

A Rancher's Rumbblings, April 24, 2009

THE CERTITUDE DISEASE

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In our September 2002 TBC Newsletter, I wrote an article entitled "The Problem with Certitude." As most issues with which TBC has dealt through the years, this problem never really goes away. In recent weeks, I've received several letters telling me, in no uncertain terms, what the "truth" is on one issue or another. For example, I've received letters from people who tell me they are "certain" that God does not call women to preach. Seeing as how the "certitude disease" is alive and kicking, I thought it would be useful to repeat what I wrote almost 7 years ago about this subject. It still applies today.

So here goes.

Throughout the history of the church, there have always been those afflicted with the disease of certitude. They *know* the truth. They know God's thinking on everything. No matter the question, they have the answer, because God has revealed it to them. And any who disagree with them are heretics.

Michael Sattler was killed by church members who had succumbed to the crippling effects of certitude. In *The Anabaptist Story*, Dr. William R. Estep records what happened to Sattler:

"On a spring day in May, 1527, Michael Sattler was sentenced to death at the imperial city of Rottenburg on the Neckar River. The sentence read: Michael Sattler shall be committed to the executioner. The latter shall take him to the square and there first cut out his tongue, and then forge him fast to a wagon and there with glowing iron tongs twice tear pieces from his body, then on the way to the site of execution five times more as above and then burn his body to powder as an arch-heretic."

What terrible things did Michael Sattler do to deserve to be put to death in such a horrible and cruel manner? In essence, he opposed the "Faith and Message" of 1527. According to the religious authorities of his day, Sattler wrongly "taught, maintained and believed that the body and blood of Christ were not present in the sacrament" and "he taught and believed, that infant-baptism was not promotive of salvation."

Baptists today agree with Sattler's theology. *But in 1527 he was considered a heretic.* Church members said he did not believe the Bible. He disagreed with those in authority and power. And he paid for his faith with his life.

In 1527, the Church called Sattler a heretic for teaching and believing contrary to "absolute truth." Today's Baptists consider the Church's absolute truth of 1527 to be heresy. On the other hand, today's Baptists consider Sattler's heresy of 1527 to be mainstream Baptist doctrine.

By the same token, might there be something considered "absolute truth" in 2009 that will be viewed as heresy 500 years from now?

The Bible is absolute truth. Where we get into trouble is by confusing our interpretations with the Bible itself. Our interpretations of the Bible are never absolute truth – and any who believe otherwise are sadly deceived, laboring under a controlling delusion.

Consider the content of the *2000 Baptist Faith and Message*. At best, statements of faith are the best efforts of people at the time they're written. But using a "statement of faith" as an "instrument of doctrinal accountability" is both dangerous and evil. That's precisely what the SBC has been doing increasingly for the past 9 years, having wielded the *2000 Baptist Faith and Message* as that "instrument of doctrinal accountability."

When the Southern Baptist Convention was formed in 1845, the founders did not adopt any creed or statement of faith, saying: "Confessions are only guides in interpretation, having no authority over the conscience."

W. B. Johnson, first president of the SBC, explained: "We have constructed for our basis no new creed, acting in this manner upon a Baptist aversion for all creeds but the Bible."

Today we recognize the wisdom of their decision, knowing that, if they had written a *Baptist Faith and Message* in 1845, it would almost certainly have included, under the heading "The Christian and the Social Order," language such as this:

In the spirit of Christ, slaveowners should treat their slaves with respect and dignity. Slaves should likewise obey their masters.

In fact, you can be sure that they would have cited – *prooftexted*, that is – scripture at the conclusion of the section in the same way that they cite *carefully selected* scripture as support in the *2000 Baptist Faith and Message*. And they would have been perpetrating a malignant interpretation of Scripture by endorsing great evil.

I am not opposed to doctrinal accountability on fundamental issues. Employees of any SBC, BGCT, or CBF institution or agency should affirm their belief that Jesus Christ was God in the flesh, that Jesus was born of a virgin, and that the Bible is God's inspired Word and our authority in matters of faith and practice.

The problem with Fundamentalists, however, is that they have too broad a definition of what is a "fundamental issue." Yes, there are a few theological beliefs, as I've just stated, on which all Baptists should be expected to agree. However, there are many, many more on which the Scripture is open to interpretation – and on which good and faithful Baptists can and do disagree.

No Baptist, no missionary, no employee should be required to affirm every word of a statement of faith written by others – especially in matters that are not essential to salvation. Such nonessential matters include the role of women in the church and the structure of the family. Arrogance is symptomatic of the disease of certitude in nonessential matters – left untreated, it will cripple the Church.

You know, it is highly probable that, 100 years from now, most Southern Baptists will be very comfortable with both the idea and the reality of women pastors. Based on the experience of others, it is likely that this changed understanding will start in rural churches where congregations cannot afford to pay a full-time pastor.

For many years now, residents of rural communities have seen the local Methodist pastor do a good job of preaching and ministering – and, in many rural Methodist churches, the pastor is a

woman. Increasingly, Baptists understand Paul's words to Timothy on pastoral qualifications as advice for a specific first-century culture rather than as a theological rule for the ages. They believe that God is making His intent clearer as He calls more and more women to all kinds of ministry, gifting them so well that no one with eyes to see or ears to hear can deny their call.

In responding to God's call, these women simply want to be obedient, to live out their call to preach the Word, visit the sick, baptize those who confess Christ as Lord, hold the hands of the dying and the bereaved, and to voice a prayer.

And yet it is over this issue – on which sincere, genuine Baptists should be able to earnestly disagree – that Southern Baptists have fired seminary professors and forced faithful missionaries to leave their fields of service. **The disease of certitude is hurting God's work, hampering those God has called, crippling the church.**

The problem with certitude is that, so often, what we are so certain of turns out to be dead wrong. Some early Judean believers taught that no man could be saved unless he was circumcised (*Acts 15*). The church members who burned Michael Sattler at the stake were sure they were right. Our ancestors were so sure the Bible taught they had the right to own other persons created in God's image that they fought a war for that "right." SBC leaders are so sure that they're right to require Baptist missionaries and seminary professors to affirm a faith statement written by someone else that they'll fire those faithful servants if they refuse to sign away their consciences.

No, we do not burn our fellow believers at the stake anymore, but we still "tear pieces from the body" of their work or their reputations with the "hot tongs" of untruth. Paul Pressler – one of the two co-conspirators in the 1979 Fundamentalist Takeover of the SBC – told a Houston television interviewer in 1982, "In some of our Southern Baptist seminaries, not a single professor believes the Bible is the Word of God." Do you think he *really* believed that?

We may "cut out the tongue" of a long-term missionary by silencing his or her witness on the field simply because he or she cannot in good conscience affirm the *2000 Baptist Faith and Message*. We may "forge fast to the wagon" those whose freedom to follow God's direction is hindered by required adherence to a human "instrument of doctrinal accountability."

History – and our own experience – tell us that human beings are often wrong. We are sinful people, unable to fully comprehend the mind of God or the teachings of Holy Scripture. Those who forget this basic truth are guilty of arrogance. Imposing one's own certitude on other believers in nonessential matters can become great evil. We must always have the humility of our Lord, and our humility should remind us that we don't fully know the mind of God on any matter. As Paul wrote, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror" (*1 Corinthians 13:12, NIV*).

If we are to carry God's love through His Son to a world that needs Him, we must stay open to the work of the Holy Spirit within us. But staying open to the work of the Holy Spirit within us means repenting of our arrogance and laying it at Jesus' feet. It means admitting that we don't know everything. And it even means opening ourselves to the possibility that our interpretation might be wrong and the interpretation of our brother or sister might be right.

In other words, staying open to the work of the Holy Spirit within *us* means staying open to the work of the Holy Spirit in *others*, too – and to the call of God upon their lives.