

BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES IN A POSTDENOMINATIONAL WORLD

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The mainline denominations have been in serious decline since the 1960's. By the early 1990's, the overall cultural decline of denominations began to be felt by more conservative groups in a strange way. Even among evangelical groups that experienced numerical growth, a change of attitude by church members and pastors toward the denominations began to appear. The old loyalty and support that could once be taken for granted from an older generation was missing from the new generation of pastors and church members. It was the Christian version of postmodernity. The experts call it *postdenominational* Christianity.

Postmodern people have no interest in joining organizations. In Southern Baptist life, pastors have observed that people may visit their church for months before they ever join. Large numbers of people may move in and out of the popular contemporary services without ever affecting the overall offerings in a significant way. In denominational life, younger pastor shows little or no inclination to get involved with the association. A recent study group of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention brought a pessimistic report about the future of Cooperative Program giving. The president of the International Mission Board has voiced concern about mission giving.

Rather than rely upon the Southern Baptist church program to provide for their curriculum needs, many conservative as well as moderate churches of the SBC have begun to use resources such as the AWANA program in place of RA's and GA's, even though AWANA is not a missions education program. Promise Keepers have replaced the Brotherhood in many churches even though Promise Keepers is not a missions support organization. Women's Ministry has replaced the WMU in many churches, even though Women's Ministry is not a missions support organization. In many churches, the old infrastructure that promoted the significance of the denominational relationship no longer exists.

Another feature of postmodernity is its focus on ME. Postmodern people are concerned with what they are concerned with. Their churches may be vibrant and attracting people to worship, but they do not attract people to the denomination. They may have an active missions program that involves a number of opportunities for members to be involved in "hands on" ministry during the year, but the phrase "charity begins at home" governs their attitude toward the broader work of cooperative missions. Larger churches may run their own missions program and tend to see no point in sending a significant amount of money to the denomination when they do not seem to get anything back in return.

Postmodern people follow a pragmatic philosophy concerned with what works. Little attention is given to broader value issues. Pragmatism drives the postdenominational churches as well. A postdenominational church may change its organizational structure, its polity, its name, its style of worship, its educational program, and its approach to missions based on what worked at a famous church. Postdenominational churches have abandoned revival meetings, visitation, discipleship training, and music more than twenty years old because it does not work like it once did. Postdenominational churches may drop "Baptist" from their name for fear that it will keep people away. Even denominational agencies that monitor major cultural trends may drop

“Baptist” from their public identity in order to appeal to the broader postdenominational world that shops around for Christian services and resources.

Are any of these trends a cause for alarm? Will these trends advance the cause of Christ? What are the implications of these trends for the future of Baptist identity in general and the Southern Baptist Convention in particular?

When I was young, the great preachers used to say that the Southern Baptist Convention was not a denomination. They took great pride in the unique voluntary association of autonomous local congregations that made up the Southern Baptist Convention. When I first became a young pastor and realized that my association did not elect representatives to serve on the state executive committee, I was shocked. I had entered the ministry after a brief career in politics, and I thought that Baptist life was organized the same way as the government. An old pastor took me aside and explained that the association and the state convention and the Southern Baptist Convention are all independent of one another. All they have in common is that the same churches may belong to all three groups.

As much as we talked about not being a denomination, we were probably prouder of our denomination than any other Christian group in America. We were big and self-sufficient. We had the largest seminaries, the largest mission force, and the largest Christian publishing enterprise in the country. Our people were involved in Christian education from the cradle to the grave. They came out on Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. There were more Baptists than people in the old South. Baptists were taught to tithe, and each church contributed a significant portion of its budget to advance the common mission and Christian education goals of the annual meetings of the association, state convention, and Southern Baptist Convention. In a sense, the Southern Baptist Convention only existed for the three days a year that the meeting took place. In the meantime, independent agencies with their own independent boards carried out their missions. Despite its bigness and success, what people called the Southern Baptist Convention was actually a number of para-church ministries funded by a single missions convention in which only members of Baptist churches could participate. The churches did not even have delegates to the meeting. The churches sent the money freely and the messengers who attended the meeting decided what to do with the money.

The old Baptist confessions of faith did not discuss the relationship between autonomous churches. The early Baptists formed themselves into associations of churches to carry out evangelism, start new congregations, and promote doctrinal faithfulness among the Baptist churches. In those days, it was a privilege to be accepted into the fellowship of an association and allowed to contribute to the joint effort of doing more together than any single congregation could accomplish on its own. This non-compulsory commitment to a common mission eventually led to the establishment of the great mission agencies and institutions of Baptist life. The organizational structures, agencies, and institutions were never what made Baptists distinctive, but they were the means through which Baptists carried out their distinctive understanding of the Christian faith.

During the “Golden Age” of the Baptist program between 1925 and 1975, Baptist identity gradually shifted away from the theological distinctives upon which the Baptists were founded and moved more toward the structures and methodologies that characterized organized Southern Baptist life. The Baptists began because of deep seated theological convictions about Scripture, the nature of the church, the ordinances of the church, and the role of the individual believer within the church. While they shared many convictions in common with the Reformation understanding of salvation, they were committed to establishing “believers’ churches” composed

only of people who had confessed Jesus Christ as savior after reaching the age of accountability and were baptized by immersion according to the New Testament pattern. As Baptist identity focused more on denominational affiliation and the Baptist program, the founding distinctives became less well known and of incidental importance to the average church member. It is not unusual to hear pastors of larger churches in suburban areas to say that their church members come from many different church backgrounds and do not know anything about Baptists. Without common theological and ecclesiological convictions, Baptist churches have no particular reason to restrict their missions and educational ventures to Baptist institutions.

When churches had revivals just once or twice a year, they focused their evangelistic preaching efforts on reaching unbelievers during those brief periods. Since Southern Baptist Churches have abandoned revivals, however, they have moved toward the “contemporary” service as a norm which caters to the unbeliever. Southern Baptists also once had a weekly evangelistic service. At the end of the nineteenth century, many churches added a Sunday evening service as an outreach effort to people who did not normally come to church. The service was informal, and the songs tended to be of a more popular nature that dealt with personal experience. These were the gospel songs people like Fanny Crosby composed. Sunday evening became the evangelistic service. It was the equivalent of today’s contemporary service. Today many churches have moved the function of the Sunday evening service to Sunday morning and eliminated the traditional service designed to strengthen the church in the apostles’ teaching. The result is that the congregations are bereft of doctrinal preaching designed to build up the body. There is nothing wrong with moving the evangelistic service from Sunday night to Sunday morning just so long as the rest of the ministry continues. Preaching that only addresses the felt needs of people neglects the unfelt needs. If churches go a generation or more without teaching theology in the context of worship, it is not surprising that postdenominational trends should begin to appear among Southern Baptists.

In a remarkable way, many conservative churches have become functionally liberal by ignoring aspects of the faith. We may assume too much about what people know and understand. One of the great strengths of the old Training Union/Church Training/Discipleship Training program was its six year rotation through the basic doctrines of Christian theology, church history, missions, and ministry. During the six years of junior high and high school, a teenager would gain a solid foundation in the faith. Today we have the amorphous “youth group” that follows the idiosyncrasies of the youth leader who does not stay around very long. Very few youth groups have a systematic approach to Christian growth and little or no transition from one youth leader to the next. Is it any wonder that today’s youth graduate from high school and graduate from church?

One could almost get depressed if Jesus Christ were not head of the church. But he is. It is not too late for any church to introduce a strategy to cover all the bases for both youth and adults. Methodologies come and go, but the objectives that they were originally created to serve remain. Evangelism, discipleship, ministry, missions, worship, prayer, and fellowship were necessary ingredients of the church after the Day of Pentecost and they continue to be. Pastors cannot expect the hesitant attendee to commit to permanent relationship to a church when the pastor is not interested in relationship to other churches. Denominational leaders should not expect churches to be supportive of the cooperative work of a fellowship of churches if the denomination does not want to associate with other Baptist groups in the world. Why would Christ bless self-interest? Satan cannot touch the church, but Christ can. The first step toward

reversing the postdenominational tendencies in the Southern Baptist Convention is to remember whose churches they are and how big the world is that he wants to reach.