

A Rancher's Rumbblings, February 3, 2009
IS OUR LOYALTY TO CHRIST . . . OR CREED?

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Last week, TBC published, in our *Baptist Reflections* column, a courageous post written by Johnny Pierce, executive editor of *Baptists Today*, for that newspaper's [blog](#), concerning the Georgia Baptist Convention's hateful and patronizing treatment of First Baptist Church, Decatur, Georgia, and its wonderful pastor, my friend, Julie Pennington-Russell. It is important that people know the truth of how mean and bullying people can be who are afflicted with the disease of Fundamentalism.

As I have written and said many times, the main difference between Texas Baptists Committed and the Fundamentalists is that Fundamentalists wanted to **control** the SBC and state conventions so they could **control** missions, seminaries, the press, and other institutions. On the other hand, our goal was to keep BGCT leadership in the hands of those who would keep our institutions and ministries free to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. It was never about theology – it was always about control vs. freedom.

I continue to hear well-meaning people say that we must be more inclusive as a state convention or risk losing more churches. I listen to these folks respectfully, but I really cannot figure out how we could be more inclusive as a state convention than we already are. We recognize the freedom of any church to give as it chooses, to call whomever it chooses as pastor, and on and on. We invite all to partner with us – provided that they don't seek to control the rest of us.

I'm afraid, however, that what some are actually saying is this: "If the BGCT does not embrace the SBC and Fundamentalism, we will leave." But folks, that's not an option – embracing the SBC and Fundamentalism. Those are the people who destroyed the SBC that we once knew and have created a competing state convention – the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention – for the purpose of exercising the same control as the SBC and for enticing churches to leave the BGCT.

No, we have no business embracing the SBC and Fundamentalism. But please note – no one in the BGCT is going to tell you that you can't be a part of the BGCT if you support the SBC and its missions financially. The BGCT lives by Baptist principles, including local church autonomy. We recognize each church's right to choose where it gives its money, and we pray that each church recognizes each member's right to choose as well. I hope that is enough – I simply do not know what more we can do.

If you missed reading Johnny Pierce's *Baptist Reflections* column last week, you'll find a link to it following this column. Please be sure to read it. In it, Johnny tells that Bob White, executive director of the Georgia Baptist Convention, warned Julie that some in the GBC are planning to move to withdraw fellowship from the Decatur church later this year – simply because it chose to call a woman as pastor. White went on to tell Julie that, if the convention disfellowships the church, "the church could not receive materials or services from the GBC, such as training in Vacation Bible School, Sunday School, or evangelism. . . . however, Bob White said he would

be willing to help 'personally' in such a situation, but not as an official representative of the GBC."

This, friends, is the result of institutionalizing controlling attitudes and creedal convictions. Even when people feel a compulsion to act in the spirit of Christ, they feel duty-bound to give their first loyalty to the institution, not to Christ. Freedom flies out the window, and the soul is trapped within the confining walls of institutionalized creedalism.

But the Jesus I know is all about loving people. Go read *Matthew 25*. Christ didn't make ideology the test of discipleship. No, the test of discipleship is your service to people. That's the spirit of Christ – loving people, in all their differences, and seeking to meet them where they are and to give them whatever they need. It means seeing Jesus in every face . . . knowing that we serve Jesus when we love those in need.

But ideology turns people into objects to be bent and shaped into acceptable forms, and it sets out to destroy any who refuse to yield to its control . . . any who refuse to conform . . . any who refuse to put the institution first. So Bob White is inclined personally to help Julie and the church that she serves, but he is such a slave to the institution that he will not stand against its control.

Julie Pennington-Russell and FBC, Decatur are free – because they have put Christ first. It is Bob White and the Georgia Baptist Convention who are enslaved – because they have enthroned ideology and the institution. For them, *Matthew 25* isn't sufficient as a test of true Christian discipleship. They apparently believe that they know better than Jesus does.

But Julie Pennington-Russell and FBC, Decatur, Georgia will just keep on being the presence of Jesus to their community, because that is what Julie is all about – and that is apparently what her church is all about, too. I would hope that Baptists would figure out by now that God uses all types of people and churches to do His work, and that doing missions is too important to let arguments over interpreting Scripture get in the way. However, after doing this job for 21 years, I have learned to never be surprised by some people's commitment to worrying over the speck in someone else's eye while ignoring the log in their own.

The BGCT isn't perfect, but BGCT leadership has worked hard to ensure the freedom of churches and believers to follow the leading of Jesus in their lives rather than force them to follow institutionalized creeds and ideologies.

When all's said and done, I'm glad to be a Texas Baptist. Aren't you?

[Go to Johnny Pierce's Baptist Reflections column of January 27.](#)