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Foreword

Three of the important trends of thought in the contemporary world relate to community, authority, and the visual. There has been, in the first place, a growth in appreciation of human solidarity, encompassing both a rising sense of the value of corporate life and a corresponding decline in unquestioning praise for individualism. One symptom has been increasing respect for the high valuation of social groups in the third world; another has been the emergence of the political theory labeled ‘communitarianism.’ Secondly, there has been a questioning of authority in the name of freedom. Traditional ways have been challenged and earlier social roles have been transformed. The most striking instances have probably been the feminist uprising against patriarchy and the demand for an end to discrimination on grounds of race. The third tendency has been the inexorable advance of the visual at the expense of the verbal. Television is the preferred medium of the many; radio is for the few. The movie rather than the novel is the standard point of cultural reference. What is seen is what leaves its mark. There have, of course, been many other developments such as the growth of prosperity in the post-war world and the information revolution of the computer age, but the three phenomena relating to community, authority, and the visual have become some of the most salient phenomena of the day.

To these trends Baptists can speak with peculiar persuasiveness. They believe in a community, the gathered church. The centrality of their churchmanship has sometimes been obscured by an ill-judged attempt to justify their principles in terms of individualism. But Baptists assert the obligation of Christians to form committed communities of like-minded people. Again, they believe in sharing authority.

While recognizing the need for wise leadership of the church, they insist that every church member has a duty to choose the leaders and to hold them to account. While acknowledging, too, the supreme earthly authority of biblical revelation, they regard it as essential for every church member to have the privilege of discerning how the Bible applies to church life in our day. And they believe in the power of the visual. The ceremony from which they take their name is a visible sign of the totality of Christian commitment. Baptists do not neglect the outward display of inward conviction, but on the contrary require submission to a rite that can be seen. The Baptist expression of the gospel is embodied in a form well adapted to the present.

Consequently Baptists challenge some odd but widespread Christian opinions. In the first place the claim is often heard that the question of which denomination to join is a matter of convenience, not of conviction. A believer, on this understanding, must take pains to learn the truths of salvation from the scriptures but need not trouble to explore how those truths impinge on the corporate existence of the church. The Bible, it is supposed, applies to the life of the individual but not to the life of the Christian community. Baptists, however, adopt a different stance. They want to proclaim biblical teaching about personal faith in Jesus Christ, but they notice that the Bible also contains guidance about how Christians should live together. Believers must be bound together in churches. It is actually rather strange to expect that the Bible should be concerned with the individual and not with the community. And any reader of the New Testament letters will realize that it is not so. Christians need to regulate their corporate life by the scriptures. That is what Baptist principles are about.

Another odd belief is that the exercise of authority among Christians ought to be restricted to a few. Yet that view is held, at least tacitly, by a majority of professing adherents of the faith. They hold that only a small body—whether bishops, presbyteries, or executive apostles—is qualified to lead. Even many who believe passionately in the application of democracy to political life often want to exclude most Christians from participation in crucial decision-making in the church. But Baptists see that Christ transforms human beings by giving them fresh insights. They are given an aptitude for participation

in the government of the kingdom of God. That is often formulated as a belief in the priesthood of all believers. It would probably better be expressed as the kingship of all believers. Christians share in the kingly authority of Christ and so are qualified to join in the rule of his church. However it is put into words, Baptists want to insist that authority in the church rests ultimately with all the committed members. They have as inclusive a view of the ideal human society as anybody else.

A third oddity sometimes encountered among other Christians relates to the practice of baptism. Those who wish to defend the acceptance of infants for baptism commonly appeal to the Bible. Noticing that we are told that in certain respects there is a correspondence between New Testament baptism and Old Testament circumcision, they rush to the inference that the two rites ought to be administered to the same individuals. Since babies were once circumcised, they should now be baptized. But Baptists want to point out a fallacy in that argument. Under the old covenant, only male babies were baptized. If the case is valid that the subjects of baptism should be the same as the subjects of circumcision, then only boys should be baptized. The line of argument, though often heard, is extremely ill conceived. Baptists know that the visual symbol of baptism is powerful when the candidates are those who choose to be immersed out of personal conviction. Believer's baptism is the television of the gospel.

So a collection of sermons setting out Baptist distinctives is timely. On the one hand it speaks to our age; on the other it challenges conventional thinking among Christians. In a late nineteenth-century pamphlet entitled *The Duty of Baptists to Teach Their Distinctive Views*, the Southern Baptist theologian John A. Broadus declared that "it is not necessarily an arrogant or presumptuous thing in us if we strive to bring honored fellow-Christians to views which we honestly believe to be more scriptural, and therefore more wholesome." These sermons, while showing a similar respect for other believers, also commend Baptist faith and order with conviction.

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