

Commentary: Why I'm leaving the Baptist denomination

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My decision to leave the Baptist denomination has been a long time in coming. The reasons for the decision are most likely not the ones you would expect. I'm not leaving for political reasons. I'm not leaving for social or cultural reasons. Instead, I'm leaving for gospel reasons.

Raised Baptist

I was raised in First Baptist Church of Kearney, Mo., and I will cherish forever the memories and faith I inherited there. In that church, I was a Royal Ambassador, met most of my childhood friends and teammates, and was baptized—twice, something [J.D. Greear](#) and I have in common.

I went on several transformative mission trips with that church, and there I felt called to vocational ministry and committed my life to it. I lived, loved and served alongside the people of First Baptist Kearney, and I wouldn't trade the experience for anything.

My faith deepened while studying at Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Mo., where professors poured into me and modeled an intellectually robust faith.

While in Bolivar, I attended Freshwater Church, a plant of Second Baptist Church in Springfield. Throughout my last year at SBU, my fiancé and I received premarital counseling from the pastor of my home church in Kearney. In December 2012, Courtney and I were married there.

Becoming a mere Christian

After six months of marriage, we moved to Texas for me to pursue a Ph.D. in philosophy. Since Courtney was raised Methodist, we visited Baptist and Methodist churches as we got settled. We ended up feeling called to and liking a moderately sized Baptist church, where we served five years as life group leaders and in the kids' ministry.

During the week, I was busy studying the histories of philosophy and Christianity. My faith was deepened, and I began to understand the way in which the Incarnation provides the ultimate answer to the questions of the ancient philosophers.

I studied Thomas Aquinas and wrote a dissertation on his understanding of the sanctification process. I also encountered a vibrant and ecumenical Christian community unlike anything I experienced before.

These experiences shaped my understanding of myself and my vocation in profound ways. I remained Baptist, but my beliefs had changed dramatically from what they were when I committed my life to full-time Christian ministry at Kearney First Baptist.

I now saw myself primarily as a Christian, rather than a Baptist Christian, and understood my work as a process of bringing the resources of philosophy—especially Thomas Aquinas—to the Baptist world.

This calling seemed confirmed when I landed a position teaching philosophy at a Baptist university in Texas. The position required us to be members of a church affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas. We joined one, appreciated it, and served there for three years.

However, over time, Courtney and I realized we were *in* the Baptist world, but not *of* the Baptist world.

Three gospel reasons we're no longer Baptist

The following are three of the doctrinal differences we have with Baptists that became clear to us.

The universal church

We need to be connected to the church universal.

I became convinced of the importance of an historical continuity with the early church. Think of the universal church as a tree and the apostolic church as its trunk. While there have been several branches in the last 1,000 years, it is important to me to participate in a church that situates itself as one of the branches on the tree. Far too often, Baptists fail to consider their relationship to the tree.

This is a gospel reason, because Jesus created and commissioned one community—his body. The triune God dwells in this community in a way analogous to his Old Testament residence in the temple. Therefore, to be separate from this community is to be separate from God. This community is certainly a spiritual community (Matthew 12:46-50), but it also is a physical community (Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Revelation 5:9-10).

Form of worship

We need worship, not an experience.

Courtney and I grew tired of worship services designed with nonbelievers in mind. This trend is most evident in the concert-like music segment of the service. Additionally, Baptist sermons seemed to us to be aimed increasingly at nonbelievers. We simultaneously were deeply committed to the mission and vision of our church and deeply bothered by the entire

“weekend experience.”

This is a gospel reason, because Christ and his redemption must be at the heart of our gatherings as local congregations. Calling our churches gospel-centered or giving an altar call each week isn't enough.

Consider the physical arrangement of our sanctuaries: Who or what is the focal point? At most Baptist churches, the focal points are people: the music minister and choir, the worship leader and band, and the pastor delivering a sermon. In the Anglican church we now attend, Jesus is the focal point. The choir is behind the congregation, and the sermon is delivered from the side of the “stage.”

Place of children

Children are members of the church.

While most Christians can agree children are not full members of the community, Baptists have a difficult time maintaining children are members at all. This problem was exacerbated when our church radically altered its practice of baby dedication, replacing it with a Parent Commissioning Service in which it was made clear nothing was happening to the child. Instead, parents were being “commissioned” as missionaries in their own home. While there is much to admire about these services and the intentions behind them, Courtney and I were uncomfortable with this way of viewing our children.

This is a gospel reason, because the child's membership in the community is a beautiful picture of God's role in salvation. There is nothing the child has done to earn her membership in the body of Christ. She has been saved by grace, not by works (Ephesians 2:8-9). To prevent a child from being part of the community until she can accept the offer of salvation places too much weight on her own works.

Of course, when she reaches the age of reason, the child must come to the point of self-denial most clearly expressed in the words of Jesus: “Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36). Nevertheless, the child is born into the community just like Israelite children were born into the people of God.

Baptists have played an important role in my life I don't take lightly. I am grateful. At the same time, I recognize we are not on the same page. I don't take this lightly either. In fact, it has led my family and me to the Anglican Church of North America.

To others considering their relationship to the Baptist denomination: I pray you will seek the Holy Spirit's guidance as you attempt to discern whether the issues you have with the denomination are issues with the denomination as such, or merely issues with particular embodiments of the denomination.

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