

Joanna Ruth Wirtz

17 November 2009

## WHY I AM A BAPTIST

When George and Ruth Wirtz moved to Texas, they swore they would be anything but Baptist. The Baptist church in the little Oklahoma town they came from had a bad reputation because it was isolationist. For example, when all the churches combined forces every year for a community-wide VBS, the Baptist church would hold its own VBS the same week. The only positive thing anyone had to say was that it had a nice missions program. Though raised Presbyterian, Ruth attended the Baptist church's GA's program as a girl.

Unfortunately, the Presbyterian church in their new Texan community didn't work out for them. The people were friendly enough, but they didn't study the Bible during Sunday school. Instead they discussed a religious book. Though George and Ruth liked religious books, they were dedicated biblicists and strongly felt that Sunday school should be dedicated to serious Bible study. A little lost, they tried branching out to other churches in other denominations, but nothing was a good fit for them.

Then Verlin invited the Wirtzes to his church. Verlin impressed them—a highly regarded engineer at George's workplace, a devoted husband and father, and lay Bible scholar with a passion for evangelism and missions. Verlin's church had more members with similar reputations. Sunday school classes showed a commitment to in-depth Bible study as did the pastor, a PhD student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

After their first visit to the church, that very afternoon church members showed up on George and Ruth's doorstep to share the gospel with them. George and Ruth were won over, and chose to become Baptists.

Thanks to my parents George and Ruth Wirtz, I was born and raised Baptist. But every person needs to grapple with faith on their own (or so Baptists claim) and now as an adult I have the opportunity to choose their way or another way. I may have different criteria than my parents did and I certainly have different experiences. What holds me to this Baptist faith?

Because Baptist faith is strongly experience-oriented, I have to be autobiographical and examine my own faith journey. Though I spent my entire childhood in Baptist Sunday school, most of my religious training was at home. My mother had a conservative Presbyterian/Baptist background and knew Scripture from the inside-out. She read Scripture with my sister and I, gave us Bible story books to study on our own, gave me my own Bible when I was seven (expecting that I would read it), and competently answered my constant Bible and faith questions. Her sisters sang Bible songs to us and challenged us to round after round of Bible Trivia. A charismatic strain runs through the family—Mom and her sisters determined from their study of Scripture that spiritual gifts are real and weren't too surprised when one of them started speaking in tongues and another began having prophetic dreams. (Curiously, despite the Baptist emphasis on personal experience and Scripture, most Baptists have not come to similar conclusions on spiritual gifts as my mother's family.)

Though most of my life I have attended Baptist churches, I graduated from an evangelical university and I worked at an evangelical publication company for three

years. I felt very comfortable, theologically speaking, in those places. I volunteered with Youth For Christ and the Billy Graham Telephone Ministry. Then I got a job as the youth activity director for a combined Methodist/Catholic youth group. When I moved in with my aunt I started attending her Wesleyan church with her. Looking for a little change, I attended a Messianic Jewish congregation for two years. I deeply appreciate the width and depth of my faith experience due to these influences, but now more than ever I am determined to be Baptist. It feels most at home with who I am and what I believe.

I deeply and passionately love Jesus. He is not just an important authoritative figure, but someone I know, someone I talk to regularly, someone I long to serve. The Christian life for me has not been a list of do's and don'ts, a support group, or a quest for proper theology, but a relationship with the divine—a journey with the divine. The Baptist emphasis on experience in one's own faith journey fits my life well. I also deeply love and respect the Bible, believing God speaks through it. The Baptist emphasis on the Bible fits me well, too.

So what do Baptists believe? Most simply put, Baptists believe in God and freedom, the Bible, the believer, and the church.

### **What does it mean that Baptists believe in the Bible?**

“We believe that the Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired, and is a perfect treasure of heavenly instruction; that it has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth without any mixture of error for its matter; that it reveals the principles by which God will judge us; and therefore is, and shall remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and opinions should be tried.” --Rev. John Newton Brown, The New Hampshire Confession of Faith, 1833

Baptists love the Bible and believe it has authority over a Christian's life and practice. Controversies in Baptist life typically revolve around differing interpretations of Scripture. Baptists reject creeds, claiming they add to the Bible, but occasionally draw up confessions like the one quoted above. Early Baptists insisted on the right to read and interpret the Bible for oneself with the aid of the Holy Spirit. We believe God speaks to us through the Bible today, orienting us toward himself.

### **What does it mean that Baptists believe in the believer?**

Baptists believe in freedom for the individual—freedom to think, freedom to study, freedom to lead, and the freedom to experience. It is a long-held, cherished Baptist belief that every person should have the freedom to choose their faith. Without such freedom, my parents could not have become Baptists. Without such freedom, my own faith experience would not have been so broad and enriched. While most people feel their own particular faith is the most valid, Baptists have been one of the few voices insisting that all people should have the freedom to choose their faith even if they won't choose the Baptist faith. Such an insistence is not only fair-minded, but best follows Jesus' golden rule: "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them." (Matthew 7:12 ESV) Baptists believe that if a person is truly free to choose the Christian faith, then that person will be a true believer.

By its very nature, the Baptist faith is experiential. Each believer must believe on his or her own. Each believer must receive and listen to the Holy Spirit on his or her own. God acted in human history in the Bible and he acts in the life histories of believers today.

Baptists emphasize the priesthood of the believer. This emphasis gives dignity to every believer, regardless of age, gender, education, physical or mental abilities, occupation, race, social standing, etc. Truth, particularly God's truth, can come from the mouth of babes because ultimately it comes from the Holy Spirit inside of us. This means every voice has a right to be heard, even those who would never be heard outside the church. This emphasis also requires something of every believer— every believer has the duty to pray, to speak, and to contribute, even when such things would not be expected from them outside the church. My mother plans to write a book about her Aunt Laura titled *Ministry of the Mentally Handicapped*. Aunt Laura was not someone who ministered to mentally handicapped people. She was a mentally handicapped person who ministered to other people.

Since God may speak through any of his priests, the voice of every believer is important. Each believer has the right (and duty) to protest the actions of the church if it disagrees with Scripture or the Spirit.

Every believer stands alone before God. If the believer is to be held responsible, the believer must be free to follow wherever the Spirit leads.

### **What does it mean that Baptists believe in the church?**

“The church of Christ is a company of the faithful; baptised after confession of sin and of faith, endowed with the power of Christ.” --John Smyth, “Short Confession of Faith”

Baptists desire to create a true New Testament church, comprised of believers who have been baptized after their conversion to Christ. Christ said, “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” (Matthew 8:20 NIV) This is the church, and this is a local church, free and independent from all outside authority

including government and religious organizations. Just as believers have the individual right of self-determination, so does the local church. This allows the people of the church to freely worship according to their consciences. A democratic entity run by Spirit-led believers will produce a Spirit-led church. It must be voluntary, or else the unity or Spirit may be disrupted. As a group, the church helps believers grow in their faith and understand what God is doing in the lives of its members. Through the church we experience spiritual brotherhood. The church also has the responsibility to reach out to its community.

The focus on the local church does not prevent multiple local churches working together towards a common goal, such as missions. On the contrary, Baptist churches often cluster together for societies or conventions, realizing there is strength in numbers.

### **What does it mean do be a Baptist in the 21st century?**

“I do believe that we Baptists have a magnificent body of truth—free, vital, honest, spiritual, and wholly in tune with the noblest tendencies of our age.” --Walter Rauschenbusch, “Why I Am a Baptist”

If Baptists are to continue to play a vital role in God's kingdom on earth, some things need to be changed, addressed, or abandoned. We must reclaim our Baptist identity as freedom-lovers and freedom-givers. Many people throughout the world do not have the religious freedom so dearly cherished by Baptists. As Baptists we have a unique calling to actively support religious freedom in all areas of the globe. We also should encourage religious freedom in our own churches and communities, fighting racism and sexism that is still often prevalent. God has called me to ministry, so if I am to continue being a Baptist, then we must allow opportunities for women in ministry positions.

Baptists in the 21st century need to discern what issues are worth fighting over and what issues are not. In the interest of Christian unity, we must increase the appropriate boundaries of theological disagreement. This will allow us to re-commit ourselves to the believer's right to study and interpret the Bible and to embrace one another as Baptist brethren.