

Commentary: Tensions in Baptist identity, Part 2

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As I noted in [my previous opinion article](#), the unique and unrivaled authority of Scripture is the starting point for most Baptists when they want to understand their tradition. Indeed, this is the lens through which they view all theological and moral issues.

Unfortunately, it also has been the axis around which some of our most ferocious and acrimonious disagreements have revolved.

Moreover, there always have been Christians who doubt the Bible can or should bear the load Baptists place on it when they start talking about Christian doctrines or practices.

Here, I will enumerate some of the challenges to a Baptist theological methodology, standing as it does on the single pillar of Scripture. I hope to help Baptists understand the reasons our theology feels so brittle, and I hope my reflections will help Baptists be more patient with one another—as well as with those from other Christian traditions.

A doctrinal challenge

An initial challenge to the theological methodology of Baptists comes from the doctrine of revelation.

In brief, many Christians believe God reveals himself both through “his works” in nature and through “his words” in Scripture. A more detailed summary of how Christian theologians have understood the interrelationship of nature and Scripture can be [read at BioLogos](#).

Affirming that God reveals something of himself and his activities through nature—something Romans 1:18-32 seems to take for granted—does not necessitate the treatment of natural revelation as equal to special revelation.

We don't have to see science as equal to biblical interpretation to take seriously the idea we can learn about God and his ways from our experience of the universe he created.

Nevertheless, if God speaks to humanity through nature, then we cannot dismiss human endeavors to understand the natural world as antithetical to our faith and unimportant for our intellectual and spiritual growth. Rather, it is entirely possible we must look to disciplines like science, history and philosophy to make sense of what God is doing.

A hermeneutical challenge

Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpretation. Interpretation is a means by which we mentally assign meaning to texts, experiences or other data provided to us by our senses.

For example, is an extended finger a command to go in a particular direction, or is it an insulting expression of animosity?

The Bible is like any other document in that its meaning is not always self-evident. It must be interpreted.

The problem is not just that we disagree about how to interpret the Bible. It is that, too often, we assume our interpretation of Scripture carries the same authority as Scripture itself.

Alternatively, we assume the lines we have drawn from the specific text we want to interpret to our rendition of that text's meaning are clear and incontrovertible.

On the other hand, erecting an impermeable barrier between text and interpretation would rob the Scriptures of any meaning—much less any authority.

Complicating matters significantly is the fact the journey from text to meaning varies wildly in length, complexity and difficulty from one text to another.

For example, “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13) seems easy enough to understand, but what about the commands God gave to the Israelites to annihilate their Canaanite neighbors? John 3:16 seems to be pretty straightforward, but the equally simple clause “this is my body” (Mark 14:22 and parallels; 1 Corinthians 11:24) inspired a controversy between Luther and Zwingli that endures to this day.

All of this means Baptists forever are fighting with one another over what constitutes a reasonable disagreement about how to interpret the Bible and what constitutes a violation of biblical authority.

Since there are no creeds to resolve the conflict and no ecclesiastical structures that can mediate disputes, Baptist institutions constantly feel under threat from those who do not understand their work or share their values, and individuals feel like they have no ability to hold the institutions they support accountable for apparently aberrant teachings.

A philosophical challenge

The Baptist theologian Stanley Grenz raised a related problem for how Baptists use Scripture. He argued modernity has conditioned people, including Christians, to work from an ostensibly infallible foundation to whatever truth they are trying to unearth.

This methodology is problematic because it assumes the universality of the

truth uncovered and ignores the contextuality of the interpreter. For Christians, the methodology is also problematic because it ignores the Spirit's role in shaping theological discourse.

Grenz preferred a dialogical model for theological reflection. He argued we ought to begin with the Scriptures, since they are the instrument the Spirit uses to communicate with the church.

He also argued tradition provides an important resource for understanding how the Spirit spoke through Scripture in times and places other than our own. That tradition, of course, is not infallible, so we always must return to the Scriptures in light of what we learn from the church.

But Grenz denied any knowledge derived from our engagement with Scripture can be anything more than provisional, since God is still at work in the church through the Spirit to reveal Christ and his will. As Paul observed in 1 Corinthians 13:8b-12, ultimate knowledge awaits the consummation of all things.

Grenz was a controversial figure in his day, and he came under continued attack after his untimely death. But I raise his concerns precisely because he was a Baptist.

Despite his opponents' protests to the contrary, his writings demonstrate he was sympathetic both to evangelical concerns for doctrinal truth and Baptists' affinity for Scripture. But he rightly understood the Spirit is the one responsible for teaching Christ's body (John 14:26; 16:12-15), and his insights call into question whether a "hard foundationalism" really can sustain theologically robust discipleship.

A historical challenge

As Willard Swartley demonstrated in his book *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and*

Women, the challenge of constructing a universally accepted interpretation of the Bible's teachings on even the most important of moral issues has been frustratingly difficult.

Even readers who seem to share many contextual factors—time, culture, ethnicity and more—can read the Bible in very different ways due to the particularities of their social location, psychological makeup, conceptual and social intelligence, and other factors.

These differences in hermeneutical approach and doctrinal outcomes cannot be described as trivial. They contributed mightily to the bloodshed wrought by the Civil War, for example, and that bloodshed may have led to a substantial decline in Scripture's credibility as a shaper of individual and community life.

As people turned away from the bible, they turned to other sources of authority and, not surprisingly, constructed new matrices of belief to guide their lives. And the dirty secret that often goes unacknowledged in our pulpits and seminary classrooms is many have found these alternate authorities to be more honest, more sympathetic and less demanding taskmasters than the Scriptures that were supposed to give them truth, freedom and life.

An ecclesiological challenge

A further challenge to the way Baptists handle the Bible can be seen when the church as a whole pursues unity and a coherent self-definition.

One of the things creeds provide is self-definition. "This is what we believe," the church says, "and you have to believe this to really be one of us."

Baptists, of course, always have written confessions of faith. Confessions

even have been used as a mechanism for establishing and maintaining fellowship between churches. Nevertheless, Baptists traditionally have understood Christian identity really is found in fidelity to Scripture, not in fidelity to any particular construction of what Scripture means.

Moreover, Baptists have sought to plumb the depths of Scripture to resolve doctrinal and ethical disputes rather than resorting to a heavy-handed dependence on a creed, confession or ecclesiastical authority structure. This emphasis on Scripture, when coupled with other Baptist distinctives, has been a source of disunity rather than unity.

It is all too easy for individual believers to set themselves up as the final arbiter of what the Bible means, thus cutting themselves off from any accountability to the church. But as Baptists have sought to address this problem by making their institutions more accountable to specific enumerations of accepted doctrines, they have made it easier for the power-hungry to use confessions to promote their own interests.

What does it all mean?

Are these challenges fatal for Baptist identity? Do they require Baptists to relinquish their dogged determination to settle every matter through absolute submission to and sustained engagement with Scripture?

In my next article, I will argue Baptists not only can double down on their commitment to Scripture, but they must do so if they are to be a vibrant community of believers in an increasingly secular and frighteningly polarized country.

While we may need to reframe some of our convictions about the Bible in order to be more faithful to Jesus, Scripture still is indispensable for shaping who we are and for infusing our witness with the authenticity, fidelity and power it needs.

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