

But we still haven't learned. We're still not confident and comfortable enough in our own skin to figure out how to work with fellow Baptists with whom we disagree.

And so, our voice continues to be diminished as we split.

Follow Marv on Twitter: [@marvknoxbs](https://twitter.com/marvknoxbs)