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Baptists at 400: Where Have We Been and Where Should We Go

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Five years ago, in Birmingham, in the occasion of the Centenary Congress of the BWA, I was invited to deliver a speech on where will the Baptists be in the next 100 years. God inspired me, and I managed to invite a panel of speakers from each continent, who presented the audience with their views, so I did not need to say anything, just a word of introduction, and a few obvious conclusions.

In order to cover my absolute inability to provide an answer to the proposed question, I quoted a famous sports philosopher of the US, Yogi Berra; who coined several deceptively simplistic and tautological remarks, such as: “It is not over till it's over,” “You can observe a lot just by watching,” and “Why buy good luggage? You only use it when you travel”, and who wrote a book of aphorisms under the name *I never said everything I said*.

In that solemn occasion, I said that if we would pose to the witty baseball philosopher the question “Where will Baptists be after the next 100 years?” Berra would answer with one of his most ingenious proverbs: “It's very hard to make predictions, particularly about the future.”

I am still to find out what in the world did I ever do to gain for a second time the doubtful distinction of being invited to speak to such a theme, but in any case, I still think Berra is absolutely right. When we aim to clarify Baptists at our 400th anniversary, especially when we try to say something intelligent about where in the world have we been in these four centuries, and where should we go from here, we enter into more than just an academic exercise in futurology. Defining such a matter is more than merely elaborating about our past and our future, it has to do with our own essence and it conveys implications that determine our very existence and our identity. Quoting Berra once more: “You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there.”

Now, taking aim at this exercise in Baptist hermeneutics, it seems logical to divide the proposal for this afternoon in four parts. First, who are the Baptists; second, the meaning of our 400 years; third, where have we been; and fourth, where should we go.

Who Are Baptists

The first and big question for our reflections this afternoon is the Baptist movement itself. It is certainly valid to ask who the Baptists are. Who is a Baptist? What is a Baptist church?

This we know: The way we define our continent will provide us with a different content. Most theologians define Baptists from a doctrinal point of view. If you or your church believe such and such, they affirm, then you are a Baptist; and even if your church does not carry the name “Baptist” or it is not affiliated with any Baptist association –convention, union, alliance, federation, or fellowship–, at least you are “baptistic.” Historians, on their part, have tended to define social groupings by their inherited roots. They explain with historical evidence how one group was born from another and in doing so they gather Baptists around their ancestry or family tree. The Baptist World Alliance and some missionary agencies have defined Baptists and the world according to their geographical belongings –European Baptists, Asian Baptists, and so on. Some newer definitions classify according to ethnic lines, also called in some Baptist circles “peoples groups,” and even some have tried sociological and socio-political approaches to come to terms with who are these Baptists of whom we affirm are celebrating their 400th anniversary.

It seems preposterous, but nobody can deny that each of these viewpoints requires that we make a preferential option for any of them before we can use them as a tool to measure or define that group of people we say we know who they are. The circularity of the argument is evident. Nobody can have the overarching all inclusive view point, since none of us is God. Willingly or unwillingly, all of us need to be acutely clear in our preferential options, or run the risk of making inaccurate or partial definitions or descriptions of our object of study.

Who are the Baptists? then. Who is a Baptist? Are Baptists the fundamentalist Baptists or the liberal Baptists? Are the best Baptists the conservative or the progressive? Are true Baptists Supralapsarian, Antelapsarian, Infralapsarian, Sublapsarian or Postlapsarian? Are the true Baptists the moderate Baptists, the mainstream Baptists or the goodwill Baptists? Should we speak of the Baptist church or of Baptist churches? Should we speak of Baptists denominations, or the Baptist is only one denomination all around the world? Are Baptists autonomous, or are they connected and dependent? Do true Baptists come from England or there might be some good Baptist coming from Galilee too? Are the true Baptists only the White Baptists, or is it possible that some Black Baptists might be good Baptists too? Are true Baptist capitalists, or there might be a good Baptist with socialist views? *Ad nauseam.*

The Baptist variety of Christians is so extensive and diverse that in everything and anything that any of us could say about the Baptists it is still possible to find a group of Baptists for whom that which we have said is not true. This realization is of especial importance in a gathering of Baptists like the one we are attending right now. Since this is a gathering of all Baptists of all over the world we have the need to speak for all Baptists, if not at least to speak about all Baptists. However, since each of us can only speak about our kind of Baptists, hopefully we would speak to all Baptists and about all Baptists in such a manner that our vocation for dialogue might become evident.

Since each of us represents only one particular kind of Baptist, and nobody can be all varieties at the same time, the vocation for dialogue becomes paramount. The big Baptist question is what do we do with the others. If we are conservatives, what do we do with our brothers and sisters who are progressive? If you are a Baptist from the South, what do you do with your brothers and sisters who are from the North? That is the question.

It occurs to me that this question is the defining element for a Baptist identity. If you do not call your “other kind of Baptist” out of the game, you are a Baptist. If, on the contrary, you only reclaim the Baptist brand for your kind of Baptist, and call all others who do not believe your particular kind of Lapsarianism out of the game, you have forgotten the essential matter of being a Baptist. Baptists are those who defend the right of the other to be the other, even when the beliefs of the other are opposed to their own beliefs. The other might be a Muslim, Jew, Baha’i, Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Charismatic, Universalist, even a Baptist. If you allow them the right to be right, even when you think they are deadly wrong, you are a Baptist.

Hopefully this exercise today is an exercise in dialogue and understanding.

Baptists At 400

We are Baptists, but we are Baptists at 400. Someone might ask, 400 years of what? Who were John Smyth and Tomas Helwys to deserve our recognition? Why are we celebrating them as our Baptist beginnings and not some of our other ancestors, such as George Blaurock, Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz, the regarded founders of the Anabaptists and the Mennonite Brethren? Hopefully we do not celebrate Smyth and Helwys just to differentiate ourselves from the Mennonites. Hopefully, also, we do not celebrate Smyth and Helwys as Lutherans celebrate Martin Luther, and Calvinists celebrate John Calvin, and the Roman Catholic Church celebrate Peter as their first Pope.

We recognize Smyth and Helwys as the first ones in history who founded a church that could be called “Baptist” which set up a historical continuity that can be traced to our days. However, we do not celebrate them as if they had set up a new apostolic succession of sorts. In fact, it was this question of succession which separated Helwys from Smyth. Since John Smyth had baptized himself, he thought that his baptism and the church that they have formed were inauthentic forms of Christianity, devoid from apostolic succession.

Tomas Helwys set the record straight: We Baptists are not successionists. Faith is not something that can be passed from one generation to another. Faith is something that is born from God into the heart of a particular believer. Baptists do not rely on succession but on faith. The most important thing for the first Baptists was not baptism by immersion –however important as it was– but the baptism of believers and a regenerate church membership.

Of course there was John Spittlehouse, an English Baptist who in 1652 wrote a book entitled *A Vindication of the Continued Succession of the Primitive Church of Jesus Christ (Now Scandalously Termed Anabaptists) from the Apostles Unto This Present Time*, and J. M. Carroll’s *The Trail of Blood*, originally published in 1931, and Charles Spurgeon, and many others

on the subject of Baptist perpetuity and apostolic succession. But again, as we have already said: For every declaration about the Baptists that anybody can make, there is always another Baptist who can prove it otherwise.

This question of the 400 years and successionism is especially important for the younger Baptist denominations of the globe. Those of us who received the teachings of the Baptist faith in denominations that cannot claim to have been around so long as the British, might feel diminished and impoverished if someone understands or suggests that any especial blessing of the Lord have come to them from that particular historical succession.

Take for instance Pablo Moreno, President of the Fundación Universitaria Bautista of Cali, Colombia. In a presentation in Lima, Perú, last year, Pablo said: “We [Latin American Baptists] need to take advantage of the celebration of the 400 years of the beginnings of the Baptist movement in Holland, because these celebrations allow us to revalue our inheritance at the same time that we rethink about it, question it and make it relevant for ourselves. This reassessment help us read ourselves in a future perspective, when we deal with the challenges and opportunities of the 21st Century, for which our traditional anchorage in what we were is not enough, as it would not be enough either to just liberate ourselves from all inheritance and add ourselves in a non-critical manner to the new. Ours is the narrow gate and the hard road of rethinking and projecting ourselves as Baptists in relation to our Latin American context, a context that demands a lot from us, and will validate us somehow in the future according to the response that we present.”

“We need to realize we are not celebrating the beginning of a denomination, but the revolutionary act of a small community of believers who, 400 years ago, decided willingly and consciously to commit themselves to the following of Jesus Christ practicing believers’ baptism. This was a revolutionary act, not because it produced something never seen before, but because this group wanted to return to the biblical sources of Christianity and restore a community of believers at the light of the Scriptures as source of all authority in matters of faith and practice. Also us, in a less unilineal and a more multilineal manner, should analyze which has been the Baptist development in Latin America in the last century of testimony, and what perspectives can we envision for our future in the 21st Century.”

400 hundred years, 100 hundred months, or 25 days ago, this is what we Baptists celebrate. We do not celebrate history as if history is our blessing and apostolic succession our strength. We celebrate the God of history, the One who sustained us when we were persecuted, incarcerated and killed because of our beliefs, the One who sustains us now in every moment of joy or suffering, and the only One who will sustain us in death and beyond.

Where Have Baptists Been

After all that I have said it should not come as a surprise to anybody to listen that I believe Baptists in the past 400 years have been all over the place. We Baptists cannot claim any sort of homogeneity or continuity that might reclaim for us any particular way of being Christian, any particular doctrine or any particular practice. Some have suggested that *baptisticity* does not reside as much in any particular element, but in the peculiar mix of those elements that Baptists have done. The fact is that even the mix –if that is the case– has not been consistent.

Perhaps nobody knows our Baptist ways as well as the leading Baptist historian who has convened this gathering today, Bill Leonard. With all due respect to his monumental work and other encyclopedic works that try to recuperate the nature of the normal, typical or ordinary ways of being Baptists around the world, they represent just a drop in the bucket of what Baptists have been all over the globe. The omnimodous Wikipedia, in its current page on Baptists in North America enlists 75 Baptist denominations. Seventy five! These are only Baptist groups in North America! My guess is that only God knows how many groups and churches reclaim the name “Baptist” for themselves over the wide earth, what do they believe and how do they practice the following of Christ in their communities.

In 1999 the BWA Division of Study and Research produced a book that may be considered the best and less biased resource on the recent life and witness of Baptists. It was produced by twenty of the best scholars that the Baptist world has ever produced. Even when, for my taste, the list was too male dominated –only one woman–, and completely Anglo –14 of them were from the US, 1 from Canada, 2 from England, and 3 from Australia–, just a reading of the names evokes *la creme de la creme* of Baptist knowledge and wisdom, being its editor-in-chief nobody else than the quintessential Baptist, Rev. Dr. James Leo Garrett, Jr.

We Baptists –that is the name of the book– tries to provide answers to 45 questions that are spelled out in its Preface. Now, imagine a book that in less than a 100 pages –88 to be exact– tries to describe accurately the panoply of the Baptist movement around the face of the earth. Definitely an impossible task.

The book begins with a balanced theological history of the Baptists as a global community of faith. The rest of the book contains five chapters on Baptist doctrine, Baptist ethics, Baptist worship, Baptist ecclesiology and the Baptist defense of human rights. I would like, Mr. Chairman, to use the next five hours of my dissertation today to read aloud and analyze a selection of the declarations of this book, as a sort of guide for my personal comments on where Baptists have been. In reading the book –which I highly recommend as a sequel to attending this focus group– someone might find that most of its declarations were prepared as didactical references directed both to “Baptist readers who wish to know more about the Baptist movement in which they are participants and for non-Baptist readers who desire to have more accurate information and insights about the Baptists” (viii).

So, while the book may serve as a tool in defining who are the Baptists and how we usually operate and understand Christianity, when reading some of the particular declarations and affirmations, one cannot avoid thinking if these statements are really a description of realities, or an expression of desires. Granted, we are all sinners, and we Baptists are not the exception.

Perhaps reading and studying books like these is what our churches should be doing. We Baptists still need desperately to understand for ourselves who we are as Baptists, what is the history that has brought us here, which are the unsettled dialogues of our existence as Baptists, which are the things that made us tick, the pains we used to have and the glories we used to achieve. It is generally attributed to the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga the saying: “The ones who do not know their past, cannot understand their present, nor chart their future.”

Where Should Baptists Go

Now, speaking of the future.

It is difficult not to sound a little prescriptive here. I am sorry for that, but I hope my suggestions are ample enough not to look as a one-size-fits-all sort of solution. I want to speak to Baptists as individuals as well as Baptists as communities and institutions. I want to be of special significance to the majority of Baptist groups in the world, who live in minority situations.

First –as my mother used to say, take your soup–, learn your story and your doctrine. History is tedious for some, doctrine is complex, but both need to be learned. Know who you are, who your parents in the faith were, and know what you believe. If you are a vagabond Baptist –and there are a few of these around– try to understand at least what are the things in the Baptist way of being that make you unsettled and unsatisfied. That is also a Baptist way.

Second, envision new dreams. Learn something new that will connect you to your future. Buy a new G4 phone, get a Facebook account, tweet the BWA congress over the internet, enroll in seminary, do something you have never done that is aimed to advance the Redeemer’s kingdom in some way. What sustains the Baptist vision is not as much history as eschatology. We live in hope of a better tomorrow. We Baptists are part of the redeemed peoples, citizens of the new heaven and the new earth that come from God. Do not be afraid of your future. Delve into it in the strong confidence that God is the One who is waiting for us in our multiple possible futures.

Third, keep it simple. Do not try to do things that you do not understand. Do the basics: read your Bible, pray, go to church, tell your testimony, get involved in ministry, give, live for others; and reach for the sublime. Then, expect God’s intervention in your life.

Fourth, keep it small. The Baptist genius has been manifested in the small. Small churches, small associations, small seminaries. When they grow, divide. Make two small instead of one big. If you are already stuck with one big, find ways of dividing without creating conflicts or at least create a network of small groups that interconnect the small into the big. Many of the things that have made Baptists great can only be achieved in small communities.

Fifth, keep it open. Welcome others, especially when they are different. Welcome the new winds of the Spirit and the new kids on the block. Open your life and your church to the unknown. Do not be afraid of peoples, realities or situations that you do not quite understand. Live a lifestyle that can identify you with the poor, the needy, the stranger, the orphan and the widow, a life of service to God through service to others.

Sixth, be discerning. Do not get tramped in useless discussions. Discern the spirits. Be astute as serpents and peaceful as doves. Center your life in experimenting the presence of God in the Christian community and empty it out in Christian service.

Seventh, keep it meaningful. The fact is that if it is boring for you, it will be boring for others. Spiritual life, church, seminary, conventional work, they do not need to be dull and repetitive. Make them significant, important and consequential.

Eighth, be honest. Be honest to God, honest to your inner being, honest to your faith community, and honest to all others. Ministry is only done in truthfulness and integrity. Don't do things –especially worship– for the show, do them in Spirit and in truth. Make the name “Baptist” be valued as the name of someone who is a leader in living a true ethical and Christian life.

Ninth, don't do it alone. The Baptist way of being the church is communal. The church is the gathered community of God. Find your place into a Christian community of believers, and try to live according to the standards of the community. Relinquish your ego to the will of the community and you will find the will of God for your personal life. Strive for unity in diversity.

And finally –this ended up being a decalogue– be intentional and authentic. Do not follow fads or trends unless they are really appropriate in your corner of the world. Whatever you do for the advancement of the Redeemer's kingdom, do it intentionally. Be deliberate, plan, meditate what you are going to do, and once in prayer you have decided what to do, keep it consistent and keep it coming. There will be rainy days, but later the days of achievement will come too.

Friends, the challenges of the future are always changing. We Baptists cannot content ourselves with insufficient elaborations of the problems of the world. The care of the planet, religious freedom, poverty, forced migrations, violence, drugs, health, security, lack of incentives, solidarity, the care of children, youth and the elderly; all these and similar world issues joined to our own responsibility of redefining evangelism, Christian education, social aid, human rights and dialogue with other religions in such a pluralistic age, among others. The agenda is extensive.

Our answers cannot be simplistic. We have to know where we want to go. Remember what they say that Yogi Berra said: “You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you're going, you might not get there.”