***What Is A Classical Baptist Church?***

*By Dr. John S. Waldrip*

What is a classical Baptist Church? Let me begin by answering that there is no unanimity among Baptists on this issue since Baptists have historically been committed to the autonomy of the local congregation as opposed to the denominational oversight of congregations so typical of the Church of Rome and the mainline Protestant organizations. However, from this pastor’s perspective, several features may be consistently found in what I envision to be classical Baptists:

First, classical Baptists are Baptists that are committed to Gospel preaching. Strange as this may sound, many these days (including Baptists) seem to have abandoned Gospel preaching in favor of what is commonly referred to as expository preaching. However, the risen Savior related all Scripture to Himself in Luke 24.27. Thus, real exposition of God’s Word involves showing how *everything* in the Bible points to the Gospel. No wonder some of the most astute Bible preachers in history (among them notable Baptists) had congregations that were thoroughly conversant in Bible truth because their exposure to the gospel from texts throughout God’s Word acquainted them with the core and theme of the Bible message.

Second, classical Baptists are Baptists that are committed to an approach to evangelism that has largely fallen out of favor since the impact of Charles G. Finney’s ministry has been felt. Finney, exposing himself in his writings as a follower of Pelagius, was opposed to monergism, the notion that the salvation of a sinner originates with God rather than being the combined effort of God and man. Sadly, many Baptists succumbed to the influence of Finney over the past two centuries for pragmatic reasons, not recognizing that his philosophy of revival and evangelism is based on a deeply flawed understanding of man’s depravity and Christ’s saving work. Thus, the classical Baptist’s model for effective evangelism is first God’s Word and second influenced by such notables as Jonathan Edwards, Charles H. Spurgeon, George Whitefield, Adoniram Judson, and William Carey.

Third, classical Baptists are deeply committed to the reality and implications of a sinner’s depravity. The result of this commitment is an understanding that the sinner’s heart is deceitful and incapable of unaided honesty. Therefore, it is crucial to any consideration of administering believer baptism or admitting into Church membership that the candidate’s conversion testimony, comprehension of the Gospel, and manner of life since conversion be carefully considered. To accept as true a person’s declaration that he is a Christian, without discerning clarification, is an unwarranted and dangerous violation of the biblical principle that nothing is to be accepted as true which does not have the attestation of two or three witnesses of fact (Numbers 35.30; Deuteronomy 17.6-7; Joshua 24.22; Ruth 4.9-11; Job 10.17; Isaiah 8.2; 43.9-12; 44.8-9; Jeremiah 32.10, 12, 25, 44; Matthew 18.15-20; Luke 24.46-48; Acts 1.8; 2.32; 3.15; 5.32; 10.39-40; 13.31; 2 Corinthians 13.1; 1 Thessalonians 2.10; 1 Timothy 5.19; 6.12; Hebrews 10.28; 1 John 4.1; 5.7-9; Revelation 1.1; 2.2).

Fourth, classical Baptists are convinced the new birth is a transformative miracle that is wrought by the Holy Spirit in the life of the sinner who comes to Jesus Christ in response to his exposure to the Gospel message. To many these days, there is no expectation of a different manner of life following conversion. However, the English Baptist pastor and author John Bunyan articulated an understanding of the new birth in his widely read *Pilgrim’s Progress* that is consistent with classical Baptist convictions about this matter. Do Christian’s sin? Sadly, we do sin. However, the blood-bought and blood-washed child of God is not the same person and does not live the same life after conversion as he did before His saving encounter with Christ.

Fifth, classical Baptists strongly resist the tendency of some to be tossed about by every wind of change and the latest fads. We embrace an old message communicated to sinners the old way and decry the depersonalization of contemporary evangelism. Though the Christian life is personal, it is not private and is intended to be lived with others in the congregation. In like manner, the Gospel ministry may be conducted on a large scale to masses as well as to individuals, though conversion occurs when Jesus becomes the personal savior through the faith of the sinner.

Sixth, classical Baptists reject the Protestant view of the Church set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter XXV – Of the Church), as well as the view of the Church set forth in what is commonly referred to as the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 (Chapter XXVI – Of the Church). Classical Baptists embrace the conviction that the Church of Jesus Christ was established by the Savior during His earthly ministry, empowered by the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, and subsequently divided into multiple congregations that established other Churches. Only in heaven will the Church be universal and consist of all Church Age believers in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 12.23).

Finally, classical Baptists are missionary Baptists, recognizing our Great Commission is rightly obeyed when Christians render service to Christ to, through, and from congregations where there is accountability, the administration of the two ordinances, and properly administered discipline, and when congregations are involved in starting other Churches to carry out the Great Commission in other places.

These are but a few of the marks of a classical Baptist, as understood by one Baptist pastor. A classical Baptist Church, therefore, agrees with these marks and seeks to exemplify them.