

Who are we, after all?

Baptist identity vs. national identity

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Let me start with few examples of how our national identity influences our values and convictions.

First is a conversation in an office in the UK (a true story):

Polish worker (Janek): Yesterday my wife and I went to the bank to open a joint bank account.

English worker (John): One bank account for both of you? Are you crazy? Money only splits people. My girlfriend and I have our own money!

Indian worker (Ikshan): You both are crazy. Give all your money to a grandma, she should decide about money; why create your own bank account!

John: What? What does grandma have to do with my money? Each of us should live on his or her own!

Ikshan: Are you crazy? We all need each other. And someone is to decide what we do with our family money, and grandma is oldest and most experienced!

Janek: You are quite right that we need each other, Ikshan. We just decided to buy our own flat. Our parents will help us.

John: Why bother your parents? And what does it mean „family money”? You just go to the bank and take a loan for your own flat.

Ikshan: You both are stupid! Janek, how much can you and your parents gather? Not much, right? John, why go to the bank and pay them extra for giving you a loan? In our family, which has about one hundred members, we all gather money for our big investments. This year we all gave money to uncle Abhijay and his wife – they will open a restaurant; next year Anurag will get married and she needs a decent dowry; and in two years time we need to buy new tractor for Arshad, since he is growing his farm!

Which kind of thinking is closest to you?

Another test: The plot from a Russian detective drama, which I watched few months ago:

Three young kids decided to take someone else's car out for a spin. The car got in an accident. A good, experienced police officer is leading the case. The car's owner wants to put all those three teenagers in jail. The officer gets to know those kids and sees they learned a lesson. So he decides to ask the owner of the car not to bring the case to court. The owner refuses to do it. He wants them to be severely punished.

The officer asks the uncle of one of those kids to repair the car. He does it for free. Then when the owner goes to the police station, he pretends there never was a case, that the car never had an accident. When the car's owner says it cannot be true, the officer asks him to go home and check whether something is wrong with his car. He goes there and sees the car is untouched.

The officer is happy that he resolved the problem well and wise.

Are you too? Or maybe you think it's a serious problem, what he did?

Why **do** we think the way we think? Who are we, after all? Are we just shaped by our national identity? Are we more our nationality than Christians? And where in this whole picture is God, or our denominational identity? And how does it all inform what can we do in and for our cultures?

Let me reflect on it in few points.

1. Our moral decisions are often informed more by our nationality and culture than our Christian or Baptist identity.

A very recent example is Norway's Barnevernet' (special government agency that is to care for children) case. It's the case of a young Christian couple in Norway whose five children were taken away by the state. The assumption of Polish folks (Baptists included) is that the government is oppressive and parents are right. The assumption of Norwegian folks (Baptists included) is that the government is right and parents are oppressive.

What informs those assumptions? I would say, probably, our history. In Norwegian history, in most cases, the government was a blessing. In Polish history, in most cases, the government was a curse. This makes us think differently from each other.

Of course, we can use our faith to prove our point. Norwegian Baptists could refer to Romans 13:1-7: we need to respect our rulers. Polish Baptists would refer to Luke 22:25 or John 15:19 to prove that we should not be naive but realistic about the true nature of earthly powers, and never trust them. But still, I think the reasons why we look differently at this case is not our reading of Scripture, but our being part of a culture.

2. We misuse our national identity.

Does it mean, that the cultural factor in itself is wrong? I do not think so, even as I think that often it misleads us and does harm to our attitude.

Yes, I think that sadly, very often we misjudge the source of our concepts. Naively or consciously, sinfully or simply because of our ignorance, we use Scripture to prove our point, rather than using Scripture to shape our point.

We are often more linked to and feel safer in our national identity, which on an everyday basis, gives us more stability, proves to be more practical, and gives us more of a sense of integrity, than the Christian part of it.

Furthermore, we often have a sense of superiority based on our national identity, supposed cultural (=national) maturity, which we, frankly said, like and cherish. And I think the reason is not so much our maturity, as it is rather our sin.

We often judge others operating on that sense of superiority, often empowered by our greater economical capacity, and expect them to agree with us in ethical or theological issues just because of that.

We often take those advantages of ours as visible proof of God's blessing, that proves our point, namely, that we are right and they are wrong.

3. We can and should use our national identity in a godly way, since this part of who we are is given by God too.

After all is said, I do not think that cultural identity in itself is out of the sphere of God's influence. I think it's a false dichotomy to either accept without hesitation all that our national identity is, or to throw it all out as sinful and wrong.

Look at the apostle Paul. He still is an Israelite: „I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin” (Rom 11:1). He has not ceased to be Israelite, once he became a Christian. Yet, when his national identity stood between him and Christ, without any hesitation he confessed: „But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil 3:7-8). But still, speaking to Jewish Christians in Rome, he is ready to pour out his heart before them, and not as confession of sins, but as proof of godly and honourable zeal and love: „I tell you the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh” (Rom 9:1-3). This love to his nation is noble, is the proof that he does not want his nation to be cursed. Indeed, he is willing to be cursed himself for the benefit of his people!

And yet, this deep fanaticism, both nationalistic and religious, is reoriented by his awareness that in a secret redemptive plan God is establishing a new identity, the identity of new people of God, a new nation across all nations, and he was called directly by the new King to be crucially engaged to this task. And he responds in obedience, somehow unhappily, but decisively and faithfully, because he knows it's a task given by God. He confesses that his „heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved” (Rom 10:1); but still, „inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry” (Rom 11:13).

So, I think God is not calling the apostle Paul to resign from his nationality. Paul is proud to be Jewish. He is really proud of it. But he is more proud of Christ. He is who he is by being who he is as a Jew. It shaped him. It made him the great apostle to the nations. It actually made him able to resign from being devoted to his own nation, because it is his nation that told him to be more zealous for God than the nation itself.

Nationality has the potential [or *power*?] to be a God-used tool to shape people in a certain way. If it was not so, Revelation 21:24.26 would not be in Scripture: „And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honour into it. (...) And they shall bring the glory and the honour of the nations into it.” But it is. There is unique honour and glory that enriches the Kingdom of God because of the variety of nations that are part of it. There is unique value that each nation can bring to the Kingdom of God – through Christians that are representing this people. Each nation. None can boast above the others.

Each nationality brings uniqueness. It's not an insignificant detail of history that Poles are between Germans and Russians. It shaped us. It's not insignificant detail, that Germans are between Poles and Czechs and French and Dutch, and so on. Where we are located is a factor that shapes us organically, by the very facts of biomes, resources, climate and natural ways of trade (seas, rivers, etc.). And our neighbours. It's all mysteriously from God. It has its reason. All does. We read in Acts 17:26 about God, that „He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings.” And time and place are the most important factors that determine the character and indeed the fortune of nations – from a strictly geopolitical point of view.

But why? What for? Well, it's not all for nations to have power struggles – or at least not primarily for this reason – but „so that they should seek the Lord in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him” (17:27). It all has a redemptive goal! That in the course of its history, in all wars and successes, they can realise that „He is not far from each one of us” (ff.).

And indeed it is so. I have one very personal example, and you also have one. Let me share mine, though. The history of Mateusz Wichary is shaped by the history of Poland. Mateusz Wichary would not have happened to exist if there had not been the 2nd World War; and 4 of my grandparents from 4 different parts of Poland before this war would not have happened to meet in the former German city of Breslau; and two of their children – Krzysztof and Agnieszka – would not have met and fallen in love, etc. up to the moment, when I would not have happened to hear the Gospel in 1st Baptist Church in Wrocław in 1991.

I am who I am because I speak Polish, I was raised Polish, I am the heir of Polish culture and history. And God is using this identity for His glory and is able to do it. Yet, he is calling me to treat my Polish national identity as serving my Christian identity, which I was given redemptively in Christ. And that is perfectly right and I am happy to do it, since my old identity, including my national identity, needs redemption. But Christ is neither denying who I am nationally, nor leaving it somehow out of the sphere of God's changing power over me. All Mateusz, including Mateusz as a Pole, is to be shaped by Christ and for Christ.

And so it is with all of us. Redemption is changing our national identity by grace. We can and should use our national identity in a godly way, since this part of who we are is God-given too.

Now, how do all those reflections refer to our Baptist identity? Is there any connection? I am pretty sure there is.

4. There is unique historically given, proven and preserved identity of a certain body of Christians, called the Baptist church, which can and should be used for God's glory in international relations of national Baptist bodies.

First of all, let us think about Baptist identity. Who are Baptists?

I would use the analogy to nations, which are described above. We are part of Christ's church, as nations are a part of mankind. God gave us time and territory in history; we happen to exist in a certain moment of redemptive history of the church; and by now, we are growing. We are stable, able to continue in our existence, generation after generation, which is a biblical test of genuineness (Mt 16:18; 28:20). We have been given our way of being church. We have our way of reading, believing and applying Scripture which proves to be fruitful. We have our strengths (without them I am pretty sure we would cease to exist, as many movements in history have done), and we have our weaknesses. As every nation, we, as a tribe in God's Kingdom, need to observe the world, and continue with who we are and where we are from, trying to adapt, and not lose our identity. And so it is with every other church. They also have their strengths and weaknesses: Orthodox, Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, charismatics – they all somehow pledge their loyalty to Christ, and somehow try to keep it.

Is it wrong? I do not think so. I think it's redemptively naive and unfair and unjust to expect from God to cease to have variety in His Kingdom. „To be one” (J 17:21) does not mean „to be the same” (and there is no verse to prove such phrase). It so happened in God's redemptive plan that He wanted me to repent in a Baptist church. And in this church I got to know Him. This church was and still is His tool for my sanctification and indeed, is my place in His Kingdom. This church, with all that it is, is still God's tool to make His Kingdom come in me and through me and in various places and countries and nations.

I do not think we are the only ones in this Kingdom. I also do not think we are the best, even though I do believe some things we grasp in the best way. But I think we can be safe and honest in our Baptist identity as something not accidental or sinful, but indeed something providentially important and useful. We are one tribe in God's Kingdom, and we do our best to be the best, using what we have been given and reaching where we can, for the glory of our Lord. God is with us, as we see His presence and blessing in what we do. It is a great identity and I am perfectly happy with it!

It is also a great offer we can share, both with unbelievers and other churches who are searching for their own identity. In Poland we incorporated a few independent churches into our Baptist body. They feel secure with us. They are more than just a local assembly now and feel safer because of that. They can refer to our national body, and indeed EBF and WBA and the whole of our more than 400 years of history. That's a great blessing!

And I think it has a deep theological reason behind it. It's not merely a whim of contemporary independent Christians – or at least those, who started to realise their need to discover their own place in history and on the map of the global church. There is deep theological reason for both *organic* and *organizational* relations with other Christians. Christ's body is to prove by its very existence the power of redemption by keeping in serious, historical, visible connection between devoted local churches, which cooperate, meet, shape each other, and serve.

I think this point flows directly from God's plan for the church. The church is to be a cross-cultural and cross-national body. Its beauty and its unique character, which is loyalty to Christ rather than anything else, is to be shaped exactly by our relations. Without them, the power of the Gospel is not as visible.

Today we have many independent churches. But I think God is leading them into this organic union. And we are what they could and indeed should join. We are the answer to this longing. All that is needed on our side is self-awareness of this unique factor we have and self-respect to the God-given reality of our history and identity, that is being shaped through its course, proving, that we indeed are part of Christ's church, since the gates of hell are not prevailing against us.

5. We are to recognize the incarnate wisdom and character of Christ in each other, in spite of and despite all other features.

The last question I would like to raise is, how are we to deal with all our differences? There are many. Sometimes we even disagree over what the core of Baptist identity is. How can we bless others with something that is not even certain to us? How can we attract others, if we are divided among ourselves? We know, from a very reliable source, that a divided home will not prevail (Mt 12:25).

Is there any hope for us? Or maybe the only hope is, that in spite of us the grace of God will sovereignly operate anyway?

I imagine it like this. If Christ would happen to live in Poland, as a Pole, He would be slightly different than if He would happen to be Swedish or Arabic. Simply, because each culture resembles God's wisdom and character in a slightly different way. Each nation struggles with slightly different issues, like each church from the seven churches in Revelation 1-3 received a slightly different word from the same holy and wise Christ. And he would behave and teach differently in each of those.

It means we all can learn something from each other, but we need to filtrate each other always in the light of Scriptural wisdom, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And I think that is our only hope – the same point of reference, that can shape and indeed shapes our character in the diversity of cultures.

Without it, we are left to ourselves. Pretending things, or being too ignorant to see who we really are and what we are really doing.

We need each other. Each needs the rest. And indeed, we need the most those who differ from us the most. I do not want to play with words here. I really think those brothers and sisters, who think in a very, very different way than we do, are to teach us the most. I am not at all saying, that we need to agree with them. In fact, if we are right, they most probably are wrong and there is no way it can be other way. But still, even as they are wrong in so many things, God wants me to understand them and make me aware of why they think the way they do. Once I understand and feel some sympathy for it, I will be ready to learn. But not until then.

And this is true humility. True humility is not shown when we agree or pretend we agree with those who we think are wrong. In my opinion it is only true stupidity or true hypocrisy. True humility is shown in our deep understanding of those with whom we disagree, understanding the pressures and reasons behind their position, even as we disagree with the outcome. In that way we can show our sympathy, even as we hold to a different position ourselves.

We need both incarnation and redemption. Both incarnation and redemption were needed for the once-and-for-all redemptive work of our Lord. But as the Kingdom is coming in this world, it is another incarnation and redemption. It is the presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit and through His unchangeable Word among us which redeems us from sin, and through us, changes the world around us. It's real. It happens in us and through us. And even as it may take a few more centuries, „till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13), that is perfectly fine, appropriate and honourable, to have our part in this glorious process of filling the earth with the knowledge of Christ. Culture, Baptist identity, and indeed even us, we all have our glorious part in this work of God. May He be gracious to us as we proceed in loyalty and joy in this noble effort. Amen.