



STUDY GUIDE - QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Reimagining Zion: A History Of The Alliance Of Baptists

Study Guide written by Dr. Laura R. Levens,
Baptist Seminary of Kentucky

Part I: Leaving Zion

Chapter 1: From Dissent to Establishment

1. Why was "religious liberty" a cherished principle for early Baptists? How did Baptists both champion and restrict religious liberty in the development of American history?
2. Why do you think the Alliance organization chose to continue carrying "Baptist" as part of their Christian identity?
3. Do you consider "Baptist" to be a part of your congregation's identity? What is the value of continuing to carry this name? What is the downside?

Chapter 2: Trouble in Zion

1. How did the Southern Baptist Convention traditionally handle "trouble" and controversy within the denomination? Why did this culminate in the decades long struggle between moderates and conservatives?
2. How was the formation of the Alliance of Baptists shaped in response to Southern Baptist controversy? Why is it important to remember this past for your church? What are the risks of continuing this past?
3. Some Alliance organizers felt "left out of the [Southern Baptist] convention because of their beliefs" and "questioned why they should keep fighting for the return of a convention that had always marginalized them." Others narrated the "take over" of the denomination that nurtured and shaped them as heartbreaking. Does your congregation share in either of these experiences? Like the founders of the Alliance, can your congregation use these experiences to initiate a search for a new way to be Baptist?

Chapter 3: An Exodus People

1. In your own words, how would you describe what it means to be "Baptist" from an Alliance perspective? Describe the context of your own congregation.
2. Why didn't the Alliance of Baptists and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship merge together? How does this history demonstrate shared trajectories of pursuing faithful ways of being Baptist? How does it demonstrate continued trouble over Baptist differences of opinion and interaction within the broader American religious landscape?
3. Can you narrate the "exodus process" for yourself or your congregation? What was it like to leave the familiar in order to venture into new religious territory? Are you continuing this venture?

Part II: Reimagining Zion

Chapter 4: We Commit Ourselves To

1. Why did the Alliance organize itself around a covenant as a guiding document? What does the practice of covenant-making reveal about the nature of Alliance Baptist identity?
2. Which phrases of the Alliance Covenant resonate with you or your congregation? Which phrases are unfamiliar or uncomfortable for you? Why?
3. The Alliance Covenant commits to distinctive principles from the Baptist tradition; the Alliance mission statement commits to habitual actions required to "keep faith" with the Covenant. How do you see these two documents working together? For example, how could the mission commitment to side with the poor direct and expand the covenant principle of freedom of the local church, and vice versa?

Chapter 5: The Freedom of the Individual

1. When the Alliance began addressing the topic of LGBT inclusion in 1992, they committed to "a forum for dialogue, soul searching and theological debate about what will no doubt become an increasing justice concern in the coming years." How did the Alliance exercise its traditional Baptist principles to engage in the process of dialogue over questions of sexuality? What about matters of environment and women's ministerial leadership? Could you commit to this process of working through conflict and exploring the limits of relationship? What is the promise and what is the cost of this process?
2. Why has the Alliance resisted the labels of liberal, moderate, and conservative to distinguish it from other Christian organizations? Why are "freedom of conscience" and "freedom of dissent" better descriptors? What theological aims must be prioritized in order to exercise conscience and dissent well?
3. What issues have arisen in your context and time that your congregation desires to address? Based on the Alliance's commitment to the freedom of the individual and the process of discernment, how would you approach the issue?

Chapter 6: The Freedom of the Local Church

1. How did the Alliance grow into its reactive commitment to the right of local churches to operate freely?
2. How did the Alliance engage the tension between local church autonomy and congregational connection and resourcing? Why do you think so much of the tension arises over matters of finances?
3. How has the Alliance of Baptist's growing commitment to women in ministry and gender equity affected your congregation? What more could be done in your congregation and in the Alliance to further support women?

Chapter 7: The Larger Body of Jesus Christ

1. How was the Alliance of Baptists' turn toward Christian ecumenism a major departure from Southern Baptist Convention practice? Was Alliance ecumenism a historically Baptist distinctive, or is it an entirely new thing for Baptists?

2. Why has there been so much difficulty maintaining denominational relationships with other Baptist groups in America?
3. Has the Alliance's pursuit of ecumenical partnerships influenced relationships between your local congregation and other local churches in your area?
4. What could collaborative ecumenism look like between your congregation and another Baptist church in your area? What about a local church from a different denomination? A church from a different racial background? A non-Christian faith community?

Chapter 8: The Servant Role of Leadership

1. How did the covenant markers of servant leadership and full partnership enable the Alliance of Baptists to readdress its purpose and organizational structure over the course of its history?
2. What did the leaders of the Alliance have to unlearn and change in order to more fully embody servant leadership? What does shared leadership require of local congregations and congregants? How is shared leadership practiced in your congregation?
3. This covenant marker ties models for leadership and community life directly to the model of Jesus Christ. Why do Baptists believe that their organizational structure should reflect the nature of God? How is this conviction also connect to the Alliance emphasis upon full partnership and the encouragement of all people to exercise their unique gifts?

Chapter 9: Theological Education

1. Name some of the different ways in which the Alliance of Baptists supported theological education for various types. How have the other covenant principles and mission commitments helped the Alliance clarify the purpose and importance of theological education in imaginative and proactive ways? Who is theological education for?
2. Why are reverence for biblical authority, respect for open inquiry, and responsible scholarship marks of "Baptist" theological education? Would you add other marks to this list, and why?
3. The exercise of the commitment to theological education has been constrained by limitation of funds even as it has been fueled by new opportunity and partnerships. Where do you think the Alliance of Baptists should concentrate its efforts for theological education today? How could your congregation be involved?

Chapter 10: The Proclamation of the Good News

1. How have the Alliance of Baptists interpreted and enacted their commitment to "proclamation of the good news"? Why does the Alliance focus its energies on partnerships that align with its spirit and covenant, and also represent geography diversity and visionary risk-taking?
2. The Alliance of Baptists has ventured into interfaith relations and social advocacy. How are these partnerships and activities a part of this covenant commitment to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ? Could you describe an Alliance of Baptists' form of evangelism and mission, or are there better terms to describe these activities?

3. Which ministry partnership(s) in this chapter resonate with you and your congregation? Why? How does your congregation engage in partnerships that demonstrate "the calling of God to all peoples to repentance and faith, reconciliation and hope, and social and economic justice"?

Chapter 11: The Principle of a Free Church

1. What does religious liberty mean to the Alliance of Baptists today? How has this commitment undergirded the Alliance's understanding of what it means to be Baptist?
2. Why must religious liberty be advocated for today? What avenues of advocacy has the Alliance taken in pursuit of religious liberty in America and internationally?
3. How has the Alliance understood its members and its organization as political voices within the public sphere? What are the limits of a religious individual in public policy? Of a religious organization?
4. The United States is currently a highly charged political climate. What can you or your congregations do to exercise religious liberty on the local, regional, and national level?

Part III: Living Zion

Individually or as a group, write your own description of your congregation and narrate how your congregation "bears the tradition" of the Alliance of Baptists. Consider these attributes:

- a. Geographical location
- b. Worship and fellowship architecture
- c. Worship order, habits, dress, and annual cycles
- d. Music and creative arts
- e. Forms and personalities of leadership and congregants
- f. Presence and method of theological education and educators
- g. Financial commitments and responsibilities
- h. Religious and non-religious organizational partnerships
- i. Congregant and ministerial influence in greater community
- j. Congregational historical memory and shared vocabulary
- k. Delegation of tasks and service across gender, generations, and years of membership
- l. Mission/ministry activities, partnerships, and communication

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