

Unashamed to be Called Baptist: Maintaining Baptist Identity

The Assembly, Baptist Union of Southern Africa
Marburg, KawZulu Natal, July 20, 2015

Romans 1:16 “I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

Introduction

May I begin by extending to you the greetings of the Baptist family worldwide? Over the next two days, several thousand members of this family are gathering in the city of Durban for the 21st Baptist World Congress. We are pleased that you are a part of the local Baptist family that is hosting us during these days.

The link between the BWA and the Baptists of South Africa was established from before the Union of South Africa was formed in 1910. In 1905, the year the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) was founded in London, England, at least six Baptists from the South African provinces were present.

Mr. & Mrs. T. Riemer from Johannesburg were there. So also were the Rev & Mrs. A. Hall from Port Elizabeth. Mr. J. E. Halford from Durban attended the congress. So also did Mr. T. Burnham King from the Cape. And it was Mr. King who addressed the congress on behalf of Baptists from the colonies of South Africa.

Over the years, Baptist leaders from this country have made a vital contribution to BWA’s life and mission. You have supplied the BWA with four Vice Presidents:

Mr. T. Burnham King, who served as your president and also the chair of your missionary society, was BWA vice president from 1905-1911.

Ms. Ethel Codrington, once treasurer of the Baptist Women's Union of Africa, served from 1980-1985. Those of you who are associated with the Rosebank Church may well remember her.

Mrs. Dorothy Selebano, served as president of the Women’s Department and as a BWA vice president from 2000-2005.

Rev. Terry Rae, your highly esteemed former general secretary, served in a number of important positions of leadership, including BWA Vice President from 2005-10.

And Rev. Paul Msiza has served as a BWA vice president from 2010-2015.

Currently, your general secretary, Rev Angelo Scheepers, serves on the BWA Commission of Evangelism. He is also a member of the BWA Advisory Committee on Mission, Evangelism and Theological Reflection. Brother Scheepers has contributed significantly to making it possible for the congress to come to South Africa and we are greatly indebted to him and to you all.

Unashamed

During this assembly, you are focusing on the theme, *Unashamed*. And you have asked me to address the subject of *Our Baptist Identity*. It is very important to locate any proud claim to a specific

denominational identity in the context of full awareness of the reality of the one church of our Lord Jesus. And that's exactly the approach I will take in this address.

The One Church

The church is God's creation – a creature of God's Word and God's Spirit. It is not a creature of human wills. It is not an entity in which any of us alive today can claim to be foundation members. The church was in the mind of God before the foundation of the earth and it came to full flower on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out on believers in Christ gathered in Jerusalem.

This church is one; it is holy; it has existed through time and space. In other words, it exists across the ages and across the continents. The church is on mission according to the will of God the Father, in obedience to the commission of God the Son, and with the enabling of God the Holy Spirit. It is sent by God on mission in the world and for God's glory. In other words, the church is apostolic.

This is the church of which we are privileged to be members. And, in the providence of God, this universal church finds expression in multiple confessional families, for example, Anglicans, Baptists, Catholics, Methodists, Orthodox, Pentecostals, and Presbyterians. This is God's church of which Jesus himself said "I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

In the power of the Holy Spirit, followers of Jesus, through belonging to many different denominations, serve as players in one great orchestra blending the melodies of God's grace. The Christian denominations are historical expressions weaving together the threads of God's grace into the fabric of our witness to the world.

The Local Church

As Baptists, we believe that this great universal church finds authentic expression in each congregation, to which we attach the name - the local church. These local churches comprise people drawn together by divine grace, pledged to follow Christ, relying on the Holy Spirit, gathering for worship and nurture, and spending ourselves in service in the world, and going out on God's mission.

Each church is not merely the sum of the individuals who are members of it. It is rather the communion that the believers share with God and so with each other. At the core of the church is our common sharing in God's own life. "Our fellowship" we read in 1 John 1:3 "is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."

Autonomous & Interdependent Churches

It is to the extent that local churches exist and operate under the rule of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23) and are led in their decision-making and their work by the Holy Spirit (John 16:13) that we call them autonomous churches.

To say a church is autonomous is not to say it is independent. It is instead to say that it is competent, under the lordship of Christ and in dependence on the Holy Spirit, to discern the will of God for the mission on which God sends it and the ministry it is called to fulfill.

Baptist churches are autonomous. But these autonomous churches need each another. I rejoice every time I read documents produced by British Baptists in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Their statements of faith, for example, demonstrate, without any doubt, the conviction that autonomous Baptist churches need one another.

When, in 1644, seven Particular or Calvinistic Baptists in the London Baptist Association developed their so-called London Confession, they included Article 47, which states that, “although the particular [Baptist] congregations be distinct and several bodies, every one a compact and knit city in itself; yet are they to walk by one and the same rule, and by all means convenient to have the counsel and help one of another in all needful affairs of the church, as members of one body in the common faith under Christ their only head.”

The British General Baptists of the 17th century shared this belief in the interdependence of the churches. Article 35 of their so-called “Orthodox Creed” adopted in 1678, states that:

“All Christians that have been baptized into one faith, and united in one true visible way of worshipping the true God, by Christ Jesus our Lord, should keep the unity of the spirit, in the bond of peace, seeing there is but one mystical body of Christ, and should have fellowship and communion in each other’s sufferings, or afflictions, for if one member suffer, all are pained with it. Hence it is also they partake of each other’s gifts in great variety, which makes the harmony of dependency on each other... and common profit of the whole...”

Baptist churches need the help and counsel of each other. This is one reason why we have unions of Baptist churches. Authentic Baptist churches know that they need each other. None are self-contained independent entities that can get along without the fellowship, the example, the opportunities, the witness and the help provided by others. To the extent that we lovingly and joyfully cooperate in our common work, without compulsion or complaining, we are able, with God’s help, to make a difference in our communities and our nation. And your autonomous Baptist churches, through your Union, share in wider partnership on the African continent in the All African Baptist Fellowship, and in still wider partnership on the global level in the Baptist World Alliance. We need the counsel and help of each other.

Believers’ Church: believing, baptized and growing

Baptists are classified among believers’ churches. These churches believe that people come to faith because the Holy Spirit draws them to God. They believe that those who respond to the pull of the Spirit do so because of God’s enabling. God reaches out to us in love and God enables us to respond to the offer of salvation. Still, God offers us the option of accepting or rejecting God’s initiative of love and forgiveness. Those who accept this discover that, throughout their lives, the Spirit keeps drawing them to God, enabling them to grow in their responsiveness to God’s amazing love.

Baptists are not ashamed to be a free church made up of those whom the Holy Spirit draws to God, who are granted salvation through the merits of Jesus’ death and resurrection and are incorporated into Christ’s body (Ephesians 1:23).

Those whom the Spirit enables to respond to the call of God confess their faith in baptism. Their baptism bears witness to what God has done in their lives. They come to their baptism with the gift

of saving faith. Meanwhile, they also encounter God anew in the waters of baptism. The baptismal stream or pool is not merely a place where we present our testimony. It is also a place where God continues the work that the Holy Spirit started in us when we were first drawn to the God of our salvation.

Disciples sent on mission

Those who are baptized in the name of the triune God and committed to sincere discipleship are sent on God's mission through the church. We are empowered by the Holy Spirit for discipleship and mission.

Every Baptist is a missionary. And historically, Baptists have been outstanding in their concern for world evangelization. We are deeply committed to spreading the Gospel so that believers might be enriched and those who have not yet made a commitment to Jesus Christ may be encouraged to do so. I hope that as a Union of Churches in this country, you possess this passion for the lost and you are an evangelizing church.

Religious liberty

Historically, Baptists have also been outstanding in our witness to the sacredness of human life. We believe that every single person is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). So, from the beginning, we have been defenders of religious liberty and other basic human rights that are included by the United Nations in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And we defend the religious liberty of all – including those who belong to other regions and those who claim to reject religion altogether.

Celebrating Baptist identity

When we call ourselves Baptists and celebrate our identity as such, we are not doing something that is negative. We are not defining ourselves by erecting boundary walls around our denominational identity. Our aim is not primarily to show the difference between us and other Christians. When we celebrate our Baptist identity, what we are doing is celebrating the gifts which, by the grace of God, we offer to the church universal. Meanwhile, we stand ready to receive from the other denominational church families the gifts they contribute, whereby they can also enrich us as Baptists. Seen in this perspective, to celebrate our identity is not to engage in a negative and divisive act. The focus on our denominational identity is meant to bring joy to people's lives, not to foment strife, create or cement division. We simply celebrate what, by the grace of God, we have become in Christ Jesus, while cherishing what God has done in the lives of other Christians, who also belong to the family called the people of God.

Adopting a proper attitude

It is important that we adopt a proper attitude to our denominational identity. Our aim is not to compare ourselves with others and to pass judgment on other confessional families and to undermine the effectiveness of their ministry. And we manifest this proper attitude and approach, by letting our light shine. By word and deed, we seek to make known the message of God's amazing love. By speaking of Christ and living for Christ, we desire to inspire those outside of the household of faith

to seek communion with Jesus and receive the gift of eternal life. We live out our faith and so bear fruit to the honor and glory of God.

When we say we are not ashamed to be Baptists and our meaning and attitude are consistent with what I have been saying this evening, we have good reason to want to maintain this identity.

I am not ashamed to be a Baptist Christian because “I am not ashamed of the Gospel because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

Conclusion

I live in a world in which secularism and post-modernism are holding many people captive, but I am not ashamed of the Gospel.

I live in a world where thousands of denominations exist, but I am not ashamed to be a Baptist Christian.

I believe there is only one church – the church of the Triune God.

This church finds expression in local churches that are autonomous and interdependent.

God the Holy Spirit draws persons into this church who accept God’s gift of salvation.

The church and its members are sent to serve in God’s mission and they defend the religious liberty of all people.

Baptists respect all Christians and we are proud of the heritage God has given to the Baptist family.

Having become Christians through the grace of God, let us proudly walk under the Baptist banner proclaiming the Gospel of salvation, calling people to faith, declaring the message of liberation and defending freedom and justice and peace. Let us labor in God’s vineyard with all the strength God makes available to us and let us do so until our Lord returns.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Neville Callam
BUSA Assembly
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