

Why Bother? Our Heart Behind a Name Change

Luke 15 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home.

Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Of all the parables that Jesus shares, this one is most personal to me. I was the lost sheep that wandered off from the fold. And Jesus was not content just preserving the 99 inside the fold who were faithful, he knew the 99 were safe and grazing (likely having other undershepherds there) he pursued the lost sheep outside the fold. And what I can never get over, is that he doesn't scold the sheep and begrudgingly bring drag him back, saying I told you so, he joyfully put me on his shoulder and carries me home to the 99, and calls a party to rejoice in my repentance. That is Jesus' heart for lost. For the outsider, for those like me who were dechurched...who thought they had it with church and Christians.

I also believe this parable offers a beautiful paradigm for the heart of the local church. The leaders of every local church, the shepherds should be developing a culture of **Insider Preservation AND Outsider Pursuit**. The nurturing and growth of the 99 and the pursuit of and risk taking to reach the 1. And if a church is only one or the other the church, that church will inevitably become unhealthy. On the one hand, churches that are drawn to preservation of those inside the walls will grow complacent toward those outside the church. In doing so they will be fearful of making changes that would upset the insiders, they may rarely challenge the congregation and that congregation can start to think it is all about them and their wants, desires... And over the years they will wonder why the church isn't growing, why young people don't stay, why there are no baby dedications and baptisms, no life-change, a lot of burying with little marrying. On the other hand, some leaders will be drawn to thinking only about the pursuit of the outsider with no concern for the preservation and continuity of the flock. Church leaders like this will have 1000 new initiatives, we be chasing trends, all about a future they seek to manifest that they don't shepherd the faithful ones right in front of them and the flock becomes under-fed, emaciated, uncared for. In other words, one church rusts out from insider preservation, and the other church burns out from outsider pursuit.

I share this devotional thought because I want you to hear above all else, the heart and approach of our leadership. I am grateful to serve with a Deacon Board and Ministry Leadership Team who I believe embody the heart of Jesus toward both insider preservation and outsider pursuit. And that is the heart behind our proposal to remove the word Baptist from the public

name of our church. For us, this change is about both preservation and pursuit, the 99 and the 1. On one hand, our heart is to continue to preserve our church identity, our doctrine, our rich Baptist history and distinctives. Our official name would still be Brandywine Valley Baptist Church. Nothing would change about that, and our commitment is to teach our Baptist distinctives to our perspective and current members. We are so thankful that we have some of you here that are deeply concerned about preservation which is critical and needed. We care about you. We recognize there are some among us for whom the name Baptist has deep, personal, emotional ties. We aren't minimizing your real and valid perspective. Our heart is for unity among our flock. Now if that was our only concern, why bother disrupting things? But our heart is also in pursuit of the outsider. This proposal is aimed at future opportunity, hospitality, and risk to reach the lost. Simply put, it is the conviction of the Deacons and the Ministry Leadership Team is that removing the word Baptist from our public name increases our ability to invite and welcome the lost inside our flock so that we can introduce them to Jesus Christ. Let me take a moment to layout the rationale behind that, there are three primary lines of thinking. Maybe you have read the FAQ that went out on Friday which lays out in greater detail...but I'd like to share three aspects of our reasoning.

#1 Baptist as a Potential Barrier to Hospitality: Notice what upset the pharisees most? Jesus welcomed sinners. It was his hospitality. While some of us inside the walls of our church may correctly understand and appreciate what it means to be Baptist, the majority of those in our community do not. In earlier days, a church was named simply by "location" "denomination" "Church", and that is how our church is currently named. And if a second church of that denomination was needed in that town, it was simply "2nd Baptist, and now the first one got to claim "first Baptist". American culture has gone through a secular revolution that some of us are just now waking up to. In an increasingly post-Christian, biblically illiterate culture, the word "Baptist" is akin to the word fundamental and is about as understood as the phrase "washed in the blood." Our experience among our community is that when we invite people to come to our church we will often hear, "Baptist? I don't think that's for me because..."

- "I don't own a suit and tie."
- "I grew up [fill in the denomination] and I'm not a Baptist."
- "I've heard about Westboro Baptist Church. Don't Baptists hate _____?"
- "I'm not very traditional so I don't think I would fit in."
- "I had a bad experience with a legalistic Baptist church."

In today's cultural climate, putting the denomination name on a church sign is asking too much of a sign - to communicate all that a Baptist is/is not. We have a better opportunity to allow our Baptist identity unfold in a person's life in the midst of a Christ-centered church.

We regularly hear stories from our congregation that support a name change. Here is just one example: "I had reservations in coming to BVBC because of the word Baptist. I had a bad experience at a Baptist church, also having Baptist in the name communicated to me that this church wasn't concerned about the lost in our community and was more focused on being a club only for Baptists. It took several times for me to finally say yes to coming after many invitations. Now I love our church! When I invite my friends to Brandywine I always have to

preface it by saying, “We aren’t really ‘baptisty’ and ‘you don’t have to dress up’ and ‘we aren’t what you think’. I would love to be able to not have to overcome that hurdle and I think it would communicate that we are welcoming to everyone no matter what their beliefs and that Jesus loves them.”

#2 Protection from Future Baptist Baggage: There are many Baptist associations, including Southern Baptists, National Baptists and Progressive Baptists to name a few. Their theological beliefs, distinctives and practices vary widely. In the past some of these Baptist groups have drifted into theological liberalism, nationalism and corruption. By far, the largest of these is the Southern Baptist Convention. Currently, there is a significant rift over the issues of race and justice within the convention. While we are not affiliated with the SBC, for many people, perception is reality. If there is a major fallout or drift in the future, we may be lumped in with one of these conventions. Removing this word helps protect our church from future baggage.

#3 Our deepest, truest identity is followers of Jesus Christ. We are so much more than being Baptists. We want Jesus to be the primary identification of who we are in the Brandywine Valley and “Church” is the Word Jesus gave to us...I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome her. This is statistically a community where less than **half of our population is religious, 26% are Catholic, and only 2% identify themselves as Baptist.** I believe this can potentially be a limiting identifier to the largely non-Christian, certainly non-Baptist community around us, who may pre-judge that they would not be welcome or fit in merely from the name on the sign or our website, before they get to know us. You say, “Well what about the 2% Baptists who move into the area and are looking for a distinctly Baptist church?” Well our experience is that Baptists know how to find Baptist churches. Google searches, word of mouth recommendations, the variety of Baptist networks we are part of and our website will all make that clear.

[Blank Slide] Now this proposed change is not without some risk. It may cause some who are so passionate about having Baptist on the sign to look for a new church. Our hope is that our patient, listening, consensus building process will help mitigate that risk. There is also a risk that it may cause some to think we have changed our doctrinal convictions or we are on some kind of proverbial “slippery slope”. Ultimately, we believe consistency over time will prove that to be a very temporary and unwarranted concern. In addition, we believe some clear communication to our community with a tagline like “Biblically Grounded or Gospel-Centered” can help clear that potential hurdle.

- Jesus was concerned about preservation and pursuit, about the 99 and the 1. That is the heart of all of this. This is not a proposal worth dying on the hill for or splitting the church over. Among the many strategic decisions and ministry initiatives to reach our community, this is only one of them and it’s not the most important one. Christians can disagree on many non-essential things and dwell in love, unity, and peace which is something that ought to be demonstrably distinct in our culture.
- We will be taking a one question survey next Sunday during the service that we want all of you to answer to better sense where you are with this proposed change.

- We are moving slowly, we will not make any changes without at least 80% approval, and no changes before the Fall. This is not an item up discussion or voting today, but the deacons will continue the dialogue over the Summer.
- I want to call us to prayer and discernment over the Summer. This isn't about us. This is asking what the Lord wants. While our leadership has spent much time in deliberation, seeking the Lord...we want to call the congregation to do the same.