

A Response to Steve Lemke’s “What is a Baptist? Nine marks that separate Baptist from Presbyterians”

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I am grateful to Dr Lemke, panel members, and students for the good-spirited and useful exchange concerning Baptist identity. Special thanks go to my friend, Dr. Lemke, for the invitation to post my response. The following comments constitute the basic direction of my response at the conference with only one additional reflection upon a later exchange.

I am in substantial agreement with the concerns expressed by Dr. Lemke. Lemke is concerned that some of our Calvinistic Baptist brothers and sisters may ignore or alter convictions so near to the heart of Baptist identity that they may cease to be Baptist or redefine Baptist. He articulates Baptist traits in an effort to mark Baptist boundaries and thus Baptist identity. He is concerned that today’s Calvinistic Baptists surrender or diminish crucial Baptist ideas, clustered around believer’s baptism and believer’s church, which early Calvinistic Baptists held with strong and costly conviction.

Numerous disclaimers are needed. 1) There are other threats to Baptist identity beyond Calvinistic Baptists who may surrender Baptist essentials. 2) Efforts to contrast Baptist ideas with Calvinistic ideas are inherently difficult given a shared and intertwined history.¹ 3) My own personal indebtedness to and appreciation for the reformed tradition is significant; my response does not address Calvinism in general. 4) And finally, there are minor concerns about the paper. My friend is less than careful with several expressions that needlessly distract from the core of his concerns. For example, the language of “original sin” seems to have considerable nuance and usage beyond strict Reformed theology; it need not be rejected. The language of “semipelagian” is unguarded and inconsistent with my understanding of Lemke’s theology at large. My endeavor, however, will focus on several more global responses.

General Observations

Two related observations will provide some hermeneutical or historical frame of reference. The first concerns the impoverishment and eclipse of theology in our denomination. And a second is about the difficulty in grasping the enduring identity of a movement, tradition, or denomination.

¹ This peril is witnessed in Paul Robertson and Fisher Humphries, God So Loved the World: Traditional Baptists and Calvinism, Insight Press, 2000.

First, we begin with an illustration. A young person attends a Passion worship assembly and is challenged to link her worship with a fervent discipleship of the mind; upon returning home she reads her first serious theological book by John Piper; she wonders why her church has been holding out on her; she adopts the critique offered at the conference – her church’s worship, thinking, and discipleship is poor and weak because their understanding of God is poor and weak.² There needs to be little wonder as to why young Baptists are attracted to Calvinism. Our churches too often are gnostic; our teaching and preaching consists of therapy, self-fulfillment and personal affirmation that seems curiously secular; our study material is unchallenging with little serious engagement of the text or theology; but Calvinism is theology – that is, refreshingly, it is about God.

Her parents fare little better visiting an all too typical Baptist church. Her dad, perhaps a salesman or public relations worker, senses immediately what is true about the church meeting that members may not see – every thing is designed for him. Ironically the church folk declare, “it is a God thing” and “it is all about You [God / Jesus]” when her father knows that it is all about him as a representative of the target group. The message is loud and clear; the sermon is self-help; the architecture and décor are for his comfort; the platform performers are salespersons and customer assistants; he is familiar with programs designed to satisfy targeted customers as a part of his every day routine in the workplace. The dad visited the church with some instinctive hunch that he may encounter something bigger than and beyond himself (bigger than even the program and institution of the local church) only to be disillusioned. He reads J. I. Packer and feels intuitively what his daughter feels: they slightly resent the company store that they imagine has conspired to keep serious matters from their attention. Numerous SBC practices contribute to this eclipse of theology; I have complained only about church growth / market strategy and the resulting theology-deprived condition. God bless the Calvinist, they speak about God, and even dare to draw conclusions about God that are not always immediately understood as user-friendly. The SBC needs to recover its / a theological voice³.

A second observation notes that traditions experience change. And that change looks like a betrayal to some and a restoration to others. Traditions evolve and transform. They change, leaving behind convictions that some think essential and taking up new goals and methods. Sometimes they adopt completely different rhetoric, and on other occasions, they keep the same

² Here I agree with the diagnosis but only partially with the proposed remedy; we must return to theology.

³ Reading “its” calls for a fidelity to historic Baptist theology; reading “a” might call for displacing the historic Baptist views with another orientation (Lemke’s concern).

wording albeit with different meaning and rationale.⁴ So also Calvinism has changed. Today, various surviving traditions within Calvinism now lay claim to being Calvin's most genuine inheritor. Long ago, Luther and Calvin would have viewed strangely much of the work of Quenstedt and Wollebius who sat in their respective chairs of theology less than 100 years later⁵. Even the synod of Dort makes affirmations that seem unlikely for Calvin himself (limited atonement).⁶ In short things change.

Baptists have been changing through the years; in the Baptist wars of recent decades, old school moderates thought they lost their identity in the conservative resurgence; today, traditional revivalist Baptists fear they are losing "it" to Calvinists who seem to be growing in influence. History reminds us that it was Calvinistic Baptist folk who saw God stir awakenings and missions only to see gifts inherited by others of a less Calvinistic bent; ironically, students today are surprised to learn that Calvinistic Baptist folk were the driving force (humanly speaking) behind these phenomenal works of God.⁷

When change occurs, beliefs are the first casualties, while practices rooted in those beliefs often linger on. One such a lingering practice provides concrete illustration for these conceptual matters and a window into the past. This illuminating, lingering practice is the act of voting to receive prospective members -- still done in some Baptist churches. Members may vote without knowing where the practice comes from or the old convictions in which it was grounded. In some churches the old practice barely survives, having now morphed into a round of applause to affirm the newcomer. I am old enough to have served old Baptists who believed they should cast votes to discern whether the prospective candidate should be admitted into the church. Membership meant something more to them; it was more like getting married than merely granting admittance to a social organization. In their thinking, members were bound by covenant to each other. The newcomer would be your priest and you were to be a priest to him or her. If you were obliged to follow after Jesus while yoked together as one, the prospective member may change your life if admitted into the fellowship. They wanted to know about the person's conversion and convictions before entering into such a weighty covenant relationship.

⁴ Edward Norman provides a good example. The church is so overcome by the secular mindset that it often unknowingly defends its tradition by secular strategy and argument. See his Secularisation, Continuum, 2002.

⁵ Bromiley, Historical Theology, Eerdmans, 1978; see his note and qualifications, 327.

⁶ R. T. Kendall's, Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649, Oxford, 1981, still stands in my judgment despite critique.

⁷ Recent history at Southern seminary is presented as a restoration of lost Calvinist identity. Again some things are recovered while other things, such as eschatology and ecclesiology, are overturned.

The illustration addresses the transition in tradition but also illuminates a historically important trait for Baptists that is now fading; I regret its decline and long for the “good old days,” or at least the goodness and character of these old cherished friends.

Baptist traits

Dr. Lemke is to be commended for his listing of Baptist traits. I will supplement and only slightly supplant his listing and explore how these traits may provide resource for supporting his concern. Baptists are people shaped by a *covenantal and communal vision of the church* (cf. items 3, 6, and 7 on Lemke’s list and the preceding illustration). This is an older notion that is almost vanished; one sighting in recent years is found in Henry Blackaby’s series, *Experiencing God*. Therein Blackaby recounted how his small flock would at times postpone plans and ministries until they arrived at a unanimous sense of leadership. Baptists did not invent the idea that learning to follow Christ involves pilgrimage with other believers; but the notion of a church of professing believers who enter the church upon the pledge and witness of baptism is rare enough in the Christian tradition; it is persistent in the Baptist way.

This Baptist sense of a covenantal community provides a neglected lens through which to view numerous events. While the SBC controversy is often recounted as the triumph of Bible believers over more liberal folk, I believe this rendering is thin; the matter may also be seen through ecclesiastical eyes to include a failure of covenant and the corollary idea of congregational discernment and care.⁸ A covenant-minded commentary could be voiced thusly: Moderate folk (think late 60s and early 70s) were so sure of their calling to take Baptists into the new century, so sure of the more secular agenda and apologetic, so sure that the unsophisticated brethren in the hinterland were obscurantists that would never wise up, that they forged ahead knowing that they would lose many conservative brothers and sisters in the journey. Old moderates not only lost the convention, they had lost previously a sense of covenant fellowship. The winning conservative parties often failed as well. Many were relieved when moderates left the convention; the notion of patient witness and ongoing engagement with a wayward brother seemed dangerous and complicated when compared to the cleaner, efficient political solution. Among the losers were the Baptist ideas of covenant community and brotherhood.

Similarly today, a Baptist theologian viewing circumstances through the covenant lens may ask why some (especially newly recruited) Calvinistic

⁸ I concede that as a Baptist these ideas apply only by extension to the convention as a whole; the buck does [not] stop at the local church.

voices give so little affection, connection, and covenant to the people in the pew and their practices. Baptists of a by-gone era would serve with a loyal sense that these people were his people. The idea of recruiting faculty to an “evangelical” or “Calvinist” (read denominationally generic) seminary that happens to be supported by a Baptist denomination is a failure of theology and practice⁹; loyalty to covenant members is missing or perhaps loyalties to another community or constituency are taking priority.

Failures of covenant may reflect that current day Baptists have been conformed to the modern mindset (think 1600-mid 1900) of this world. Modern thinking rejected the contributions and restraints of tradition and community for the autonomous reasoning of a free and independent thinker. Among the many implications of the modern era was a new way of thinking of one’s group. An older view, which recognized our indebtedness and “rootedness” in a concrete organic body, gave way. Instead individuals began to see their relationships as elective; even the groups to which we belong we now see as composed of replaceable parts¹⁰. Characteristically modern leaders who ponder change simply calculate the numbers (people) lost and gained. The record sadly shows that Baptists, like other children of modernity, treat almost every covenant with the same dismissive attitude; in membership or marriage we behave like everyone else.

Also Baptists have been *conversionist* (cf. items 3,4, and 9 from Lemke’s list). I concede most Baptists today understand conversion too narrowly in terms of revivalism. Not every Baptist conversion may look alike, but almost every Baptist believes each person must have a moment or season of turning and rebirth. The implications of conversion are numerous. Baptist conversion weighs against infant baptism. Also Baptists’ persistent announcement of the Gospel in missions and evangelism, while beginning among Particular Baptists, was maintained by less Calvinistic folk in more recent experience in America. The question of the compatibility of evangelism and Calvinism cannot be answered in theory only, but also in practice.¹¹ A conversionist theology may even lead Baptists to read the Bible differently -- a communal reading that typically promotes a hermeneutic of immediacy; simply put, Baptists read the Bible as a body of followers seeking

⁹ Building a seminary with intentional denominational diversity among its faculty is a praiseworthy goal, but is beyond the explicit goals of SBC seminaries. Even such ventures usually have a theological identity that serves as an anchor or center. For example, one may build a seminary around distinctively Baptist beliefs where faculty differs upon the issues of Calvinism or a Calvinistic seminary where faculty differs on the issues distinctive to Baptist theology (Lemke’s worry).

¹⁰ Both ancient Gnostics and contemporary children of Modernity seek liberty from community; Modernity’s discontent is profoundly pictured by the late A. J. Conyers, *The Listening Heart: Vocation and the Crisis of Modern Culture*, Spence, 2006.

¹¹ I concede that Fuller and others make theoretical sense; I also acknowledge that the denomination’s current disarray with program-driven and production –minded thinking makes genuine, spiritual, discernment (for example, of evangelism) very difficult.

to render simple and sudden obedience. Baptists' hermeneutics are less sophisticated in one sense; they read texts in a more straightforward manner and have been suspicious of interpretations that seem to reverse the face value of the text. For example, Calvin reads Jesus' prohibition of oath-taking in light of larger contextual and canonical considerations; Calvin concludes that believers can take oaths under certain circumstances. By comparison Baptists have seemed like simple Biblicists; but they are not necessarily simplistic. While Calvin's argument seems right to most Baptists today, earlier folk thought it curious that after enough interpretation was done obedience no longer seemed necessary.¹²

Thirdly, Baptists have emphasized the necessity of *honestly acting upon convictions* (this replaces Lemke's first trait)¹³; a believer's convictions matter and call for a concrete communal expression. While we did not invent integrity, our history is full of persons coming to conviction and acting upon it in costly and courageous ways. We remember that Reformed folk persecuted Baptist folk precisely over convictions about conversion and community. Baptist pioneers may have been too quick to act upon convictions. We frequently teach students about John Smyth in England and Holland and Roger Williams in England and America by recalling their many denominational and convictional phases. Both of them went through numerous phases before landing upon a phase, at least for a time, which we call Baptist. The Baptist traits of community and personal conviction hold in a necessary and unavoidable tension.

These are sad days for a people descended from Smyth or Williams who taught convictions were important enough to suffer for and who advocated religious liberty on the premise that convictions should not be coerced. Reports that missionaries are coerced to retroactively comply to new policy are disappointing; the report of a missionary who indicates his compliance against his conviction is also disappointing; the report of a missionary whose work is exemplary and Baptist by every other measure but who comes home because he prays in tongues is also disappointing.

Servants to the denomination face simple tests: do we show committed love to teach and serve this people (covenant community)? Do we affirm and teach the theological orientation of this people (conversion et al)? Do we serve with integrity and teach with sincerity of purpose (true to conviction)?

Additionally, I will address one subject of exchange between Doctors Lemke and Rathel. Lemke and Rathel reflect upon a proposal for "theological

¹² Supplementation is supplanting as they say today. Cf. my "The Hermeneutics of Conversion" in Ties That Bind, ed. by Freeman and Furr, Smyth and Helwys, 1994.

¹³ I struggle with and cautiously appropriate soul competency.

triage” which ranks Trinity, Christology, justification of faith, and the authority of Scripture among first order doctrines (Christian essentials), and baptism in a second category. In a commonsensical fashion, we must explore the purpose and utility of a model. If we propose a “triage” as a working guide for our interaction with other Christian traditions then it seems less threatening; if the triage, once put in place, is a guide to or justification for reshaping the denomination (such as hiring new faculty members or admission to cooperative ventures) then its advocates face questions concerning character and conviction.

While calling for theological fidelity to a Baptist vision, we must also offer a constructive voice in dialogue with the larger church. My own personal convictions are voiced not only in my local church but also within the context a Baptist family that extends through history and across the world; similarly, I find my place in a larger Christian family; the language of “baptist” and “catholic” (lower case) make more sense than ever. Despite my longing to know and love the larger church wherever I find it, eventually, I must express my faith in a concrete fashion through the practices of a community. The question of Baptism is, in this sense, essential and not secondary; sooner or later one should join or start a church. Furthermore, the theological ideas identified as essential or first tier are subject to a wide variety of interpretation; we share them with other Christians not only because they are central, but because in an effort to find common ground we state them in a more general fashion. For example, readers may be surprised to know that some Catholic believers would affirm these four first tier doctrines when stated so summarily. In the concrete and practical matters of appropriating and responding to the gift of justification we would differ. Also, we would differ on the understanding of the Trinity and how we should respond to God’s character in the arenas of ethics and worship¹⁴. Again, the task of validating these doctrines in our concrete and congregational practices reveals who we are in the bigger and richer church and kingdom. More than ever, I belong to great catholic and baptist families; but for now I belong to a people who follow peculiar practices; in a humble way, this people gives witness to the larger church by their faithful baptismal practice; community, conversion, and conviction stand together.

¹⁴ The centrality of the doctrine of the trinity emerges in the conversation of Lemke and Rathel as well as recent SBC headlines. We observe that both doctrines and practices must be discerned with care; we must teach that both the person and the work of the Holy Spirit are to be honored. More charitable readings of Pentecostal teachings are suggested in [The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology](#) by Amos Yong, Baker, 2005.