

POVERTY AND THE BAPTIST LEGACY IN THE WORLD

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There is a scene in the book of *Nehemiah* where Nehemiah has inspected the conditions of Jerusalem and has called the people together. He informs them of the situation as he sees it and then calls them to action, saying, “You see the bad situation we are in . . . let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach.” And the people responded, saying, “Let us arise and build.” The Scripture then says, “So they put their hands (together) to working for the common good” (*Nehemiah 2:17-18*, NRSV). Baptists have always been those who somehow (in spite of their differences) have been able to “put their hands together to working for the common good.”

My paternal grandfather came to the United States from Monterrey, Mexico, in 1909 to save his family from the starvation precipitated by the Mexican revolutionary war. When I was a child, my grandfather lived with us. He didn’t speak much English. He would speak in Spanish. I would answer in English, and we understood each other perfectly. As a child, the thing I loved most about my grandfather was that he always had candy and money . . . and he would give it to me. He would see me and say, “Venga aqui” (*come here*). I would go sit on his lap. He would hold me tight and whisper in my ear . . . “Nunca olvides” (*never forget*). And I would say, “Whatever, Grandpa . . . you got any money?”

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He would place a few silver coins in my little hand and would say, “Nunca olvides.” And I would say, “Yeah . . . sure, Grandpa.” I didn’t understand . . . but now I do. *Never forget* means never forget who you are . . . never forget where you come from . . . never forget your heritage. I get it, Grandpa. I didn’t always get it. There was a time (during my teenage years) when I didn’t want to remember. I didn’t want to be Mexican, because I didn’t want to be different. But I get it now, Grandpa . . . and you were right. I pray that Texas Baptists would hear my Grandpa’s words . . . “Nunca olvides.” Baptists have always been those who, somehow (in spite of their differences), have been able to “put their hands together to working for the common good.”

I want us to reflect tonight on why, historically, that has been so, and why that innate Baptist ability to organize and work together for the common good has shaped us into a force that is uniquely prepared for the challenges of the 21st century. Specifically, the challenges we will face as change agents in a world that will grow increasingly hostile toward Christianity and increasingly apathetic toward the poor.

Preserving a Distinctively Baptist Witness in the Face of Globalization

The most pressing issue for all of us is *globalization*. We must preserve a distinctively Baptist witness in the world, because the world has changed and continues to change dramatically. Change has always been a part of life. That is nothing new. What is unprecedented in human history is the rate of change. The acceleration of change is killing us. Corporations are falling like monolithic giants. Nations are going bankrupt. The world is shrinking at an exponential rate, and collaborative efforts are expanding at the speed of a microchip. The world will not be the same 10 years from now, and the church is not immune.

Churches are trying to live with four and five distinct and very different generations worshipping under the same roof. And while we fight our worship wars, ecclesiological battles, creedal clashes, and doctrinal differences . . . there are millions suffering under the oppressive forces of poverty. It is a mind-blowing and dizzying time to be alive . . . and most Christian groups will begin to shrink away and build fortresses of protection against every perceived danger or threat . . . but I believe that we, as Baptists, have been shaped as a people for such a time as this. We have, in our arsenal of faith practices, the tools we need to ride the waves of change.

Those pieces of our Baptist legacy that we have all studied and cherished as formative values in the practice of our faith . . . things like soul competency, the priesthood of every believer, religious freedom (and its soulmate – the separation of church and state), voluntary cooperation based on missionary zeal, church autonomy (and one of its essential benefactors, non-creedalism). These stand like great communication links towering over the landscape of Baptist life. They connect us and benefit us even before we're able to name them.

Our Baptist heritage – the Baptist distinctives – make us a powerfully effective Christian force in a rapidly changing world. Please understand – any one of our Baptist distinctives is held by a number of different Christian groups, but none can claim the unique combination of beliefs that we hold. As Bill Pinson puts it . . . It is “the *combination* of beliefs and practices (that) sets Baptists apart from other Christian groups. There is a distinctive group of doctrines and politics for Baptists, a *sort of Baptist recipe*. Like most recipes, each of the ingredients *is not unique to Baptists*, but the *total mix is distinctively Baptist*” (from www.BaptistDistinctives.com). I agree with Dr. Pinson, and I would add that it is that recipe that makes us strategically positioned for the race to globalization and, therefore, strategically positioned to be Jesus Christ to the world's poor.

Our conservative Biblicism combined with our love for religious freedom . . . our penchant for autonomous thought and practice combined with our passion for cooperation . . . our disdain for hierarchical governance combined with our respect for accountability through congregational leadership . . . our theological center of grace and grace alone, combined with our innate suspicion of anything that smacks of legalism or creedalism . . . all combine to make us especially adept to meet the challenges of the next century.

As an example, allow me to refer to just two aspects of globalization as discussed by Thomas Friedman. The first is taken from his book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, and the second is taken from his more recent work, *The World is Flat*.

Baptists Pushed to the Margins – A Good Thing!

In *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Friedman describes the characteristics of the countries and institutions that will collapse under the weight of globalization and compares them to those that will prosper. In his characterization, he notes that the nations that are inflexible, totalitarian, and

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dictatorial will suffer and languish behind a changing world. By the same token, institutions that are controlling, legalistic, and demand conformity at all costs will wither under globalization. Such nations and institutions will NOT carry us into the future (pp. 212-247).

Nowhere is this more important to understand than in our own nation. Jim Wallis reminds us that “Spiritual and religious values should influence our perception of and participation in politics – making a difference in the systems that govern and either hurt or help people. But while religion belongs in the political world, religion and ideology are not good partners” (*The Soul of Politics*, p.34).

Yale law professor Stephen Carter, in his book, *The Culture of Disbelief*, warns against “reaching conclusions on political grounds and, afterward, finding religious justification for them, instead of letting genuine religious conviction shape honest political judgments” (as quoted in *The Soul of Politics*, p. 34). And Jim Wallis concludes that “perhaps the best test of the spiritual integrity of our political commitments is their predictability or unpredictability” (*The Soul of Politics*, p. 34). It seems to me that most of what is coming out of the larger Christian community in America is extremely predictable.

The problem is that no one is talking to each other. If the last three elections have taught us anything, they have taught us that the polarization of America is complete. And American religion is just as polarized . . . a polarized American church that is the mirror image of the polarized culture.

Jim Wallis, in *The Soul of Politics*, concludes that “the inability of either liberalism or conservatism to lead us forward is increasingly clear” (p. 21). He says that “the two dominant forms of religion in our time have failed to provide the spiritual guidance that might inform a politics of moral conscience. Both conservative and liberal religion have become culturally captive forces that merely cheer on the ideological camps with which each has identified” (p. 36). Wallis warns, “Religion as a political cheerleader is invariably false religion” (p. 36).

The religious right, for instance, feeling pushed to the margins, “woke up” in the 1970’s and 80’s and decided to become a prophetic force in American politics, and I applaud that thought. If it’s really the thought that counts, they are to be highly commended. I am just left wondering where this “great moral force” was in the civil rights battles of the 1950’s and 60’s. Most Southern White Baptist Churches were eerily silent during those years when our nation desperately needed a moral compass and a prophetic voice. Or even worse, they were very vocal on the side of evil. And, more recently, I have to wonder if they did not have a severe case of laryngitis when our country entered into an unprovoked war, against the better judgment of most of the rest of the world.

This is hard for me. I love my country. I’m an avid Olympics fan, and I tear up every time I hear the national anthem. I feel the pain of every American athlete who didn’t have a good day. AND I feel the pain of being pushed away from the national conversation because of my Judeo-Christian perspective. Jim Wallis writes that Stephen Carter, in *The Culture of Disbelief*, “contends that a prejudice against the influence of religious commitment upon political issues now characterizes many sectors of American society, including the media, academia, the law, and the corridors of political power.” Carter notes that “religious conviction is trivialized and becomes quickly suspect when it seems to be affecting political matters” (*The Soul of Politics*, p. 32).

In plain English . . . the Christian Church in America is being pushed to the margins. And, as a member of an ethnic minority in America, I say to the church . . . “Welcome to the margins!! We’ve been waiting for you!!” I agree with most of the values of the religious right. Where I think

they get it wrong is that they see being pushed to the margins as a bad thing – something to fight against. I see it as a good thing. In fact, it may be the very thing that saves American Christianity.

The church cannot serve a socio-political ideology and Christ at the same time. The church can speak prophetically *only* from the margins of society . . . only from *outside* the corridors of power . . . never from the seat of power. Both the left and the right seem to be fighting for a place at the center of political power. And any Christianity operating from that position will be a controlling, legalistic, and spiritually oppressive force, unable to distinguish the voices of political allies from God's voice. And, I would add, that is the very kind of institution that will wither under the weight of globalization. It is, therefore, imperative that we remain distinctively Baptist because we have the right recipe to be a prophetic voice, speaking from the margins, in a shrinking and dynamically changing world.

Being Authentically Baptist – for the Sake of the Poor, the Hurting, and the Lost

The other aspect to globalization that I want to briefly mention is what Friedman calls "Open-Sourcing." In his book, *The World is Flat*, Friedman discusses the 10 forces that flattened the world. Flattener #4 is "Open-Sourcing," or what Friedman calls "Self-Organizing Collaborative Communities." It is, essentially, "thousands of people around the world coming together online to collaborate in writing everything from their own software to their own operating systems to their own dictionary to their own recipe for cola – building always from the bottom up rather than accepting formats or content imposed by corporate hierarchies from the top down" (p. 81). Everyone in the group is allowed to add their improvements to the product . . . and, oh yeah . . . they offer the product for free . . . talk about grace! It's like the Cooperative Program on steroids. It's beyond that. It's the walls coming down . . . all of them . . . and it's messy. If you don't like messy, then you're going to have a very difficult time in the 21st century.

The larger Christian witness in America doesn't like messy. They like clean lines; black-and-white; a place for everything and everything in its place; doctrinal purity (as if that were really possible). The problem with those who seek to purify the church has always been that they wind up looking more like those who crucified Jesus than those who followed him.

It seems to me that, in a day when all of the walls that have separated nations and people groups are coming down – making room for larger and more effective cooperation – the larger Baptist witness in America is pulling out of collaborative efforts and building more doctrinal walls than ever before. It is one of the most frustrating problems in Baptist life today. It is absolutely essential that we hold close and dear the precious ingredients of our Baptist recipe that allow us to ride the wave of collaborative communities. If we don't . . . I'm not sure who else will, AND if we don't, the ones who suffer the consequences of our failure are the poor.

Remember – we do it for the sake of the poor, the hurting, and the lost. We must preserve a distinctively Baptist witness in the world, because the poor, the hurting, and the lost are depending on it. Gandhi said, "Poverty is the worst form of violence" (*Seeds of Peace*, p. 127). I pastored for 10 years in the poorest county in Texas and one of the poorest in the nation. The poverty in our state and world is simply overwhelming. The poor are depending on our witness in the face of the strongholds of systemic evil in our state and nation – what Walter Wink calls "the domination system" or "the powers that be" (*The Powers that Be*, p. 32).

The larger Baptist witness in America seems to have fixated on a few politically salient issues and, although those issues are not unimportant, in fixating on them we have largely abdicated our prophetic voice where it counts the most. We have failed to throw the full weight of our

Baptist strength behind the life-and-death issues that affect the most people. I speak here of the multiplicity and complexity of issues surrounding the plight of the poor.

Tony Campolo points out that the Christian Coalition, the most successful religious lobbying group in American history, was formed to address the need for the government to support “traditional family values,” as it defined them . . . and yet, the voter guides that the Christian Coalition distributed to millions of Christians completely ignored the needs of the poor (*Speaking My Mind*, p. 126).

The Poor – Jesus’ All-Consuming Concern

I don’t have to remind this audience of Jesus’ concern for the poor. It was all-consuming for him. In the *Old Testament*, the subject of the poor is the second most prominent theme. Idolatry is the first, and the two are often connected. In the *New Testament*, one out of every 16 verses is about the poor. In the *Gospels*, the number is one out of every 10 verses; in *Luke’s Gospel*, one of every seven; and in the book of *James*, one of every five.

All of the politically-charged issues of Jesus’ day were (it seems to me) side-stepped by him in lieu of his concern for the poor. In his inaugural homecoming message at Nazareth, Jesus sets the agenda for his ministry when he says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor” (*Luke 4:18a*, NIV).

Jesus starts his most famous sermon by saying, “Blessed are the poor” (*Luke 6:20*). And, if Hans Dieter Betz is right in identifying the literary genre of the Sermon on the Mount as the Greek “*epitoma*” (*The Sermon on the Mount* from the Hermeneia series) – and I believe he is – then the epitome of Jesus’ teaching (as compiled by Matthew) is his concern for the poor and the marginalized and the oppressed . . . the 90% of the population (in his day) who, because of the Roman and Temple taxation systems, could not afford to both tithe and live, and were, therefore, labeled the “unrighteous ones” (the “*Am Harez*” of the land) . . . the working poor.

According to Richard A. Horsley, around the 1st century, there arose, for the first time in Hebrew history, a minority class of people who lived in the cities (mainly Sepphoris and Tiberias) and produced nothing, living instead off of the taxation system. These citizens of the “consumer city” were an elite class living off of the working poor (*Archaeology, History and Society in Galilee*, p. 79). The working poor (labeled the “*Am Harez*,” or the “unrighteous ones”) were the ones who loved Jesus the most . . . because he first loved them. His heart was always with them. In fact, there is no written record that Jesus ever entered the cities of Sepphoris or Tiberias, the two largest and most important 1st-century cities in Galilee. He spent all of his time, it seems, in the small villages . . . with the poor.

If we lose our distinctively Baptist heritage, there will not be a unified, coherent Baptist voice speaking for the “*Am Harez*” of our state and our nation . . . and a greatly diminished one speaking for the “*Am Harez*” of the world. Both the left and the right in American Christianity have sold out to one political perspective for 30 pieces of silver (promises that never come true, and trickle-downs that never trickle). Their political litmus tests ignore the largest and, in global terms, the most devastating issues of our times: all of the issues fueled by abject poverty. Their alliances (or, more often, their failure to align with certain groups) betrays their deeper concern with preserving the American Way of life and the truth as America sees it, rather than standing with the one who said, “I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life” (*John 14:6*, NIV).

Richard Lischer, in his Lyman-Beecher lectures at Yale, said, “Contemporary religion focuses on its own successes and avoids at all costs the paradox of the cross, a move that has produced a flood of compensatory words” (*The End of Words*, p. 9).

Following Wherever Jesus Leads Means Following Him to the Poor

The larger Baptist witness in America is in grave danger of a great “Christological distance” – what Erhardt Guttgemann calls “the distance created by the tendency to redefine Christ in some more ‘contemporary’ meaning, less dependent on just who the crucified Jesus was” (*The Politics of Jesus*, p. 120). You know who Jesus was . . . he was poor; he was born poor; he lived poor and with the poor; he died poor; and he rose again for the poor.

John Howard Yoder, in his *The Politics of Jesus*, reminds us that “to follow after Christ is not simply to learn from him, but also to share his destiny” (p. 124). “Wherever He leads I’ll go. He drew me closer to His side, I sought His will to know, And in that will I now abide, Wherever He leads I’ll go. I’ll follow my Christ who loves me so, Wherever He leads I’ll go” (*The Baptist Hymnal*, #285). Really? *Wherever* he leads? He leads us to the doorsteps of the poorest of the poor. He points to them and then turns to us and says, “Whatever you have done for the least of these, you have done for me” (*Matthew 25:40*, NIV).

To follow Christ wherever he takes me . . . WHEREVER He takes me . . . without being labeled a socialist or a communist or a liberal or, even worse, dare I say . . . a Democrat. I don’t believe that I’m any of those labels. And, at one time or another, I have probably been all of them . . . and will be again. But the words of Paul keep ringing in my ears, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (*Philippians 3:10-11*, NIV).

I want to know Christ! And so, I follow NO MAN, NO SOCIO-POLITICAL IDEOLOGY, NO DENOMINATIONAL APPARATUS, NO CAREER PATH – I WANT TO KNOW JESUS – I WANT TO FOLLOW JESUS – WHEREVER HE LEADS, I’LL GO – AND JESUS ALWAYS LEADS US TO THE POOR!

My mother is at the age where she is starting to give her children (my sister, my two brothers, and me) pictures from her treasured collection of family albums . . . some of her most treasured memories preserved by Kodak. I told her that there is only one picture I want. It is my father’s first-grade class picture (from 1939). If you look closely, you’ll find him on the third row, three kids over from the right. The reason I want that picture is that there is a hole in it . . . a hole where my father’s feet should be. Apparently, he was one of only two children in the class who were too poor to own a pair of shoes. There are about 40 kids in the picture. They took the picture, and my father didn’t have shoes. At the age of 7, he somehow understood that there was something wrong about that and, therefore, something wrong with him. So he brought the picture home and, before anyone could see it, he cut his own feet out of the picture. I can see my father – as a little 7-year-old boy – so filled with shame that he takes out his pocketknife and carefully cuts out his own feet.

I want that picture, because it defines my father’s life: Work hard, work hard, work hard, to make as much money as you can so that none of your children will ever have to cut their feet out of the picture.

We must preserve our distinctive Baptist witness, because no child should ever have to cut their own feet out of the picture.

In the spirit of Nehemiah . . . I say to you . . . “You see the bad situation we are in . . . let us rebuild our Baptist heritage and identity . . . so that we will no longer be a reproach.” And may we as a people respond by saying, “Let us arise and build.” And may the generations that follow say of us . . . “So they put their hands (together) to working for the common good” (*Nehemiah 2:17-18*, NRSV).