

**Good Reasons to Be Baptist:**  
***The Need for Personal Experience***  
Exodus 3:1-15; Acts 9:1-9

June 22, 2008

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I almost became a Presbyterian. This was back in the mid 1980s. I had recently graduated from one of our Baptist seminaries, and the battle between moderates and fundamentalists in our denomination was at a fever pitch. Lines were clearly drawn in the sand, and it was becoming increasingly evident that I was on the losing side of the line. The theological fundamentalism of the new leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention was stifling, and I felt like I had only two choices: leave or fight. And I didn't want to fight. I simply wanted to be a pastor and do so with a sense of integrity. I could have been Presbyterian. After all, I did marry one, and we've done all right. I could be a Methodist. I could be an Episcopalian. If my wife and children would be accepted, I could be Catholic. In my heart of hearts, I am simply a Christian, a "mere" Christian, as C. S. Lewis would say. And yet I say that as one who is a Baptist. Yes, like many of you, I was born into a Baptist family, but there was a point when I chose to remain Baptist.

Over the next weeks I want to talk with you about some of the reasons why I chose to remain a Baptist. There are some good reasons to be Baptist, and I am grateful for churches like this one that understand them and make it possible for some of us to not leave or fight either. I want to be careful, though, because I don't want to sound arrogant, as if Baptists own the Kingdom of God. We don't, not even here in the Deep South. I once had an Episcopalian doctor who took pleasure in telling me, "Baptists and kudzu are taking over the South." In his opinion, they were equally noxious. Truthfully we are one expression among many of the common faith. While it is appropriate for us to respect the other Christian traditions, it is important that we understand those things that make us Baptist.

To understand these good reasons to be Baptist, we have to go back to the beginning, which is not to John the Baptist as we once taught. Historians today believe that Baptists came into being in the seventeenth century in Holland and England. Like it or not, many of our beliefs then were a

reaction to what was practiced in the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England. In both of those traditions, baptism was and is administered to infants. One of the things our forefathers and mothers insisted upon, and we do to this day, is that baptism is for believers only. Baptism into church membership is for those who are old enough and mature enough to understand and choose Christ personally. Early Baptists believed that the actions of one's parents on your behalf did not reflect your heart or your intentions. Therefore, they insisted that baptism not be administered to infants because infants do not have the capability of believing. Believer's baptism became so important for those early reformers that people called them the "Dippers," making light of their way they dipped people into the water when baptizing. Of course, the name that finally stuck was the Baptists.

While this may not sound like a big deal to you today, be assured that it was back in the seventeenth century. They called it "the watery war." A now famous debate took place in 1642 between a Baptist named William Kiffin and an Anglican named Daniel Featley. Rev. Featley wrote a paper about the Baptists with this title: "The Dippers Dipt, or Anabaptists Duck'd and Plung'd over Head and Eares." [sic]. They had a way with titles back then, didn't they? He charged in this paper that Baptists were mostly illiterate people, which was probably true, who polluted the rivers with all their baptisms. He charged that Baptists were guilty of child abuse because they refused to hand over their infants for baptism. The prevailing belief at that time was that if an infant died not baptized, that infant's soul would be eternally damned. There was a saying in those days that went like this: "The walls of hell are lined with the souls of babies not baptized."

Underneath this watery war is a good reason to be Baptist. Please note that the reason is not our mode of baptism because Baptists didn't always immerse. No, it is the expectation that every individual have a personal experience with Christ prior to baptism. The Baptist position was that an infant did not have the capability of personally making a decision to follow Christ. So they withheld baptism, waiting until the individual stood face-to-face, toe-to-toe with Jesus Christ and answered this question, "What will I do with Jesus of Nazareth?"

That's what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus. William Barclay, a great British New Testament theologian, calls Saul's experience that day "the most famous conversion story in history." (*Acts*, p. 7) It would

be more than arrogant of me to call Saul a Baptist, but I will say that he had a Baptist kind of encounter with Jesus that day. Face to face, toe to toe—just Jesus and Saul. When it was all over Saul had answered that important question, “What will I do with Jesus of Nazareth?”

I had that face-to-face, toe-to-toe experience when I was a teenager. I was lying in bed one night, reflecting upon the things I had been taught by my church and family about God. I had a strong foreboding feeling come over me. There was a sense of urgency about it that I cannot explain, that there was something incomplete about me, that God was calling to me and wanting me to call back. So that night, to the best of my ability to do so, with all the understanding I had, I gave all I knew of myself to all I knew of God. In retrospect now, I know what was happening to me that night. In a bedroom rather than a chapel, with no clergy present, in good Baptist form, I was answering that most important question.

That’s what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus. He was the most notorious enemy of the church. He terrorized the Christians of that day. He gave approval to Stephan’s stoning by guarding the coats of those who carried out the murder. Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, says that Saul was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” when he secured permission to go to the city of Damascus. The purpose of the trip was to arrest any who were followers of Jesus.

But something happened on the way to Damascus. Someone has said that Saul “ran into” Jesus. I would say that he did. As he approached Damascus, Luke says that light from heaven flashed around Saul. Try to picture this in your mind. The light flashed, Saul fell to the ground, and a voice called to him, saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Notice that his name was called twice, like Abraham when he met God (Genesis 22:11), like Jacob when he met God (Genesis 46:2), and like Moses when he met God beside the burning bush (Exodus 3:4). “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me,” the voice said. Remember, he was the enemy of the church, but the voice said, “Why do you persecute *me*?”

Saul did what you or I likely would do. From the hard, dusty road to Damascus, he called out to the voice from the lightening, “Who are you, Lord?”

He used the word “Lord” the way we might use the word “sir.” Who are you, sir?

“I am Jesus,” the voice replied.

That response meant something to Saul that it might not mean to you or me. Saul was a devout Jew, remember. He knew the Hebrew Scriptures. He knew that when Moses met God at the burning bush and asked for God’s name, God said to Moses, “Tell them, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me.’”

“Who are you, sir?” And the voice responded, “I AM Jesus.” And suddenly Saul knew that when one stood face to face with Jesus, he stood face to face with the God of the burning bush.

The text says that Saul was blinded. Ironically he was blinded, but the eyes of his heart were opened. He was humbled. The most notorious enemy of the church, the terror of Christians, the murderer of the followers of Jesus, was led by the hand. Even Saul entered the Kingdom of God the way everyone must, like a child.

That is why Baptists believe in the need for personal experience before baptism. Your experience and mine will not be identical to Saul’s, of course. But it must be personal, not our parents’ decision. It must be ours, us face to face with Christ on a lonely, dusty road. And there we must answer the question, “What will I do with Jesus of Nazareth?”

Let me tell you about one of our great Baptist leaders, a man named John Sampey. If you were to visit the seminary I attended, you would see a building named after him. He was simultaneously president of the Southern Seminary and president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Dr. Sampey writes that when he was young he had no peace about his salvation. He just wasn’t sure. He felt the terrible burden of his sinfulness, and no one could tell him how to get rid of it. On the night of March 3, 1877, he was unable to sleep. Here are his own words describing what happened to him that night:

*In desperation I lifted my eyes up and began to talk in a whisper to the Savior. I said to him, ‘Lord, Jesus, I do not know what to do. I have prayed, but I get no relief... I have*

*read the Bible, but my sins are still a burden on my soul. I have listened to preaching, but I can find no help. I do not know what to do except turn it all over to you. And if I am lost I will go down trusting you.'*

In his memoirs, Dr. Sampey wrote that something happened then, something he had never experienced. It was like a great Presence filled the room, and the Presence spoke to him, though not audibly, "My boy, I have been waiting for you to do what you have done. You can count on me to save you. I will not fail you."

Dr. Sampey says that his pillow was wet with tears of joy because he had personally experienced Christ. (*Memoirs of John R. Sampey*, pp.6-7)

That is why Baptists don't baptize infants. We believe that baptism should be withheld until you are mature enough to answer for yourself, "What will I do with Jesus of Nazareth?" And that is the question I leave with you this morning. What will you do with Jesus of Nazareth?

#### Closing Prayer

Lord, look upon us as individual men and women now. See us on our roads to Damascus. Call to us, and give us courage to call back. Amen