

Commentary: The sin of certainty

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The day Paige Patterson was installed as president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, he stated, “The New Testament is crystal clear that a woman cannot be a pastor.” I remember thinking at the time, my great-great-grandfather, Robert Morrison Currie, who came to Texas from Mississippi in 1857 and founded the First Baptist Church of LaVernia and was the first moderator of the San Antonio Baptist Association, probably felt that the New Testament was crystal clear that a white man could own a black man. After all, he was a man of his time in the South, and he certainly had Scriptures he could use to support that position on slavery.

I think both men are wrong in their interpretation of Scripture, but I tend to steer clear of making statements with certainty, because I know—as a fallible human being—I “see through a glass darkly.” This tendency to pull back from considering our own understanding as absolute may be the defining difference between what we call moderate Baptists and fundamentalist Baptists, although I don’t want to put those who disagree with these thoughts in the fundamentalist camp.

Now, do I believe there is “absolute truth” in Scripture about many things? Yes, I do. After all, my Ph.D. is in Christian ethics. My life has been about taking a stand. Do I believe I, as a sinful human being, can know absolute truth absolutely? Of course not! That is a claim of certainty that I would never make. We all should have convictions on which we base our lives, but dogmatism does not honor Christ.

I remember my college pastor telling me over lunch, “I never claim to have a message from God, because then if I say something stupid, the

congregation has to decide if I'm a liar or God is an idiot."

At this year's Baptist General Convention of Texas annual meeting, messengers voted to declare any church that decides to include homosexuals in the full life of that church as being out of "harmonious cooperation" with the convention. I opposed the motion, because I saw the motion as having nothing to do with the biblical concept of marriage or homosexual activity but, rather, as being about Baptist polity. As executive director of Texas Baptists Committed for over two decades, I led the effort to keep the BGCT free from fundamentalist control, precisely so our state convention would not do this sort of thing but would respect local church autonomy and the priesthood of all believers.

Several of my friends have disagreed with me, with great certainty. They say the Bible is "crystal clear" about what constitutes biblical marriage and in declaring homosexual activity as sinful. They may be right, as I simply am not willing to say for sure, because again, I see "through a glass darkly." I do know any Christian or church or convention has lost perspective when it substitutes morality for forgiveness—law for grace.

I also think many have never grasped that accepting and approving are not the same thing. I am not where Wilshire Baptist and First Baptist in Austin are on this issue, but I'm OK with them being there.

Even if my friends are right, what happened to the principle of Baptists giving others the freedom to be wrong? How did the decisions of First Baptist in Austin or Wilshire Baptist in Dallas hurt the ministry of any church that disagrees with their actions? How did it hurt the BGCT or its ministries? It didn't, and the arrogance of absolute certainty is never a healthy witness to a lost world. In my opinion, the convention's action has harmed and weakened the witness of Texas Baptists.

To support their certainty, some used ludicrous analogies that they

certainly would reject a church who practiced white supremacy or pedophilia. These examples are ludicrous, because they involve behavior that is abusive and harmful, and no Christian would support that; however, there is no evidence that sexual activity between consenting adults is abusive or harmful—even if it were unhealthy or sinful, as some say it is.

History has shown the universal church has been wrong on many issues throughout its history. This particular issue is far from settled, as many Christian denominations and churches have accepted homosexuals into the full life of the church. A person with an open mind should at least be willing to admit that, 100 years from now, the majority of Christian theologians, pastors, churches, etc., might come to view Christians of our time and past times—who interpret the Bible as being “crystal clear” in declaring homosexual behavior sinful—as having been wrong. Time will tell. But claiming certainty is the sin of arrogance.

As for me, I am not really angry, although I am sad. I am proud of my ministry and that of Texas Baptists Committed, even if it is not going to have lasting results in Texas Baptist life. Things change, and new leadership happens (see secular politics). I cannot know the future, but I know that certainty exercised in a cooperative effort leads to the exclusion of more and more who do not “get in line.” I expect, over time, the BGCT will merge with the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention for financial purposes, and our BGCT institutions will have a serious decision to make. If I were them, I would be making preparations now to become fully independent of BGCT governance.

I long ago decided most aspects of organized Christianity have a huge fear of true grace. Grace is messy. Certainty is comforting to most. I will cast my lot with those who are comfortable struggling and hoping for enlightenment from time to time and always willing to make a mistake from being too committed to forgiveness and grace. As Paul said when he was at his best:

“For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Corinthians 13:12, KJV).

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13, NIV).

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