

Jeremiah 31:27-34 The New Covenant
October 20, 2019

A New Pew report is out, and they claim church attendance and religious affiliation is down again, and they are saying the country is less Christian. They say only 10 years ago, 79% claimed to be Christian, now only 67%. Personally, I think fewer people are claiming to be Christian, more are willing to admit that they have no affiliation. I don't think it ever was 79% or is 67% now. Nonetheless, the "Great Decline," as I like to call it, is pervasive, seems like a crisis.

Churches are trying new things in these post-denominational times. There is a movement to remove from their name the denominational affiliation. Some churches are inter-denominational, some non-denominational, and some are just trying to hide their affiliation. This phenomenon is happening on all sides of the ideological divide.

Baptist churches are taking the name Baptist out of their name because they think it has a negative connotation, driving people away, or keeping them from coming in the first place. Some will mention the controversial "Westboro" Baptist Church in Kansas, known for some extreme measures, protesting funerals, which reveals a disrespect for the dead that is rather astounding.

By the way, others have taken the word "church" out of their name, opting for other words like fellowship, center, or temple. The result is to move away from

both the heritage, and the substance of who we are as the people of God.

I understand the sentiments behind all this name changing, but choose against it. We are the First Baptist Church and have chosen to leave that part of the name in. The main reason for this decision is because I think it is dishonest. Churches should be what they are publish it to their communities. Actually I have no reason to discuss this issue this morning except as an illustration regarding our text, which allows us to do a little education work and remind ourselves of the meaning of the Christian/Baptist heritage. Bear with me.

Baptist

Why still Baptist? One must begin with the recognition that there are reasons for distancing oneself from one's heritage, and the Great Decline is foremost. Denominations themselves reflect a history of disunity and divisiveness, and sometimes even war. Some groups have become associated with political movements and allied with parties, and some might say, lost themselves. And there is not a group that does not have negative aspect to their histories.

I was raised among Southern Baptists, a group founded upon the defense, to them on biblical grounds, of the institution of slavery, and later the perpetuation of segregation in the South. Their failure to criticize their culture resulted less from a lack of courage than from a general agreement with it. The

largest Baptist group in the world, one that has done many good things along the way, had its origins steeped in racism.

Like other denominations, Baptists have been parochial, believing themselves to be the “one true church.” They have been accused of being hyper-judgmental and even hateful to those outside their ranks, largely known by what they oppose. We are attached by name to that heritage.

Is that negative heritage the essential meaning of, “Baptist;” to be parochial, lacking the ecumenical spirit, hyper-judgmental and doctrinaire, arrogantly believing ourselves to be better than others; racist, sexist?

Voluntary Faith

I do not believe so. Baptists used to speak about “soul-competency, and the Priesthood of all Believers. They insisted on baptism only after one had *chosen* faith in Jesus, and called it “adult believers baptism.” The idea was that there is no spiritual value in accepting without thought one’s birth heritage. Other groups agreed but the Baptists are the one’s who insisted upon it.

For that reason they championed the Separation of Church and State and religious liberty, defined not in terms of protecting their own freedom, as many do today, but of standing for the freedom of others; people of other faith traditions and those who claim no

faith at all. They understood that if the freedom of others is limited, then their own freedom is limited as well.

The Baptist movement recognized and emphasized the moral and spiritual power of voluntary adherence to one’s faith and religious tradition. They believed that any person who claimed to be a Christian to attain a reward or avoid punishment rather than out of sincere faith, was not Christian at all, no matter how many sermons had been heard or Sunday School lessons learned. Faith is voluntary or it is not faith.

Some reject the Baptist name because they think the Baptists have abandoned this heritage. As for me, even though I agree that the larger movement that goes by the name “Baptist” *has* largely abandoned it, I can still affirm it.

The Text From Jerusalem

It is the text from Jeremiah that brings us home to the meaning of our faith tradition. In it we find these piercing and prophetic words:

“‘The time is coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah (and if I may say, with the entire human race) . . . And this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time,’ declares the Lord.

'I will put my law in their minds and write it in their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. . . because they will all know me, from the least to the greatest,' declares the Lord.'"

And we know that these words were important in the foundation of the Christian faith because they are quoted in the New Testament, in the letter to the Hebrews, with allusions to it in other places.

This image of God's law (or teaching) inscribed on the heart and written on the mind speaks of the life of God deep within a person's inner life. God's law is not merely something to be memorized or regurgitated on a test, or even recited, it is to be internalized, so that the person of faith can voluntarily agree with it and wholeheartedly pursue its keeping.

To be Baptist, essentially means to voluntarily cooperate with God in the cutting of this new covenant, to make one's heart and mind available for the inscribing of its terms, not grudgingly, or against one's will, but willingly.

We are not legalistic about these things, although sometimes in our history we have been, only accepting people whose baptism came after having accepted Christ, but that is our witness to the world.

The love of God, and of neighbor, and of enemy, are not mere words. The belief in the power of repentance, of the reconciling nature of Christ's death, are meant to be transformational, causing us to be

kind, forgiving, to restrain judgment, to be accepting of those different from us, and to give others a chance, and I almost hate to use this overused word, to be "authentic," genuine, sincere, even when they do not agree. We are about the work of becoming human beings in the highest and holiest and best sense of the word

The Great Promise

It is a great promise, and this new covenant does not depend upon our acceptance of it, but upon the mystery of God's grace which draws us. This is not an agreement that we make, but that God makes with us, and when God's grace is done, we become truly human at last, to the glory and praise of God.

I am not sure it matters what we call ourselves, nor do I fear the Great Decline, because the gospel reaches into every life, and if people stop believing for the wrong reasons, there is a better chance they might start believing for the right ones.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)