

The Baptist Way of Being the Church

Toivo Pilli

Presentation at the EBF Council held in Tallinn, Estonia

29 September 2016

„For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.“ (Matthew 18:20)

Baptists believe that the Church is constituted by Jesus Christ who is the cornerstone. His model and authority bring the church into existence. It is his voice that creates faith, gathers those who believe and makes *ecclesia* a 'gathering church'. According to Baptist convictions, it is not the presence of a bishop, or administration of the Word and Sacraments that exclusively mediate Christ. They may, but – ultimately – it is the relations and networking of disciples where Christ is manifested. This is why Baptists follow congregational model, or free church model, if you prefer.

I remember discussions, years ago, in the International Baptist Theological Seminary, Prague, whether mission or worship is the primary focus and task of the church. And those who were wise among us, said: 'Both!' This is like you ask from a child if he/she would prefer a cake or an ice cream. And the answer is: 'Both!' Jesus Christ creates relations, and he reveals his power and authority in the believers' community, and this is what makes both worship and mission meaningful. Otherwise, worship becomes an empty ritual, and mission a mere human activity.

1. Viability of a baptistic model of the Church

On the wider world of Christian theology and practice there are signs that the understanding of the church is moving away from hierarchical and institutional definitions.

Estonia is considered to be one of the most secular countries in Europe. Only 15-20 per cent of the whole population affirms that faith in God plays any role in their life. However, according to 2005 survey more than 50 per cent acknowledged that they believe in something – a higher authority, heavenly powers or divine force. One explanation for this obvious contradiction says that these people express their detachment from institutionalised church, from Christendom power structures associated with ecclesial authority. And they, as unexpected as it might seem, show openness to find a Christian fellowship, are yearning for meaningful spiritual environment for growth, and admit willingness to build relationship with God and with fellow human beings. Faith has actually not disappeared, it is only seeking new forms and expressions – less doctrinal, more communal.

What kind of Church do Baptists represent in the societies of Europe? In individualistic cultures? In the midst of affluent and apparently self-sufficient ideologies? What kind of Church do we embody when we are facing real and spiritual poverty? When we are with our fellow citizens in the midst of confusions? – Do we grasp for the Christendom models? Or do we re-interpret and re-discover our 'baptistic' identity?

Miroslav Volf has called free churches 'the churches of the future': "Although the episcopal churches will probably not surrender their own hierarchical structures, they too, will increasingly integrate these Free Church elements into their theology and practice."

The question remains: Do we as baptistic believers understand and cherish and put into practice the communal and Christ-centred ecclesiological model that defines the tradition where we belong? Or have we, perhaps, forgotten the valuable gift of being a Church in a baptistic way?

Recently, there was a story in the press that told about a man in the Philippines who had been hiding a 34-kilogram pearl under his bed. According to the local beliefs pearls bring good luck. However, he had forgotten about the pearl. He was sleeping every night on this world largest and 100-million-dollars-worth pearl without being aware of the value or opportunities it might open for him. Dear fellow Baptists, let us wake up to the treasure we own! Relational, covenant-based, community orientated model of the Church under the Lordship of Christ is the treasure, and it is increasingly relevant in the post-modern, post-denominational age.

2. Jesus said: I am with them. If we seek to be a church under the Lordship of Christ we are challenged to celebrate and witness to Christ's presence in the believers' communities.

We live in times when there are many theories and methods how 'to do church.' There is ongoing discussion about liquid church and new-ancient church, about emerging church and missional church... You name it!

This interest in methods of mission and leadership structures is important and understandable – we are committed to fulfil the Great Commission as well as possible. But what I want to remind us about is: we are too easily stuck to methods and models, sometimes borrowed from other cultures, we are too easily lured by the promises of effectiveness that we hope to copy in our own environment.

I want to go home from this meeting with stronger faith that it is the Lordship of Christ that is essential for the church! 'Jesus Christ is the Lord!'

This essential 'credo' or confession of faith leaves creative space for different styles of worship, different ways of reaching out to neighbours. This allows the beauty of a mosaic of gifts and talents and movements that all stem from one root of humble confession: Jesus Christ is in the midst of us, Jesus Christ is the Lord!

Baptistic hermeneutics does not see a contradiction between Matthew 18:20 and Matthew 16:18. In the latter passage Jesus asked from his disciples, what people think who he is? And Peter blurted out, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God'. Jesus replied: „And I tell you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church...“ It is the baptistic belief that it is not the person of Peter upon what the Church is built. After all, Christ is the rock and cornerstone, there is no other foundation. Rather, it is the witness of the disciples, including Peter, that Jesus is the Messiah – and this response to the Lordship of Christ is needed for building the Church. This witness always has a communal not only personal element to it!

The Body of Christ, in a baptistic understanding, means that in every church, in every congregation, Christ is present as a whole, with all means of salvation. In this sense it is universal, and the catholicity – lower case ‘c’ – is reflected in a local church. ‘Here catholicity means the wholeness of a congregation or church based on the presence of the whole Christ’.¹

If it is Christ who constitutes the Church, and expects us to witness to His Lordship, then the most urgent challenge is not in finding a universally working mission model or right worship. The challenge is to elevate and celebrate Christ in the midst of the believers’ communities.

3. Where two or three come together. The church as a community of believers.

The church’s life, however, has not only vertical dimension, anchored in Jesus Christ, but also horizontal dimension, an orientation towards brothers and sisters. In the 16th century, the Anabaptist or Radical Reformation believers embodied a new church model – church as a fellowship, as a community of brothers and sisters. Centuries later, the house church movement founder Ernest Southcott said: ‘We don’t go to church, we are the church!’

The words of Jesus in Matthew 18 had been forgotten in ecclesiological sense for a long time. This was why Anabaptist approach seemed so innovative, when compared to episcopal model. The radical believers were considered heretics in their culture. However, they believed, as did later Baptists, Quakers and others belonging to radical or dissenting tradition, that Christ’s Command of Love is manifested in practical, real-life situations.

Miroslav Volf has drawn some conclusions based on the notion that the church ‘is not a single subject but rather a communion of interdependent subjects’.² He says that the church is fundamentally a ‘polycentric community’ that allows members to participate: ‘When you come together, *each one* has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up the congregation.’ (1Cor 14:26) This horizontal polycentric approach, describing relationships of the believers in the fellowship, is not undermining the vertical reality of Christ-centred understanding of the Church.

The challenge for believers’ churches in post-denominational age, is not primarily a doctrinal purity. This does not mean that all things go, this means that we are all in a process of learning and developing. And God has still new things to reveal... This makes us humble, but also, I believe, more open to the guiding and shaping work of the Holy Spirit. If relations between ‘two and three’, and being together in Christ’s name, are important for the baptistic way of being the Church, then the major challenge is to live a life of meaningful discipleship and make the Rule of Love visible in the surrounding culture and in the believers’ communities.

¹ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p. 271.

² Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p. 224.

4. Coming and being together – unity and meeting ‘the other’.

In a post-denominational age, and this is where we increasingly are, a new task for Baptist churches is not only to ask about our own identity, but also to learn about the identity of other Christian traditions. This involves an understanding that God’s work and God’s kingdom is larger than our story. Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher, has helped us to realise that we need others in order to understand our own identity. I need ‘You’ in order to understand who am ‘I’. This is true also in mutual communication between different Christian traditions.

Post-denominational setting means that as Baptists we are involved in two processes. We re-discover own story and historical identity, but at the same time we have a chance to see this story on a wider panorama. Figuratively speaking, we believe that we are together with Jesus in a boat, but the New Testament says that ‘there were also other boats with him’ (Mark 4:36). Baptist ecclesiology, focusing on the fellowship with Jesus and the community around him, is not an exclusivist community.

In North-America, James Wm. McClendon has argued that we should prefer speaking about baptists with small ‘b’, a term that allows to see connecting links between all those who emphasise discipleship, radical conversion and following Christ, mission, religious liberty... This is one example, emerging from our own story, that has made an attempt to see our mission and identity as a unique tradition rather than define it in denominational terms.

But we do not need to go too far. Jesus said we have to start first with Jerusalem, the closest circle of relationships. Unity in Christ is not uniformity! It is honesty, respect and love! It is independence of the local churches and unions, but it is interdependence because of Jesus Christ. We do not own freedom, it is a gift from God. And this is why Baptist churches can give up some of their freedom – for the sake of a bigger cause: the cause of God’s kingdom!

Baptist way of being the Church is a calling to give up personal pride and collective egoism. This is why I admire and respect the churches and unions within the EBF family, who have been over the years committed to cooperation, consciously supporting other members of the Body of Christ, being patient in theological questions that take time to settle, and they have been listening, but also speaking into each others’ lives. This is making oneself dependent on others – for Christ who is in the midst of us, and who made himself dependent on the shelter he was offered, yes, even on disciples. He asked them for help – and was dependent: if they bring some food from nearby villages or not, if Judas is using the purse well or not, if they are able to find accommodation or not...

However, if presence of Christ is defining the whole Church, then definitely His presence leads to ecumenical relations with other traditions. Jesus Christ is not a Baptist! Jesus Christ constitutes His church, not only a Baptist or a baptistic church! In this country, as Evangelical Christians and Baptists, especially in the early decades of our history, we have said harsh words about other traditions. Pastor of the Tallinn Oleviste ECB Church Osvald Tärk once said: “We must admit, there have been moments when we have been like a fleet in a foggy night, drawn into a sea battle. But when fog dissolved we suddenly realised we have been shooting our own allies.” Fortunately, Christ is the true light!

The attitude that we are part of a larger, universal body of Christ, while being thankful and firm in our ecclesiology, is a good platform also for doctrinal conversations. An inspiring example how this can be done is the document “The Word of God in the Life of the Church” (published 2012). This is a Roman-Catholic and Baptist World Alliance joint document, which is illuminative not only about the others but also about our own theological identity about the church.

The challenge is not to carry out a contest ‘which church is better’, but instead, by learning from others to re-discover the internal life and energy of our identity as ‘believers’ churches’.

Eschatological vision: true church is yet to come!

Last not least – while we find causes of thankfulness in the past, our eyes are turned into the future. Past is an attractive source of respect and models. Future is, however, an inevitable dimension for a dynamic identity. Nigel Wright has said: ‘None of us can claim to be the true church, because the true church has yet to come!’³ And he continues: ‘When we are backward looking concerning the church, we end up arguing. When we look toward the future we pull together to work for the coming of the true church.’⁴

³ Nigel Wright, *New Baptists, New Agenda*, p. 4.

⁴ Nigel Wright, *New Baptists, New Agenda*, p. 7.