

# Voices: What can Baptists learn from the Wesleyan tradition?

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**Editor's Note:** *This is the first article in a series focused on what Baptists can learn from the Wesleyan tradition.*

Many Baptist conventions, associations, networks and churches are in a state of flux and transition in terms of their present and future. While this season within Baptist life is creating numerous challenges and conflicts, it also opens up the opportunity to reflect on who we want to be as Baptists, now and in the future.

In reflecting on these challenges and conflicts, I have sought to learn from different Christian traditions. One of those traditions is the Wesleyan tradition, learning from the unique characteristics of the broad tradition that connects back to the writings, leadership and teaching of John Wesley.

Writing from my experience as a Baptist pastor, I believe, at a minimum, there are two aspects of the Wesleyan tradition from which Baptists can learn.

## **Holy Spirit emphasis**

First, the greater emphasis on and openness to the Holy Spirit within the Wesleyan tradition can provide a corrective to Baptists.

While this emphasis on and openness to the Holy Spirit often is focused on the importance of holiness in the Wesleyan tradition, I want to focus specifically on how this emphasis on and openness to the Holy Spirit can provide a corrective to how Baptists often think and teach about God's

work and our response in salvation.

Concerning salvation, the Wesleyan tradition, like most Baptists, emphasizes penal substitutionary atonement, that Jesus died on the cross as substitute and bore the punishment for our sins and the need for conversion.

What is distinctive about the Wesleyan tradition and the larger classical, evangelical Arminian theological tradition is the belief that God's enabling, awakening, convicting grace, prevenient grace, is needed for there to be faith in Christ Jesus.

What is too often common in Baptist churches is the belief that if people have enough information and/or receive a strong enough appeal, they can decide, on their own, to follow Jesus. The focus on prevenient grace in the Wesleyan tradition reminds us that salvation is first—and foremost—a work of God the Holy Spirit in a person's life, and it is only by the Holy Spirit that a person is enabled and empowered to put his or her faith in Christ Jesus. Unlike those in the Reformed/Calvinist tradition, Wesleyans affirm that there still is freedom to resist this salvation.

## **Thinking beyond categories**

Second, I believe the Wesleyan tradition, especially in its evangelical expressions such as the Global Methodist Church and Church of the Nazarene, provides an alternative to the ways certain theological directions have happened within the broad swath of conventions, associations, networks and churches in the Southern Baptist tradition.

More specifically, coming out of the infighting within the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1970s to 2000s, the reactivity between the groups often drove each side either further to the theological left, liberalism, or the

theological right, fundamentalism.

The Wesleyan tradition provides a tradition that can look different from these polarities within Baptist life. The Wesleyan tradition, at its best, can provide a way of being an evangelical Christian that holds to a vibrant, warm, thoughtful, intellectually vigorous, evangelistic, historic, orthodox Christianity.

That is, the Wesleyan tradition can teach Baptists there is more than one alternative to fundamentalism than liberalism and to liberalism than fundamentalism. Therefore, the Wesleyan tradition might help Baptists from the Southern Baptist tradition help to think differently and beyond the political and theological categories that have continually shaped the debates and divisions within this segment of Baptist life.

## **Learning from others**

While I believe there is more that can be said, I believe these two ways—a greater emphasis and openness to the Holy Spirit and looking to the Wesleyan tradition as an alternative to the infighting and categories within broad Southern Baptist life—provide us some frameworks for helping us think about who we want to be as Baptists, now and in the future.

We do not need to become Wesleyans, but we can learn from them. In so doing, we might find our own beliefs are enhanced and discover new ways of thinking about and living out our beliefs with the result that our Baptist conventions, associations, networks and churches are strengthened.

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*Trinity Conference of the Global Methodist Church. The views expressed in this article are the responsibility of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of the Baptist Standard.*