

First Place Winner — 2004

Faith On the Run: Why I'm Still a Baptist **Mark 10:46-52 and selections from Hebrews 11**

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Today is Reformation Sunday—not generally a high liturgical moment for most Baptist congregations.¹ The ones who do commemorate the occasion usually focus attention on the Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli—key figures in the mainstream Reformation, what historians refer to as the Magisterial Reformation. Rare is the attention paid to other dissident leaders of the time—people like Conrad Grebel, Pilgrim Marpeck, or Menno Simons. These are among the leaders of the radical wing of the Reformation, dismissed as “incendiaries of the common-wealth,” tagged by their enemies, and now by history, as Anabaptists. More on that later.

I have two personal and important associations with Reformation Sunday. One is the fact that my wife Nancy and I were jointly ordained twenty-two years ago on this Sunday.

The second association involves a trip Nancy and I took with my parents several years ago. After retiring, my dad became absorbed with tracing our family history. He tracked down a good deal of information, linking our origins to what is now the Schlesweg-Holstein region of northern Germany—formerly part of the old Danish Kingdom, where there was once a Danish King named Sehested. But Dad wanted to search for specific documents that could not be obtained from a distance, so we went rummaging through public archives and church libraries in several cities from Hamburg to the Danish border.

Among the documents we discovered on that trip was correspondence, written in 1866, which named my great-great grandfather, Claus Henrich Sehested. [In the reigning Prussian Empire, spelling of Sehested—pronounced SESted—became “Sehestedt.”] After returning home, we located someone who could translate the documents (written in Old German) and were stunned to find out that the letters were initiated by a Lutheran Church official requesting that Claus report to a “Pastor Schwandter” in the state church office to explain why he had joined the “Sabbatisten” congregation.

(After correspondence with several European church historians, our best guess is that the *Sabbatisten*—one of the many small dissident Christian groups lumped together under the Anabaptist

label—are ancestors of those believers known here in North America as “Seventh Day Baptists,” so-named because of their conviction that Jesus never changed the day for proper worship (from Saturday to Sunday). These *Sabbatisten*, like most Anabaptists, were pacifists, as were Seventh Day Baptists in their early days).

In reply to this ultimatum, my great-great grandfather asserted that he had no intention of reporting as directed; that he found the principles of his new church “more biblical;” and that he did not recognize Pastor Schwandter’s authority.

I’ve known since seminary that my deepest Baptist roots rest with my Anabaptist ancestors in Continental Europe; so discovering that I actually have their genes as well was quite thrilling.

There was a time when Baptists (whose Southern-flavored phonetic pronunciation is “Babdists”), like mesquite trees in West Texas, were viewed with annoyance. But somewhere between the Carter and Clinton/Gore administrations, mesquite-grilled food became the culinary rage. And we *Babdists* started learning the social graces.

Since Will Campbell has a fair amount to do with the fact that I’m still a Baptist, I’m tempted to start by mimicking his voice with something like *‘cause I’m po’ white trash and proud of it*. But Bro. Will is a species all to himself. I’m just happy to be in the same genus.

So I’d best speak first-person, which is a very Baptist thing to do—and a major reason I am willing, after some serious ancestral interrogation, to lean into the tradition of my childhood nurture. “Testimony” is a treasured activity in Baptist circles and an important reason why I maintain that identity. Testimonies are personal, unscripted narratives of faith. They are stories of conviction, of choices made, both for and against, often under trying circumstances.

The significance of testimony bespeaks the emphasis placed on conversion. In our evangelical passion, we have always known what my Roman Catholic friends now say best: disarming the heart and disarming the nations are parallel struggles. As a liturgical genre, testimony is more associated with the laity than with clergy, evidence of our notion of “the priesthood of the believer.” When testimony time comes, the floor is open to anybody, even the young, the untrained, the non-ordained.

As T.S. Eliot complained, we know too much but are convinced of too little. Testimony is the language of conviction. Testimony involves wombish disclosure, the entanglements of Spirit and flesh. The stories come from the trenches. They summon memories of passion, of risky business, of suffering,

but ultimately of joy. They are tales of conception and gestation, birth and rebirth. Death is cheated on a daily basis.

Part of the reason I'm (still) a Baptist is implied in the very name. We Baptists love water music. Our roots stem from the nonconformist traditions in sixteenth-century Continental Europe and seventeenth-century England. Leaders of the "left wing" of the Reformation were convinced, after first hand reading of scripture, that baptism was for believers only—no faith by proxy. Their opponents dubbed them *Anabaptists*, or "rebaptizers." Contrary to popular opinion, the debate was not so much about how much water was enough (though the dissenters usually performed the rite by full or partial immersion in water, or by pouring a pitcher of water over the head). The debate was over the question of whether citizenship in the Body of Christ was coterminous with citizenship in the state. The subversive character of divine obedience was framed in dramatic terms, especially so with most of the Continental radicals who also refused on biblical grounds to wield the sword in defense of the state.

These civilly-disobedient believers were not hounded and hung, butchered and burned by Roman and Reformation leaders because of a disagreement over how wet you had to get in order to be really baptized. Or even how old you had to be. No, the conflict revolved around the content of the new covenant signified by baptismal waters. For the Anabaptists, the common purse was a more significant confession than the common creed. (Ananias and Sapphara were not struck down because they refused to affirm the Bible was literally true!) For the radical reformers, Jesus' own rejection of the military option—however sacred the purpose might be conceived—was self-evident. This deconstruction of the "myth of redemptive violence" (Walter Wink), and the reconstruction of a new political vision—a vision articulated by the testimony of Jesus—was what made the Anabaptists such a threat. And also why they found themselves on the run.

The wedge driven between civil and divine authority, and the ensuing legacy of political dissent, is the singular contribution of these rebaptizers to U.S. history. Roger Williams, founder of the first "Baptist" congregation in England's New World colonies, was driven out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1635 because of his preaching. The first of four charges in his conviction was that he declared ". . . we have not our land by patent from the king, but that the natives are the true owners of it, and that we ought to repent of such a receiving of it by patent."

Williams knew what we—in our sentimental and fraudulent retelling of our nation's founding

story—usually omit: That the impulse for religious freedom was being hijacked by robber-baron forces. And the same forces are still at work, reported by bloody repetition in daily news broadcasts, only disguised by the loud chants of freedom! freedom! democracy! democracy! I dare say, nothing is more crucial in our time than the need for a critique of the ideological use of the language of freedom.

I am a Baptist (still, despite obvious cause for embarrassment) because of a profound metaphor of faith summoned by my rebaptizing ancestors. To the great chagrin of the major Reformation figures of the day, these unlettered Anabaptists argued that “salvation by faith alone” was a worthy notion but an insufficient alternative to the tyranny of Roman Catholic sacramental control. The rebaptizers insisted on speaking of *Nachfolge Christi*, “following Christ.” They sensed that “faith alone” language was too abstract, too devoid of animation, lacking the capacity to indicate the concrete character of discipleship.

Which is why, in the Mark story read earlier about the blind man who, upon gaining his sight, responded not by orthodox theological declarations. The text simply says: “he followed [Jesus] on the way.”

Similarly, this is why the historic survey of the faithful in history, found in Hebrews 11, has not a word about their correct doctrine but of their courage and perseverance in the face of calamity, suffering, and martyrdom. The faith of these saints was not that of cognitive assertion but of dangerous assault on the reigning values of their age.

And what more should I say of this?

Historically, Baptists have been urgent apologists for freedom. “Soul competency” is the traditional phrase, meaning each bears both the weight and the privilege of decision. No pope, no bishop, not even any T.V. evangelist can prescribe the terms of faithful living. We are populists, in the best sense of the word, and thus also profoundly multiracial. (At least as a whole, though rarely in part.)

Ironically enough, despite the emphasis on freedom, Baptists are a deeply communal people. Every Baptist churchhouse has a kitchen, and the dishes are well worn as are the offering plates, because money is not a private prerogative but a covenant commitment. Baptists are also a people of “the Book.” This characteristic functions as the tradition (for a notoriously traditionless people) of accountability. In an increasingly rootless and disposable culture, fidelity to scripture (which includes, in good Jewish fashion, arguing with scripture) fosters communal identity and the habits of cultural transcendence, forming and informing faith.

Needless to say, being a Baptist can be a confusing (and confused?) enterprise. Our tent stretches

across everyone from Jesse Jackson to Jesse Helms, from Marian Wright Edelman to Jerry Falwell, from Martin Luther King Jr. to John D. Rockefeller (not to mention my Aunt Len). You have to wonder if this is a confessional tradition or a three-ring circus.

Admittedly, with important exceptions, we are an arrogant and often insular people. The dramatic rise in social power and economic class among Baptists in the U.S. has crippled many of the impulses described above. As we saw in the 1990 Persian Gulf War, Episcopal presidents (G. Bush) now summon Baptist preachers (B. Graham) to bless military adventure. We have become “at ease in Zion.”

But the sectarian quality—the vestigial memory of God’s impending, rending Reign—is still there. Baptists at their best are sectarian, apocalyptic, against the world. Not against *the earth*, mind you (the distinction is crucial); but *the world*, that complex set of arrangements and powers that now rummage creation. At our best, when we sing “This World Is Not My Home” that old gospel hymn functions not as escapist piety but as the subversive prayer of “Thy Kingdom come on earth, as in heaven;” not as pie-in-the-sky dividend but as recollection of Jesus’ warning: *In the world you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer. . . .* As I’ve cautioned my daughters, when you talk about heaven—biblically speaking—you’re liable to raise hell.

“You shall know the truth,” wrote Flannery O’Connor, paraphrasing a verse from John’s Gospel, “and the truth will make you *odd*.” That’s why we *Babdists* have always been at our best on the run.

Come to think of it, all of us have.

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¹This sermon was initially preached on Sunday, 26 October 2003, under the title “The Church Formed and Reformed.”