

Why My Dog Tag Had the Letter 'B'

Deuteronomy 30:11-20

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

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This week marked the 50th anniversary of the Cuban missile crisis. Even those of us who were children at that time remember talking on the playground about what would happen if the bombs were dropped on us. We remember the incredibly pointless exercises of hiding under our desks at school during “bomb drills.” Some of us remember church basements marked with the yellow-orange and black pie slices indicating that they were to serve as bomb shelters.

One memory that came back this week from the Cold War days was the experience of being issued dog tags. After some calculation I realized that it was before the Cuban missile crisis that I got my dog tag in school. It was 1961, during the first year of the Kennedy administration. My family had come back to the States from Japan for a furlough in Arkansas. At some point in that year, each of us—at least in the third grade—was issued a dog tag, just as if we were in the army. There were several messages in that gesture. One was that in the nuclear era there are no civilians. We are all soldiers now. We all have to be prepared for battle.

This message was not lost on me, or on a generation of children. Dog tags were issued to second and third graders in New York City as early as 1951 [<http://www.thomhartmann.com/users/leighmf/blog/2012/02/dog-tags-children>], for the explicit purpose of identifying bodies in the event of a nuclear attack. I had heard my parents use stories about Hiroshima in their missionary sermons, and I particularly remembered one about a man not being able to recognize the burned and melted body of his sister except for the print of her dress seared into her flesh. That was the grisly purpose of dog tags: so they would know who we were if we melted—or rather, who we had been. And so the authorities could bury us properly if our parents were dead. These things leave an impression.

I don't know when Arkansas caught up with New York in the dog tag business, but it must have been before 1961, because when I came home from school with my dog tag my mother seemed very happy that it was marked with the letter B. The first time they had issued dog tags in school they had been marked with the student's religion, but the only choices were P, C, and J—Protestant, Catholic, Jew. The Baptists in Arkansas had gotten quite irate about being lumped in with the Protestants. We are not Protestants, they insisted. We are Baptists! And since they were somewhere close to being a majority in those parts, they got their way. The next time dog tags came out you had the option of having yours marked with the letter B. So, my mother told me, in the event of a nuclear war I would be buried as a Baptist and not, God forbid, by some Methodist or Presbyterian. This was a source of some rejoicing for her, if not for me. I was, as we say now, creeped out.

There were two reasons the letter B was important to my mother, one preposterous and one legitimate. The first reason was that a good many Baptists in that part of the world subscribed to the theory that Baptists had descended from the very first Christian churches—that there was an underground river of true believers and martyrs who had always believed in a church of converts who were baptized only after they came to faith and in a church governed democratically. A popular little book called *The Trail of Blood* spelled out this lineage by claiming that our ancestry included every group that Rome had ever called heretical. This whole idea was a response to the Campbellites (the Churches of Christ) who claimed to be restoring the New Testament church and had stolen many Baptist churches in the process. It was also a response to the Episcopalians and Methodists who claimed they were a part of apostolic succession just like the Catholics. For the Baptists I suspect it was a case of doctrine following marketing. In any case, the whole idea was wrong, and any historian will tell you that Baptists emerged around 1600.

But the other reason it was important to my mom that Baptists were not Protestants was that there are some very real differences. For one thing, the Protestants baptized babies, which meant that they didn't take conversion or personal faith in Jesus as seriously as we did. Another thing was that they had bishops or something similar which meant they didn't take priesthood of all believers as seriously as we did. But the thing that got under her skin more than those was that all of those darn Protestants had come from state churches, so they didn't really believe deep down in the separation of church and state.

This is a delicate matter to discuss on Reformation Sunday in a Baptist church which is occasionally dubbed “Pan-Protestant” because so many of our members come from other Protestant traditions. But at least once or twice a year I want to remind you that we are a Baptist church and stand for certain things that may be different from the church you grew up in.

We do celebrate Martin Luther today, of course, remembering that on October 31 he nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenberg church. He was protesting at first the corruption in the medieval Catholic church and opposing the idea that forgiveness could be dispensed by the church at will, even in return for money. Baptists certainly agree with Luther on his slogans: *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Fides*, *Sola Scriptura*—that we are forgiven and saved by God's grace only and by means of faith rather than works, and that our only authority is the Bible rather than the statements of the church. But the Baptists in the 17th century followed the lead of the Anabaptists in the 16th century who took the Reformation even further than Luther, emphasizing personal discipleship, the gathered church, and an end to sacraments, hierarchy, and alliances with state power. Luther ordered the killing of Anabaptists as he encouraged the killing of rebellious peasants and Jews. Since the early Protestants tried to kill the Baptists in Europe, England, and the English colonies, some Baptists have declined to take the label Protestant.

I want to spell out for you three basic Baptist convictions that we do not share historically with most Protestants, even though during the 20th century in America we saw most Protestants come to accept them in what Lutheran historian Martin Marty called “the Baptistification of the American church” (Martin Marty, “Baptistification Takes Over,” *Christianity Today* [2 September 1983]: 33-36).

1. **Free choice matters.** Baptists have emphasized that you have to choose to be a follower of Jesus. Your parents can't do it for you. The state can't do it for you. Faith in God is a personal choice. I don't deny that there have been Calvinists circling the herd wanting to de-emphasize choice in favor of God's sovereignty and the doctrine of election, but the mass of Baptists have understood that becoming a Christian is a free choice. This is what we see in the Bible. God gives Israel a choice of being in covenant with him or not. In the passage we read from Deuteronomy 30, God gives the people a choice between life and death: "Therefore choose life." Joshua famously says, "As for me and my house, we will choose the Lord." When God calls people in the Old Testament, they sometimes argue with him. God doesn't always get his way. Many times God says something like "I begged you to do x but you chose to do y." It certainly sounds like free choice. When Jesus calls people to follow him or come to him, he does not speak to them like some kind of hypnotist: "You are in my power. You must follow me." No, they still have a choice. Sometimes they say "No, I have too much money to follow you," or "My family is too important to me to follow you." No one is compelled by God overruling his will.

This belief in free choice is the reason we practice believer's baptism and immersion. It's not that the mode itself was the central issue, even though everyone today acknowledges that it was the practice of the early church. It's about letting each person make his or her own choice about becoming a Christian and not letting parents or culture do it for them. You have to make a decision about following Jesus *before* you are baptized, not after.

2. **The church is a body gathered by free choice.** You are not born into a church. You have to make up your own mind. Baptists understood before Kierkegaard that "When everyone is a Christian no one is a Christian." Citizenship in a Christian nation does not make you a Christian. Being brought to church as a baby does not make you a Christian. That happens by free choice, and you become a member of a church by free choice. Church membership is intentional and agreed upon by making a covenant.

3. **The use of state power to support religion impairs free choice.** This is the biggest practical difference between Baptists and other traditions that descend from state churches—not only Catholic but Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran and Orthodox. It has been the Baptist position since 1609, not only that the king has no right to violate the freedom of the individual conscience in matters of faith, but that using state power to promote religious views is a deprivation of freedom. If state power supports the Christian faith, it takes away the option of true faith. If I choose to become a Christian because the law says to or because of loyalty to my nation, I have not exercised faith in Christ at all.

I want to illustrate how these convictions play out by telling you three stories about one of my Baptist heroes, John Leland, three encounters he had with the "Founding Fathers."

The first takes place in 1784 when John Leland, a Baptist pastor in Virginia, got into a conflict with **Patrick Henry**. It involved the first faith-based initiative after the Revolution. Henry proposed a kind of voucher system, a tax for the support of religious teachers which would allow each taxpayer to choose which religion they wanted to support. That seemed fair to many, including George Washington, and it passed the state legislature on the first two readings, but Leland mounted a ferocious campaign against it. He got the Virginia Baptist to issue a strong statement which said that the Gospel does not need government support to succeed, and that such support is repugnant to the Gospel and a violation of religious liberty. The Baptists won the fight.

The second takes place in 1788 with John Leland standing under a tree talking with **James Madison**. Madison had sided with the Baptists in the earlier battle with Patrick Henry. This time Leland wanted to talk about the proposed Constitution, of which Madison was one of the primary authors. It was good that the Constitution did not mention God or religion, but it was not good enough. Leland came with a list of ten problems he had with the new Constitution and a demand for an amendment guaranteeing religious liberty. We think Leland told Madison that without that amendment he would have to lead the Baptists to oppose the Constitution. It may well be due to John Leland that we have the guarantee that there shall be no state support of religion and no infringement on the free exercise of conscience.

The third scene is New Year's Day 1802 in front of the still-new White House in Washington, where **Thomas Jefferson** greets John Leland and a wagon carrying a four-foot wide cheese weighing over 1200 pounds. It was a gift to the President from the Baptists of Cheshire, Massachusetts, where John Leland was then serving. He wanted Jefferson to know that the Baptists were behind him as a champion of freedom. The farmers of western Massachusetts collected the milk of 900 cows on July 20 and poured it all into a giant cheese press at the Baptist church. When the cheese was ripe, Leland made a parade of it, bringing his wagon through downtown Baltimore before heading to the little town of Washington DC.

Here's the thing about that cheese: John Adams was the religious right's candidate in that election. He portrayed himself as the friend of churches and Jefferson as someone infected with liberal French philosophy. He said Jefferson didn't believe the Bible and was not really a Christian—and that was mostly true. He accused Jefferson of wanting to end government support for religion and even national days of prayer, which was precisely why the Baptists loved Jefferson. Leland was willing to support an unbeliever who would champion religious liberty—as Jefferson had done in Virginia—over a believer who would try to use the government to support Christianity. So I guess Leland wanted to say to Jefferson, "You're the Big Cheese now! Thank you for supporting the liberty of individual conscience that Roger Williams and John Clarke had won for Rhode Island. Thank you for bringing it to Virginia and to the United States. Thank you for resisting the temptation to get the political support of churches by supporting them with taxes and government declarations." For Leland, as for all of us Baptists, the main issue is whether the individual is left free to choose to follow Jesus. It is possible to make that free choice under persecution, but harder to make that free choice if the government is telling you to be a Christian. As our own Election Day approaches, let us be sure that we as Baptists are standing on the side of freedom