

TIME FOR BAPTISTS TO THINK BIG, ACT BIG, AND LEAD BIG

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1 Corinthians 1:10-13a and 17-18

10 Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. 11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. 12 What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." 13 Has Christ been divided?

17 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. 18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Introduction

The time for a new day has arrived; and the opportunity to think bigger than ourselves and beyond our present time is before us.

In the summer of 1993, I packed my Fundamentalist bags and headed to Fort Worth, Texas to attend Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Little did I know when I stepped foot onto the campus that fall semester, several months later into the spring a situation would arise on campus that would change my theology, the way I thought about the world, my relationship with Christ, and the mission he put into my heart.

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In the spring of 1994, I witnessed with my own eyes the evils of a divided house, making Christian men act in a very unchristian manner. It was the notorious semester when Dr. Russell Dilday was removed from the presidency of Southwestern. Up to that moment, I knew nothing of a "controversy" that separated my Baptist family. Yet, there it was, before my eyes, turning my stomach as I heard words used against a man I knew to be impeccable.

One of the most striking elements of that entire event for me was not the manner in which some men acted gravely that week (for all men and women are capable). What stood out to me more than anything else was the level of dignity, grace, and boldness demonstrated by Dr. Dilday. Now, I had heard this before when I arrived on campus the first week, but when Dr. Dilday stood

in front of the president's house that warm spring day after being treated like a petty criminal and proclaimed, "Keep up with your studies, for Southwestern is much bigger than one man," I believed him.

Bigger Than One Man, One Institution, One Baptist

Bigger than one man. Bigger than one institution. Bigger than one state. Bigger than one convention. Bigger than one nation. That phrase, "Bigger than," what does it really mean? Well, of course, we all like to think we know what it means, but do we really believe it? Do we really practice it? Oh yes, we Baptists, and in particular we Texas Baptists (one of which I am, by the way), like to talk about our conventional bigness and boast about our missional prowess, but today I hope to convince you that the time to think beyond today and better than the status quo is upon us.

But you might ask, why now? During this time? At this moment? Why should we be talking about extending our cooperating hands and unleashing a mission worthy of the God we worship? For me at least, simply put, the handwriting is on the wall. Behind closed doors, we talk about it, in hallways we whisper our fears, but we have yet to publicly acknowledge the reality we are all facing in Baptist life. My friends, and please believe me when I say that, the overarching Baptist mission does not have a sustainable future.

Now, we can blame it on anything we want: economic recession, competing conventions, apathetic Christians living in our churches, or spineless pastors unwilling to speak out. However, if we choose to look outward to point the blame, we dare not do it without looking into the mirror first. For too long now, we have been caught up in a struggle over territorial dominance: theological, missional, and institutional. Please do not misunderstand me, this is not an indictment upon those years, for if it were not for brave individuals and organizations standing up to Fundamentalism, like Mainstream and Texas Baptists Committed, free and faithful Baptists would not have the opportunity now before us.

The purpose of that statement is to acknowledge the shift in landscape. Today, at this moment, we are a fragmented bunch of Baptist Christians working separately to evangelize and minister to the small parts of the world where we exist. We still use the terms "conventions," "associations," and "fellowships," but their application is shaky at best. Many of our conventions, institutions, and local churches are worried sick about their individual sustainability. Fiscal and numeric reality is hitting the Baptist fan, and we do not like what we see. Again, this is not an indictment, but most certainly a vivid and frightening reality.

We traditional Baptists have grown older, tired, and a bit jaded from the years behind us. As a result, we realize that if something does not change very soon, everything for which we worked over the years will fade away as time passes. And this time it will not pass away because of a dark political takeover, but because there will be no one left to steer the ship.

Therefore, the time to think "beyond" and "bigger" has come. This is not a call for a good ol' traditional Baptist bureaucracy, but a challenge to our leaders to collaborate now on the next phase of our Baptist existence. Because of the precedent set before us by the likes of Smyth, Helwys, Holmes, Leland, Carroll, Truett, Reynolds, Strickland, Baugh, Stephenson, Dilday, and many, many others, we have an opportunity to rise above our reality to dream a God-sized vision that truly impacts our future.

When Baptist pioneer Zacharias Morrell came to Texas in 1835, he looked out across her great landscape and envisioned a movement bigger than himself. Mainstream and Texas Baptists, I am asking you to dream again. I am asking you to think bigger than yourself one more time. I am asking you now to look over your borders, recognize those of us who want to partner with you, and cast a vision worthy for all of us to follow.

And as always, this God-sized vision will center on what we Baptists do best: training and sending out men and women to be the presence of Christ within this world. From the Triennial Convention to the rise of the Southern Baptist Convention, Baptist General Convention of Texas, and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, we Baptists have made it a point to pour our foundation upon those precious words of our Lord, "You will be my witnesses."

A Baptist Mission for a New Generation

However, in acknowledging the current reality we face, we must conclude that the time for a new strategy has emerged. I believe there are four areas that need our attention this morning. First, the local church must regain her ecclesiastical position for all Baptist work. Second, the missional philosophy must be present in all that we do. Third, social justice must be voiced if we are to have any missional integrity. Fourth, we must make certain the next generation is empowered to sustain the Baptist mission.

Ecclesiastical Position

This is hard to say and hard to hear, but from my vantage point as the pastor of a local church, we Baptists have moved away from the local congregation being the point-organization in all that we do. From our global initiatives to our local endeavors, there are times when I feel like the institutional hand extended toward me is more interested in keeping the dollars flowing than hearing the local church's thoughts about kingdom strategy.

In the *New Testament*, it was the local church that was established and empowered to engage in the Great Commission. The local church, her members and her leaders, was the only agency that trained and sent out men and women to be the presence of Christ around the Mediterranean. Thankfully, we have come a long way since the *New Testament* in adding other means of distributing the Gospel, but the one constant that remains throughout Christian history is the local church.

As previous evidence suggests, we can no longer afford the status quo. The time has come for the local Baptist church to reclaim her role as the leader within the Baptist movement. Local pastors and leaders must exercise their religious liberty to create, promote, and implement a new and creative Baptist vision for our future. With the incredible advancements in technology, the local church possesses the means to be a critical voice in theological training, empowered to create local and global networks, and develop the ability to send out her own missionaries in cooperation with other partnerships. The local church must once again dare to be bold and dream big.

Missional Philosophy

Secondly, the missional philosophy must touch everything we do. From our worship to the continuation of our cherished Baptist principles, the mission of Christ must remain present

above all else. Again, we turn to the precious words of Jesus, “Love God with all your heart, mind, and soul and love others as you would love yourself.”

Scholars tell us the term “missional” is difficult to define. However, using “duck methodology,” I think we can gain a clearer understanding of the term and its application. Simplistic, but still relevant. Knowing that if something walks and talks like a duck, it must be a duck – if someone walks and talks about the love of Christ, then it must be missional in nature.

More than any other Baptist principle today, the missional philosophy of faith is germane to the new generation. The number of young Christians looking to do missions and ministry in new and exciting ways continues to astound me. Granted, their methodologies are unorthodox and uneasy for those of us who are more comfortable with traditional models. However, their ways are contagiously inspirational. They are discovering they do not need us to fulfill their call. They are simply finding ways to be obedient to God.

Being missional simply means to promote the grace of God and love of Jesus Christ to those we encounter. Whether that is handing out a mosquito net in Western Africa or swinging a hammer on a Habitat build in Eastern Norman, young and old alike are rediscovering the Great Commission. Baptist Christians are committing themselves to a cause greater than their own, with the understanding that this is simply what Christians should be doing.

If Baptist churches, institutions, and conventions do not begin to understand this premise, then we will lose the next generation. And if we lose the next generation of young Baptists, we most assuredly are staring into the face of a powerless faith. For all of you pastors, convention leaders, and institutional heads, the time has come for you to collaborate together for the purpose of casting a larger Baptist mission.

Social Justice

Thirdly, not only is missions at the forefront of the next generation – the social justice movement is sweeping across people of faith. The next generation has gazed upon the idealism being handed them by their predecessors and condemned it as an old model for an old era. Hearing the echoes of the civil rights movement, Christians are collaborating to address ethical issues from a faith perspective. As this movement builds, my hope is that the next generation will be more accepting of others, more strident in the pursuit of religious liberty for all people, and more demanding that oppressive systems be redeemed for the consideration of the common good.

In other words, while many in our aging cohort think the upcoming generation will be more immoral and unethical, I choose to believe otherwise. In fact, I think the next generation has an incredible opportunity to right many of the wrongs we have committed. On environmental issues, they understand our ecological responsibility as stewards of God’s earth and the dire need to make changes in energy consumption. On western capitalism, they see their parents’ struggles to purchase more stuff when all they truly want is their presence at home. On cultural diversity and the establishment of the diverse community, they do not know anything different. On the global plight of the poor, they are mounting up in numbers to travel abroad and empower indigenous people.

On both a local and global scale, the next generation is casting their vision upon what we are leaving behind and saying, “not on my watch.” As a movement based on the missional words of Christ, we are in perfect position to reach out to this rising generation and stand beside them in this ethical plight.

However, we dare not be unauthentic in our words and deeds, for they know more than any generation the shallowness of empty words. Social justice does not come to fruition through powerless documents that do nothing but make nice photos on a newsletter. Social justice emerges when the people of God finally decide enough is enough and work together, empowering others for the common good. In other words, our faith has words and deeds.

Empowering the Next Generation

Finally, for all of this to transpire, we must make it a top priority to empower the next generation. In almost every Baptist meeting I have attended, the same lines are uttered: “How can we get the next generation involved in Baptist life?” As Jesus left this earth, he did not leave it without empowering those that would follow him. He gave them both vision and opportunity to proclaim with words and deeds the Good News.

Our seminaries and theological schools are crossing new barriers in empowering a new generation of Baptists. Yet, there are some startling trends developing. Some graduates do not want to serve in the local church; and if we’re honest, who can blame them? We local churches have not always been that welcoming to young ministers – especially our female pastors.

However, residency programs – such as the ones at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas and First Baptist Church, Oklahoma City – are working to buck that trend, but there still remains a stigma in many seminarian minds.

You and I need to make certain that this changes. As I described earlier, the local church has fallen from the point on many issues with which we deal these days. We have been fine with letting others speak and do on our behalf. It has created an impression that if someone young truly wants to make a difference in this world, they must do so outside the realm of the local Baptist church. We need to reverse this by creating direct partnerships with organizations willing to empower the local church to be the “sending” agency for the next generation of church planters, missionaries, and local pastors.

Now, to accomplish this lofty goal, we need outside partners to assist us. Mark my words: we will always need seminaries for training, mission agencies for appointments, and convention strategists for consultation. But the local church must take the lead. If we can accomplish this paradigm, the benefits of such an arrangement are countless for the new generation of Baptists within the local church.

On a vast global scale, we will have strong local support. In the age of iChat, Facebook, and Twitter, local church members are able to have direct and instant contact with the people they send out on the other side of the globe. Needs can be met directly without bureaucratic hurdles and unfunded requests. When local churches feel as though they have an ownership in missional endeavors and the new generation feels the local support from home, local support melds with global vision.

In addition, churches need to start churches. If this new Baptist movement has any chance of surviving, then local Baptist churches are going to have to be intentional and strategic in planting churches. We have a very talented and creative group of young ministers graduating from our seminaries with new strategies in their minds. We should not demand that they fit into our molds, but we should empower them to take a risk, take a chance, and see how God blesses their efforts.

The next generation will determine whether the Baptist movement continues to have both local and global impact for the Gospel but, if they are not given the encouragement and opportunity to demonstrate their talents, they will find other places to serve.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the day has come for traditional Baptists to start thinking in new ways. The time has come for us to build a bridge to the future through the creation of new networks and global partnerships. If you hear me say one thing today, please hear this: the time to think “beyond” our day and “bigger” than the status quo is now. We need to see visions from our Baptist leaders that defy human understanding. We need to see strategies that only God can deliver.

The one thing about this New Baptist Covenant movement that astounds me is the fact that it is happening at all. Bringing Baptists together for anything is like asking David Currie to herd cats on his ranch. Difficult, indeed. Nonetheless, great things can happen, if we only dare to believe, dream, and enact.

The time is right now for a new Baptist movement to emerge, locally rooted with global vision. Over 10 years ago, Dr. Herb Reynolds once challenged us to develop a Baptist Convention of the Americas that brings Baptists from North, Central, and South Americas together for a common purpose. In my own mind, the time for such a partnership has come.

Now, I know, we all have our own problems, issues, and interests. But, if something of this scale is to ever occur, Texas Baptists are going to have to take the lead. For over 13 years in Texas, I attended your seminaries, pastored your churches, and served on your boards. Now, I feel so at home at calling myself a Texas Baptist that I joined a church in Oklahoma that has directly tied itself to the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

In all my years living and serving in Texas Baptist life, there is one thing I learned. Texas Baptists like to talk “big.” It is time for Texas Baptists to lead out “big.” Back on the front lawn of Southwestern Seminary, a fellow Baptist challenged me to be part of something that was much larger than me. He challenged me not to let opposition stifle me, hurdles trip me, and quagmires entangle me. He taught me to dream big, for the God we serve is moving, and moving in a big way.

We can no longer afford to be the divided body. We can no longer wait to form impotent committees that produce mounds of paper without any results. We can no longer wait for the future to come to us. It is here! There are poor and hungry among us. People are suffering with sicknesses that are often easily treatable. People are strangers in a foreign land, being treated more like political fodder than the precious children of God that they are. People are suffering like never before, and people are literally dying by the millions – while all the time, we are comforted by the fact we are trying to figure it all out. Damn us for our arrogance.

The issues and solutions are big, my friends, but we serve an even bigger God. We can no longer afford to be a divided Baptist body. The time is now to unite behind the grace and love of Christ, for a common purpose of being the presence of Christ to all we encounter. The time to think “beyond” and “bigger” is now. We cannot wait any longer. Amen.