

IN FOCUS: Baptist identity & our future together

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Over the last few weeks, I have been to a number of Baptist meetings. Some were state-level and others were national-level.

It has been fascinating to observe and participate in Baptist life. There is amazing diversity in this family we know as Baptists. We do not walk in lockstep in some of the tenets of our faith. We are diverse politically, ethnically and even in the way we do business. Wikipedia concludes that there are 211 denominations called Baptists worldwide, with close to 100 million adherents.

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What makes a Baptist a Baptist? I think every one of us perhaps would have a different answer to that question.

Most Baptists and many other faith communities share some common beliefs. Many faith communities believe in salvation by grace through faith and the Bible is the inspired word of God. Others practice believer's baptism. Congregational polity, local-church autonomy, separation church and state, and a lot of other beliefs we hold are shared by others. An intense desire to do missions has been a hallmark of Baptists and many other faiths.

I believe one of the things that sets many Baptists I know apart from the rest of Christendom is an intense desire for freedom.

We are not encumbered with a creed but find faith in the Bible. We do not believe in coerced faith but argue for the freedom of religion or even the freedom for one not to believe. We believe in free local churches. There is

no denominational hierarchy that assigns our pastors or requires certain beliefs. Even in our churches, democracy typically is the order of the day. Of course, there are exceptions, but in the tradition of John Smyth and Roger Williams, freedom has been a hallmark of who we are.

So what does the future hold?

I believe as we embrace the freedom of individuals to respond to God and free churches in a free state, we are uniquely equipped for the future. Together, our role is to help churches be free to do the work of Christ in completing the missions God has called them to.

Is that a uniform task? Every church possesses unique gifts and talents. Every church is filled with unique people who are ambassadors for Christ and called to be missionaries for the kingdom. Our job is to help every Christian, every church, every association, every institution and our state convention realize the freedom to become the missionary people God has called us to be.

This is the work we are called to do. This is the freedom we are called to share. We have received the gift of freedom from our Lord. He has freed us from the bondage of sin and from the threat of death to the freedom of life and life in its greatest abundance. It is not ours to keep but to share.

Let's be about it.

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