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THE MEANING OF THE BAPTIST EXPERIENCE



WILLIAM E. HULL

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When Baptists attempt to understand and interpret their distinctive approach to the Christian faith, they typically do so in terms of experience. They are not the only religious movement to do this; Mormons and Pentecostals, among others, share a similar emphasis, yet in very different ways. Baptists, however, attach such great importance to experience that it inevitably was chosen as the defining word in the title of this study. So think with me for a moment about what it means to view religion primarily as a reality to be *experienced* rather than a ritual to be enacted, as in Catholicism; a doctrine to be affirmed, as in Protestantism; or an ethic to be observed, as in Judaism.

By its very nature, experience is personal. It cannot be inherited from the past, transferred in the present, or preserved for the future. We may learn about the experiences of others in vivid detail but, in so doing, realize that what is being reported is theirs and not ours. Conversely, when we share our experiences with others, we know that we are not reproducing in their lives what happened in our lives. This is particularly true of religious experience when we are seized with a sense of awe and wonder that cannot be put into words. Even when both parties are doing their best to communicate, we often end by saying, “You will just have to experience this for yourself to know what I am talking about.”

An experience begins to take shape when an individual becomes so engaged in some aspect of life that the attention is focused, the mind is stimulated, and the

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emotions are stirred. Such a response, in turn, activates the use of one's faculties to apprehend the meaning of this encounter, utilizing the words and symbols, the concepts and categories, available to that person in light of his or her mindset and outlook. This process of internalization explains why an experience remains uniquely one's own even after it is widely shared with others.

In general, we may say that experience is one of the ways in which each of us assimilates a growing awareness of reality. While there is no predictable formula by which this happens, the process often unfolds as follows: (1) We encounter something hitherto unknown and are arrested by its possibilities. (2) We respond with our whole being in an effort to make room for this new reality along with what we already know about life. (3) If the addition of this new perception proves meaningful to us, we then seek to share our discovery with others in the hope that they will experience it for themselves.

Now let us apply these reflections to an understanding of the Baptist experience. By emphasizing that their faith is a matter of experience, Baptists are affirming that Christianity is accessible to the senses if one will only pay attention, such as by hearing the gospel, reading Scripture, and observing the witness of the church. As the opening verse of the First Letter of John puts it, the word of life is that "which we have *heard*, which we have *seen* with our eyes, which we have *looked upon* and *touched* with our hands" (1 Jn. 1:1, RSV). But each individual must grapple with the claims made by these sensory impressions and come to convictions regarding their meaning in ways that shape one's deepest commitments. None of this need happen in isolation, however, because, in the solitary struggle to decide what the experience means, one may be surrounded by believers who both share their own experiences and evaluate the experience of the one seeking insight. While Baptists desire consensus within their fellowship that makes sense of these many testimonies, the very nature of experience as personal guarantees a high degree of diversity because of the different backgrounds and modes of expression represented in any group that gathers voluntarily.

If we were to put conceptual labels on the characteristics of experience that have emerged in these introductory comments, at least seven might be selected for emphasis, here listed in alphabetical order: empiricism, existentialism, individualism, personalism, pluralism, pragmatism, and subjectivism.

Look for these dimensions as our discussion unfolds because they will play a part in our evaluation of what the Baptist experience means.

BAPTIST EXPERIENCE IN THE PAST

Any religion based on experience is profoundly influenced by its immediate context; that is, it is shaped in response to what is actually happening at a particular time and place. By contrast, a religion based primarily on reason develops its emphases by engaging in rational thinking about ideas that may have come from thinkers living in any period of history and in any part of the world. Indeed, many denominations try to anchor their identity in a set of timeless doctrinal affirmations precisely in order to avoid the contingencies that come with changing times. But Baptists believe that God acts in history, that what comes to pass is guided by his divine purposes; thus, they are responsible to grapple with life as it unfolds so that their faith both shapes and is shaped by each new situation in which they find themselves. As George Buttrick once put it, Baptists view history as a dialogue with God in the language of events.¹ So let us begin with a look at how the Baptist character was formed in the crucible of the centuries through which they have journeyed to the present.

For a millennium stretching roughly from 500 to 1500 A.D., much of Christianity in the West was an integral part of a monolithic culture governed by hierarchical authority. The monarch ruled the state, the pope ruled the church, and the father ruled the home. But a period of enormous ferment stretching from the Renaissance of the fourteenth century to the Reformation of the sixteenth century began to challenge this top-down system of governance by the entrenched elite. For example, building on the fearless witness of John Wyclif and John Huss, the German reformer Martin Luther dared to set his personal convictions regarding the meaning of Scripture above the collective consensus of the established church, thereby introducing an emphasis on individualism and existentialism into his understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith.

Even though Luther and the French reformer John Calvin were able to break the grip of the papacy on the European Continent, they were not ready to carry their reforms to the point of freeing the church from its fateful embrace by the state, a relationship that had existed since the time of the Emperor Constantine early in the fourth century A.D. When the second wave of the

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Reformation reached England in the late sixteenth century, those determined to rid the established Anglican church of the last vestiges of popery came to be called Puritans because of their concern for the “purity” of the faith. Frustrated by resistance from the monarchy, which resulted in long delays and meager results, the more impatient of these reformers organized themselves into voluntary congregations and covenanted together to put into practice without delay the marks of a true church, thus earning such derisive epithets as Separatists, Nonconformists, Independents, and Dissenters.

Violently persecuted as sectarians, one English Separatist group from Lincolnshire under the leadership of John Smyth sought asylum in Holland where some members were later influenced by Mennonites in the Anabaptist tradition. In 1609, the Smyth group accepted the New Testament practice of believer’s baptism and applied it to a few dozen of their members, thereby becoming the first of what would be called Baptist churches in the historical sense of that term. Note two features of this originating impulse that are often neglected or misunderstood. First, while deeply indebted to the Protestant principle of continuous reform, Baptist identity was even more radical for it represented an effort to reform the Reformation! The movement arose, not in protest against a corrupt Catholicism but in protest against an incomplete Protestantism. Second, to contest the established church was not simply a matter of tinkering with ecclesiastical machinery. Rather, it represented a frontal challenge by ordinary citizens to the authority of the sovereign, to the cultural norms of society, and to the exclusive prerogatives of the clergy hierarchy. Indeed, the very existence of Baptists was subversive of the status quo as it had existed in Constantinian Christianity since classical antiquity!

Proof of this startling claim was provided when Baptists in the New World found themselves bitterly harassed for two centuries (late 1630s through early 1830s), not only by Anglicans in the South, but by their Congregational cousins in the North. The banishment of Roger Williams from the Massachusetts Bay Colony by the Puritans in the mid-1630s may be taken as prototypical of just how alien the Baptist idea was until the full implications of the American Revolution began to be grasped early in the nineteenth century. But even then, as Baptists entered a period of rapid growth spurred by the Second Great Awakening, spokesmen such as John Leland functioned to confound

both the cultural and religious elites of the day by insisting on the right of all people to think for themselves no matter what the results might be.

This iconoclastic impulse has continued to characterize the worldwide spread of Baptists to the present day. It is striking to observe the close correlation between patterns of growth and their political contexts. In Old World countries dominated by established churches, such as in Great Britain, Scandinavia, and Continental Europe, Baptist strength is limited or even in decline. In New World countries with strong traditions of religious liberty, such as the United States, Baptists are strong but growing only modestly. In Third World countries, however, where the struggle for religious freedom is still underway, such as Brazil, Nigeria, and Korea, plus China and Russia, Baptist life is vital and growth is rapid. It is not accidental that Baptists seem to flourish best in places where non-elites are pushing the envelope of freedom in reaching for the right to choose.

With this historical framework in place, let us ask how these formative events have shaped Baptist identity. As the Baptist movement approaches its 400th anniversary, the experiences over these centuries have contributed to what might be called a gene pool that continues to influence what Baptists are today. At the core of this denominational DNA is a tilt toward voluntarism, the freedom to follow an uncoerced conscience, and the right of self-determination in matters of religion. In resisting a faith externally imposed by traditional hierarchies, whether by the state, the church, or the family, Baptists were among the first to insist that individuals have both the right and the competence to function as self-reliant actors on the stage of history, indeed as agents of their own destiny in responding to the claims of God.

This willingness to question one's inherited lot in life and seek a better way received dramatic expression in the experience of believer's baptism, a practice so revolutionary that it gave the breakaway movement its name. At first, those who sought baptism as adults were actually being re-baptized since they had already been baptized as infants into the Church of England. By advocating a radically different understanding of baptism, the Baptists were defying the laws of their nation, the claims of the established church, and, in some cases, the wishes of their own families. But they were also symbolizing the inauguration of a whole new order both in their personal lives and in the life of their fellowship. Believer's baptism was not only a rite of initiation for

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the individual. It was also the foundation on which to build a believers' church that characterizes itself, not by how one is born, but by how one is born again (Jn. 3:1-7).

In the climate of modern American democracy, with its hard-won emphasis on religious liberty, this insistence on free choice now seems axiomatic to us; but during the first half of Baptist history, the notion that common folk could be trusted to handle their religious affairs was simply unthinkable. Because of the intransigence of entrenched elites, both religious and political, Baptists were able to gain a foothold in history only by courageous opposition to a ruling aristocracy that sought to suppress any nonconformity by overt persecution. This dissent did not reflect an argumentative spirit or a desire to engage in controversy for its own sake but was a principled plea for a fundamental human right that eventually became enshrined in the First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution.

But what about the second half of Baptists' 400-year history, particularly in the United States where the freedoms for which they fought so long have finally been largely accepted? Some think that Baptists can no longer function as responsible dissenters because they have moved from the margins to the mainstream of our national life. Has the meaning of the Baptist experience as an embattled minority during its first two centuries become irrelevant to the meaning of its experience as a flourishing and respected faith during the next two centuries of its existence? I suggest three reasons why the Baptist past is not obsolete as a guide to the Baptist present and future.

First, Baptists have always had a deep love for the Bible, which is full of courageous challenges to those "principalities and powers" that seek to dominate religion to their own advantage. Circumstances have changed, but the rivalry between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world still endures, calling believers to a militant faith if they would be true to the thrust of Scripture, which is where the early Baptist dissenters got their marching orders. Second, even today, particularly in Third World countries, Baptists are being persecuted and even martyred for their faith, often more so than in earlier years. Fellow believers living in more favorable circumstances need to use every means of dissent at their disposal to protest these infringements of basic human rights. Third, even in the United States with its commendable practice of religious liberty, there are always government and church leaders willing to form

covert alliances designed to trade favors that benefit one political party and one religious constituency to the exclusion of others. Baptists are well positioned to oppose such entanglements because they know from experience that church and state function best when neither encroaches on the domain of the other.

To summarize what we have learned from this swift survey of the past: Baptists emerged as a freedom movement some 150 years before the American and French Revolutions forever altered our understanding of human rights. What those uprisings accomplished for politics by armed warfare, Baptists accomplished for religion by personal suffering, which was to define a sphere of freedom for the human spirit that it had never enjoyed before. By insisting on the right of self-determination in all matters relating to God, a people with only the power of protest relativized many of the absolutes of their day, redressing serious imbalances that had been embedded in western Christendom for more than a millennium. This they did by championing the primacy of individuals over institutions, of autonomy over authority, and of commitment over conformity. And in so doing they gave back to the world a biblical faith that could not only be believed and practiced but could also be *experienced*.

BAPTIST EXPERIENCE IN THE PRESENT

As a movement originating among common people seeking freedom from the heavy hand of the ruling classes, early Baptists were not blessed with many trained intellectuals capable of developing a theology that would express their distinctive experiences in doctrinal form. No theologian has ever shaped the thought of Baptists as did Martin Luther for Lutherans, John Calvin for Presbyterians, or John Wesley for Methodists. As a result, Baptists borrowed most of their formal statements of faith from existing confessions that reflected the consensus of Christian belief. A comparative study reveals few differences between what Baptists and other denominations affirm about the classic doctrines of God, Creation, Sin, Salvation, and Eschatology. Baptists are not indifferent to propositional formulations of faith, but they are more interested in having concrete experiences of the realities that these abstract statements describe.

For this reason, we shall focus here on how the Baptist passion for personal autonomy in matters of conscience has nourished certain impelling

convictions grounded in experience rather than on how this concern received expression in approved statements of doctrine. Other treatments in “The Baptist Heritage Library” series (of which this booklet is a part) provide useful discussions of Baptist “principles” and “priorities” which I shall supplement by exploring five convictions grounded in living a freely chosen life of faith. Because these characteristic ways of viewing the Christian faith are more instinctive than reflective, we shall see that they are often expressed better in the hymns we sing than in the confessions we recite.

The Priority of Personal Conversion

At the bedrock of the Baptist mindset is a conviction that Christianity begins, continues, and ends as a personal experience with God revealed in Jesus Christ through the witness of the Holy Spirit. This divine/human encounter results in a transforming relationship sustained by the Lord of the universe living at the center of one’s very being. One of the first choruses that children learn to sing contains the words “Come into my heart, Lord Jesus. Come in today, come in to stay.” This relationship is so immediate and intimate that no proxy may be interposed between the individual and God. Earthly agents such as parents and preachers may encourage and facilitate a response of faith to the beckoning of the divine, but they are only witnesses, not mediators. Each person, however humble, has both the right and the responsibility to decide, without interference, how to respond to the invitation of the gospel. As the old song puts it, “Nothing between my soul and the Savior.”

Baptists are not unaware of the dangers that lurk in this emphasis on personal experience. When is a child mature enough to make a meaningful decision regarding spiritual matters? When is a decision truly one’s own rather than the result of pulpit persuasion or crowd pressure? Indeed, when do we know our own mind and motives well enough not to be deceived by subjective fantasies? In addressing such concerns, Baptists dare to believe both that God is personal and that he seeks personal relationships with his own. In his infinite wisdom and power, he is surely great enough to authenticate the experience of his presence in ways that differ uniquely from experiences of our own making, thereby helping us to distinguish clearly between the two. In any case, as we mature we tend to evaluate our experiences by their results. Since God alone

can produce a conversion experience radical enough to be called a “new birth,” Baptists are content to validate those decisions that lead to the kind of life-changing consequences that none of us could ever create or control.

The Sufficiency of Scripture

Baptists have long been known for their reliance on the Bible as “the sole rule of faith and order.” In their early conflicts with the established church, this axiom championed the teachings of Scripture over every form of ecclesiastical tradition that regulated the content of the faith, such as creeds and the rulings of councils. Because the state church enjoyed the backing of the ruling authorities, many of its beliefs and practices were enacted into law; hence, anyone could be prosecuted for failure to conform. Thus the “Bible only” battle cry of the Baptists was an audacious attempt to oppose both civil and ecclesiastical authority by appeal to divine authority—that is, to set God above both church and state!

The key issue in this revolt is often misunderstood even by Baptists because modern circumstances, especially in the United States, are so different from those with which Baptists struggled centuries earlier. We tend to think that this controversy arose because Baptists were “for” the Bible while their opponents were “against” it. Far from it! The Anglican persecutors in England and the Congregational persecutors in New England made just as exalted claims for the Bible as did the Baptists. In fact, Baptists used similar wording about Scripture in their doctrinal statements as did their enemies! The contention that divided them was the claim of the established church that its official pronouncements embodied the true interpretation of the Bible; thus, any deviation represented a false understanding of Scripture. After all, ecclesiastical tradition beginning with the Apostolic Fathers represented centuries of cumulative effort by the most learned minds of the church to distill and apply the teachings of Scripture. How could the spontaneous interpretation of rank amateurs who lacked both training and supervision possibly overturn the carefully controlled interpretation of experts whose findings had been approved at the highest levels?

The freedom to interpret the Bible afresh is not viewed by Baptists as license to substitute private opinion for long-standing consensus. But they know that Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to guide his followers into fresh truth (Jn. 16:13), a promise the first Christians claimed as they reinterpreted the Old

Testament in ways that it had never been understood before. They also know that God is guiding his people into new situations where fresh applications of the faith can be attempted that have never been possible before (Jn. 16:12). Most of all, they know that studying the Bible avidly, experiencing it directly for themselves, leads to insights not available to those so content with their venerable traditions that they seldom bother to check the scriptural source from whence those traditions are said to have been derived. Just as Baptists insist that the approach to God be direct and immediate, so must the access to Scripture be just as open and unencumbered without first filtering its truth through the lens of the reigning consensus. Only in this way does the unfettered Word retain its freedom to reform the church itself!

An Uncoerced Faith

Both in England and in Colonial America, Baptists struggled against the coercive power of an established church that had privileges granted to it by law. But their insistence on separation of church and state was not limited to a desire for disestablishment. Rather, they were seeking an independent domain for faith that was free of all earthly constraints, a setting in which each person was answerable directly to God. Ever since the time of Constantine, the state had sought to use religion both to maintain public order by inculcating morality and to legitimate temporal authority as seen, for example, in the concept of “the *divine* right of kings.” But Baptists were certain that faith does not flourish best when intimidated by fear of the crown or even by pressure from the local magistrates.

Baptists’ plea to provide a protected sphere for religion does not mean that church and state should be separate because the former is good and the latter is evil. Rather, the principle extends to the church itself, which should protect its members from a clergy hierarchy seeking to exercise control over individual believers. Each person should feel free to embrace God, to interpret Scripture, to formulate beliefs, and to practice discipleship without coercion from minister, deacons, or groups seeking to enforce their views. Likewise, congregations should feel free of coercive efforts by denominational officials to have them adopt positions and practices with which they do not agree. The point here is really very simple: one cannot have an authentic experience if its outcome has

already been predetermined by someone else! To be sure, individuals make mistakes when they are set free to determine the shape of their obedience to the living God but, as history abundantly demonstrates, authoritarian leaders also make mistakes when they try to control those under them, with the further disadvantage that errors made by clergy professionals with a reputation to defend are almost impossible to overturn while errors made by lay amateurs with only their best interests at stake are more easily corrected.

Baptists have developed two distinctive emphases to help them avoid entangling alliances with any kind of coercive power structures. The first is sometimes called “soul competency,” at other times the “priesthood of the believer,” both expressions underscoring the right and responsibility of each individual to seek a relationship with God based on one’s own personal commitments. The other emphasis is on “local church autonomy,” which begins with the congregation and extends to every level of the denomination. By giving the right of self-determination to each person and group, Baptists deliberately diffuse the distribution of power so that it will not flow downward in coercive fashion as almost always happens in any hierarchical structure.

The Ties that Bind

The twin emphases on individualism and independence do raise an acute problem for Baptists, namely, how to maintain unity and order in both their congregations and their denominational bodies. Stories of church splits are commonplace, and the fact that there are at least eighty separate Baptist groups in North America speaks for itself.² Indeed, one prominent church historian, Winthrop Hudson, himself a Baptist leader, castigated the traditional point of view described above as “based upon an anarchical principle that breeds disunity, division, separation, fragmentation, and proliferation.”³ After an extended analysis of the “atomizing effect” of this “nonchurchly understanding,” he concluded that the “shibboleths” of soul competency and local autonomy “linger on to create confusion, introduce dissension, inhibit action, and prevent any intelligent statement of the theological undergirding of denominational life from being formulated.”⁴

It is certainly true that Baptists did begin by dismantling the external bulwarks of church order. They rejected an authoritarian clergy, they repudiated

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the role of binding creeds, and they renounced civil laws that gave government the right to enforce religious uniformity. So seemingly reckless was this demolition of the established church that its advocates accused the Baptists of being anarchists whose decentralizing tendencies would lead to the collapse of Constantinian Christianity. But in the place of external props, Baptists put something profoundly internal as the foundation of their solidarity, what Paul called “the unity of the Spirit” (Eph. 4:3, NRSV). The very experience of conversion in which they were filled with the Spirit made them one with other Spirit-filled believers. This oneness in the Spirit was what the New Testament called “fellowship” (*koinonia*), and it quickly became a cardinal Baptist conviction nourished by a rich fund of experience that found expression in the song, “Blest Be the Tie that Binds.”

Hudson was correct to claim that issues of unity and order raise the more basic question of the nature of the church. In a word, although the Constantinian emphasis was on the church as an *institution*, Baptists emphasized the church as a *fellowship*, a spiritual brotherhood, a community of the called. The key difference in these two conceptions is that the Baptist understanding puts responsibility squarely on each member to ensure that the church accomplishes its mission. Instead of depending on external reinforcements to maintain cohesiveness, a polity of self-governance in which all are equal motivates laypersons to work together in providing leadership, teaching the Bible, cultivating prospects, visiting the sick, underwriting the budget, playing the piano, and fulfilling a host of other duties involved in functioning as a church. The evidence is not convincing that an institutional approach to church order elicits that kind of commitment from the laity.

The same dynamics at work at the congregational level have been extended by Baptists to the denominational level. The autonomy that gives each local church maximum flexibility to respond to the challenges of its particular setting is also granted to district, state, national, and international bodies. That is, no denominational entity has authority over other such entities except when they enter into voluntary partnerships as equals. Instead, each body is guided by representatives from the churches who come together as a cross-section of grassroots Baptist life to review and approve its work. Again, this deliberate avoidance of a pyramidal power structure does not create chaos

but rather establishes incentives designed to ensure cooperation. For it means that everything Baptists do as a denomination lives or dies by whether it serves the needs of its supporting constituency. By contrast, those systems that depend upon vested authority rather than voluntary persuasion tend to become insensitive to the expectations of those whose support is essential.

A Story to Tell

The same convictions that some see threatening church unity and order also seem to undercut evangelism and missions as well. Does individualism tend to make Baptists inbred and therefore indifferent to uncommitted outsiders? Likewise, does localism tend to inhibit an interest in global outreach? True to its tolerance of great diversity, some Baptist groups have been anti-missionary, such as hyper-Calvinist Primitive Baptists, but most Baptists are noted for an aggressive witness both at home and abroad. Why this unceasing effort to reach every person with the gospel? The urgency of evangelism roots in Baptist self-determination. By insisting that the voluntary baptism of believers replace the automatic baptism of infants, Baptists created churches that are always one generation away from extinction! Since they are not part of an established church mandated by law as the proper place to register births, solemnize marriages, and record deaths, the only way to attract members is through a winsome witness. Because of the crucial importance of an uncoerced conscience, this witness is offered, not to proselyte, nor to judge one's inherited religion, nor to claim superiority, but to give all persons a choice regarding Jesus Christ as Lord of their lives.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Swiss theologian Emil Brunner came to realize that the Baptist sense of mission is distinctive because a free church independent of the state is different from a Constantinian church established by the state. Baptists operate under what Brunner called "the principle of mutual competition," that is, they have to compete for every person whom they reach because they never get members as the result of natural birth, civil law, or cultural tradition. Instead, all who affiliate do so by conscious choice, and competition is inherent in the act of choice. Then Brunner added, "The law of competition has had a beneficial effect in that it has compelled the Churches to exert themselves. Only by remaining vital could they exist at all."⁵

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Which is but another way of saying that the faith most freely chosen is the faith most freely shared.

As we have considered these five core convictions that are so characteristic of how Baptists shape the Christian faith, I hope you have seen that common to them all is the desire for self-authenticating experiences of divine reality. As the twentieth-century British Baptist leader H. Wheeler Robinson put it, “Their [Baptists’] passion for liberty was ultimately inspired by the supreme positive principle, which stands in contrast with all kinds of emphasis on the external expression of religion—the *intrinsic* authority of the Gospel, which witnesses to itself by its own nature.”⁶ What Baptists have spent four centuries learning for themselves and then sharing with others is that unrestricted spiritual freedom provides the optimum circumstance in which to experience the Christian faith. Now let us explore what the relevance of such an approach might be in the years to come.

BAPTIST EXPERIENCE IN THE FUTURE

One of the great challenges facing any experiential religion is how to process new experiences prompted by changing times, particularly those that seem to threaten the continuity of the movement’s beliefs and practices. In other words, if tomorrow is very different from today, can Baptists keep from becoming a very different denomination in order to remain relevant and survive? This is a particularly acute question just now because there is a strong sense among many that we are entering a major new era of human history. Having just ended a century of horrendous wars, many have concluded that the modern age launched by the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century is now exhausted. The fact that we refer to its successor as “postmodernism” means that we have not yet decided what the next period will be like except to agree that it will be different. In this climate of breathtaking change, I suggest three areas in which Baptists need, if anything, to magnify what they have learned by long experience.

The Need for Dissent

Baptists need to raise an unequivocal dissent against those guardians of the status quo who would deny the full exercise of religious freedom to any

person for any reason. White Baptists in the American South almost completely abandoned this prophetic role when they became so dominant as to constitute the unofficial established church of Dixie. Fortunately, the torch was not extinguished but passed to African American Baptists whose churches took up the struggle for freedom during the Civil Rights Movement that overturned enforced segregation. There is still much work to be done in this area as African American and white Baptists unite both to overcome the tragic legacy of the past and to offer their newfound sense of equality to the many other ethnic groups that have migrated to our country in recent years.

In all of our churches, Baptist and otherwise, there is no larger group whose spiritual freedoms have been restricted than women who make up the majority of the membership. To be sure, they are free to work in the kitchen, keep the children, and sing in the choir, but in many congregations they are arbitrarily restricted in practice, if not in policy, from serving in lay leadership positions such as deacon, in clergy roles such as pastor, and in denominational assignments such as institutional trustees. But listen to their experiences of conversion and calling and you will discover a giftedness and commitment that is in every way the equal of those experiences that God grants to men. In the past, religious limitations placed on women were assumed to be legitimate because they coincided with prevailing cultural patterns that prescribed the role of women in society. But now that there is more gender equality in the secular world than in the churches, Baptists have many years of work before them to root out the last vestiges of discrimination that embarrass our most basic convictions.

On the global scene, the Baptist quest to experience the fullness of a freely chosen faith speaks to one of the great issues of our time: Are earth's children to be governed from below or from above, by authority that flows upward or downward? That is, will human destiny be determined by the common people, the disenfranchised masses, the neglected majority, or by the traditional elites, the hereditary aristocracies, the privileged minority? Obviously, there are whole populations in the totalitarian Second World and the underdeveloped Third World that have never known even a small measure of the religious freedom that Baptists long fought to win. The overriding imperative of the new era we are entering may be to help a host of Second and Third World peoples learn even the rudiments of religious freedom. At the moment, particularly in

the volatile Middle East, it seems that it may take decades, if not centuries, to make substantial progress in this area.

Far from being irrelevant, the Baptist experience as a freedom movement is urgently needed in the new age being born. All about us are what Emma Lazarus called “huddled masses yearning to breathe free”—those whose vision is constricted by the lack of adequate education, those trapped in a stagnant economy without any chance for productive work, those constrained by a collectivist business culture offering prosperity at the price of captivity, and those living with a sense of permanent homelessness desperately in search of roots. If Baptists will but recover the radical thrust of their originating impulse, they will be well positioned to tutor those yearning for freedom by shaping with them the rich potential of an unfettered faith.

A Redefinition of Church-State Agenda

In the beginning, Baptists had to become aggressive political activists in order to achieve their primary goals because they wanted a kind of religious freedom that only the government could grant. Their struggle was not successful until the American Revolution created a democracy, rather than a monarchy, that made an established church illegal—the last state church, in Massachusetts, was not abolished until the 1830s. As Baptists in the United States began to flourish under a system that encouraged the free exercise of religion, they gradually shifted their attention away from the political arena except for a few special interests such as prohibiting the sale of alcoholic beverages. Their main concern in the area of public affairs was to guard the wall separating church and state.

But in recent years, geopolitical developments have redefined the church-state agenda in ways that may make it a dominant issue for years to come. Suddenly, the western world finds itself under attack by terrorists determined to pit the two most powerful religions in the world against each other in a fight to the finish that they view as a “holy war.” It is remarkable how this conflict reenacts the dynamics that gave rise to the Baptist experience. Once again, we have an assertion of religious absolutism by a clerical hierarchy enjoying the protection of theocratic states noted for their autocratic ways that have largely disenfranchised the majority of their citizens, especially women. Lacking a

system of checks-and-balances not only *within* government, as with the separation of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, but also *between* government and other forces in society, such as a free press, free schools, and free churches, a fanatical fringe of Islam has been allowed to run wild for lack of what we have identified above as the distinctive Baptist contribution to church-state relations. Alas, the religious wars are not over!

One of the dangers of fighting a religious war in which victory is as difficult to define as it is to achieve is that we become like our enemies. Already the lure of theocracy is all about us as various religious groups seek governmental favors in exchange for political support. But what if efforts are made in the name of a militant patriotism to co-opt Christianity as an American or Western religion so that it no longer functions as a global religion without allegiance to any one country or culture? Baptists know from experience that when the interests of the church are no broader than the interests of the state, the church loses its leverage to reconcile those divisions that condemn the world to perpetual strife. The distinctive Baptist understanding of religious liberty is not some denominational oddity, a mere hiccup on the side of history. Rather, it offers an essential contribution to the development of a post-9/11 geopolitic by enshrining the insight that the awesome spiritual power of religion may not be linked to the equally awesome temporal power of the state if any semblance of freedom is to survive.

The Urgency of Intellectual Work

A great deal of serious intellectual work will be required if the meaning of the Baptist experience is to influence the most thoughtful minds and thus shape an agenda to address the complex challenges of the years ahead. My greatest fear is that the most valuable contribution that Baptists have to offer will be ignored because it is not presented in clear and compelling terms. Thus far, most Baptist thinkers have been pastor-theologians and seminary professors concerned primarily with understanding conversion and church life to the neglect of broader socio-political issues. Without a legacy of deep involvement in the public square, such as denominations in the Constantinian tradition have long cultivated, efforts to gain a hearing by key strategists have been superficial at best, not because the Baptist perspective is weak but because its advocates have so little training and

THE MEANING OF THE BAPTIST EXPERIENCE

experience in commending it to others. Here let me hint at a few of the ways to prepare for more fruitful dialogue in the days to come.

We need a comprehensive understanding of the role of experience in human affairs. A century ago, William James pioneered the philosophical and psychological study of religious experience, which has been updated recently by Charles Taylor. Baptist faculty in colleges and universities need to supplement this work by exploring how experience shapes our interpretation of history, our appreciation of the fine arts, our reading of literature, and even our research in the social and natural sciences. Indeed, experience plays a direct part in everything we learn because learning itself *is* an experience, but this role is often obscured or unappreciated. For some influential intellectuals, experience is one key in the shift from modernism to postmodernism. The former era is said to have neglected experience because it was too rational, objective, and impersonal, while the latter era now encourages experience through its emphasis on realism, particularism, and the tolerance of ambiguity. Obviously, the best Baptist minds need to be in the thick of this discussion.

A lively intramural debate also needs to be underway regarding the relation of experience to theology. Lamentably little has been done by Baptists in this area since E. Y. Mullins, stimulated by the work of William James, tackled the subject a century ago in *The Axioms of Religion*.⁷ One way to frame the issue at a time of rapid change is to ask whether experience should be shaped by theology or theology by experience. Many Baptists are so accustomed to the former option that the latter sounds almost heretical. But consider the biblical account of the conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10. When Peter saw that the Roman centurion and the Gentiles with him believed and were filled with the Holy Spirit, he authorized their baptism even though they had not been circumcised in accordance with the theology of the Jerusalem church (Acts 10:44-48). Criticized by the circumcision party for this doctrinal deviation, all Peter could reply was, "Who was I that I could withstand God?" (Acts 11:17, RSV). In other words, here was an inherited theology struggling to catch up with new and surprising experiences!

In the New Testament, which is the sole rule of faith and order for Baptists, early Christians made a number of remarkable changes in order to reach out beyond Judaism to the wider Gentile world of its day. Not only did

they abandon the practice of circumcision; they also changed the Sabbath on Saturday to the Lord's Day on Sunday and replaced their worship in the temple, priesthood, and sacrificial system in Jerusalem with worship in their homes. The amazing thing is that all of this happened in one generation without any explicit doctrinal guidelines handed down by Jesus or the first apostles. Instead, the New Testament churches pursued their mission with a passion and then formulated a theology to describe what God was doing in their midst. If the Baptists of tomorrow will go where God is going and do what God is doing, they will meet the challenge of their age. For they already know by experience that "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is *freedom*" (2 Cor. 3:17, RSV).

Having belonged to the Baptist family for more than seventy-five years, I have known it at its best and at its worst. I shall doubtless remain a Baptist for the rest of my days, not because I have found the Baptist way superior to all others, but because, by providence and persuasion, these are my people whose experiences have shaped many of my experiences. Speaking at the bicentennial celebration of Columbia University in 1954, J. Robert Oppenheimer described the ties that bind me to the Baptists even as I remain open to the total witness of the church in its manifold expressions:

We know too much for one man to know much; we live too variously to live as one. . . . Our knowledge separates as well as it unites; our orders disintegrate as well as bind; our art brings us together and sets us apart. Diversity, complexity, richness overwhelm the man of today. Superficiality and fatigue become the temptations of those perpetually and precariously balanced between the infinitely open and the intimate. [In such a time,] Each . . . will have to cling to what is close to him, to what he knows, to what he can do, to his friends and his tradition and his love, lest he be dissolved in a universal confusion and know nothing and love nothing.⁸

ENDNOTES

1. A central theme in George Arthur Buttrick, *Christ and History* (New York: Abingdon, 1963). For specific references, see the Index of Persons and Subjects under "History: A Dialogue" on page 173.
2. J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 7th ed. (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2003), 556-85.
3. Winthrop S. Hudson, *Baptists in Transition: Individualism and Christian Responsibility* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979), 21.
4. *Ibid.*, 27.
5. Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation*, Dogmatics, vol. III (London: Lutterworth Press, 1962), 80.
6. H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists*, rev. ed (London: Kingsgate Press, 1946), 136. Italics in the original.
7. E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908).
8. Cited by Martin E. Marty, *The New Shape of American Religion* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 143, from *The Reporter*, January 13, 1955.

Discussing the Meaning of the Baptist Experience

A guide for congregational conversation

William E. Hull's *The Meaning of the Baptist Experience* invites readers to understand Baptist identity through a faith that is personally experienced and freely chosen. This discussion explores how that identity shapes our relationships with God, with one another, and with our neighbors.

For the leader

Plan for 45–60 minutes. Before the gathering, invite participants to read the booklet and mark one passage that resonates with them and one that raises a question.

For a 45-minute session, use questions 1 and 6 and choose three of the remaining questions. For a full hour, use all six. The follow-up prompts are optional. Reserve the final five minutes for the closing reflection.

Encourage participants to connect their reflections with particular passages in Hull's essay. Welcome differences in experience and interpretation, allow time for thought, and make room for people who have spoken less. Participants may pass on sharing a personal experience.

Hull's essay reflects its 2008 setting. His descriptions of the Baptist "present" and "future" offer an opportunity to consider both what has changed and what remains unfinished. Page references below follow the booklet's printed page numbers.

If the group needs two sessions

Use questions 1–3 in the first meeting and questions 4–6 in the second. Begin the second gathering by inviting participants to share anything they have continued to think about since the first conversation.

1 When faith becomes our own

Read alongside the introduction and “The Priority of Personal Conversion,” pages 7–8 and 14–15.

Hull emphasizes that others can nurture our faith, but they cannot experience it on our behalf.

What has helped faith become your own, and how have other people or a congregation shaped that experience?

If helpful, ask:

- How might faith that begins in childhood become our own in new ways throughout adulthood?
- How can a church make room for people whose experiences of faith differ from the stories most often told in that congregation?

2 Why freedom matters

Read alongside “Baptist Experience in the Past” and “An Uncoerced Faith,” pages 9–13 and 16–17.

Hull describes Baptists as a freedom movement. In his account, believer’s baptism expresses a personal response to God and a freely chosen commitment to a community of faith.

How does understanding Baptists as a freedom movement deepen or challenge your understanding of Baptist identity?

If helpful, ask:

- Where do we see the difference between encouraging someone’s faith and pressuring that person to conform?
- What responsibilities come with the freedom to follow one’s conscience?

3 Reading Scripture with conviction and openness

Read alongside “The Sufficiency of Scripture” and “The Urgency of Intellectual Work,” pages 15–16 and 23–25.

Hull links confidence in Scripture with a willingness to reconsider inherited interpretations. He also asks how new experiences may change our understanding of what God is doing.

When experience and a familiar interpretation of Scripture seem to be in tension, how can a congregation work through that tension faithfully?

If helpful, ask:

- Has another person’s experience helped you hear a familiar biblical passage differently?
- What helps us distinguish a fresh insight from an interpretation that simply confirms what we already want to believe?

4 What holds us together

Read alongside “The Ties that Bind” and “A Story to Tell,” pages 17–20.

Hull recognizes that freedom can lead to division. He also describes fellowship, shared responsibility, and a freely offered witness as central to Baptist life.

What holds our congregation together when we do not all think alike, and what does belonging ask of each of us?

If helpful, ask:

- Recall a time when people in the church worked faithfully together despite disagreement. What made that possible?
- How might our shared life make the Christian faith inviting to others while respecting their freedom to respond?

5 Living out the freedom we affirm

Read alongside “The Need for Dissent” and “A Redefinition of Church-State Agenda,” pages 20–23.

Hull challenges Baptists to examine whether they extend to others the freedom they cherish for themselves. He addresses racial injustice, restrictions on women’s ministry, and the entanglement of religious and political power.

Where do you see a connection—or a gap—between the freedoms Baptists affirm and the way we practice our faith?

Choose one area to explore:

- **Race and fellowship:** What might we learn by listening to Baptist congregations whose racial history and experience differ from our own? How could that listening shape a relationship?
- **Women’s ministry:** Beyond affirming women as pastors, how can a congregation recognize, nurture, and make room for women’s gifts and calling?
- **Religious liberty:** What does our commitment to church–state separation ask of us when people whose beliefs differ from ours seek the same freedom we value?

6 What we hope to pass on

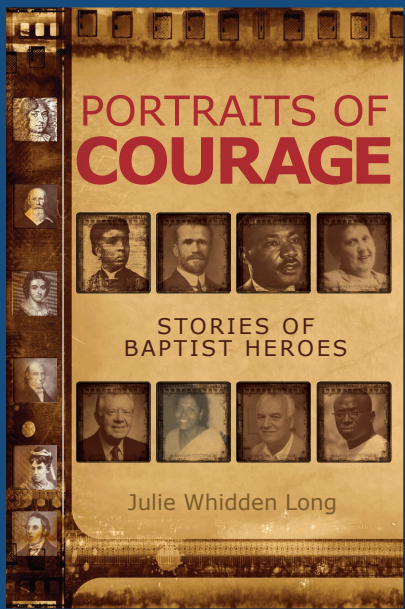
Read alongside Hull’s concluding reflections, page 25.

Hull closes by affirming his belonging to the Baptist family while remaining open to the wider Christian community.

What is one Baptist conviction you hope the next generation will experience in our congregation, and what practice would help make that possible?

Invite brief responses. Close by naming a question or possibility the group would like to keep exploring.

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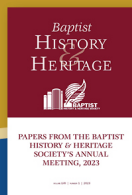
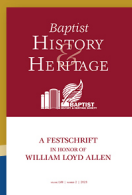
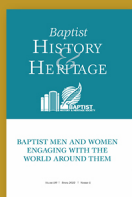


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William E. Hull (1930–2013), research professor at Samford University from 2000 to 2013, was a highly acclaimed educator, minister, author, and lecturer. He earned a B.A. at Samford and the M.Div. and Ph.D. at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and did advanced study at the University of Göttingen, Germany, and Harvard University. At Southern Seminary, he served successively in 1954-75 in the New Testament department as fellow, instructor, assistant professor, associate professor, and professor; and variously as chair of the New Testament department, director of graduate studies in and dean of the School of Theology, and provost. He pastored First Baptist Church, Shreveport, Louisiana, in 1975-87. He served Samford University in 1987-2000 variously as provost, acting president, and university professor. He served in denominational roles on associational, convention, and Baptist World Alliance levels, delivered 11 lectureships, spoke on *The Baptist Hour* radio program, wrote and contributed to numerous books and articles, and received many recognitions, such as the Outstanding Educator Award presented in 1999 by the Association of Southern Baptist Colleges and Schools.

