

Why I Am a Primitive Baptist

By Elder Michael L. Gowens

Today after more than three decades of trying to preach the gospel, I want everyone to know that I feel highly blessed and privileged to be a Primitive Baptist.

I am sad to admit that I haven't always been of that mindset. There was a time in my early ministry when I allowed a critical spirit toward the Old Baptists to make inroads into my mind. I criticized them for what appeared to be a lack of zeal, a general lack of interest in "church-growth", and an attitude of exclusivity. For reasons that I will not here analyze, my attitude toward the people with whom I had been identified from childhood was dangerously negative. I didn't realize how close I was to losing the best blessing I've ever had in life.

I learned that some of my peers in the ministry were also struggling with the same kind of identity crisis. Like the mindset that exaggerates the vices of one's own spouse while inflating the virtues of the neighbor's, we flirted with the notion of greener pastures. I subsequently watched as some followed this path to its logical conclusion and actually left the church. When a few brethren attempted to introduce various practical innovations, and some suggested that we replace the name with a more ecumenical label, and began to question and challenge long-accepted doctrines, I was shocked into reality. In my youth and immaturity, it never dawned on me that some would actually try to change the doctrine and the practice of the church. The departure of a few close friends in the ministry in the late 80's and early 90's, therefore, was a "wake-up call" to me. As a result of this epiphany, I decided that it was a real possibility that the fault lay with me, not the Old Baptists—that perhaps personal ambition and a proud preoccupation with what outsiders thought of me had colored my perspective.

Shakespeare's quote, "Striving to better, oft we mar what's well," gave me pause to consider that my attitude had been both sinful and unrealistic. I concluded that it would be foolish to leave the family estate for a flight of fancy, to exchange a solid and substantive Biblical fare for the superficiality of dramatic productions and programs, to trade the pearl of great price for what amounted to costume jewelry. I don't intend to fault people who prefer the "big business" model of church-life, but I am confident that it is not for me. It would not satisfy the deep needs of my soul. So today, I do not hesitate to say that I am happy to be an Old Baptist. Let me enumerate a few reasons.

First, I share the Primitive Baptist's strong commitment to Biblical *simplicity*. Unlike most professing Christians, the Old Baptists believe that simplicity is preferable to complexity. We want to minimize distractions—whether in terms of physical decoration and adornment, or in terms of liturgical formality and extracurricular programs—from the central theme of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I prefer the simple worship-structure of congregational singing, public prayer, and Biblical preaching observed by the typical Old Baptist church. I don't want to have to sort through a complex maze of religious activity in order to find one morsel of bread for my hungry soul. I like the solid theology and rich experience expressed in the old hymns and sung *acapella* by an entire congregation in four-part-harmony better than the low-cal, feel-good, musical performances, bands, and praise-choruses that are becoming increasingly more commonplace in many Christian circles today. I had rather hear a Spirit-filled, extemporaneous sermon that explains the Bible, proclaims the good news with enthusiasm and passion, stirs my mind on the most sublime and noble themes, and confronts and challenges me to greater godliness, even though the preacher tends to end his sentences with a preposition or leave a participle dangling, instead of a refined and polished twenty-minute, four-point, pre-packaged lesson that is mechanical and Spiritless. I get that kind of simplicity among the Old Baptists, and confess that it suits my case.

Second, I am a Primitive Baptist because I agree with *the way they interpret Scripture*. No one makes sense of the whole Bible like the Primitive Baptists. No other group interprets Scripture with greater consistency than these people who understand the discipline of "rightly dividing the word of truth." The habit of distinguishing between sonship and discipleship—between unconditional and gospel salvation—between relationship and fellowship—between union with Christ and communion with Him—between regeneration and conversion—between eternity and time—between judicial and parental judgment—between reality and the perception of that reality—is the hallmark that separates Primitive Baptists from virtually every other school of Biblical interpretation. The doctrine embraced by sound Primitive Baptists

makes room for both the “shalls” of Isaiah 1:18 and the “if’s” of Isaiah 1:19, affirming that eternal life is certain and guaranteed by God, and insisting that the life of Christian discipleship is conditioned largely on our obedience and faithfulness. Old Baptists are virtually alone in their ability to reconcile apparently contradictory texts like Ephesians 2:8 (a text that teaches that salvation is not of ourselves) and Acts 2:40 (a text that exhorts us to save ourselves from this untoward generation), because they understand that the first verse has eternal ramifications and the second does not. Others who do not understand this important principle can only explain the apparent inconsistency in terms of “a mystery that finite minds can never comprehend”. I’ve never heard any preacher make sense of the Bible better than the average Primitive Baptist who understands the need to rightly divide the word of truth. I’ve never heard anyone but an Old Baptist explain how it could be that Christ died for “many” (Rom. 8:29; Heb. 9:28) who will ultimately live with Him in heaven, but that only “few” are traveling the narrow path of Christian discipleship (Mt. 7:13-14). I am convinced that the Primitives are correct to make this distinction between eternal and temporal salvation and this is one of the main reasons that I am happy to be a Primitive Baptist today. Take away this hallmark of Old Baptist doctrine, and the Primitives are no different theologically than any other group.

Third, I believe that the Old Baptist’s *interest in cultivating true, apostolic, New Testament churches* is legitimate. Many in the current Christian climate of ecumenism reject the idea of church identity. But throughout history, there have always been those who sought to pursue a pure church, free from institutionalism. Historians term people with these convictions “the Free Church Movement”, a category that includes such relatively obscure groups as the Donatists, Novatians, Waldenses, Lollards, and more. Though each of these groups had their flaws and blemishes, they shared one thing in common—a commitment to apostolic purity in the face of ecclesiastical authoritarianism. They are often dismissed as heretics because only the works of those who wrote against them have survived. But each of these groups sought to tailor church worship, polity, faith and life to the Biblical and apostolic pattern, and to keep the church free of magisterial entanglements. They believed that God would continue to bless His true church and they sought to be identified as such a church by conforming themselves to the Biblical pattern. The Primitive Baptists share this commitment to purity of doctrine and practice with a view to pleasing the Lord. In a day when many (if not most) denominations are “measuring themselves” by each other, competing with each other for popularity, and governing church life by popular preferences, the Old Baptist concern to please God, to have authentic and true churches, and to be thoroughly Biblical is refreshing to me. That’s an important reason that I am a Primitive Baptist today.

Further reasons could be cited, but I trust these will suffice. I know the Old Baptists are not perfect; but then, neither am I. The faults of those of us known as Primitive Baptists notwithstanding, I am more committed today than ever before to be nothing more than a simple, old-time, Bible-believing, salvation-by-grace-preaching, Primitive Baptist, even if others think I’m weird or ignorant or out-of-touch with the modern world. I concur with Primitive Baptist convictions regarding believer’s baptism, close communion, age-integrated worship, and the need to maintain church discipline. I am satisfied with the arguments against musical instruments in the worship service, Sunday Schools, mission boards, secret societies, and parachurch auxiliaries. I agree with their views of congregational church government and individual church autonomy. I am convinced that the Old Baptists are correct regarding the utility (or purpose) of the gospel and the conviction that God does not employ human means or instrumentality in regeneration. I now know that this is where I fit. No longer am I troubled by a crisis of identity. These are my people. They sing my song; they understand my story; they speak my language. I cannot speak for anyone else, but these are some of the reasons I am a Primitive Baptist.