

Baptist heritage and relevance today^{*}

Introduction

a. **The promise of the baptist tradition.** The *Baptist tradition*, which reaches back to the 16th and 17th centuries, counsels us to live *a radical commitment to Jesus Christ*, and therefore to be *suspicious of the dominant trends in society, religion and culture*; it emphasises the *importance of conscience, and of carefully listening to the voice of conscience*, and it encourages us to see *freedom as the essence of faith*.

I will try to *locate* what we as *Baptists* may have to contribute to the witness of the *Christian church* in the *society* in which we live. This implies a number of claims:

- *That we do have something to offer.* Being the product of a tradition that reaches back to 16th century Europe and to 17th century England we shall need to ask ourselves what our tradition may lay upon our hearts and minds for our lives and ministries today?
- *That we are part of a larger movement,* the Christian church, the "body of Christ", and that we would yield to sectarian tendencies if we failed to recognise this, to repress it, or not to live it. The *ecumenical movement* is one of the great movements of God's Spirit

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in our century. And with all its ambiguity, its power plays, its unacceptable compromises, there is no turning back. To read the sign of the times must be to actively and intentionally join the ecumenical movement in its local, national and international expressions.

- That it is the noble task of the church to *witness* to the *missio dei*, and to become a *partner with God* in *his* mission to the world. The church is by being on mission in its witness that God in Christ has claimed his creation for himself. Denominationalism is being relativised by our commitment to Christ. We must accept and occupy the place where we find ourselves, but we must look beyond it, and eagerly anticipate the coming of God (the βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ, as elaborated in Mark 1:15).
- That, finally, it is the *world and the society that is important* to God and therefore to us. Anyone who has been touched by God's grace and knows that it was God who touched her, knows herself as being ontologically woven, not only into *God's economy*, but also into *nature*, whose air we breathe, whose water we drink and whose food we eat, into *history*, which shapes us and which we help to shape, and into *the human family*, who has created us and whose destiny we share. God has elected his creation for salvation, and our election can only be a call to service to participate in God's mission of *shalom*.

b. The merging of horizons. It is not my aim to list *Baptist distinctives*. That would be easy and it has often been done. We would talk about the authority of Scripture, about believers' baptism, about the church as the gathered community, about separation of church and state, about freedom of conscience of the believer, about a non-hierarchical church, about mission and evangelism. All that is important. But I would like to try going a step further.

What is the *heart* that beats behind the manifestations? What is the *spirit* that expresses itself in certain forms? Given our *tradition*, what mission might God lay on our hearts and minds *today*? No denomination has a special hold on God's kingdom. We all have aspects that can enrich the witness of the "body of Christ". When Paul speaks of the "*body of Christ*", he uses the imagery of *many members* who in their togetherness and their interplay make up the body. What is it that *we* can contribute to the body? And, given the biblical exhortation of the *responsibility of knowledge* - "Whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin" (James 4:17) -, what, given our tradition, is it that *we must* contribute to the "body of Christ" if we are to be true to our tradition and responsive to the Spirit of God today?

Holistic Mission

a. **Mission as essential mark of the church.** The church does not exist for its own sake. As Jesus was the man "for" and "with" others, so the church reflects God's being by being "for" and "with" others. In the present debate, whether *mission* belongs to the *esse*, to the *essential* marks of the church, or to the *bene esse*, to the *desirable* marks, the Baptist answer, both with reference to our tradition and with reference to our understanding of the biblical message, must be clear: *mission belongs to the essence of the church*. God *is* in that he comes and loves. Fire *is* in that it burns. The church *is* in that it shares what it has received. During the *Reformation* it was not the magisterial reformers, but our spiritual forebears for whom *Matthew 28:16-20* constituted the divine necessity (compare 1 Cor 9:16) which the Spirit of God laid upon the heart of the believer and the community of faith.

b. **The crisis of mission.** Nevertheless, we must recognise that *imperialism* (ours was supposed to be the "Christian century"), a *gnostic Christology* (claiming the riches of Christ apart from the poverty of Jesus) with a subsequent *gnostic anthropology* (saving a person's

"soul"), and an *inadequate doctrine of God* (how can a God who is love assign people to *hell?*), have left their legacy in our midst. We must therefore start anew. It is not enough to affirm mission as being constitutive for the church. We must ask what *mission is today*, and we must become aware of God and *his* mission in the world.

c. **The world as a global village.** It has been a recent discovery, but now we know it. The world and the cosmos is a delicate system in which *everything is interrelated*. *The world is a global village*. Tearing or destroying this delicate net of inter-wovenness at any one point, has consequences for all other points. We are beginning to understand that all of humanity is sitting in the same boat; a leak at one end will ultimately make the whole boat to sink.

The *major crises* that challenge us today are crises that *affect all humanity*. Whether we think of tidal waves, of toxic waste products, of the destruction of rain forests, of the spreading of deserts, of wars, of accidents in nuclear power stations, or of the denial of human rights. They are no longer limited to certain countries or geographical regions. They affect all of us. This may require a *change of focus* for us.

d. **The need for a paradigm shift.** *Christian churches*, at least in the "West", have been *centring their main interest on the "believer" and the "unbeliever"*. Most of our energy, our time, our money, our personnel is used to accompany the believer with the comforting and challenging presence of the gospel, and to try to present the gospel to the unbeliever. Pastoral Care, Mission, Evangelism and Church Growth are nearly exclusively focused on the believer and the unbeliever. Most "Baptist" talk of mission is in terms of converting the unbeliever, increasing church membership, and "doubling" the number of churches.

The same is true for *"Western" theology*. The silent dialogue partners for our theological reflections are the *believers* on the one hand, and the *agnostics* and the *atheists* on the other. The method for

theological reflection is not gathered from the social sciences, but from Philosophy. Our main interest is to help the believers to give a rational and coherent account for their faith, and to convince the intelligent and cultured seeker for truth that faith in Jesus Christ is a viable option.

This focus on the believer and the unbeliever is of course justified in that the church must care for its members, and it remains a vital function of the church to present the riches of the gospel in word and deed to the unbeliever. Yet, when this focus becomes so determinant that a large part of God's concern is blocked out, then it becomes a reduction of the gospel and a distortion of our faith. Then our ministry is no longer a credible analogy to the gospel of Christ.

e. *Justice as a theological concern.* No one can read the biblical message without being made aware of *two further dimensions* that are inherent to the Judeo-Christian understanding of God: the *concern for justice* and our perception of *nature as creation*. In other words, will we have the sensitivity and insight to take *the crisis of justice*, and *the ecology crisis* into our *theological* reflection? Will we realise that for us as Christians, who confess *God as creator and redeemer of the world*, it is not possible to believe in *God*, and at the same time by-pass the suffering of *God's* creation.

To *widen our commitment*, and by this to form a closer analogy to our faith in Jesus Christ, means to include into our vision of Christ not only the believer and the unbeliever, but the "non humans", the "non persons", the "poor", the "wretched of the earth", the "forgotten children of the world", those who have "no voice and no friends and no power".

In the New Testament world these people, who were denied to experience their full humanity by the structures of the world, were the fishermen, the women, the children, the tax collectors - all those with whom Jesus shared his faith in God and his vision for the future.

We have to locate, each of us in the place where we find ourselves, the people who have no voice and no power and no friends and then become their advocate. Lazarus is lying at our door step and our attitude to him will be our attitude to God.

The challenge of the situation in our "global village" can help us to rediscover the *theological resources* that are inherent to our faith in Jesus Christ: *God's partiality* for the widow, the stranger, the slave and the oppressed as seen in the Old Testament legal and prophetic traditions. *God's self identification with humanity*, yes, with *all humanity* in the human being Jesus of Nazareth. The fact that *Jesus revealed his deity and lived his calling* by proclaiming the word of forgiveness and liberation, and by actually living this word in his fellowship with the outcasts of his day. That he sustained this vision of life even *unto death*; - and how God himself *confirmed Jesus' vision of life by raising him* from the dead. That the earliest Christians tuned into this vision of reality by reading the signs of the times and identifying the present of Christ with those who were pushed to margins of life (Matthew 25:31-46).

f. The ecological dimension of theology. The other challenge is related to *the ecological crisis*. As human beings we live by being related to God, to each other, and to nature. We are created to worship God, to love each other, and to enter into a partnership with nature. It is this third aspect of our being which for centuries we have taken for granted, but which we are beginning to rediscover by being confronted with the *ecology crisis*.

We are so closely woven into the delicate life net of nature that with the sickness of nature we are becoming sick. With the health of nature we are becoming healthy. Indeed, so

... intimate is the linkage between humankind and its environment that the distinction between individual and environment blurs. Some of the air we breathe becomes a part of us. The oxygen metabolises our foods and becomes a part of our flesh and blood; particulates we breath accumulate in our lungs. Some of the liquids we drink

*become part of our bodies, as do the toxic substances the liquids sometimes contain. The soils become our food, which in turn becomes our tissues. In fact the term 'environment' - i.e. human surroundings - is an inadequate and inaccurate concept because there is not and cannot be a sharp distinction between humankind and its surroundings.*¹

Experts tell us that the garden of nature, into which God has placed us, is in bad shape. Deforestation, desertification, air, water and soil pollution, the thinning of the ozone layer, nuclear waste products, the extinction of species, are just some concepts that stand for the raping of nature and the subsequent threat to human survival.

We can't blame nature for the ecology crisis. The ecology crisis is not a crisis of nature. It is a crisis of humanity. Created to be caretakers and partners of nature, we have assumed the role of ruling over nature. We have exploited the earth in order to satisfy our own appetites. And, what is especially regrettable for us as Christians, we have justified our selfish usurpation with biblical texts like Genesis 1:26.28 and Psalm 8. Have we not committed blasphemy when we have used such biblical texts, not only to place ourselves into the centre of God's interest, but to validate our greed, which has resulted in the ecology crisis today?

Perhaps the ecology crisis will help us to rediscover the *theological resources* that are inherent to our faith, and thus widen our commitment so that our life and ministry may begin to form a closer analogy to our faith in Jesus Christ. *God as "creator of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen." Christ as mediator and sustainer of creation* (1 Cor 8:6; Eph 1:9f.; Col 1:15-20; Hebr 1:2.10; John 1:1.3.14). *The Holy Spirit as the giver of life:*

When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground (Psalm 104:29f.).

g. Widening our commitment. We may therefore need to *widen our commitment* to mission by shaping with our lives and ministries closer analogies to our faith in Jesus Christ. A lot of changes will have to be made in our lives, our theology, our churches, and our ministry. Our faith in God as creator, reconciler, and redeemer can no longer by-pass the disadvantaged and nature. Our commitment to them is not an optional extra. In our present world situation it is indeed necessary to make a *special effort* to shape our commitment to nature and to those who are pushed to the margins of life. Such efforts are an essential part of our faith in a God whom we confess to be the creator of heaven and earth, who loves the world (John 3:16), and who in Jesus Christ has concretely reconciled the world with himself (2 Cor 5:18-20).

In analogy to the intention of texts like Mark 9:37, Matthew 25:31-46 and Luke 10:25-37 we would have to conclude that in the torn nature, in the torture victim, in the child that is dying of hunger, the Broken One of the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* is again lying half dead on the side of the road of life, hoping that the representatives of the religious establishment will not walk by, and then shape their theology to justify their disinterest.

Discipleship

a. A baptist emphasis. Realising the danger of caricature, our Baptist *emphasis*, and the way we understand the biblical message, is not on *liturgical worship*, not on an *individualised and privatised faith*, not on the *rational acceptance of dogmatic truths*, but on *following Jesus in Christian discipleship*.

This emphasis is controversial, both in theory and in practice. There is, *first of all*, the fear that a focus on discipleship would lead to a *distortion of the "sola gratia"* and possibly even to the heresy of *synergism* (from the Greek word συνεργεῖν = co-operating"). Then, *secondly*, it has been suspected that discipleship may suggest a *distortion of the "sola*

fide", and lead to a *moralisation of faith*. Both dangers must be acknowledged and avoided. *Synergism* is suspect because it questions the soteriological sufficiency of *sola gratia* by maintaining that the human being "co-operates" with God in the work of salvation. And if faith is dissolved into morality then its justifying and liberating character is being lost.

However, is it not equally true that the constant awareness of, indeed even the fascination with these dangers, coupled with individual and ecclesiastical self-interest, has led to an *ideology of sola gratia* and *sola fide* by which it is no longer evident *who* the God is, who raised Jesus from the dead, and *who* the Christ is who has been raised from the dead? Allow me to illustrate this with a historical reminder from our baptist tradition.

b. **A historical reminder.** During the Reformation it was the *left wing of the Reformation*, the so-called *Anabaptists*, who suspected a reduction of the Gospel when the magisterial reformers made a distinction between justification and sanctification, and when they located the presence of Christ exclusively in the word and in the (proper) administration of the sacraments. Our forebears agreed with the magisterial reformers in their insistence on *sola gratia*, *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*, but they insisted that faith means more than the individual and personal appropriation of salvation. It means "*following Jesus*" in the context of an *intentional Christian community*. They criticised the reformers' understanding of faith as being superficial and shallow. In their understanding the reformers preached "a sinful sweet Christ", who does not lead to a "betterment of life".²

c. **Creating analogies to the resurrection of the crucified Christ.** From its earliest days the Christian church has struggled to identify the content of faith. The inventive creativity of human religious instincts, the unwillingness of Christians to squarely face what has been considered "foolishness" and a "stumbling block" to the

religious establishment and to the intellectual elite of all times (1 Cor 1:18-2:5), has led to the *domestication of the cross* and to a *spiritualisation of the resurrection*, so that the offence of the cross, the call of Jesus to radical discipleship, tuning into God's passion for the world, seems to be no longer determinative in our midst. We have become comfortable middle class Christians. Hanging silver and golden crosses around our necks; using a cross as a sign of victory by which we conquer other nations and other religions; developing complicated theories of atonement in which the poverty of Jesus' life, his liberating solidarity with marginal groups, his revolutionary but non-violent attacks on the political and religious structures (law and cult) and institutions (temple) of his day are given no theological status; reducing the resurrection to a historical event which can be investigated by our reason - all this has made faith comfortable and serviceable in a hedonistic and consumer- oriented culture where Christian faith must be marketed as a religious option to provide fun for our living.

Very early, discerning Christians and Christian churches began to protest against the separation of faith from the obvious offence, from the poverty and from the particularity of Jesus. *Paul* in his protest against the church in Corinth, where charismatic self-edification had become more important than waiting for and sharing with the slaves and wharfies and nannies, emphasises that the *crucified* Christ is the host at the Lord's supper - " ... the Lord Jesus *on the night when he was betrayed* took a loaf of bread ..." (1 Cor 11:23) - and that it was therefore inconceivable (1 Cor 11:20!) that a *Christian* church would not wait for the "late-comers". Indeed, the earliest Gospel, the *Gospel of Mark*, was written 40 years after Jesus' death to protect the identity of Christian faith against the distortions of the ever present religious instincts of Christians. The *Gospel of Mark* is a protest against spiritualising Christian faith, by inter-weaving the miracle stories with the passion story of Jesus. Thereby the first evangelist insists that Jesus can only be known "on the way", and this way is the way of following

Jesus in radical discipleship (Mark 8:27-9:1). The writer to the *Hebrews* invites the friends of Jesus to "go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured" (Heb. 13:12f.); and in the *Book of Revelation* it is the "lamb that was slain", Christ *crucified*, on whom the "power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing" of God rests (Rev 5).

What role does the presence of the *crucified* Christ play in our theology, our worship, our life, our mission? Have we become so religious, so settled, so comfortable, that we are no longer able to *hear* call to radical discipleship? To know God means to do justice (Jer 22:13-17); to know God in Christ means to obey Jesus in the power of the Spirit.³

The Church as κοινωνία

a. Society is becoming "colder". Society around us is becoming "colder". We live in a world where traditional structures and authorities are being questioned and are breaking. Individualism leads to loneliness. Solidarity is challenged by a Social Darwinism in which only the fit survive and only the strong can be free. The gulf between the rich and the poor, between those who have work and those who don't, is widening. Budget managements, the ever present power of the dollar, and the Dow Jones Index cannot spread human warmth, and they frustrate any attempt at community and solidarity.

b. The promise of κοινωνία. Will we as Christian and as churches be willing and able to read the signs of the times? World wide the churches are looking for a *new symbol* that may give a better expression to what the church *is* and therefore *should be*. The symbol κοινωνία has emerged as having widespread acceptance and therefore bearing some interesting promise.⁴ It invites us:

- to share in the "κοινωνία of his son, *Jesus Christ* our Lord" (1 Cor 1:9, 10:16);

- to share in the “κοινωνία of the *Holy Spirit*” (2 Cor 13:13);
- to share in the *church* as the world wide “body of Christ” (1 Cor 10:16). Indeed the *collection* which Paul takes up among the Gentile churches for the Christians in Jerusalem is called κοινωνία (2 Cor 9:13, 8:4). Faith in Christ in the power of the Spirit leads to the awareness: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it” (1 Cor 12:26). This awareness of the interwovenness of all life is then spelled out in Matthew 25:31-46 where service to Christ is identical with service to the poor and oppressed.

c. **The Baptist Contribution.** Baptists speak, with reference to 1 Cor 11:18 - “... συνερχομένων ὑμῶν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ ...” (“when you *come together* as the church ...”) - of the church as the “*gathered community*”. Not hierarchy or organisation, but the dynamic and open gathering of the people of God as an open and vibrant community in worship of God, in commitment to each other, and in willingness to enrich the world with the Gospel, could become a reflection of the trinitarian life of God.

This implies that the church is an *intentional community*. We don't “go to church”; we *are* the church at home and at work and on the football ground. The mutual inter-relationship of Christians within the community of faith has *soteriological* dignity. We are Christians, not alone but in togetherness. Situations of persecutions, in which we have experienced God as “burden carrier”, have taught Baptist Christians that we need to walk together and carry each other's burdens (Gal 6:2).

Since we are inter-woven with other churches in the *one* “body of Christ” we need to *discover each other as sources of life* rather than as competitors for new members.

Both our tradition and the biblical imperative counsel us to rediscover the Reformation emphasis on the “*priesthood of all believers*”.

We are a *lay movement* and we need to resist the clericalism of the ecclesia. We, the clergy, have failed the church by withholding from the people of God the critical and liberating power of the gospel. Biblical fundamentalism and evangelical conservatism often divert our sole emphasis on Christ and on the liberating power of the gospel, they thereby hinder our discipleship and keep our churches in a dogmatic straight jacket.

The signs of the times call for an age *beyond denominationalism*. There is the more structured ecumenical movement that finds expression in the local, national and international ecumenical councils; and there is the unstructured ecumenicity of people who gather under banners such as “evangelicals”, “charismatics” or “social activists”. The clock cannot be turned back. However, lest a *post-modern relativism* captures the church’s imagination, we need to know where we stand, and from there make our contribution to the being and mission of the church.

Rediscovering the church as κοινωνία would mean that we learn:

- to seek, encourage and affirm *difference* and variety in our midst. God’s grace is as colourful as a rainbow; and the κοινωνία of Father, Son and Holy Spirit can only be reflected by a church where creativity and difference is not feared but sought and celebrated.
- to *share* and *receive* spiritual and material gifts.

“Resident aliens”⁵ - an alternative vision

a. *In the world, but not of the world*. I have been a resident alien in three different countries (Australia, Switzerland, USA). I wanted to be part of the culture; and yet I knew that I was different. It is part of our Baptist tradition that we are *suspicious* and therefore

critical of culture and society. Both in the 16th and in the 17th centuries our movement arose out of tension and *conflict with state and church* of that day. For them it was not a conflict for its own sake. It was a *conflict of conscience*. Must not Christians, whose conscience is bound to the *biblical story of Jesus*, anticipate tension and conflict with the culture in which we live?

"Our citizenship is in heaven" says the apostle (Phil 3:20). By that he did not mean withdrawal from the world, as his own life story easily and convincingly illustrates. It meant drinking from different wells; living in the world with our conscience bound to "heaven".

b. Beyond "liberalism" and "conservative evangelicalism".

I would suggest that we would be well advised to seek a way *beyond* "liberalism" and "conservative evangelicalism" which determine the life of our churches, although the theological nomenclature may be unfamiliar.

Liberalism is in danger of selling the gospel out to cultural norms and values. We live in a culture of self-gratification, hedonism, consumerism and social Darwinism. The worth of persons are measured by their usefulness. This is reflected in the churches' continual efforts to provide fun for ever growing congregations. Church growth and human emotions have become a measure for the presence of the Spirit. Self-sacrifice, discipline, care for the "other", be it the unemployed, the elderly, the handicapped or the indigenous people, are not in vogue or given a secondary theological status.

Conservative evangelicals, on the other hand, are in danger of privatising and intellectualising Christian faith. Personal experience and doctrinal orthodoxy have become more important than criticising society and shaping an alternative community.

c. The church as an alternative community with an alternative vision. A new commitment to Jesus Christ must include the

courage to shape a community which manifests the present of the crucified Christ in the power of the Spirit. Such a community must live in tension and conflict with the dominant values that determine our culture and must again begin to accept and fulfil the role of the prophet. Economic rationalism, social Darwinism and an ingrained white superiority feeling are fundamentally opposed to the Christian understanding of life. Why is it so difficult to muster opposition and resistance to governments that so clearly measure human values in terms of dollars?

A Tradition of Dissent Religious Liberty and Human Rights

a. **The claiming of freedom.** The baptist tradition is inextricably bound up with the claiming of *freedom*. We believe in a God who has heard the cries of his people, and who wants to deliver them, and who says to those who believe and obey him, as he said to Moses of old: "So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (Exod 3:6-10). Paul's dictum that "for freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal 5) and John's assertion that believers in Christ are not slaves of sin, but people who are liberated for worship and service (John 8) should sit well with Baptists who are in touch with their tradition.

b. **A historical reminder.** When in 1602 a group of Christians under the leadership of the Anglican Clergyman *John Smyth* (1563?-1612) separated from the institutional church and formed an intentional Christian community they called themselves "*the Lord's free people*". The story of Jesus as the story of freedom has initiated and has shaped the Baptist tradition from the beginning. *Thomas Helwys* (1550?-1616), who in 1612 formed the first Baptist church on British soil, was imprisoned and died for the right to claim that no king or earthly power has an ultimate claim over the human conscience.⁶ A century earlier, 5,000 *Anabaptists* were banned, excommunicated, tortured, burned at the stake and drowned for obeying the liberating

call of Christ to Christian discipleship. *William Knibb* (1803-1845) fought for the abolition of slavery and for the end of the slave trade in Jamaica through the British parliament, against the resistance of church and state,⁷ and *Martin Luther King* struggled against the demon of racism until in 1968 at the age of 39 he was mowed down. Was their struggle worthwhile? Do we own that part of our tradition? Where is our willingness to dissent, to denounce, to protest? Is there a truth that fascinates us so deeply that we are prepared to pay a price, rather than surrender it?

Our forebears were identified with the *left wing* of the Reformation, the *radical* reformation. *Separatists* and *Dissidents* and *Non-conformists* they were called. Why? Because they wanted to be *free people*. Free from the domination of state and church. Free for Christ - the master of their conscience!

c. Are we “the Lord’s free people”? What has happened to the passion for freedom in our midst? Are we too wedded to the status quo? Have we become more concerned with “comfort zones” than with discipleship? Is there anything occupying our conscience that we are willing to suffer and die for? Is our denominational leadership more concerned with harmony than with truth? Are we always trying to please the vocal and conservative elements in our churches?

Why is it that we are not speaking with a clear sound on *women’s ordination*? Why is it that we are not *members of the National Council of Churches*? Why are we not members of the *World Council of Churches*? I suspect that the story of freedom has by-passed us, and we have sought and found a conservative comfort zone. Our confession to the Lordship of Christ has unknowingly given way to an *ecclesiastical captivity*. This brings me to the last point that I want to mention.

Christology

Towards a theology of the liberating pain of God

a. **The need for a credible theological foundation.** Whatever we believe and do, we must not surrender the quest for *truth*. We must have a *theological foundation* for what we are doing. For *Christian faith* this *theological* ground is the *resurrection of the crucified Christ*.⁸ This ground is being challenged today, both from within and from without the church. I mention two such challenges.

b. **The post-modernist and the conservative challenge.** There is, *first of all*, the challenge of *post-modernism*. Post-modernism puts aside the question for a universal truth. It suspects that universal truth theories are inherently imperialistic. Truth therefore is situational and relative. There are many truths and many stories; but there is no universal truth and no Grand Story (no meta-narrative).

The *second* danger, which is probably more of a challenge in our churches, is the *conservative domestication* of the gospel by reducing it to a historical fact or a dogma that must be intellectually accepted. The free Spirit of God which is his unconditional self-giving par excellence and who has no other passion than to point us to Christ, is subordinated to the words in the Bible and therefore encourages legalism rather than leading people into the broad place where they can breathe the free air of God.

c. **Authority grounded in a *person*.** Both dangers can be avoided, both challenges can be met, if we recognise that both, our tradition⁹ and the biblical message, point us to the *Person of Christ* as the final authority for faith and praxis.¹⁰ Not a book or a creed, but a *person* is the ground and content of our authority. A person invites faith and obedience. It has the quality of risk and adventure. Legalism leads to a fundamental distortion of faith.

d. **The particularity of that person.** The ground and content of our faith is a *particular* person, the person of the *crucified and risen*

Christ. The experience of political and religious persecution has led Baptists to appreciate the biblical insistence on the *partiality* and the *suffering* of God.¹¹ In Jesus Christ God has revealed that he *takes sides* and that he is *vulnerable to the pain* of his creation.

Injustice and pain will not decrease. They will increase. And with modern media technology we shall know all the gory details of pain and injustice from Burundi and Rwanda, from Nagaland and Bosnia. But closer to home we shall have to realise that with economic rationalism and a "user pays" mentality determining our way of life, our society will get colder. The old people and the handicapped, the unemployed and the minority groups will be further disadvantaged. When the welfare of a society is measured in dollars and interest rates and money market acceptance, then human dignity will be left out in the cold. Shall we be able and willing to relate the liberating *partiality* and the creative *suffering of God* to the *needs of our world*?

Thorwald Lorenzen

NOTES:

1. Gerald O. Barney, Study Director, *The Global 2000 Report to the President. Entering the Twenty-First Century. A Report Prepared by the Council on Environmental Quality and the Department of State, Vol. II, Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981, p 227.*
2. Balthasar Hubmaier writes: "Faith alone makes us holy (frumm = fromm) before God ... Such faith can not remain passive but must break out (ausbrechen) to God in thanksgiving and to mankind in all kinds of works of brotherly love." ("Eighteen Theses" (1524), in: W. Estep, ed., *Anabaptist Beginnings (1523-1533). A Source Book*, Nieuwkoop, B. De Graaf, 1976, p. 24; Conrad Grebel writes to Thomas Muntzer: "... today ... every man wants to be saved by superficial faith, without fruits of faith, without baptism of trial and probation, without love and hope, without right Christian practices, and wants to persist in all the old manner of personal vices" (C. Grebel, "Letters to Thomas Muntzer," in: *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*[1957], p. 74); Jakob Kautz challenged the Protestant clergy of the city of Worms on June 13, 1527 by insisting: "Jesus Christ of Nazareth did not suffer for us and has not satisfied (for our sins) in any other way but this: that we have to stand in his footsteps and have to walk the way which he has blazed for us first, and that we obey the commandments of the Father and the Son, everyone according to his

measure. He who speaks differently of Christ makes an idol of Christ." (Cited from R. Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism. An Interpretation*, Scottdale, Pa., Herald Press, 1973, p.85); perhaps Hans (John) Denck has most clearly expressed this concern: "... none may truly know (Christ) unless he follow after him with his life. And no one can follow after him except in so far as one previously knows (erkennet) him." ("Whether God is the Cause of Evil," [1526], in: *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* [1957], pp. 88-111, p.108).

3. The impressive words from the last paragraph of Albert Schweitzer's classic *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1910 [1906]) are worth repeating here: "Jesus comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."

4. Compare: Thomas F Best and Günther Gassmann, eds., *On the way to Fuller Koinonia*. Official Report of the fifth World Conference on Faith and Order. Faith and Order Paper no. 166, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1994.

5. The title, but not the content, is taken from a book by Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon. The subtitles of that book are: *Life in the Christian Colony* and *A provocative Christian assessment of culture and ministry for people who know that something is wrong*, Nashville, Abingdon, 1989.

6. This is expressed in Thomas Helwys, *The Mistery of Iniquity* (1612), published for the Baptist Historical Society (London, Kingsgate Press, 1935).

7. Compare: Philip Wright, *Knibb 'the Notorious': Slaves' Missionary 1803-1845*, London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1973.

8. See my recent publication: Thorwald Lorenzen, *Resurrection and Discipleship. Interpretive Models, Biblical Reflections, Theological Consequences*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis, 1995.

9. At the debates and disputes between Anabaptists and Reformed theologians in Zofingen (1932), Bern (1538) and in Frankenthal (1571), for instance, both parties accepted the sole authority of the Bible for faith and practice. They disagreed, however, over the point as to how the Bible was to be interpreted. While the Reformed theologians affirmed an identity of content between the Old Testament and the New Testament and thus considered both Testaments to be equally authoritative, the Anabaptists wanted to accept the authority of the Old Testament only as far as it does not contradict the gospel of Christ (for the Zofingen debate see: Heinold Fast and John H. Yoder, "How to deal with Anabaptists. An Unpublished Letter of Heinrich Bullinger," *MQR* 33 [1959], pp. 83-95; for the Bern debate compare: Walter Klaassen, "The Bern Debate of 1538: Christ the Center of Scripture," *MQR* 40 [1966], pp. 148-156; for the dispute in Frankenthal compare: Heinold Fast, "Die Frage nach der Autorität der Bibel auf dem Frankenthaler Täufergespräch 1571," *MGB* 28 [NF 23] [1971], pp. 28-38; Jesse Yoder, "The Frankenthal Debate with the Anabaptists in 1571: Purpose, Procedure, Participants," *MQR* 36 [1962], pp. 14-35).

In a letter preparing for the *Zofingen Debate* Heinrich Bullinger gave the following advice as to how to deal with the Anabaptists: "... when the prayer and opening address have been completed you should immediately bring forward the following proposition: *When tensions and conflicts arise between Christians concerning matters of faith, they should be decided and clarified with Holy Scripture of Old and New Testament.* ... as soon as it has been read you shall call out: 'If anyone holds otherwise, let him come forward!' In this way you will wring it out of them if anywhere there lurks a negation of the Old Testament." [The full letter is published in: Heinold Fast and John H. Yoder, "How to deal with Anabaptists. An Unpublished Letter of Heinrich Bullinger," *MQR* 33 [1959], pp. 83-95].

The first point on the agenda for the *Frankenthal Debate* was: "Whether the Old Testament Scripture is as valid to the Christian as the New; i.e., whether the principal doctrines of faith and life can and must be proved from the Old Testament as well as the New." [Cited from Jesse Yoder, "The Frankenthal Debate with the Anabaptists in 1571: Purpose, Procedure, Participants," *MQR* 36 [1962, 14-35], p. 22].

It must be recognized, of course, that behind these apparently theological positions there stood concrete *ecclesiastical and political interests*. For the Reformed theologians the covenantal theology of the Old Testament was of decisive importance for their doctrine of *infant baptism* and they also justified the *bearing of arms* and the giving of *oaths* from the Old Testament, while the Anabaptists felt that an uncritical reception of the Old Testament would threaten their insistence on *Non-resistance*, their *withdrawal from political responsibility* and their *rejection of capital punishment*.

10. The British Baptist Declaration of Principle (1938) reads: "That our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters relating to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His Laws."

Already in 1527 the Anabaptists of Grüningen in Switzerland argued that Zwingli based his practice of infant baptism on the Covenantal theology of the Old Testament because he could not find validity for it in the New Testament. This procedure was considered to be illegitimate because the Covenant in the Old Testament was really pointing to Jesus Christ who alone is authoritative for Christian faith and practice. ("Eingabe der Grüninger Täufer an den Landtag" [1527] in: Leonhard vom Muralt und Walter Schmid, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz*, Bd. I, Zürich, Theologischer Verlag, 1952, pp. 234-238, pp. 237f.; compare: John H. Yoder, *Täuferium und Reformation in der Schweiz*. I. Die Gespräche zwischen Täufern und Reformatoren 1523-1538, Karlsruhe: Schneider, 1962, pp. 100-105; John H. Yoder, *Täuferium und Reformation im Gespräch*. Dogmengeschichtliche Untersuchung der frühen Gespräche zwischen schweizerischen Täufern und Reformatoren, Zürich: EVZ, 1968, pp. 36f.).

In *A Short Confession of Faith* (1610, Lumpkin, pp. 102-113) by John Smyth and his group, reproducing basically the Mennonite *Waterland Confession* (1580,

Lumpkin, pp. 41-66), we read in Art.27 that the "doctrine" which the pastors must proclaim to the people must be "the same which Christ brought out of heaven ... which we find written (so much as is needful for us to salvation) in the Scripture of the New Testament, whereto we apply whatsoever we find in the canonical book of the Old Testament, which has affinity and verity, which by doctrine of Christ and his apostles, and consent and agreement, with the government of his Spiritual Kingdom." (Lumpkin, p. 109) Noticable is the *christological concentration, the relativisation of the Old Testament and the soteriological aim of the Bible.*

Thomas Helwys, the leader of the group of early Baptists who opposed John Smyth's and his group's attempt to join the Mennonites, wrote in 1611 A *Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland* that "the scriptures off the Old and New Testament are written for our instruction, ... that wee ought to search them for they testifie off CHRIST And therefore to bee used withall reverence, as conteyning the Holie Word off GOD, which onelie is our direction in al thinges whatsoever." (Art.23, Lumpkin, p. 122).

Specific at this point is also the *Account of our Faith* (1977) of the German speaking Baptists (Austria, Switzerland, Germany - in: G. Keith Parker, *Baptists in Europe: History & Confessions of Faith*, Nashville, Broadman, 1982, pp. 57-76) which begins with "God's Revelation in Jesus Christ" (I/I), and also commences the section on "God's Word - The Bible" (I/VI) with the sentence: "Jesus Christ is God's Word in person to us men." Further: "The gospel of the crucified, risen and coming Lord Jesus Christ is the center of the New Testament and hence of the entirety of the Holy Scripture." (I/VI) On this christological basis "the normative character of the New Testament for the life and teaching of the church" is asserted (I/VI).

Compare also the Baptist theologians Augustus Hopkins Strong (1836-1921), *Systematic Theology, Vol. I: The Doctrine of God*, Philadelphia, Judson Press, 1907, pp. 219f.: "While inspiration constitutes Scripture an authority more trustworthy than are individual reason or the creeds of the church, the only ultimate authority is Christ himself." (p. 219); and William Newton Clarke (1841-1912), *An Outline of Christian Theology*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898, pp. 45-47.

11. Theological expressions of this baptist experience are: James Hinton, *The Mystery of Pain*, London, 1866; H Wheeler Robinson, *Suffering Human and Divine*, London, SCM, 1940; Warren McWilliams, *The Passion of God. Divine Suffering and Contemporary Protestant Theology*, Macon, Ga., 1985; Paul Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1988; Thorwald Lorenzen, *Resurrection and Discipleship. Interpretive Models, Biblical Reflections, Theological Consequences*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis, 1995.