# Baptist Basics

BAPTISTS TOGETHER

10 Radical Dissent

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Baptists are both ‘radicals‘ and ‘dissenters‘, but these words need some explanation. They are ‘radicals’ in the sense that following Jesus Christ sets them apart from many fashionable opinions in society and forces them to ‘dissent’ from them.

## The roots of radical dissent

Following a Messiah who was crucified by the religious and political powers of his day makes a big difference to the way we think. Jesus plainly did not fit in with the powerful people of his day. His proclamation of the mercy of God did not suit the religious attitudes of the most powerful forms of contemporary Judaism. His claim to be some kind of king advancing a kingdom, even one ‘not of this world’ (John 18:36) did not go down well with the Roman authorities. Conspiring together, these powerful forces engineered his crucifixion to do away with him.

The first Christians to follow Christ were only too well aware of how different they were. They experienced persecution and opposition for their beliefs. They felt themselves to be in conflict with the powers of their day (1 Corinthians 2:8; Ephesians 6:12). They talked of not being ‘conformed to this world’ but being ‘transformed’ (Romans 12:2), just as Jesus had spoken of seeking first the kingdom of God and its righteousness (Matthew 6:33). In short, the first Christians were being shaped by different forces from those

which shaped the surrounding culture. Jesus and his kingdom made them different and it was their very difference from the rest that gave them their potential to transform people and communities. This was what Jesus meant by calling his Church 'salt' and 'light' (Matthew 5:13-16).

## Nonconformity and persecution

It is helpful to grasp that what came in with Christ was fundamentally different from what had gone before. Religion and culture in the ancient world were inseparable and reinforced each other. Religion pervaded everything. The role of religion was, among other things, to legitimise the power of the ruling classes in such a way that to question them was to blaspheme against God. Because of their ideas, early Christians were destined for a clash with the State.

In the Roman Empire all religions were accepted, provided they would pay lip-service to the official religion of the Empire which proclaimed the Emperor to be a god. Occasionally this was vigorously enforced and sacrifices to the Emperor's statue were demanded. The one religion to be exempt from this duty was Judaism. The Jews with their belief in one God, were recognised as an oddity and allowed to be nonconformists provided they kept to themselves. On those occasions when the Jews were forced to conform, they rebelled against Rome. When Christianity developed out of Judaism, Roman tolerance became highly intolerant.

Christians were evangelistic and believed they were commanded to make disciples. Moreover, they were being highly successful in this. The Christ in whom they believed had been crucified at the orders of the Roman authorities, so putting the State in conflict with God at this point. The Christians refused to acknowledge the Emperor as a god. To them he was a human being bearing the responsibility of governing justly. They were prepared to pray for him but not to him. Instead of proclaiming, as was the custom, 'Caesar is Lord', they asserted 'Jesus is Lord'. This was an act of radical dissent and it got them into trouble. It was seen by successive Roman administrations as a revolutionary and subversive declaration of faith and was used as the pretext for persecution.

## The years of compromise

One of the strangest stories in the church's history is the way in which the persecuted church we have described actually overcame its persecutors, but non-violently. In the year 313AD, the Roman Emperor Constantine decreed the full toleration of Christianity. This followed on Constantine's apparent conversion to the faith. But over the next one hundred years both empire and church underwent a transformation. The church shifted from being a persecuted, powerless minority to being a persecuting, powerful majority. This was particularly evident in the reign of the Emperor Theodosius who in 380AD passed a decree establishing the orthodox Christian State, outlawing paganism and penalising heretics. The papacy in particular came to occupy an immensely powerful position. Christianity moved from practising the freely chosen and costly faith it had originally had, to being the official and compulsory religion of the Empire.

Christian attitudes to this remarkable transition have differed. Some have hailed it as the triumph of Christianity and the logical outworking of the church's mission to overcome the world. Others have seen it as the betrayal of Christ, as the hi-jacking of the church and of the Gospel in order to make the Christian faith fulfil the role of a State religion. Radical dissenters are of the latter opinion. Some have even described this transition as the 'fall' of the Church from its original faithfulness, just as human beings fell from their original fellowship with God. Nowhere is the change of the Church's position more evident than in the fact that this persecuted, nonconformist movement began as a State religion to persecute those who dissented from its own teaching.

## Baptist Dissenters

There have always been those who have protested against what they saw to be the Church's compromise. It is difficult to square the powerless, crucified Christ who identified with the poor, with a powerful, wealthy and persecuting Church. Indeed, true Christianity makes a very awkward State religion for the simple reason that its central story, the way of Jesus to the cross, is one which shows just how wrong the powerful can be. Much of the Church however, succeeded in forgetting this historical Christ, substituting instead, images of his universal reign and glory to justify their new-found imperial power.

Yet many others remembered the historical Jesus and sought to be faithful to him. This was particularly true of the original monastic movement with its commitment to poverty, chastity and obedience. It was also true of a whole host of medieval movements which sought to return to the Christ of the Gospels. These were all in origin, radical (wanting to return to the roots of faith) and dissenting (being critical of the majority of the church and society). Strange though it may seem at first glance, Baptists belong to this tradition. Fundamentally, Baptist Christians share the faith of the whole Church. Where they differ is in their understanding of the Church itself. Baptists (and other Christians with similar beliefs) have returned in their understanding to the early church, to the belief that true Christians are those who have submitted themselves to Christ as Lord and have done so freely. The true Church is composed consequently of these true Christians, in contrast to a State Church which includes the uncommitted and those who are Christians in name alone. To be real, faith needs to be personal and voluntary and it is likely to make the Christian different from the conformist majority. To make Christian faith compulsory is to lose something essential. Nevertheless, just as in the time of Jesus and the early church, this 'moral minority' can have a great influence for good. This understanding of what it means to be the Church is called the 'believers' church' or the 'free church' concept. It carries with it a new understanding of the State.

The State is created to serve God and for the good of humankind. It does its best when it does not claim too much for itself, when it sees itself as a servant and when it does not attempt to impose a religious ideology upon people. The State can at times exalt itself into an idol or it can at other times use religion to justify illegitimate power. A radical dissenting position argues that the State best serves God and humankind when it fosters religious liberty and other freedoms, and especially when it respects and protects the rights of minority groups. It should be understood that this approach is based on the confident belief that because the gospel is true and can look after itself, it does not need to be bolstered by State power or given preferential treatment. This conviction is normally termed the 'separation of State and Church'. It is not the same as the separation of church and society (which is impossible), nor does it mean that the Church is not concerned about affairs of State. It means rather that the Church does not use the State for its own ends and the State should not use the Church, or any religion, for political purposes.

Baptists in England came to be called 'nonconformists' and 'dissenters' when, in the seventeenth century, they resisted the attempts of the State to impose

religious conformity upon them. They were severely persecuted for their convictions.

## The shape of dissent today

What, if anything, does dissent mean for today? We may summarise its implications by saying that Baptists believe profoundly in a free church and a free society.

*A Free Society:* Radical dissent has political implications. Baptists reject completely any form of totalitarianism, the belief that the State or the institutional Church, working separately or together, can dictate to people how to think and what to believe. Instead they emphasise freedom of conscience and religious liberty. Inevitably, this makes Baptists strongly supportive of societies which allow freedom to their citizens and value plurality, the differences between people. Because of their history, and in faithfulness to Christ, Baptists resist attempts to impose beliefs and ideologies and are opposed to any discrimination against people on the basis of what they believe. Because of their own way of being the church which emphasises the 'priesthood of all believers', Baptist tend to support political systems which encourage the participation of all in the political process. They are, indeed, amongst the originators of the democratic political system.

*A Free Church:* Being free for Christ involves far more than being legally free from State control. In Old Testament times, God's people were constantly tempted by idol worship. The same temptations, in different guises, are present today in our cultures and societies. Idols are usually parts of the creation which have been exalted into objects of worship and have gained a control over people which only God should have. As in the Old Testament, idols demand sacrifices, they enslave and destroy people. It is possible, even for Christians, to become enslaved to these powers and to lose their freedom for Christ. What is needed instead is radical dissent, the insistence that only Christ is Lord and the refusal to go along with the crowd. At the same time, the church is called to show people a better way, a contrasting way of living which offers to persons and communities the opportunity to be different.

Some examples of the 'idols of our time' might help to make the point. Mars, the god of war, is still in business. The international arms trade leads to the production and distribution of weapons of destruction, fuelling areas of conflict

across the world. The result is human sacrifice. The church is called to reject this idol and to take up its vocation to be a peace-maker. Another idol is wealth. The worship of Mammon means that some make themselves wealthy at the cost of countless people across the world. The church's vocation is to follow Christ in his identification with the poor, to reject the view that life consists in the abundance of our possessions. Instead the material resources of the earth and the produce of human labour are to be used to meet the needs of people. The worship of Aphrodite, the goddess of erotic love, is very prevalent in our culture. It is a caricature of the God-given sexual desire which is a wholesome and healthy part of life. It leads to the exploitation of women and the illusion that sexual activity is the greatest good. The church's vocation is to affirm the value of sexuality while opposing the exploitation and illusions of our culture concerning it. In recent years the earth-goddess Gaia has returned to prominence in the claim that nature is itself to be worshipped. The vocation of the church is to affirm God's good creation, to promote ecological responsibility, while denying that the earth is itself God and making it clear that to believe it is, will ultimately brutalise and dehumanise.

## The Challenge

The need for the church to be a community of radical dissent is as great as ever. Our society is dominated by many false gods and we are called to dissent, in order that we may offer the world a better way, a way centred on Jesus Christ as Lord who alone sets people free. It is a noble tradition and a noble vocation.

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ISBN 978-0-901472-75-5

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