

LABELS ARE DANGEROUS

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I do not like 'labels', for they can be misleading. In my own case, for instance, I have always been an 'Evangelical': as a young minister I was on the Council of the Evangelical Alliance, and over the years have been involved in many Evangelical bodies. Nonetheless, I dislike the implication that 'Evangelicals' alone are 'Gospel-centred' people: that is patently not the case. Indeed, there have been occasions when I have experienced more of the love of God outside, rather than inside, the Evangelical fold!

Although I was a co-founder of 'Mainstream – Baptists for life and growth' and later became Principal of Spurgeon's College, which has a world-wide reputation for its passionate evangelical faith, I have developed a particular aversion to distinguishing between Baptist 'evangelicals' and 'non-evangelicals'. I do not deny that there have been Baptist ministers who have been true theological liberals, but the rite of believers' baptism with its explicit call to repentance and faith ensures that the vast majority of men and women in Baptist ministry are 'evangelically-minded'.

Nor do I like those churches which call themselves 'Bible-believing' churches. There is a large independent church just outside Chelmsford which on its noticeboard declares 'We are a Bible-believing church'. I want to get out a large red felt pen and cross out the word 'Bible-believing' with 'Jesus-believing'!

Strangely, you may feel, one label I am happy to wear is 'Baptist'. In part this is because in using this term I am not demeaning any other group of Christians. In part, too, this is because the term sums up my ecclesiological convictions which have led me to become a Baptist minister. Do notice the plural use of the word 'convictions'. As members of the College will know, there is no one distinctive Baptist 'belief' – rather it is the combination of our beliefs which make Baptists Baptist. As I wrote in *Radical Believers*:

Although probably most people think of believers' baptism as the primary Baptist distinctive, Baptists are in fact not the only Christians to practise believers' baptism – believers' baptism is practised by Pentecostals, the 'new churches', and many other Christian groups. Another key Baptist distinctive is their concept of congregational church government - however, as the very term implies, this concept is shared too by Congregationalists (most of whom have now become part of the United Reformed Church) and by some other Christian churches too. Likewise, other important Baptists distinctives such as the priesthood of all believers or the separation of church and state, are not peculiar to Baptists, but are shared by many other Christians too.... Perhaps Baptist distinctives can be likened to a set of genes, which because of their particular arrangement produce a family likeness wherever Baptists are to be found.

I confess that I am concerned by the increasing number of churches in membership with the Baptist Union of Great Britain which do not have the word 'Baptist' in their name. Why not, I wonder? Is it that they are simply 'baptistic' rather than 'Baptist'? Is there a reluctance to

own the 'full set' of Baptist beliefs? I understand the argument that in today's world the word 'Baptist' conveys very little to people with no Christian faith. But then I wonder whether the alternatives which are used by such churches are any more intelligible to the 'outsider'.

True, if we were starting from 'scratch', we might want to ensure that we had the word 'Christian' in our title. But we are where we are – and to brand ourselves a 'Baptist-Christian church' sounds odd and could imply that there are some Baptist churches which are not Christian. Perhaps General Mobutu, the former President of what was then Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), was right when he ordered the various Protestant denominations to unite and become one 'church' - church noticeboard were hastily repainted, and underneath the overarching sign 'the Church of Christ in Zaire' were the words 'Baptist community' or 'Methodist community'!

What do you think?

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