

A Call to Theological Maturity

Not that I have already reached the goal or am already fully mature, but I make every effort to take hold of it because I also have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus. Brothers, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus. Therefore, all who are mature should think this way. And if you think differently about anything, God will reveal this to you also. In any case, we should live up to whatever truth we have attained. (Philippians 3:12-16; HCSB)

Onward into Christ

In dealing with youth, a pastor will almost always be presented with the question, “How far can I go and not sin when I go out on a date?” The first time I (Robin) was presented this question, I tried to give an answer that offered parameters of what was allowed. I later came to realize that this is the wrong approach. I (Malcolm) once heard a Christian physician address the issue of sexual sin in such a manner. His basic response was, “You boys can touch your girlfriend here but you should not touch her there; you may hold her this way but not that way.” He then demonstrated various ways to do so with his wife, which raised every eyebrow in the auditorium. It is a telling parable about this method of thinking that this physician, once widely sought after as a Christian speaker, fell into immorality.

The desire to discover the lowest possible standard before sin happens is not the way Christ expects us to live. Indeed, seeking the lowest denominator may be indicative of an improper attitude about temptation. Instead of seeing how far we may travel away from Christ's will before we have gone over the edge, one who professes Jesus as Lord should be seeking eagerly for closeness to His will. If He is Lord, He must be Lord of the Christian's life in truth. This applies equally in the spheres of doctrine and ethics. The Christian should adopt the attitude that asks, “How may I fulfill the standard that Jesus Christ reveals in His Word?” Likewise, the Christian must avoid the opposite attitude, which asks, “How far may I get away from Christ's commands before it is wrong?”

As Paul showed through his positive example, cited above, “I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus.” The direction of the Christian life should always be a movement towards the high calling of Christ. The successful Christian life is a dynamic walk with God into His will, not a probing away from His will. Paul expressed this same idea in a negative manner in many places. The Christian must flee from those things that are not God's will, including fornication (1 Cor. 6:18), idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14), greed (1 Tim. 6:10), and youthful lusts (2 Tim. 2:22). As Paul summarizes it, “But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness” (1 Tim. 6:11; cf. 2 Tim. 2:22). The Christian life is to be characterized not by a search for the lowest common denominator but by a desire for and attempt to live with the greatest possible fidelity to Jesus Christ.

“Theological Triage”

A few years ago, an early modern paradigm was dusted off and re-offered to postmodern Christians under the name of “Theological Triage.” While we affirm this paradigm as a laudable effort, what we have seen, as of late, represents a distortion of its employment. The misuse of this method can be seen especially in the spiral downward to a “lowest common denominator” approach to church fellowship and ethical conduct. We believe that when theological triage is used in this way, it is being used inappropriately. As I (Malcolm) stated a few years ago in *The Formation of Christian Doctrine*, the irreducible minimum and the reduction to the absurd are dangers to be avoided, even as we recognize the necessity of comprehending the simple pattern of the gospel (p. 141).

Our point here is that theological triage, while possessing a legitimate use, becomes a dangerous enterprise when used as a means to discover and then remain stagnant upon the least common denominator. Defining the gospel is necessary for clearly preaching the only means of salvation, a salvation that comes by grace through faith in the God-man, His death and resurrection. But receiving the simple (yet profound) gospel is but the inception of the Christian life. The Christian who relies upon the “first-order” doctrines errs when this becomes an excuse for ignoring or downplaying “second-order” and “third-order” doctrines.

Using theological discrimination to discern the gospel is one thing, but using it as an exculpation of Christian immaturity is quite another. Discerning when a person is doctrinally and experientially a Christian is both proper and necessary for the preaching of the gospel. But leaving a Christian doctrinally, morally, or ecclesiastically in the early stages of the Christian life is grossly improper. We do spiritual harm to an immature Christian when excusing their immaturity; and we diminish Christ’s Lordship when we glibly refer to His commands as “secondary,” “tertiary,” or “non-essential.”

The Limits of Theological Triage

When the method of theological triage was issued, it was accompanied by a call for theological maturity. We agree and echo this desire for growth, which we believe involves a growth into faithfulness to the Lord. Much of the current crisis in Baptist life circles around the relationship between gospel and faithfulness to Christ. On the one hand, the responsible Christian preacher, like Paul, will be careful to preach the gospel clearly. And he will be careful never to confuse the gospel with legalistic righteousness. Paul’s harsh words about the false teachers troubling the Galatians come to mind: “You who are trying to be justified by the law are alienated from Christ: you have fallen from grace!” (Gal. 5:4). There is no room for legalism in preaching justification as the declaration of righteousness through faith in the Righteous One.

On the other hand, Paul never treated justification by grace through faith as an excuse for immaturity. The responsible Christian preacher, like Paul in Philippians 3, will not stop with the basics of the faith but will issue a call to forsake immaturity and pursue maturity.

The Christian must constantly be “reaching forward” even as he or she is “forgetting what is behind.” The author of Hebrews spoke in the same way, when he exhorted, “Therefore, leaving the elementary message about the Messiah, let us go on to maturity” (Heb. 6:1a).

Perhaps one way to illustrate the difference between mature and immature uses of theological discrimination, or theological triage, is by considering the bowie knife. A bowie knife, sold in earlier years under another memorable title, the “Arkansas toothpick,” is a tremendous tool. However, only people who know how to handle such an amazingly long and sharp sword should be using it. As a fierce weapon used in the wild and during war, a bowie knife must be employed carefully and for specific purposes: the novice would do well in learning how and when to use it. For instance, it would not be wise to use its long blade for cleaning one’s teeth. Moreover, it would be a moral tragedy to hand a bowie knife to a child as a table instrument for spreading butter. If not used correctly, harmful effects may and will result.

Similarly, those who use theological discrimination for the purpose of defining salvation must realize that the same system may lead to devastating results when discerning moral norms or establishing church polity. Theological triage must not be used in ways that abandon its proper use. “Second-order” and “third-order” issues are sometimes now considered detriments to local church cooperation and Christian unity. An oft-repeated plea, and one that should not fall upon deaf ears, is that we should focus upon the gospel itself. The gospel properly occupies the primary tier of theological triage. That is where the focus of our preaching and teaching should dwell, especially when speaking with lost people and with new Christians. However, the classification of any doctrine as “second-order” should never be taken as a means for treating it as “insignificant.”

Baptists are the Great Commission Christians

The secondary issues include, according to the offered form of theological discrimination, those doctrines that make us Baptist. One may consider here such important Baptist distinctives as believers-only baptism by immersion, New Testament communion, democratic congregationalism, and regenerate church membership (cf. *Baptist Faith and Message*, articles 6-8). To term such doctrines “secondary” in the sense of “insignificant” or “unnecessary” or “indifferent” is not only a misuse of theological triage; it may be more egregiously a subtle but significant downgrading of Christ’s Lordship over His church. Indeed, we would argue—building upon an earlier metaphor—that a misuse of the bowie knife of theological triage may end with the consignment of some Christians to the spiritual emergency room. For the church planting enterprise in which Great Commission Christians engage, these second-order doctrines may not be ignored; if they are ignored, chaos and confusion of the Corinthian magnitude will ensue.

Those of us who have become affixed with the terminology of “Baptist,” in addition to “Christian,” do not accept our identity as Baptists primarily because of tradition, although there is much within the tradition to claim (and some to disclaim). Our forefathers, and one hopes all of their theological children, received the name because of its convenient

associations, associations that find their critical expression in the Great Commission. What drives many of us to embrace the name of Baptist is not tradition but our understanding of the commands of Jesus. To put it succinctly, we are Baptist because, like Paul reminded the Philippians, “we have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus.”

Although we are willing to distinguish doctrines of salvation from doctrines of church and Christian life, we are not willing to apply the terminology of “secondary” and “tertiary” to the Lord’s commands. Jesus commanded us to obey the Great Commission, and we do so in an orderly way—going, we make disciples, then we baptize and teach all things He has commanded. We follow the Lord’s commands according to His Commission and according to the order He Himself revealed therein, not because we belong to a certain denomination, but because Jesus Christ has gotten hold of us. We want to hold to our Baptist identity because we want to obey the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will not let our hearts depart from His will for His churches!

This is not a proud claim that somehow Baptists are better Christians than any others. May Christ humble any Baptist who would dare make such a man-centered suggestion! Rather, we hold to Baptist distinctives because we believe they best embody the commands of our Lord Jesus Christ regarding His churches. We really believe that God’s Spirit led our forefathers to interpret properly the inspired Word. And were we to discover that Baptist distinctives disagreed with the New Testament, then we would either strive, with integrity towards the community, to change Baptist minds and hearts to conform to His will, or we would strive to become something else. Either way, the point is that we are Baptist because Jesus has laid hold of us and we want to glorify Him.

The Lord’s Will is Our Non-Negotiable Mandate

The basic Christian confession as summarized in the New Testament is the confession, according to Paul, that “Jesus is Lord” (Phil. 2:11; 1 Cor. 12:3) or, as Peter and John said with the same meaning, “Jesus is the Son of God” (Matt. 16:16; 1 John 4:15). It is a person’s free recognition through faith and submission through repentance to Jesus as Lord that stands at the beginning of the Christian life. And if the Christian life is not to remain in a stillborn or immature state, the Christian must strive in sanctification and discipleship to live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Baptists have come to their convictions regarding the church and morality out of a desire to honor Him as Lord, both within the church and within our personal lives. Because the Spirit has illumined the Word to us, we have adopted these views and held to them, even when commanded by governments and churches to cease and desist. We continue to hold to these convictions today, not out of a sense of spiritual superiority to men, but out of a sense of spiritual submission to Christ. We must obey the Lord’s commands, because He has taken hold of us. We must obey the Lord’s will, and He has not given us any prerogative to accept some of His commands while we reject or modify others of His commands. This applies both to the case of the church and to the case of the Christian’s personal life.

In the first case, with regard to the church, we may not baptize babies, because we believe that the New Testament has no record of such and that the Lord commanded the baptism of believers only (Matt. 28:18-20). We will not sprinkle or pour, because we believe that the Lord literally commanded immersion, for only immersion properly symbolizes the gospel of His death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-7). We must correlate baptism with the covenanted church, because this is the witness of the Lord and His apostles regarding the Christian's conscience (Matt. 18:18-20; Acts 2:41; 1 Pet. 3:21). We may not say that non-Christian baptisms are Christian baptisms, because we believe that the Word of the Lord is the only authority for baptismal practice. If we affirmed non-Christian baptisms, such as those described above, we would dishonor our Lord.

Similar ecclesiological convictions apply to our practice of the Lord's Supper. To openly allow Christians who refuse a proper Christian baptism to participate at the Lord's Supper table would be on our part a lack of faithfulness to Christ Jesus. We believe that proper Christian communion must be maintained according to His Great Commission. We cannot forget that the Great Commission also includes "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded." We believe we would be denying His Lordship over His church if we were to compromise the purpose and meaning of the Lord's Supper revealed in His Word (Matt. 26:26-29 and par.; 1 Cor. 5:6-8; 10:14-22; 11:17-34). This is why we defend the practice of the Lord's Supper as outlined in all three renditions of the *Baptist Faith and Message*.

In the second case, with regard to the Christian life, we recognize that the flesh is opposed to the Spirit of our Lord. The flesh is not the object of our obedience, but Christ Himself is (2 Cor. 10:3-6). Any ethical system that seeks to live according to the mores of fallen culture will ultimately fail to render honor to God in the body. Rather than accommodation to culture, the Lordship of Jesus Christ must drive our ethics. For instance, because sexual intimacy expresses the oneness between a man and his wife (Gen. 4:1) and is the means God chose for man to fill the earth (Gen. 1:27-28), we reject any system that embraces fornication (1 Cor. 6:9b), adultery (1 Cor. 6:9b), sodomy (Rom. 1:26-27a), or homosexuality (1 Cor. 6:9b; Rom. 1:27b), among other perversions.

The object of our faith is Christ and only in Him will we find joy and fulfillment. His Word has the power to transform relationships so that the Christian's natural sexual passions find their free and proper expression in a relationship of fidelity between the one man and his one wife. Belonging to Christ means a lifelong journey of sanctification onward into Christ wherein we should "abstain from sexual immorality" and possess our "own vessel in sanctification and honor" (1 Thess. 4:3-4). For a believer, the old life that once yielded itself to iniquity must be crucified. The believer must now yield himself to sanctification in Christ (Rom. 6:19). If a church adopts an ethic contrary to the Word, it ceases to be a vessel of honor before God and compromises its witness before the culture.

The Journey of Faith

We do not have this response to other Christian churches because of any delusion that we Baptists, specifically Southern Baptists, are somehow perfect. Alas, we know our own

history, which is filled with the righteous mercies and judgments of God. We may make no claim to infallibility; that is for the ecclesiastical hubris of others. We have this response, not because we claim perfection, but because, like Paul, we must press on toward perfection. Moreover, once a truth is obtained, we are under spiritual conviction that we may not let it go and slip away from His Lordship in an effort to “widen the tent.”

Led by the Father’s grace through His Spirit, we believe that Baptists came to their convictions as they submitted to His Word. To apply the language of the Holman Christian Standard Bible in Philippians 3, Baptists have “attained” to certain truths. These truths include doctrines of the church and the Christian life. Because the Lord has given us these truths, we may not suppress these truths, even in the name of Christian unity. We may not let these truths go, for any reason whatsoever, because “we have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus.” It would be a sin against our conscience and the light that God has shed upon His Word for us to dishonor Christ for the sake of unity in Christ, for there can be no true unity apart from the Lordship of Jesus in His churches. Who among us would dare to argue that disobedience to Christ’s commands is the basis for unity in Christ’s name?

What we can and must do for those Christians that are not Baptists is to encourage them to submit even more to the Lord’s will. And when they will no longer listen, we will resort solely to the illimitable power of prayer. With Paul, we humbly pray that those Christians with whom we disagree regarding our Lord’s commands will no longer “think differently” but that “God will reveal this to you also.” Likewise, we would hope that non-Baptists would share the grace of God’s revelation with us where they deem we have not properly interpreted God’s Word.

And what we can and must do for those Christians who are Baptist, but who nevertheless consider important issues regarding the church and the Christian life to be matters of indifference, is pray that God will illumine more clearly the importance of His commands to them. Conversely, we would ask them to speak truth to us and to pray for us so that He would show us where we have erred. Nevertheless, where the perfect Word of the Lord is clear before us, we cannot but be held by Him. May those Great Commission Christians, also known as Baptists, be more faithful to Him tomorrow than we were yesterday.

Robin Foster
Malcolm B. Yarnell III