

On Being a Moderate Baptist

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Introduction

I'm a poster child...
for a Baby-Boom,
Suburban,
Southern Baptist,
in the Bible Belt.

I grew up in a neighborhood Baptist Church, playing church baseball, going to all the SBC programs, attending Fall and Spring revivals, singing in youth musicals, and knowing my way around Glorieta. I was a product of a very powerful era in Baptist life.

How would you describe it? Here's a few words I would use. It was....

- Revivalistic – We were focused on the front... going “down front.”
- Sweet, Sentimental - we got choked up when folks walked the aisle. We loved hearing “personal testimonies.”
- Active – it was a highly programmed era. We were at the church... a lot.
- Exclusive – We were right or at least “righter” than everyone else.
- Evangelistic – Winning the world was our aim and knowing the Roman Road so you could share it was a sign of Christian maturity.
- Uncritical... Pop Christianity - We jumped happily and enthusiastically into what was happening in the mainstream, evangelical culture. We went to Billy Graham crusades and to Bill Gothard conferences. We read the Late Great Planet Earth and The Cross and the Switchblade and, God's Smuggler, that book about Brother Andrew who smuggled bibles across the iron curtain. We were “all in.”

It was a very powerful time in Baptist life and in my life.

But I left it. I found myself... as did many of you taking a different path... a path that for lack of a better descriptor, we call Moderate Baptist Life, this path and this “movement” that has been institutionalized, to the degree that we do that, in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Here, as we begin, my confession is that as one who left the path of my childhood, I've spent a lot of years wondering if I was a Baptist... really.

I know many of you might be quick to say, “**yes you're a Baptist, we were and are the real Baptists,**” and I know there's some truth to that historically. But there's more to it than who matches up best with history. Who's more like the Anabaptists or more like those Baptists who first sent missionaries, or died to separate church and state, or even more like the Baptists of my childhood.

Certainly, we have a claim to make and we should make it. But there's more to us... more to we moderate Baptists than our Baptist lineage. There's been more going on... than reacting to fundamentalism. Something has been happening in the Church and in our churches. There's been more happening in me and in you. We're different than we were.

So, like many, many, in our tradition... I've wondered, **"Am I really a Baptist?"**
"Do I need to be elsewhere?" **"Is there a home I've not found?"**

There's not a minister among us who hasn't asked those questions and who hasn't been in that conversation over coffee 100 times. We didn't fit in the old paradigm and found ourselves together on a new journey and we were wondering if the new journey was a Baptist journey.

I confess that has been a focus of my own ongoing discernment in a time that so many describe as "post-denominational."

I was there at, what would be looking back, the first meeting of the CBF... with all my college buddies and seminary car pool friends. It was one of the most exciting moments of my life.

We felt at home.

We felt like we belonged

We felt great hope.

We just felt great.

And we cast our lot with a new thing and lots of us are still here. **Why?** Why are we still here... given the conversations we've had over coffee where we've wondered honestly about our true identity.

That's part of what I want to try and answer in the time we share together, today. I want to just try to share some observations about what has happened in the CBF... this movement, which like a lot of other denominational homes and traditions, has become a kind of "roundhouse" for various parts of the Christian faith, where expressions of Christianity that have been moving through history and have arrived in this postmodern, post-denominational world... and into our moderate midst.

Really a better image would be those bodies of water, some streams, some big rivers, some rivulets and creeks that have been trickling through the centuries across the landscape of Christian history.

And if you could see a map of it or if you could get at 60,000 feet and see it, you'd see where they've connected along the way.

What river diverged here or there...

What stream pooled up by itself to seemingly die....

What life-giving spring popped up out of no where.

And then you would see them all merging in about 1980... In one big river... And you'd see the exciting turbulence of all that and the power of it and the disorientation of it and the new life it has created.

It has been a time of awakening. All these rivers crisscrossing... all these denominational streams flowing into one another colliding and colluding. It's been a frustrating but fascinating and fulfilling time in the Church.

And we were floating along in our Baptist river... and it seemed like over night... we were floating along next to some folks who came from other places...

Reformed rivers...

Contemplative creeks...

Liturgical worship waterways...

Streams of Social Justice...

These folks had not been floating with us back in the day... back when we got on buses and went to Glorieta. It wasn't just that things were changing in Baptist life because of a political power move by more conservative Baptists... things were changing everywhere in the Church.

The ecclesial boundaries were coming down.

To mix my metaphors again... You've probably heard Phyllis Tickle say that every 500 years the Church has a yard sale. Think about it...

The days of the early church era giving way to the Holy Roman empire in about 500.

Then the Great Schism between East and West around 1000.

Then the reformation about 500 years later.

And now this... we're in another yard sale...

a Post-modern yard sale.

And you know how it is with a yard sale. You start throwing out lots of junk... or stuff you don't need, you get rid of... (Sunday Night Church, Revivals, Being at church all the time, envelopes to check off, certain ways of preaching...) you sort of pawn off or put out for the garbage truck... things that you once appreciated but just aren't you anymore.

And then too, you find old valuables in the attic that you didn't even know belonged to you. **"Wow... I didn't know... how could we have lost this along the way?"**

That's what's happened in this era of quick ecclesial change... many of us found ourselves in the Church's attic and we've found things that we wanted and needed and for which we have longed.

So... we've been holding these antiques... these gifts that weren't apart of who we were and we've been so glad to have found them.... so blessed... It has been for us salvation.

And so we've wondered, **"should we stay, are we Baptist?"** Is this moderate Baptist tradition our true home? And some have said, **"no"** and they've left. And lots of us have stayed.

I know that every story is unique but I'm wondering if sharing some of mine and how I see our movement as a pastor, might help.

I'm not a Church historian...

Not a theologian really...

Not a scholar...

We pastors are really more like scavengers than scholars... but we do learn, as we're out there... sort of boots on the ground... some things that we really need to share.

Part I - So What Did We Find in the Attic How are We Different?

What did the larger Tradition give to us? I'm going to suggest five things that in my own experience have been changes. You may hear this and say that, either in your own experience or perhaps in Baptist history, what I'm suggesting isn't accurate. And you may be right. All I can say is these things are changes from what I knew as a young person... they were not on that un-air conditioned church bus we took to Glorieta back in '72.

As I unpack what seems to be on the bus now, it's hard to know for sure where to start. You know how this goes, it's chicken and egg and everything is a kind of Holon. Everything's a part of everything and every part affects every part. Mess with one aspect and you'll wind up messing with everything.

So, I'll just jump in and ask... **What's different now???? What are the dissimilarities?**

I think we have....

1. A different epistemology.

We have a different epistemology. We have a different way of knowing what we know and certainly a different way of knowing from those who are to our right in Baptist life. In a way, I'm talking about a theology of revelation or of discernment or of authority. How do we know?

You know what our answer is as Baptists... or at least what it is suppose to be... or what it was in our childhood faith. The Baptist answer is "The Bible"... we know what we know through scripture and while most of us here are going to affirm that scripture is still sacred and central to us, my experience in moderate Baptist life is that we came to own a fuller, and I would say ironically, a more biblical way, of knowing.

Many of us came from churches where the parking lots were full of cars the bumpers of which bore that stickered clichéd confession, "**The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it.**" We were, to say it more generously, "simple Biblicists."

But along the way, we moderates found ourselves affirming, with Christians throughout time that God's will is not discerned only through scripture. I think this epistemology was always there but we started saying it out loud. We embraced the historical, biblical truth that all Christians are working with a kind of holy algebra rhythm and there are certain elements to the equation. And here they are... every healthy Christian is engaged in these know it... confess it or not.

- Community – Both past and present. Our informal relationships, our local churches, our traditions, and The Tradition are all speaking to us and we place great value on this. What other Christians in the past thought and what our fellow pilgrims believe now, get a vote as we discern what is good and right and true.
- People... Certain People – Wise teachers, charismatic/gifted leaders, the apostles, and prophets have always been a part of how we hear from God.
- Reason... The Capacity to Think and Think Creatively – Our faith lifts up the call to love God with “all our mind.” This is what it means to be someone created in the image of God... to think deeply and creatively and reasonably.
- Conscience... that gut-level knowing – Convictions are often simply present in us and we believe can be God given. At times, they lead us to stand against tradition or community or and authority or even in the face what seems to be reasonable or scriptural.
- Experience – Truth is being manifested in the world and in history and in our personal stories and so becomes an obvious way of knowing what we know. Everyone has a story and when it comes to deciding what’s true those stories bear weight.
- The Numinous – Some of us will have mystical encounters that will have great influence on what we believe and what we do.

My contention, as I’ve said, is that all Christians are dealing with all of this but what I believe came to be in our moderate journey was that we owned it. We said “out loud”... **it’s not just scripture** and, again, ironically this is what scripture teaches.

Take a journey through the book of Acts and you’ll see all of this at work. You’ll see those in this fledgling faith reflecting on scripture. Making sense of what was happening in light of their sacred stories and teachings.

You’ll see that... but you’ll also see mystical experience being authoritative... visions (Peter at Caesarea), dreams (Paul and his Macedonian Dream)... the disciples even cast lots to see who would replace Judas.

You see the mystical... You see leaders being deferred to... The apostles and the teachings of the apostles were lifted up as authoritative. Paul expects to be heard as an authority.

And people heard him that way but they didn’t just listen to the apostles, they also listened to their own gut... their conscience. Barnabus does not do what the apostle Paul says, he chooses his own path and takes John Mark on a Mission Trip. His heart matters... his intuition and mind lead him away from an apostolic directive.

Conscience matters... and the community matters too. There are clearly democratic processes of discernment going on in the early days of the Church. **“It seemed like a good idea to us and to the Holy Spirit”**, that’s what the minutes read from the Jerusalem council. Majority (and the Holy Spirit) rules.

And reason is used, experience, too, is used... They saw the holy spirit falling on folks in unpredictable ways... outside what they knew previously to be true. So they said, **well who can argue with that? "I guess God is doing a new thing." "I guess we didn't see it all things so perfectly."**

So a couple of thousand years later, when we moderates saw that women were capable of leading and of preaching and of teaching... it wasn't a problem for us to use good reason and say, **"Seems like God is calling our daughters to preach."**

It wasn't a problem for us to act on conviction while others were stuck in the letter of the law...

It wasn't a problem biblically for us to say, we were being led... as individuals. God is speaking to us.

We also saw the resonance of what we believed in Scripture, we saw a trajectory of change beyond patriarchy.

And all of this was brought to bear in our discernment... so when Paul says, **"I don't want any of the woman to say anything in any of the churches,"** we say, **"God is not saying through Paul that all women everywhere are never to speak or lead in church."**

It's a different way of knowing. *The B-I-B-L-E, yes that's the book for me. I stand alone on the word of God, the B-I-B-L-E...* that chorus we sang over and over taught us something that wasn't true and it was wrong in two ways. It's not just the Bible "alone" and we never stand with it "alone."

We have come to see that and now articulate and act on a different way of knowing.

And of interpreting... which really is the next domino to fall in all of this. Our epistemology seemed to change and so to did our hermeneutic. The way we handled scripture.

2. We have a different hermeneutic...

We lived into a different way of seeing scripture. Our way of handling scripture became both more critical and more childlike. More scholarly and more imaginative. More reasoned but also took us beyond the limitations of rationality.

We went beyond what was deductive and propositional and exegetical. Rather than extracting things from the bible, we were trying to get in the Bible.

Somewhere along the way I remember reading some early church teaching on this... and I realized that the way we were handling scripture wasn't just different than other Baptists but that it had matured and that maturation was... is the natural movement for anyone developing spiritually.

The early Church Fathers acknowledged that sacred scripture is multi-layered. In other words, in many, if not most cases, there are multiple meanings of a

text and that's not only good but it's intended. It's the nature of sacred, holy writings.

But... it's very important for a community to see this and dangerous to our spiritual health when we don't see it.

The ancient community that first received and interpreted and taught the Bible... would have known this and been very comfortable with this. The bible comes from a world where this layered way of knowing was familiar... at least to those who were wise.

There are spiritual levels within us and in every life... and there is always a journey being made. So, the bible functions in different ways for different people depending on where they are. Some ancient writers referred to this as the "senses of scripture," describing what we are perceiving and how that changes as we change. It makes sense, doesn't it?

All the levels are necessary... and all of them must be accessed to nurture spiritual health. In the early centuries, they'd use a hazel nut to illustrate this but, of course, we should use a pecan to see the importance of these levels of interpretation.

First, there's the Literal and Narrative – which is the husk of the pecan. It has to be there, if its not, there'll be no pecan pie at Thanksgiving. This is the level that offers a kind of protection to what is precious inside. It's where our children must begin. **"Here's what happened... this is our story."**

No one looks at a preschooler and says, **"Now, what does that story mean to you?"** No one says, **"Now, did you notice that there are two creation stories in Genesis?"** No one tries to explain the culture of human sacrifice to the preschool class prior to telling them about Abraham and Issac. We just tell the story.

"Stack up these stones," the scriptures say, **"And when your children ask you what they mean, you tell them... and do so with no ifs, ands, or buts. No stuttering allowed."** (from W. Bruegaman's Creative Word)

We just tell the stories. **This is what happened.** And we don't stutter. Here is what happened!!!! With big exclamation points!!!!

But we don't stay there, because we can't... not if deeper truth and deeper intimacy with God is to be known... Not if pecan pie is to be on the Thanksgiving table.

We move then to what is moral and doctrinal – At this level of meaning we begin to say, **"so what?"** It means that we not only tell our children the story of Moses bringing the Ten Commandments down from Sinai but that we're having them memorize them in VBS.

There are dos and don'ts and we got them from the bible.

We don't lie...

We care about the poor.

We honor our parents.

We don't eat forbidden fruit.

It means that we tell them the story of Zacchaeus... and we talk about what Zacchaeus did at the end because we have to learn how to make amends.

It means, we not only tell about the birth of Jesus but we teach the doctrine of Incarnation. We not only tell a story about the death of Jesus but we teach about atonement. This happened and here's what it tells us about God.

This tends to be a very rational experience and it is absolutely essential. It's the shell... It's the way of interpreting scripture that is preparing us for something that is a great mystery. That's the paradox, isn't it, this time of nailing things down... "**here's how we behave, here's what we believe,**" is in preparation for "letting things go" in order to go beyond them.

I think it's the Dali Lama that says we must memorize the rules really well so that we will know how to break them rightly.

Baptists, and lots of western Christians, were really good at these first two levels of interpretation. We knew how important the husk and the shell were and we did them well.

They are the right work of the first half of life... of childhood and adolescence. And we did them well... but I really believe that what we began to experience in our moderate churches... was a movement deeper into scripture and the life of faith.

And it wasn't all we were dealing with, I know. We were influenced by modernity and the "hermeneutic of suspicion" (Newbigin) and we were reacting to pulpit pounders and bible thumpers... I confess that and we can come back to that but...

I do believe, more importantly and essentially, we were also ready for Pecan Pie. We were hungry for something larger and so we found ourselves wielding another hermeneutic... another way of holding and seeing and teaching and preaching a text.

The Fathers of the Church, the first theologians called it the allegorical or analogical – Some might use tropological or archetypal or even mystical. It's a hermeneutic for "**the second half of life**" as some teachers (Rohr, D'Arcy, and others) call it.

Now, things have gotten larger and the questions aren't about the rules and they aren't about rational doctrines or what this means to me as a 15 year old at youth camp bible study... But what does this mean at the largest, deepest, truest level.

The bible now becomes a kind of hologram for the soul's journey. We begin to see spiritual truths that are embodied in our stories. We begin to see metaphysical realities that are behind our historical narratives and our rational doctrines... we see them as essential patterns that have been revealed in redemptive history and in the "Wisdom of the Ages" and through the teachings of the Church. They are manifestations in time of what is timeless.

Every story is now about God and who God is and what God is like... and this is always true.

This experience is enlarging...

It is symbolic...

It is contemplative...

It is imaginative.

And I believe that, while we still honor what our brothers and sisters need in every spiritual stage, we have moved. We've known and we've seen how the letter of the law kills. We've gone deeper and lots of folks in our movement are enjoying pecan pie now... Thanks be to God.

What I want you to see is that everything I'm going to try to name that seems to be in play in our movement was something that we were receiving from the Great Tradition. These were things lost to so many of us in the pews...

This wisdom way of knowing...

This sacred hermeneutic...

Yes, our western rational heritage... modernity... and our Baptists reaction to all things catholic were also in our DNA but, while we were still being influenced by those realities, we were being led into more ancient realities.

Again, I'm not a historian but I am a curator of my own heart and it seemed like my heart was hungry for these things and Jesus says that to be hungry is a blessed thing... **Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled.**

We weren't merely being freed up from fundamentalism, we were being fed by new things.... that were really very ancient things.

3. We also found (and this is number three if you're counting) a historical understanding of liturgy.

Most of us came out of what I would call "Revivalism." And as one who thinks on it a good bit, we did have our liturgy... "**standing as we sing, first, second, and last**" but we weren't too very conscious of how this was forming us or how it was leading us into the holy of holies... into the Center. Said maybe in a more generous way, we weren't carrying the truths of the liturgical tradition... that's not what Baptists majored on.

But, I remember in 1978, I was a junior at Baylor and really struggling to find a place to be in church. I would leave mad when I went to the traditional Baptist churches in town... but wouldn't know why.

And I found my way one Sunday morning to Lakeshore Baptist Church and someone put a worship guide in my hand that had been thoughtfully prepared... there were readings, there was care given to hearing scripture, there was room for silence, there was a flow that seemed thought through... and my life was changed.

I'm the interim now at Lake Shore and I recently told them the story of my first day there when I was 20 years old and I could barely get through the story. It was so powerful to me that I wept. It was my first encounter with the liturgical tradition of the Church.

Then I went to Willow Meadows in Houston as a young adult and George Gaston and William Love told me we were going to do Advent and I said, in my third year in seminary mind-you, "**what's Advent?**"

And before I knew it we were at Good Friday.... and then we were hanging a beautiful red cloth at Pentecost. And we were talking as a staff all the time about the

elements of worship and the movements and the music and how it all fit. It was central to who we were as ministers and what we were trying to do in the church. Worship was our core.

And we were all learning, weren't we. We discovered the lectionary along the way. And we discovered and began to look at historical patterns... liturgies. We began to move beyond our obsession with being different and begin to ask more serious questions about the path that we must take and help a congregation to take... that leads to the heart.

Gathering...

Expressing Adoration and Gratitude...

Owning our brokenness and need for grace...

Praying for one another and the world.

We began to understand the place and power of ritual. We began to have a reverence for the symbolic and how important it is in worship.

For the body...

For all our senses...

for thinking

and for ... not thinking.

We were just moving naturally... doing Advent leads to doing Holy Week and doing Holy Week leads to doing Lent. Some of it was just the blessed but "slippery slope" of the liturgical world. Some of it was that we were hungry for what is sacramental. We wanted to engage the mystery.

Why do you think we all love Harry Potter so much? It's because we know the world is really magical and not mechanical. It is thick with meaning and with the holy and we are made to know God's grace in things... things... not just in the ideas in our heads.

Worship is different now than it was at Northlake Baptist Church where Frankie McCan, the Church secretary, would just change the hymn numbers each week and change the title of the special music. I'm not saying that Baptist had never been liturgical... A broad understanding would say there's no such animal as a nonliturgical church, there's always a way of seeing "the work of the people" at 11:00. But we were not liturgical in continuity with the Tradition.

And somewhere along the way, I found myself drawn to that very thing. It meant something to me, for instance, each week as a pastor that Christians all over the world would be reading the same texts. I found it important, essential to be saying some things, together. I loved trusting in prayers penned by saints and passing "the Peace of Christ" ... someone taking my hand and looking me in the eye and blessing me as my priest with God's peace.

I was in love with liturgy and so, of course, I would ask myself (and others would ask me too) are you still a Baptist? Because our worship had changed... it was no longer Revivalistic. All things were not pointing towards an altar call. I'd changed... was I still Baptist??????

I had a different understanding of authority...

I had a different hermeneutic...

I worshipped in ways that made Anglicans jealous.

Was I Baptist? I was liturgical through and through... and that wasn't all that had changed from my childhood.

There were two more changes.

4. We discovered the spiritual tradition...

Of course, we weren't alone but all of the sudden, Baptists were reading Quakers and Catholics like Foster and Nouwen. Before the 80s were done, most of us had a Thomas Merton book (or two) on our shelves and so it wasn't long before we were being introduced to The Desert Fathers and the spirituality that took root there and became the DNA of Christian Monasticism.

We started having seminars on silence and Sunday School classes on the Sabbath. Learning to be present and quiet in prayer, listening in prayer, became common place in moderate Baptist churches.

I remember one year when I was pastoring in Waco, our young people returned from Passport camp where they had fallen in love with Lectio Divina. And they wanted us to do it on Sunday morning... and we did. Teenagers embracing the contemplative.

Ministers started going to spend time in monasteries.

Choruses from Taize started showing up in our hymnals.

People started taking classes in Iconography...

And walking Labyrinths.

And fasting.

I bought a rosary... and got a kneeler.

The Jesus Prayer, Centering Prayer, Breath Prayer, Body Prayer, Praying the Hours... these became a part of what many moderate Baptist were practicing in their spiritual lives. We, really along with the entire Christian tradition, were discovering a world we'd not known.

It was an ancient world full of practices but also a world with some different theological underpinnings... These ancient practices were in place because of what we were coming to believe deeply about what it meant to be a human being... Who we were, who we are as spiritual beings. We begin to have, what we might call Spiritual Anthropology.

So there were two tracks... one we'd call Praxis and the other Theoria. Our practice of spiritual development was changing but so too was our thinking and we were discovering a more ancient way of seeing ourselves and the cosmos.

As I've referenced already, we were not just descendants of old Baptists... but of the enlightenment. Our minds, for better or for worse, were captive to modernity and it's mechanical world.

We were and still are limited in so many ways by Sir Isaac Newton... and we were that way as Biblical literalists and then that way as Biblical Critics. Both are trapped in the rational mind.

It's the same limited, dualistic, way of seeing.

The same limited way of understanding human beings.

The same limited way of perceiving the cosmos.

And while we're only begin to access this ancient Christian wisdom and worldview, it's what we're trusting in and experiencing in the contemplative movement that our moderate tradition has embraced.

And I have one more can of worms I'd like to open... the fifth thing that I believe has changed and while I believe it to be commonly a part of the way we think in moderate Baptist life, it's not too very often said out loud. But I want to say it today.

5. We found a fuller soteriology.

I stopped handing out tracts. When I was a teenager, I would go to the mall with my youth group... we'd go to White Rock Lake in Dallas, armed with "four spiritual laws" tracts. We were fervent 15-year-olds and like most Baptists of our era had been trained to witness and believed that we needed to get after it.

We had a soteriology... a theology of salvation. Folks needed to "get saved" and "getting saved" meant ... well... it meant or could mean, a couple of things.

It could mean...

Saying the prayer at the back of that four spiritual laws tract.

Or... it could mean... walking an aisle and confessing Christ as savior and Lord.

It generally meant deciding that you believed or believing the right things about Jesus.

Getting saved was typically about a moment, a punctiliar moment, when you were "born again."

Getting saved meant, no matter how it happened to you, that you were "good to go" and by that I mean, "good to go through the pearly gates." We had been "washed in the blood," "forgiven," ... we'd been saved from our sin and that meant that we were "bound for the promised land."

Our picture of this and understanding of our situation was judicial... meaning we were guilty and we needed to be pardoned. All this is sounding not just familiar but central to our journey. At least half of our hymns declared this theology of salvation.

We were guilty

deserved to be punished and should be punished

and God required this... His wrath had to be satisfied.

This is the righteousness legal code

written into the universe.

And so Christ came to die in our place... it was a penal, substitutionary atonement. And if we believed the correct things about that... then we would be saved from the death and punishment we deserved.

Salvation, Eternal life... heaven... was reserved for those who had “believed with their hearts and confessed with their mouths”... or to use the less biblical language those who had...

“Accepted Christ...”

Or **“Invited Christ into their hearts”**

Or had a **“personal relationship to Jesus.”**

This was the soteriology, the theology of salvation, that caused me and my buddies to walk up to strangers at North Park mall and the Hippies and White Rock Lake and ask them what would happen if they died that night.

Somewhere along the way, I stopped handing out tracts and asking that question... And, if pastors were allowed to bet, I’d bet a paycheck that most of you did as well.

And some would be quick to say that it was a strategic move... that old methods weren’t effective or perhaps just were not Christ-like. They might be quick as well to say that their theology hadn’t changed, but I would say that is not at all likely the case.

And it’s not merely a conversation about who’s in and who’s out... Who’ll be in heaven and who’ll be in hell, though that’s part of it. It’s really more about the nature of salvation and what our biblical tradition and our ecclesial and spiritual traditions have conveyed to us. It’s also, as I’ve said, about what the spirit of God is teaching us in these days.

Now before you all get in a panic about where I’m going with changing soteriology business, I’d like to say, that I believe what we have is a Pascal Mystery. That’s the language of the Church. What does it mean that Jesus is here, that God incarnate suffers... that he dies? And how does his birth, life, ministry, resurrection, and ascension help us peer into that mystery.

And, as you know, the Church has been talking about that...

Debating it...

Theorizing about it...

All of that...

And throughout the centuries, at the same time... trusting in it. It’s a mystery we confess and in which we trust and through which we live.

But the Church has had a really big discussion for a really long time about the meaning of it. There are many, many theories of atonement and sadly, most folks in the pews aren’t really aware of that. And my contention is that all of the “theories” and “theologies” are bearing something that is important to see in the cross-event and important as we make this journey of salvation, which is not at all merely about getting into heaven. And we... often we in the Baptist world shrunk it down to that question. “Are we good to go?”

The Church has had a fuller, larger, longer conversation and we can’t unpack it all here but, as I said, there have been many theories about what was going on in the death of Jesus and what about it was saving.

Some of the theories ask what has been exchanged???

Some, what has been transformed???

Some, what has been revealed???

All connected to the Church, all flowing from scripture, but not all of them understood or spoken of or taught or sung about at the Baptist church of my youth.

And somewhere along the way, it occurred to me, that my moderate Baptist brothers and sisters were awakening to a fuller notion of salvation. And this will be an over-simplification but it was a soteriology that was not primarily about escaping damnation but of being made whole.

Simply put, I believe that many of us began to see the gospel as medicinal rather than judicial or economic and, while we may not have been led to that by the study of the Church's teachings, many of us found great affirmation as we began to study the Early Church Fathers. Where we hear them speaking of...

The transformation of all things...

The restoration of God's world...

The theosis of human beings...

Becoming Christ-like.

"He became what we are that he might make us what he is." That's what echoes from the Early Church theologians.

Who are you? Who were you meant to be? Do you know that you are of God? That you belong to God and are beloved of God? Our sins and the world's Sin has hidden that reality. And salvation is a journey where we come to know it fully and live from it and love from it.

To be in Christ is to be a new creation.

There is so very much to say and to think here.... stuff that takes a whole course in seminary to plough through. All I can say here is that I believe our understanding of salvation began to be shaped by all that stuff and is ultimately about our transformation and I think my CBF sisters and brothers would say, also about the world's transformation. We woke up and found ourselves with a different soteriology.

We were no longer as likely to be handing out tracts as ham sandwiches to someone who was hungry.

We started building Habitat houses instead of bowling alleys in our churches.

We started thinking about healing ministries...

And the inner life...

And making relationships redemptive.

Social justice was a part of our understanding of the good news that Jesus came preaching.

Some would say that we became less evangelistic and maybe that's true... and I would say, where it's so it's sad, because everyone needs the good news of God in their lives. I believe the most loving of us, however, and the most thoughtful of us... are always ready to talk about what is at the heart of who we are.

What our life is about...

So, I don't have tracts anymore... And I don't feel guilty compulsion to witness... But I do feel called, as we are all called, to bear witness to the love of God and to the story of Jesus. It's just that it sounds really different now.

Part II – Why Am I Still Here?

So, given all that has changed and all we've received from those who are beyond Baptist Life, the question is, "why am I still here?" Why am I still a Baptist and a moderate Baptist? And I'm aware that many of my contemporaries aren't. Some of us stayed and some of us jumped into other denominational pastures.

Others have left too... as lay persons and as clergy, you've had friends who've moved to other traditions. Maybe saying it was because they were no longer really Baptists.

They became Episcopalians or Disciples of Christ...

Maybe they joined a Methodist or Presbyterian Church.

Are they Orthodox now? Or Catholic?

Quaker? EV Free? Unitarian? Assemblies?

Or maybe they go to the Journey... or the Stone... or the Village.

Or maybe they've stayed.... Like you have and like I have.

And I know that part of our answer to the question of "**why**" is... "just because." It's just life.... especially if you're in vocational ministry. You grew up in this and went to Baptist schools and you have a network... and friends... AND you have a job... and you have a car payment... and college tuition on the way.

And on top of all that, you've learned via the pastors group you meet with monthly or the friends in your prayer group that the grass really isn't greener on the other side of the fence.

So it's six one way and half a dozen the other. Meaning, in the post-denominational, ecumenical, Heinz 57 world, where the lines are now so blurred, you could go... but you just don't because you happen to be where you happen to be. I suspect that's true for lots of us.

But maybe, you're conscious of some other reasons?

1. Because this is our home. It's our story and you're sticking to it. We need to be true to it. We're dancing with the one that brung us (a strange metaphor for old Baptists). It's our family.

I'm still a Baptist because I'm a Baptist. I can't stop being a Baptist anymore than I can stop being a Burluson.

When I went home two years ago to my church in Dallas for our 40th reunion... in a way, not much had changed and I could no longer join that congregation. The pastor was even a bit nervous about letting me preach... but I did.

The weekend was mostly tender and mostly tender to me because of all the parents that showed up.

My parents were there... who had coached everyone in baseball and softball and taught Sunday School and RAs.

The Englishes were there. Ken English taught my 5th grade Sunday School class and during the year he would mark our heights each month all the wall of the class room. And he didn't get too mad when we made paper airplanes out of our lessons and flew them out of our second story Sunday School window into the neighbor's back yard.

Lois Ferguson was there. She was my Jr. Choir director and she taught me how to sing harmony to hymns.

Frankie McCan was there. Frankie was our department director and I remember her one Sunday morning explaining the Trinity to us... I didn't know to tell her at the time that she was advocating modalism, which was declared a heresy in the 2nd century but I do remember that Sunday and how important it was for me as a 7th grader to have some explanation.

Our youth minister's wife, Vicki, was there. She was so fun and always made everything fun.

Nancy Lance was there... Her father, Leo (who is with the Lord) was my 6th grade Sunday school teacher. If we were present every Sunday in a month he would pick us up in his 1952 Chevy... (aka "The Black Swan), he'd take us to Baskin Robins for ice cream and then, with cones in hand, we'd drive around in alleys, as he honk the "Ah-Uh-Ga" horn.

Arch Archilla, our old crooner, was there.... and I remember the first Sunday we visited that church when I was ten, he sang, "I'll tell the world that I'm a Christian."

Thelma Pate and Sam Ferguson were in wheel chairs. Sam was the director of our sports ministry. Lucy and Glen Cox, who are pushing 90, had to leave early on their walkers.... Theirs was the home where we often had fellowships after church and where their son Tony and I practiced with our band.

I was so moved to be there with these Baptist saints and to remember all of them. Many who have since died. I am their spiritual offspring. They are my Lois and Eunice whose "sincere faith" lives in me.

The time they spent...

The commitment they made...

and to which they were faithful...

The love they shared....

I would not be standing here were it not for them so... I have to stand with them still in some ways. And it is their path, their Baptist path that is mine.

My calling, our calling, is to take it deeper, not to sell our birthright for a bowl of potage, but to be truer to it.

This is a large conversation, isn't it... because the problem with any doctrine is when it's thought of as static, final, and an end in itself. Just as we spoke of a maturing hermeneutic of scripture, we must come to a maturing understanding and embodiment of our core doctrines and our core Baptist principals.

Leaving because we're dissatisfied, doesn't allow for enough dissatisfaction, so that we're pushed deeper into the core of a faith. We're merely responding to its shadow or to some small captivity of what is huge and universal.

So... I'm staying and I hope in staying to have, as Paul said, the sincere faith that was once deposited in me stirred in new ways for a new day. Leaving is too easy... it's like dropping the name Baptist from your sign for marketing purposes. It's too easy and there's too much to lose.

So, there's a heritage that is precious for many of us and a lineage that is ours to understand... a deeper meaning to our narrative to discover and embody and tell...

But... we also stay...

2. Because we really do value our DNA.

There's a DNA that is in us and this genetic human, divine stuff of religious life is for sure, alive in us. It's a DNA that is living... not just valued consciously but living truth that emerges and we may not be the only ones who manifest it... but others have joined the Baptist band wagon, historically speaking. This is our core stuff.

I'm really circling back here to the freedoms that have defined us for so long. Freedoms that were centered in the idea that each of us must (beyond our formation) make an un-coerced response to God.

It is the essence of the biblical story. It's at the heart of all things... that you get to choose. It's in the second chapter of Genesis... there's a tree there and it's a tree of choice.

Touch it... or not...

Take and eat or not.

Obey God... trust God... or not.

God leaves himself and his world and each one of us really, totally vulnerable to our yes or our no. We can mess up the garden. We can say no to God and to God's ways... or we can say yes to God and to God's love.

We believe as Baptists that we must be free to say yes for it really to be a yes. It's at the heart of all our freedoms. Religious freedom from the state or from the Church or from a family even... stems from this central notion that you have to say yes yourself.

Some will be quick to point out, that given all we inherit through culture, family, and church it seems like we're making a mountain out of a voluntary mole hill. And we should acknowledge that self-made faith will be a silly and shallow faith.

But... our conviction about choice is not a confession about formation (though some Baptist err there)... our conviction is a spiritual anthropology that

acknowledges the mystery of a human being... and a human being who really, really matters. And who is called into a relationship of love and in love there is always a place for rejection. Yes, we've being chosen... loved first... but we can say no to it all.

It's the Baptist part of the truth of God we bear and we know how costly it was to make it known and valued in our world... and just how easily it's polluted by well-meaning followers of Jesus.

And they just don't know, do they? Forgive them, Lord, they don't know what they do when they wrap the bible in the flag... When they would use the power of the state and community to coerce faith in others... When they so easily tag America's cause as God's cause and as righteous.

We must continue to bear witness to this part of the gospel... that God speaks to a person... and calls a someone. There's always a soul in someone. And though the soul has been shaped and though it maybe persuaded it's always free... and that's at the heart of a Baptist faith.

And that soul freedom is mirrored in ecclesial freedom.... and while we're so thankful for what we're receiving from the larger tradition, we're so thankful too for our capacity to say, **"here's how we're going to do it."** Unity and uniformity are not the same thing.

I'm the interim pastor at Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco and Sunday morning, I was moved by what I experienced as a very Baptist day in worship. Kaitlyn, a freshmen in college, was being Baptized. She's grown up in this church and they had deposited a sincere faith in her.

But she made a choice to be Baptized.

On the table and the pulpit there were permanents, cloths that were different shades of watery blue (and yes they do know the color of ordinary time). On the table was a great big ceramic bowl full of what with a sea shell in it, a historic symbol and implement for Baptism.

During the processional hymn, "Shall we Gather at the River," the baptismal candidate, Kaitlyn, processed first... barefooted and wearing her white robe. As scripture were being read, Kaitlyn and her ministers made their way out into the Baptistry and after some wonderful and very person pastoral words, Kaitlyn's youth minister stood to read her testimony of faith. It was beautiful and it was hers.

The service continued with prayers and with songs and scriptures... and a half decent sermon. But there Kaitlyn was again at the end reading a responsive reading with the congregation and hearing of their ongoing commitment to her. After which we confessed our faith with the words of Philipians and then sang a hymn of praise, "Worthy of Worship." It was a beautiful day and it was so because we had this Baptist capacity to both receive wisdom from the Tradition and yet be so very responsive to our context.

She grew up in a place that taught her what she needed to know... they unapologetically formed her ... and then she expressed her faith in Jesus by believers Baptism and with the words of her confession.

It was a very Baptist moment and embodied the best of what happens when our cherished capacity to honor the sanctity of the work of God in the Church and the work of God in a person. And it's the entrainment of the two that make what is happening in the CBF so very wonderful and why I think many of us are still here. It's a place of sacred alchemy that keeps us here.

And finally, it's just that we really like who we are. It's...

3. Because the Moderate Path Really Resonates with Us.

There is a spiritual bent that is ours. My theory is that we just came out of the womb this way and who we are as moderate Baptists just resonates with us.

It's just who you are and I are and where we feel at home. It is our theological world as Paul Jones would say. Or as Jesus might say, "You didn't choose it really... it chose you."

There's an essence in the heart that has to be honored... a spirit, an energy that is your way of being you and the world. And for many of us, the Moderate Baptist path gives of place where that essence can be honored and expressed.

I'm so thankful for who we are....

We are Moderate Baptists....

by Burt Burleson

We are moderate Baptists.

*We are ecumenical to the core,
denominational mutts...
part this and part that.*

*One part "softly and tenderly"
and one part "Ode to Joy."*

*We are a wonderful mix of liturgies
and "prayers from the heart."*

We are reverent and warm.

We're just a mix of a lot of things and that's what makes us... us.

We are missions and social justice.

We are revival passion and intelligent faith.

We are casseroles and we are contemplation.

Evangelical and post-evangelical.

We are from Anabaptists and the Jesus people.

We are from Lottie Moon and MLK.

From George Truett and Thomas Merton.

From Billy Graham and Jimmy Carter.

We're from so very much.

And there are things we like...

*We like the Enneagram
and any wisdom that helps us to be Christlike.
We like earthy, common talk
and the way it doesn't exclude.
We like singer-song writers
and any real artist and their real art.
We like knowing how holy any meal can be
and we like beer with our pizza.*

*We read...
We read Augustine and Harry Potter
Julian of Norwich and Anne Lamott
NT Wright and Brian McLaren.*

*We have instincts for seeing the holy in the human...
And a fondness for sermons that are understated.
and a love for Truth too large for bumper stickers.*

*We're blessed to have our women leading...
Our children laughing a lot...
Our youth learning.
And everyone else being real.*

*We tend to cast votes with the marginalized.
We cringe when someone speaks of God being removed from schools.
We don't enlist easily for culture wars.
And we never, never sing patriotic songs on the Sunday before the 4th.*

*Moderates are honest.
About our doubts...
About not being certain...
About our own darkness...
And about our love for Jesus.*

*We're not too interested in being at the church all the time
but are profoundly interested in what it would mean
to be the Church all the time.
We resist too many programs
but still know an ice cream fellowship in the backyard
to be essential to the Kingdom's work.
We want to reach people and want our churches to thrive
but never assume that numerical growth
to be a sign of God's blessing.*

*Some of us don't really like the word moderate... but it's who we are,
Because we're often moderating.
Holding this and that together.
It's a hard place to be.
And who knows... will we be a blip on the church history radar?
Maybe!
But we're learning not to lose sleep over that
and to simply to be faithful.
Faithful Moderate Baptist.*