

**Baptists and Evangelism:
Passion for God, Passion for Truth, Passion for Souls**

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Gospel proclamation has always been a central theme of Baptist life. Among the children and stepchildren of the Reformation tradition in the seventeenth century, Baptists, with their believers' church convictions, were in the vanguard of those who emphasized the necessity of hot-hearted evangelism. Not every one of them was fully evangelical, and not every one was heartily evangelistic, but with the Baptists who have been the most spiritually virile and theologically healthy, three tenets have fueled their passion for souls. They were convinced, first, that God was mighty unto salvation and that he certainly could and would save a great multitude, since he is sovereign in his providential guidance and in his saving authority. Second, they affirmed that evangelism entailed the articulation of doctrinal verities, "gospel truths," which sinners must understand and affirm if they are to be unbelievers no longer. Theological truth claims are not subordinate to the gospel but are integrally wedded to it. Third, their conviction about the believers' church fostered a doctrine of voluntaryism that impelled them to issue the promiscuous call to all to repent and believe the gospel message. They were convinced that only that person who actually repents and believes will be saved, regardless of his relationship to a territorial or state church. These advocates of the believers' church saw themselves, thus, finishing what Luther started with his ringing cry of *sola fide*. This triumvirate

of convictions is easily viewed in the lives and writing of great Baptists all through history. This essay will briefly examine these three convictions concerning evangelism in the first three hundred years of Baptist life.

God is Mighty to Save

Most Baptists have affirmed God's sovereign work in salvation, even if they have not all agreed about the fine print. This conviction was not unanimous, though, either in England or America. From the earliest days men such as John Smyth, Thomas Helwys, Daniel Taylor, and Benjamin Randall have staked their claim to a thoroughgoing Arminian confession in which God has inaugurated salvation in Christ, but not necessarily in the lives of specific individuals. John Smyth argued that justification consists partly in the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, "and partly on inherent righteousness, in the holy themselves, by the operation of the Holy Spirit, which is called regeneration or sanctification since any one is righteous, who doeth righteousness."¹ The Roman Catholic overtones of this understanding of justification are quite clear. Likewise, for Arminian Baptists, the call to salvation is extended equally to all persons and is co-extensive with the atoning work of Christ.² Particular Baptists were convinced that such an understanding of the call is inconsistent with the Scriptures emphasis on gospel preaching as the means by which God brings the elect unto salvation.³

¹John Smyth, "Short Confession of Faith in Twenty Articles by John Smyth," quoted in William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1969), 101.

²"Revision of the Treatise and the Faith and Practices of Free Will Baptists," in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 369-73.

³Andrew Fuller accused Daniel Taylor of compromising with deism and Socinianism in his view on the universal call. Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1988), 2:544.

In the first three centuries of Baptist heritage the General Baptist understanding was clearly the minority tradition. Men such as Bunyan, Keach, Gill, Knollys, and Kiffin, Calvinists all, pastored the larger churches, authored more books, and cast the larger shadow, so that the majority of Baptists in Great Britain and America were in the generally Reformed camp.⁴ The General Baptist tradition, on the other hand, was highly susceptible to theological defection, and many fell prey to Arianism, Socinianism, and Quakerism.⁵ Such defections led to the accusation from Particular Baptists that the Generals not only reinterpreted God's sovereign work in salvation in a manner contrary to the Reformation tradition, but that they also diluted the gospel truth with clearly heretical doctrines.⁶ Particular Baptists were convinced that they themselves were faithful both to the heritage of sound doctrine which is represented in such documents as the historic creeds of the church, as well as to the heritage of the gospel which was recaptured in the Reformation. They believed that General Baptists were always in danger of abandoning the former, and partly because they had already abandoned the latter.⁷

Andrew Fuller is one of the most revered names in Baptist history. Managing secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society and the man who "held the rope" for William Carey in India, Fuller has often been regarded as the one who rescued Particular Baptists from the snare of

⁴I am using the "Reformed" designation to refer to those who accepted the lion's share of Calvinist soteriology. I am aware that not all of these persons affirmed limited atonement.

⁵Leon McBeth provides ample documentation of the tendency of General Baptists to fall into theological reductionism. McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 152-70.

⁶This is not universally true, of course, as some in the "free-will" tradition have remained committed to the inerrancy of Scripture and to theological orthodoxy.

⁷That is not to imply that all general Baptists were so afflicted, or even that none of them would affirm some understanding of God's sovereignty, even in salvation. Dan Taylor affirmed that God is sovereign, but his formulation was still trenchantly Arminian. He was thus committed more to explicating man's free will than God's sovereignty. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 343.

hyper-Calvinism. There is no doubt that he had an evangelistic heart, and there is also no question that he gave strong affirmation to God's powerful and sovereign work in saving human beings. In dialogue with the Arminian Baptist, Daniel Taylor, Fuller noted, "Whoever are saved are indebted to sovereign and efficacious grace for their salvation."⁸ Even more specifically he affirmed, "If some are brought to believe in Christ, while others continue in unbelief (which accords with continued fact), the difference between them must be altogether of grace. . . . Here, therefore, we are landed upon election—sovereign unconditional election."⁹

The first president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, James Petigru Boyce, made a strong case for God's priority in applying grace. "God, of his own purpose, has from Eternity, determined to save, and to save a definite number of mankind, not for or because of any merit or work of theirs, not of any value to him of them; but of his own good pleasure."¹⁰ In England, Charles Spurgeon was laboring to preach the grace of God against many detractors. "I have known men to bite their lip and grind their teeth in rage when I have been preaching the sovereignty of God. . . . The doctrinaires of today will allow a God, but he must not be a King; that is to say, they choose a god who is no god, and rather the servant than the ruler of men."¹¹ Expounding on the relationship between God's *plan* of salvation and the *effecting* of that plan, Spurgeon proclaimed, "The grace of God cannot be frustrated, and Jesus Christ died not in vain. These two principles I think lie at the bottom of all sound doctrine. The grace of God cannot be frustrated after all. Its eternal purpose will be fulfilled, its sacrifice and seal shall be effectual;

⁸Fuller, *Works*, 2:544.

⁹Fuller, *Works*, 2:675.

¹⁰James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1887), 246. This is an abbreviated quotation from this page of the book.

the chosen ones of grace shall be brought to glory.”¹² God is mighty to save, as both the one who *inaugurates* the plan of redemption and the one who *initiates* individual salvation.

Spurgeon, Fuller, and Boyce, passionate evangelists all, knew in the depth of their beings that from first to last, from blueprint to final construction, “Salvation is of the Lord” (Jonah 2:9).

Gospel Truth

Baptists from the earliest days have affirmed that the Gospel *message* is a series of affirmations about Father, Son, and Spirit which must be known, affirmed, and embraced in order for one to be saved. In other words, doctrine is central to gospel proclamation. One temptation that evangelists have faced since the earliest days is to use emotional persuasiveness isolated from exposition of truth. Baptists grew in America during and after the Great Awakening, but some evangelists at this time adopted approaches to evangelism that overplayed the emotional card to the exclusion of an exposition of truth. Fear of spurious conversions in “enthusiastic” settings led John Dickey to warn,

There is oftentimes, during a season of revival, a high degree of excitement produced, which, if not properly directed, is baneful in its effects. Man is so constituted that nothing of any importance is affected without excitement. But such is human nature, that where the excitement exceeds a certain limit, it evaporates and often leaves the mind in a more stupid state than before the excitement commenced. Converts brought into the Church under a great excitement seldom do anything unless they are excited. If they do not degenerate back to entire conformity to the world, they settle down to a state of coldness and lukewarmness, entirely inconsistent with Christian character. They patiently wait until the next protracted meeting, or until the Lord revive his work.¹³

Human beings are so hard-wired that moving the emotions is surely an integral part of the conversion process, but Dickey’s words serve as a sober reminder that it is possible to get people

¹¹Charles H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 36 (Pasadena: Pilgrim Publications, n.d.), 416.

¹²Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 16 (Pasadena: Pilgrim Publications, n.d.), 252.

¹³John M. Dickey, “Thoughts on Revivals,” *Western Recorder* 18 (September 17, 1851): 1.

to make a “decision” without their being truly convinced of the truths of the gospel. *Compulsion* without genuine *conviction* almost certainly entails a *conversion* that is not authentic.

John Bunyan urged the need to know gospel facts in his little book, *Some Gospel Truths Opened*, in which he noted that the gospel is explicable in five affirmations: the Son of Mary is God, He made the world, He is our only Savior, He died for sinners, He is ascended and returning again for his people. In “The Author to the Reader” (the preface) of that book, he urges, “But if anyone come unto thee, and doth in truth advance [these doctrines]. . . . If his conversation be agreeable to his doctrine, . . . Receive that doctrine and receive it really, for it is the doctrine of God, and of Christ.”¹⁴ For Bunyan, the failure to affirm all of these convictions leaves one’s soul with no hope for salvation.

Benjamin Keach’s approach to evangelism was also rooted in theological affirmation. Preachers must encourage persons “to labor after true Faith,” to “endeavour to believe and repent, and close with Christ upon a Peradventure.”¹⁵ This is the task of evangelists. In urging this necessity, though, they must also make plain the nature of the gospel, which is “the imputation of Christ’s active and passive Obedience, through the free grace of God, apprehended and received by faith alone, without anything wrought in us, or done by us; not by imputing Faith or any other act of Evangelical Obedience, but the imputing of Christ’s Obedience and Satisfaction exclusively of all things whatsoever.”¹⁶ In our day of hyper-emotionalism in which sermons and appeals often deliberately circumvent the reasoning process, and evangelists

¹⁴John Bunyan, *Some Gospel Truths Opened, The Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 2 (London: Blackie and Sons, 1875), 138.

¹⁵Benjamin Keach, *Exposition of the Parables* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 1:194.

¹⁶Keach, *A Medium betwixt Two Extremes* (London: n.p., 1698), 36.

manipulate crowds with lighting and music in order to gain “decisions,” we would do well to attend our forebears and their call to proclaim gospel truths in all of their fullness. That we live in a world that no longer believes in “truth” makes this necessity all the more critical.

God Commands Men Everywhere to Repent

God is sovereign, gospel truths must be proclaimed, and men and women must be urged to repent and believe the gospel. For some, this might be a *non sequitur*. If God is sovereign, then why must we command sinners to repent and come to Christ in evangelism? Both Arminians, like Daniel Taylor, and hyper-Calvinists, like James Wells of London, concluded that the two ideas do not go together. Taylor contended with Fuller that his commitment to evangelism did not comport with his theology, while Wells lambasted Spurgeon for not being faithful to the heritage of Reformed Baptist preaching. Both the Arminian and the hyper-Calvinist, though, were out of their league. When Spurgeon was asked how he reconciled the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man, he replied, “I never reconcile friends.” Both men, and a host of others like them, were assured that their one task was to follow the Bible faithfully. If Scripture said that God is preeminent, powerful, and awesome in salvation, then they affirmed that. If it also said that men and women must repent and believe the gospel, then they affirmed that, with the conviction that the two thoughts are not ultimately in conflict.

Fuller and Spurgeon fought wars on two fronts. The Arminians were on one side with their denial of God’s sovereignty in initiating salvation. The hyper-Calvinists were on the other side with their denial that unbelievers have the obligation to repent and believe the gospel. Baptist preachers such as John Brine and James Wells refused to urge unbelievers to repent and believe the gospel in their preaching and excoriated men such as Bunyan, Fuller, and Spurgeon for doing so.

Fuller's great book, *The Gospel of Christ Worthy of All Acceptation*, constitutes his reply to the hyper-Calvinists. He argues from Scripture that faith in Christ is commanded in the Bible of the unconverted, that every person must approve of God's revelation, that lack of faith in Christ is a sin, that God punishes unbelief, and that faith is a duty even as other spiritual and moral dispositions are duties. "It is the duty of ministers not only to exhort their carnal auditors to believe in Jesus Christ for the salvation of their souls; but it is at our peril to exhort them to anything short of it."¹⁷

The same emphasis can be found in the preaching of Basil Manly, Sr. Manly was firmly convinced of the sovereign power of God to save: "My brethren, however mysterious and incomprehensible it may be, that God chose a poor sinner like me—freely chose me, loved me, redeemed me, called me, justified me, and will glorify me—I will rejoice in the truth, and thank him for his free grace! O, where is boasting then?"¹⁸ This same preacher was also fervent and passionate in exhorting sinners to repent and believe the gospel. "Manly believed that in order to convict a sinner of his lost state, 'you must isolate him—you must make him feel alone'; the preacher must make each person feel that they [sic] were 'the person directly addressed, and concerned in what is said,' so that the message might be personalized and internalized."¹⁹ Few were more passionate about evangelism than Keach: "Faithful ministers art willing to spend their

¹⁷Fuller, *Works*, 2:387.

¹⁸Basil Manly, D.D., "Divine Efficiency Consistent with Human Activity," preached at Pleasant Grove Church, Fayette, Co., AL, quoted in Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 192.

¹⁹A. James Fuller, *Chaplain to the Confederacy: Basil Manly and Baptist Life in the Old South* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 51. The internal quotes are from Basil Manly's "Sermon Notebook."

Lives to win Souls to Christ, yea, to die upon the spot to save one poor Sinner.”²⁰ God is sovereign, but sinners must repent. Preachers must command them to do so with passion and fervor.

Many of the best representatives of this tradition have been the Baptist voluntaryists.²¹ Isaac Backus and Shubal Stearns were mighty evangelists, both influenced by the luminaries of the Great Awakening, such as Whitefield and Edwards. William Carey and Adoniram Judson gave their lives and so much more to carry the light of the world to the darkness of superstition and moral decadence in India and Burma two centuries ago. James P. Boyce invited D. L. Moody to erect his tabernacle on seminary property in Louisville in 1887, while seminary professors and students served as counselors for the Moody “crusade” in the river city that year. There were certainly doctrinal differences between Moody and Boyce, but not on the matter of the free and passionate offer of the gospel to all who would hear it. On that they were of one heart and mind.

Whither Now?

Baptist people still debate the fine points about how God’s sovereignty and human responsibility measure up to one another. These issues are raised by Bible passages themselves, so such debate is almost inevitable as long as we love and read the Book and are committed to promoting its theology and adhering to its guidance. It does seem clear, though, that our

²⁰Benjamin Keach, *Display of Glorious Grace* (London, 1698), 141, quoted in Tom J. Nettles, “Benjamin Keach (1640-1704),” in *The British Particular Baptists 1638-1910*, ed. Michael Haykin (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press), 1:123.

²¹There is a difference between *voluntaryism* and *voluntarism*. Voluntaryism is the belief that one must make a profession of faith in order to be saved. Voluntarism is a “philosophical term for human volition” which arose in Enlightenment circles. Voluntaryism is a term “used to describe the ‘free’ churches in contrast to the ‘established’ churches.” James Leo Garrett, Jr., “Evangelicals and Baptists—Is There a Difference?” in *Are Southern Baptists “Evangelicals”?* by James Leo Garrett, Jr., E. Glenn Hinson, and James E. Tull (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983), 122.

“gospelizing” will never be biblical unless it contains all three elements that we have presented in this essay: confidence in God’s power both to inaugurate and initiate salvation, care to proclaim the whole counsel of the evangel, and commitment to command sinners with all urgency to flee sin and fly to Christ, Who is their only hope. Even within those guidelines, however, there will still be disagreement. How are we to handle such differences? We must treat each other with the cordiality that befits men and woman of God. As Spurgeon once said, we will have to agree to keep two bears in our Baptist house: bear and forbear.²²

²²Thomas Armitage, *A History of the Baptists*, rev. ed. (New York: Brian, Taylor, and Co., 1893), 351.