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Baptist Worship in Ecumenical Perspective ¹

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Introduction

Any attempt to write in general terms about Baptist theology and practice of worship must commence with an acknowledgement of the fraught nature of the attempt. Baptists have historically been committed to the autonomy of the local congregation in most areas of theology and practice, including worship. Contrary to popular opinion, this conviction is not just a belief that each congregation should be free to get things wrong in its own unique way, but a belief that God leads each congregation in differing ways, taking into account their unique context, culture and giftedness. It is, you might say, the principle of liturgical inculturation pushed to its logical limit. Baptists then, do not usually seek to express or symbolise their unity by agreeing on texts or patterns of worship that will be common to many congregations. Rather they have seen liturgical diversity as an inevitable consequence of each congregation discerning and faithfully responding to a God who values and utilises their particularity. Historically they have tended to rally round the cause of common mission, rather than common prayer.

Influences

Questions about worship were significant in the disputes that saw the first Baptists take the separatist path in the early seventeenth century, but they were not so much concerned with form or style as authority. By what authority does the church determine its liturgical practice? Their answer was that Scripture is the sole external authority. From this conviction came two distinctive liturgical stances: baptism for believers only, and non-conformity.

Although the early Baptists were best known, and indeed named, for a liturgical distinctive, the limitation of baptism to believers only and the preference for immersion as its mode does not presuppose a general liturgical style. Indeed, most Christian traditions today affirm immersion as the preferred mode, and the baptism of conscious converts as the normative model, but these convictions are expressed across the full spectrum of Christian liturgical styles.

The same is true of non-conformity. Liturgical non-conformity is the refusal to conform to a pattern of worship dictated by an earthly authority. The Puritan movement was committed to taking its liturgical cues from scripture alone and was thus unwilling to conform to any pattern of worship not mandated by the Bible. One thing that distinguished the Baptists as they emerged from the Puritan movement was that they were non-conformist in principle rather than simply in the particulars. Many Puritans were no less willing to impose liturgical conformity than was the Church of England; they merely disagreed over what should be imposed. The Baptists, by contrast, held that the interpretation of the scriptural witness could not be imposed either and that each congregation was responsible for discerning how God, through the scriptures, was calling them to order their

¹ Some parts of this chapter first appeared in a thesis entitled *The Liturgical Expression of Baptist Identity* submitted by the author in 2001 in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Theology from the *Melbourne College of Divinity*.

worship. It can be seen, then, that the reasons Baptists took their separatist path included the desire to escape a particular liturgical conformity, but not a desire to create an alternative conformity. Indeed, openness to changes of practice as ‘more light and truth broke forth from God’s word’² was frequently affirmed in the early Baptist writings and confessions of faith. These starting points meant that Baptist liturgical practice was always likely to be responsive to new liturgical trends, but unlikely to be uniformly influenced in any one direction. Indeed, most of the significant shifts have been either derivative or reactionary, and have led to more diversity, not less.³

The liturgical style of the first Baptist congregations was simply a continuation of what had been taking place within their sector of the Puritan movement. The extreme rejection of prepared materials that characterised the first congregation (led by John Smyth in 1608) was not common to all Puritans, but nor was it unique to those who became Baptists. Within half a century there was such a significant move back towards prepared patterns in the interests of order and dignity that by 1691 prominent Baptist leaders like Benjamin Keach could openly advocate the careful composition of hymns, sermons and prayers.⁴

During the latter part of the eighteenth century, the Evangelical Revival swept across British protestantism and had a massive impact on the Baptists. Studies of this have mostly focussed on the movement’s impact on the Baptists’ mission, evangelism and sense of identity, but less attention has been given to the impact on their worship. It was significant, though, generating the beginnings of a shift in the understanding of the purpose of worship. The revivalist passion for procuring conversions led to the worship service being seen as an instrument to be employed for this task. This shift influenced Baptist worship in Britain, but its biggest impact was on the American frontier. American revivalism, expressed most clearly in the form of the ‘camp meeting’, developed a liturgical pattern that was oriented almost entirely to the ‘harvest’ of souls.⁵ The change can be traced in the increasing anthropocentricity of American hymnody, and it produced a “shift from subtlety to straightforwardness” in liturgical language, imagery and architecture.⁶ However, these changes were neither universal among Baptists nor unique to them, for frontier revivalism reshaped virtually all protestant traditions in the USA.⁷

This same pattern of evolution continued in the twentieth century, as sectors of the Baptist communion embraced major liturgical changes in response to patterns encountered in broader movements. The influence of the Ecumenical movement has been widespread, but low key, apparent mainly in a more frequent borrowing of resources, especially for occasions such as weddings and funerals. Because Baptist ecumenical engagement has occurred primarily at the local level, this pattern of borrowing has further diversified Baptist practice.

The influence of the Liturgical Renewal Movement has not been widespread among Baptists, but it has been profound among some and can be clearly seen in many of the liturgical resources being

² The saying itself is attributed to John Robinson, a Pilgrim Father, in 1620

³ Ernest Payne’s historical survey bears this out : “The Free Church Tradition and Worship” *The Baptist Quarterly* 21 (1965) 51-63.

⁴ *The Breach Repaired in God’s Worship*. (London: John Hancock, 1691) p.138-139

⁵ David T Priestly, “The Impact of Revivalism on Baptists in North America” in *Baptist Faith & Witness: The Papers of the Study and Research Division of the Baptist World Alliance - 1990-1995*. Edited by William H. Brackney and L.A.(Tony) Cupit (Birmingham AL:Samford Uni Press, 1995) p. 69-70.

⁶ Thomas R McKibbens, Jr. “Our Baptist Heritage in Worship” *Review and Expositor* 80 (1983) p.63-65

⁷ James White “The Classification of Protestant Traditions of Worship” *Studia Liturgica* 17 (1987) p.271

produced by and for Baptists.⁸ It is something of a paradox that Baptists have been so slow to connect with this movement, since so much of its work has involved recovering some of the earliest layers of Christian worship practice — a quest for which Baptists have often strongly avowed their affinity.

The instinct for fidelity to early church patterns is greatly counteracted in much Baptist thinking and practice about worship by the revivalist tendency to view worship as an evangelistic tool and a consequent willingness to reshape the tool in the interests of maintaining its effectiveness in a changing world and in disparate contexts. This is apparent in the influence of two other movements. The Charismatic Renewal movement has had a very widespread influence, especially when one notes the number of churches which, though not embracing the public use of gifts such as glossolalia, have been greatly influenced by the movement's liturgical patterns and music.

The Church Growth movement has also had considerable influence. Seeing congregational size as the indisputable measure of God's blessing, it has produced 'mega-churches' with big-production, performance-oriented liturgies.⁹ The 'seeker sensitive service' has also emerged from this movement. If churches had heeded the argument of the movement's leaders that, since this is not a worship service but an evangelistic event, they need to have another occasion in the week to meet for worship, it could have generated a renewed understanding of worship as the community's praise of God, but this has not occurred on any noticeable scale. Even where it has been attempted, the pattern of the seeker event seems also to be the governing form for the worship service.¹⁰ Although this movement may claim Baptist origins, it is neither confined to Baptist churches nor developing as a natural expression of something avowedly Baptist. Instead it may simply represent a marriage between evangelical revivalism and the growth principles of modern business culture.

This history suggests that Baptist liturgical practice has never developed a unique pattern of its own. Although in particular eras or areas there has been the "familiar paradox" of virtual uniformity in free-church worship,¹¹ when read over four centuries and several continents, the most notable feature of Baptist liturgical history has been its openness to change. As is the case in several denominations, the diversity is greater now than ever before, but it is nevertheless still possible to identify some dominant types.

Dominant Patterns

The *Reformed Service of the Word* has been the most prevalent liturgical form among Baptists for much of their history, and outside America it has remained so until recent decades. Incorporating hymn singing, prayers, scripture and preaching, it is essentially the historic four-fold order without the liturgy of the Table. In some places the four-fold movement has still been clearly evident, with the intercessions, offering and prayers of thanksgiving following the sermon, but as the sermon came to be seen as the climax of worship, these elements were more frequently to be found preceding it. Intercessions and thanksgivings are commonly combined into one extended 'pastoral prayer', led from the pulpit or lectern. The only books in use were usually the Bible and the hymn book, but many Baptist hymn books contained liturgical settings of psalms, canticles and prayers for

⁸ Michael Walker, "Baptist Worship in the Twentieth Century". In *Baptists in the Twentieth Century*. Edited by K. W. Clements (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1983) p.23-25

⁹ Raymond Bailey, "The Changing Face of Baptist Worship". *Review and Expositor* 95 (1998) p.49-50

¹⁰ Donald P Hustad, *True Worship: Reclaiming the Wonder & Majesty*. (Carol Stream: Hope Publishing and Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1998) p.230-231

¹¹ Ken Manley, "The Way We Were - Worship in Australian Churches in 1900 - The Baptists" *Australian Journal of Liturgy* 1 (1988) p.156

congregations to chant in unison or read responsively. Baptist sources though have always provided such material in forms which, like the hymns, assumed occasional selection rather than ordinary usage within a fixed liturgical form. The Lord's Supper has been celebrated with varying levels of frequency. Weekly observance has been rare, quarterly more common, and monthly probably the most prevalent, although observing it on different weeks in morning and evening services has often allowed fortnightly communion. Until a generation ago, the observance of the Table was often appended to the main service, after the dismissal, and although this originated for similar reasons to the ancient dismissal of the catechumens, in many places it led to communion being seen as an optional extra. Memorialism has tended to be the dominant understanding of the Eucharist, often leading to an almost funereal tone. A recent variant on this Service, influenced by the charismatic movement, has seen the hymns, which were previously interspersed through the service, replaced by a contemporary genre of praise songs and grouped into an extended 'worship time' at the beginning of the service. The retention of other formal elements such as scripture readings and intercessory prayer still distinguish this variant from the Contemporary Praise-and-Worship form described below.

The *Revivalist Service*, as has already been noted, came to prominence in the evangelical revivals of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It quickly became the dominant pattern in the USA, and more gradually elsewhere as well. The service has a three-fold pattern based on the order of the evangelistic rally.¹² The first part, often simply called the preliminaries, consists of rousing singing and testimonies. The second and longest part is the preaching, which is oriented towards securing a response of repentance and dedication. The third part, once commonly known as the 'harvest' or the 'altar call', is the calling of penitents to express their decision by coming forth to pray and be prayed over. In some places, this last part included immediate baptism. Scripture reading and intercessory prayer have tended to diminish in prominence over time, with scripture often being reduced to an introduction or illustrations in the sermon, and intercession for the world outside often disappearing altogether. Observance of the Lord's Supper varied. In some places it continued as an addendum after the main service. In others it became a token inclusion in the 'preliminaries' before the sermon. Generally in revivalist services it became less frequent, and in some places it disappeared almost entirely.

The *Contemporary Praise-and-Worship* service emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century under the influence of the Charismatic movement and has become the dominant form in much of the Baptist world, either in a pure form, or by hybridising it with the Reformed Service of the Word as described above. It has much in common with the Revivalist service, and indeed it grew from it, but via a detour through Pentecostalism. Essentially it employs the order and music of Pentecostalism, but removes or downplays the spontaneous prophetic input from the congregation (including glossolalia). Often the order is identical to the revivalist form, but the first part, often now known as the 'worship time', is given greater prominence and understood not just as a warm-up, but as a journey into an intimate worshipful encounter with God. The metaphor of moving through the courts of the Tabernacle towards the Holy of Holies is often employed to explain this action. The congregational singing which dominates this first part is led from the front by a 'praise band', and employs a light rock musical genre with the words invariably projected on screens for the people. Some use of responsive prayers is reappearing within these services, but rebadged as 'praise shouts' with the words projected and a strong percussion accompaniment setting the rhythm. The third part, now known as the 'ministry time', is less focussed on the conversion of the unchurched, and includes prayers for healing and sanctification, or for a deeper experience of God and an intensified commitment to God. In some places, especially under the influence of prosperity doctrines, this

¹² It is, however, arguable that this pattern did not begin with the evangelistic Camp Meetings, but with Zwingli's Service of the Word in which the confession of sins immediately after the sermon became the concluding act of worship.

form is now being seen as a two-part order. The first part, known as the ‘act of worship’, is an extended bracket of songs, beginning with upbeat praise and moving into a more intimate worship mode, followed by an exhortation to sacrificial giving with the promise of God’s blessing in return, and the collection of the tithes and offerings. The second part, the ‘act of commitment’, consists of the sermon, usually oriented towards securing a commitment to faithful Christian living with a promise of earthly blessings for those who do so, and then the ‘ministry time’ during which people come forward to express their response in fervent prayer for themselves and one another.

Worship in the *African-American Baptist* churches is structurally similar to that of the Revivalist and Praise-and-Worship styles, but it is distinct enough in ethos and expression to be identified separately. It is almost without parallel in the extent to which the people’s identity and experience (including, especially, their suffering) are fully and redemptively expressed in the worship event.

The *Ancient-Future Worship Service* has emerged in the Baptist scene only recently and it will be interesting to see whether it fulfils the claims that some are making for it.¹³ Essentially it is an evangelical reappropriation of the classical four-fold shape of worship, complete with scripted participatory liturgies and ‘high-church’ multisensory symbolism. The things which set this movement apart from the established liturgical churches is a very free-church attitude to the authorisation of liturgical practices and texts, and often a more playful approach to the linguistic forms and to the use of space and action.

Family Resemblances

Despite the extraordinary diversity represented in the above descriptions, there are some features that can be picked out as constituting some identifiable family traits.

The first would be the importance ascribed to *personal sincerity and individual experience*. Baptists have generally understood worship as the outpouring of the believing heart, and so tend to value the sincerity with which each individual enters the liturgy above the content, structure or aesthetic quality of the corporate action of the liturgical event. Similarly they will be less likely to judge the success of the liturgical event by its overall correctness or profundity than by the depth of the experience the individual worshippers have within it.

A second characteristic trait of Baptist worship is the *centrality of preaching*. While Baptist preaching has ranged from carefully crafted, sober expositions of scripture, to emotional extempore pleadings for conversion, it has always been regarded as a central and essential ingredient of the worship service. Indeed, in some places Baptists have been known to speak of attending a sermon rather than attending worship, and the sermon has sometimes occupied as much as three quarters of the total service time.

Another characteristic trait of Baptist worship is the prominence of *singing*. Although the early Baptists argued over whether it was acceptable to sing texts other than Biblical psalms and canticles, spirited singing has always been a feature of Baptist worship. The early debates were quickly settled, and Baptists were the first churches to introduce congregational hymn singing in seventeenth century England. The twentieth century has seen a rapid expansion in the range of material for congregational singing, and a proliferation of new musical styles and accompanying instruments. In the contemporary praise-and-worship services in particular, with their light rock music and band,

¹³ Robert Webber, who popularised the phrase, suggests that it may become the dominant pattern among post-modern evangelicals. See for example, his *ancientfutureworship.com* website, or his books, notably *Ancient-Future Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1999)

singing has come to occupy an even more prominent place in the worship, and in fact, to many Baptists the word 'worship' has come to refer to the time the congregation spends in song.

Extempore Prayer is another notable characteristic of Baptist worship. Arising from the emphasis on personal sincerity noted above, Baptists have generally valued the prayer that flows spontaneously from the heart above that which has been crafted by others for congregational use. In some places and times, Baptists have frowned even on pastors writing out their own prayers for use in public worship, let alone the use of a prayer from a book. However, there have also been plenty of Baptists who have recognised that the Holy Spirit can inspire pastors at least as well in their studies as in the pulpit, and that prayer can have an impressive function as well as an expressive function.¹⁴ Well crafted prayers can serve to impress both the truth of the gospel and the language and rhythms of prayer on the heart and mind. However, even in the recent Contemporary Praise-and-Worship and Ancient-Future styles, which are more dependent on pre-composed texts than any previous form of Baptist worship, it would be very unusual to find no opportunity provided for extempore prayer, either from the leader of worship or with congregational participation.

This though leads us to the final characteristic trait which deserves attention: the widespread Baptist *ambivalence towards written liturgical texts*. Since their beginnings, the significance they have ascribed to personal sincerity and extempore prayer has frequently expressed itself in a distrust and even outright rejection of pre-composed liturgical materials. At the same time, however, the steady increase in the amount of singing in Baptist worship has meant that more and more of their worship is dependent on the use of written liturgical texts. Indeed, the widespread use of hymnals as a source of spiritual writings to aid personal devotion is evidence of how Baptists have valued the impressive function of written texts, even if they have usually not recognised its correlation with the use of prayer books in other traditions. Clearly most Baptists have failed to recognise that what they do in song and what other traditions do in chant or spoken word are functionally the same, and so there continues to be a widespread dissonance between what Baptists think they do and what they actually do in their worship.¹⁵

Ecumenical Issues

When considering the implications of present day Baptist liturgical thinking and practice for ecumenical participation and engagement, and for the search for Christian unity, a number of issues stand out.

The first concerns the emphasis, in ecumenical dialogue, on the quest for common liturgical texts as a pathway to greater unity. This quest is essentially foreign to the Baptist mindset. While it is recognised that things such as a common hymnal have sometimes fostered a greater sense of familial bond between Baptist congregations, Baptists have never seen differences in worship language, style or structure as an obstacle to unity, even among themselves. Conversely, however, the quest for common patterns and texts may well prove, in itself, to be an obstacle to unity for Baptists. The belief that God's call to each congregation is particular, and the consequent insistence on protecting each congregation's right to discern and obey the details of that call without external human interference, mean that Baptists do not even begin with the assumption that greater homogeneity in worship is a desirable objective. Rather, they would tend to suspect that the quest

¹⁴ Christopher Ellis, "Baptist Worship" in Paul Bradshaw (ed.), *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (London: SCM, 2002) p.55

¹⁵ It is also worth noting that in the last half century there have been some Baptists making significant contributions to the production of liturgical texts. Stephan Winward, Neville Clark, Alec Gilmore, and Paul Sheppy in the UK and John Skoglund in the USA have been especially prominent.

for common worship might come at the expense of the Spirit's mission of incarnating the body of Christ in each community in ways which are truly indigenous to those communities.

A second issue relates to where the majority of Baptists stand in relation to the so-called "ecumenical consensus" on worship. It could be justifiably argued that the biggest divides between churches are no longer on denominational lines, but between those churches whose worship conforms to the traditional four-fold structure of the "ecumenical consensus", and those whose worship follows the three-fold or two-fold structures identified above in the descriptions of Revivalist and Contemporary Praise-and-Worship styles. There is considerable conversation and cooperation between congregations of different denominations on each side of this divide, but very little across the divide, even between those of the same denominational affiliation. The responsibility for this divide is mutual, but it is apparent that the very language of "consensus", or even of "convergence", serves to exclude those who do not subscribe to it. This is not a specifically Baptist issue, but since the majority of them do not identify with the liturgical "consensus", they more readily find partners for conversation and cooperation among those whose worship forms they share, including the Pentecostals and those of the traditional denominations who have adopted revivalist and pentecostal worship structures. Until real progress is made in promoting significant understanding and respect across this divide, most Baptists will not see much relevance in the "ecumenical" endeavours taking place on the other side. If the Ancient-Future Worship movement grows as rapidly among Baptists as some are predicting, it is likely to bring more Baptists into conversation with those on the "consensus" side, but only through a switching of sides, not a healing of the rift.

A third issue, or group of issues, surrounds Baptist understandings of the relationship between ordination and liturgical presidency. There have been eras in Baptist history when the leadership of worship has largely been the exclusive preserve of the ordained pastors, but this is increasingly rare today. In some of those same eras, sacramental presidency has been reserved to the clergy, but even then it seems probable that this was done for the sake of decency and public image rather than because of any widespread conviction that the sacraments would otherwise be rendered invalid.¹⁶ Baptists in general do not think of the Church in institutional terms, but in congregational terms, and so they would assert that where a group of believers congregate and bind themselves to one another to offer themselves as the body of Christ, there is the Church and the fullness thereof.¹⁷ They will not regard their celebration of Eucharist as being dependent on the validation of the congregation or its presider by any outside body. While most Baptists would argue this simply on grounds of congregational autonomy, a case can be made that the most intrinsically Baptist position on this locates sacramental priesthood in the baptised status of the gathered congregation rather than the ordained status of any individual within it.¹⁸ This is not simply a "lay presidency" position, but a view of presidency as being congregational. This view would hold that where two or three gather in his name, there is Christ, embodied in them, presiding at his own Table. Because baptism is thus seen as ordination for ministry and the religious life, it can be argued that far from abolishing the clergy, Baptists have instead abolished the laity!¹⁹ In practice, this is not to dispense with the ordained ministry, but it does make clear that ordained ministry is delegated from the congregation. Commitment to the three-fold ordering of ministry and episcopal succession is extremely rare among Baptists, and since they usually order their ministry at the local level, there is little likelihood

¹⁶ Marjorie Warkentin, *Ordination: A Biblical-Historical View* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B.Eerdmans, 1982) p.78-84

¹⁷ Baptist World Alliance "Towards A Baptist Identity: A Statement Ratified by the Baptist Heritage Commission in Zagreb, Yugoslavia July, 1989", reproduced in *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms*, by Walter Shurden, (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1993) p. 64

¹⁸ Nathan Nettleton, "Eucharistic Celebration - A Baptist Perspective" in *Eucharist: Experience & Testimony*, edited by Tom Knowles (Melbourne: David Lovell, 2001) 180-185.

¹⁹ Paul Bradshaw, "Patterns of Ministry" *Studia Liturgica* 15 (1981) p.57-58

of this changing in a widespread way. While it is true that Baptist understandings of ordination are another issue on which Baptists have never managed to achieve any solid consensus among themselves, it is also true that they would not usually see the lack of consensus as an obstacle to unity. To many other churches though, the Baptist practices are likely to be a significant obstacle.

Conclusion

The most notable feature of Baptist worship practice, especially when looked at across the centuries as well as across the globe, is its diversity. Neither their history, nor their theology, has wedded Baptists to any one liturgical pattern or style, and far from being an accident or oversight, this diversity is actually something that Baptists have a theological commitment to protecting. They hold that God values and utilises the particularity of their giftedness and their context, and calls them to develop patterns of worship and discipleship which will best serve the cause of the God's reign in their own lives and their own locality. Historically then, they have tended to rally round the cause of common mission, rather than common worship. Tragically, large sectors of the Baptist communion have abandoned this historic expectation of diversity, and sought to secure a conformity which both isolates them from the rest of the Christian Church and fundamentally transgresses the heritage of their Baptist forebears. However, for the rest of the Baptist family, it remains paradoxically true that it may be precisely the diversity of theology and practice which they are unwilling to eliminate from their own ranks, and which they would consider to be a model for unity, that ends up being the biggest obstacle to their involvement in the quests for a fuller visible unity in the Christian Church.