

SERMON – 11/04/07

Christianity's Family Tree - BAPTISTS

I think I was in the 4th of 5th grade. It was a Sunday morning worship service. My dad was singing in the choir. I was sitting with my mom in church.

- We got to the final hymn of the service... I don't remember exactly what it was...
 - But as was the tradition at First Baptist Church in Scottsdale, AZ, during the last hymn of the service people were invited to “come forward”...
 - If someone wanted to give their life to Jesus for the first time... or if they had done that a while ago, and now wanted to rededicate their life... now was the time to walk down the center aisle.
- I had just finished our church's Junior Discipleship Class, taught by none other than my own father...
 - It was the American Baptist's way of having what we Methodists call “Confirmation”...
 - 8 or so weeks of training about what it means to truly be a follower of Jesus...
 - Now that the class was over, everyone knew the next step was to “come forward” during the last hymn.
 - So here we were.
- The hymn started. My stomach got a little nervous.
 - I looked up at my mom and asked, “So, should I go forward now?”
 - I just knew this would be one of those mother-son bonding moments... the kind that you'll remember for the rest of your lives... that with a tear rolling down her cheek she'd reply, “Yes, son... go and become a Christian!”
 - What she actually said on that Sunday morning in Arizona was, “Well, if you have to ask me, I guess that means no.”
 - *(pause)* WHAT!?!?!?
 - I stood there stunned for the rest of the song. I couldn't believe my mother didn't want me to become a Christian!?!
- I spent the rest of the week trying to figure out why my mother had been so mean to me...
 - And by the time the next Sunday rolled around, I realized my decision to follow Jesus wasn't something I needed my mother's permission for.

- In fact, I hate to admit it... but I realized that my mother was right... when we give our lives to God (or when we confirm what our parents did for us as children), it has to be a choice we make solely for ourselves, and no one else.

Welcome to the latest segment in our ongoing sermon series entitled, “Christianity’s Family Tree: What Other Christians Believe and Why.”

- This week we get to learn about the denomination I grew up in as a child – the Baptist tradition.
 - In case you’ve joined us along the way, the focus of this series is not to tell you why we, as United Methodists, are the “right” church...
 - Nor is it to lift up some of the crazy & outlandish beliefs or practices of some of our fellow believers...
 - The goal is to help us all see how it is that we came to be who we are today... and at the same time, find ways that we can learn from our brothers & sisters of other denominations...
 - So that hopefully we’ll be more faithful in our following of Jesus!
 - (By the way, we’ve been taking the denominations in chronological order in which they developed... and this is the first week we’re deviating from that a bit, as Methodism would be next in line... but we’ll cover that on the last week of our series!)
- Once again I need to mention that I owe a lot of the research for this series from Pastor Adam Hamilton’s study book of the same title.
 - “Baptist” is a term that applies to a broad family of Christians.
 - There are about 45 Million Baptists of various types around the world... with 33 Million living in the United States alone!
- But let’s see how this diverse group came to be in the first place...

- Last week we spoke about the Anglican tradition... and how, in England, they sought to forge a “middle way” between Catholicism & Calvinist Protestantism.
- But in the 1600’s in England, there were many among the clergy & laity who dissatisfied with this “middle path.”
- They sought to purge the church of its Catholic or “high church” elements... to restore it to what they believed was its “NT character”... and to purify the church & its members, challenging them to lead a holy life.
- This group became known, initially in a derogatory way, as “Puritans”; for their emphasis was on moral & spiritual purity.
- The Puritans were also known as Dissenters and Nonconformists. Many remained part of the Church of England, seeking to work for change from within; but the more radical Puritans left the church, and among these were the Pilgrims.
- Another group of Puritans who called for more radical reform (& also eventually left the church) were the Baptists.
- Although some Baptists trace their faith to nonconformists throughout church history, the first Baptists as we know them came from the Puritan tradition in the Church of England.
- Baptists believed that only those practices explicitly described in the New Testament were to be made normative for the church.
 - Since the NT only reports the baptism of adult converts who were called to repent & be baptized, it was reasoned that infant baptism should be eliminated.
 - Thus they were first called Anapedobaptist, which refers to those who are against the baptism of infants.
 - Note: Every branch of Christianity that we’ve studied so far practiced infant baptism (these traditions look to Acts 16 when the Bible records that two “entire households” were baptized – and that would include children).

- John Smyth was the first Baptist pastor on record. He established his church in 1609, and on the first Sunday he rebaptized all the adults who had been baptized as infants!
- Baptists, in their call for more-radical reform, rejected not only infant baptism... but also the liturgical elements of worship – the formal acts of worship, the vestments or dress of the clergy, and anything else that was deemed “too Catholic.”
 - There was no processional... there were no acolytes, cross-bearers or candles...
 - The early Baptists disregarded symbolic acts & gestures...
 - They also eliminated the altar, which was seen as a place of sacrifice.
 - Communion was deemed an act of remembrance... a memorial, rather than a sacrament by which God conveyed his grace... and it was observed less frequently than in sacramental churches.
 - Instead of coming forward for the Eucharist to receive Christ... Baptists were invited forward to confess publicly their need for Christ and to invite him to forgive their sins & become Lord of their lives.
 - The process also led most Baptist churches to drop the saying of the Lord’s Prayer during worship (since it seemed too Catholic & repetitious)...
 - Many Baptist churches would not typically observe Ash Wednesday, Lent, or Advent... though in our time, some have begun to explore these ancient holy days & seasons (like the one church I visited a few weeks ago).
- Because the Baptists were seen as radical reformers, they were persecuted by both the “high church” Anglicans & the “low church” Puritans.
 - Consequently, Baptists have traditionally had a strong appreciation for the separation of church & state.
 - Each week we’ve been looking at how each denomination might view church history... well, here’s how our Baptist brothers & sisters might view it.

- The solid red line on the right traces the roots of the Baptist traditions to the Anglican Church...
- It shows that Baptists felt neither the Anglicans, the Lutherans, nor the Presbyterians had gone far enough in reforming the church. They proposed more radical reforms.
- But you will also notice the dotted line in the middle... many Baptists do not acknowledge their lineage through Catholicism and Anglicanism, but see themselves as simply restoring the church to its earliest days.

A couple of weeks ago I had the pleasure of getting to know a brother in Christ, the Rev. Dr. Dwight Cook of Trinity Missionary Baptist Church.

- Located near the airport, this congregation is predominantly made up of military families, as they seek to be faithful to the calling God has placed upon them.
 - This particular congregation is American Baptist... and some have even said that it's the closest of all the Baptist churches to United Methodism in its moderation!
 - Baptists have traditionally treasured the autonomy of the local congregation, and they do not answer to bishops or to any outside authority.
 - I asked Rev. Cook about that autonomy... he said that they are "congregational in polity, but ecumenical in spirit."
 - There are voluntary associations, he continued, that connect churches together. As the Holy Spirit leads, churches join themselves with like-minded congregations.
 - Dr. Cook said their church is passionate about HIV/AIDS ministry... and they'll associate with anyone else who has a similar passion.
 - There are literally hundreds of different Baptist associations or "conventions"... from ultra conservative to liberal...
 - The largest association of Baptists in the US is the Southern Baptist Convention.
 - As I mentioned before, Trinity Missionary Baptist is American Baptist (which, incidentally, was the Baptist association I belonged to when I grew up in Arizona).

- (One other neat connection I had with Rev. Cook is that we both attended the same seminary: Drew Theological School in Madison, NJ. I received my Masters there, and he received his Doctorate.)
- Despite the incredible diversity among Baptist Churches, there are some basic beliefs & practices that just about all Baptists adhere to...
 - They begin with a **Believer's Church**... or a church comprised of those who have made a confession of faith in Christ.
 - Dr. Cook told me he was 8 years old when he, and 5 of his buddies, came forward and gave their lives to Christ, living in Roswell, GA.
 - Baptism is an outward sign of this confession of faith... and every congregation has their own baptismal pool inside their church!
 - Here's a picture of the baptismal at Trinity Missionary Church... this is where the new converts walk down into the waters & rise up as new Christian believers!
 - Another tenant at the heart of Baptist identity is **Religious Liberty**... Faith is uncensored, meaning that God alone is the judge of conscience, not the state or the religious establishment.
 - While Baptists do not use the Creeds, they do have **Faith Statements** that are generally agreed upon by those who associate with a given convention. For Southern Baptists, this statement is called "The Baptist Faith & Message."
 - Perhaps most importantly, many contemporary Baptists believe that the **Bible is the first & ultimate source of truth** regarding anything that it touches (over science, history, math, etc.). It's often referred to as "inspired & infallible."
 - Dr. Cook said that being involved in a Bible study is part of the culture at Trinity Missionary Baptist... they have 7 different Bible studies during the week at their church!
 - Sunday School is very important, and it's not just for children, either... they encourage all adults to participate.

- And if you want to be a leader in the church (one of the elders), being involved in an ongoing Bible study is required.
- One of the final basic tenants of our Baptist brothers & sisters is that they also follow the Protestant emphasis of **salvation by grace through faith!**
- I asked Dr. Cook to share a little bit more with our congregation about the Baptist emphasis on a personal relationship with Christ...
 - Here's the message he wanted to convey to us...

One of the gifts our Baptist brothers & sister bring to the church is a love for the Bible and the witness of a commitment to a personal relationship with Jesus.

- Pastor Adam Hamilton writes:

“Baptists emphasize making a decision for Christ in a very simple salvation message... Somewhere along the way it’s important for you to say, ‘I’m choosing to follow Christ.’ ... Sometimes we in the mainline churches have forgotten that. We have thought that if people just come to church, they’ll get it by osmosis.”

- Today we’re going to end this time by giving ourselves a chance to “come forward” and recommit our lives to Christ...
 - If you feel like you need to rededicate your relationship with God... if you feel like you might have been a bit distant from the LORD and you want to move closer...
 - Maybe you feel as though you’ve recently turned a corner, so to speak, in your relationship with God... and you want to confirm that new direction!
 - Or maybe you feel like your faith has become a bit stagnant... and you want God to help fill you with living water, not stagnant water...
 - Then I’d like to invite you to come forward as we sing the chorus of “I Surrender All.”

- You can come and stand down by the alter & sing... you can come and kneel & pray...
- You can even come and dip your fingers into the baptismal font, reminding yourself (and everyone else) of the covenant God made with you at your baptism.
- Come and stay as long or as short as you want... then return to your seats...
- If your walk with the LORD is going very well, then I invite you to pray for those who come forward as you sing the chorus...
- Let us join together in spirit and voice!