

400 YEARS OF BAPTISTS: IN THE BEGINNING

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Text: Joshua 4:1-7

Introduction: Question - how many of you here today are Baptists? Well, let me say to you, in a denominational sense, "Happy Birthday!" The very first Baptist church was organized sometime in late 1608 or early 1609, some 400 years ago. It was founded by a group of English men and women, who were because of religious persecution during the reign of King James I in exile in Amsterdam. This year Baptists throughout the world will remember their humble beginning in a world that was so different than ours today.

Because we are a Baptist congregation and because I am a Baptist historian during the months ahead in 2009 we will celebrate the 400th anniversary of this foundational event and the resulting denomination that arose from this new church. My intentions are to preach a series of sermons on Baptist distinctives and contributions, and to try and draw from our history, our theology, and our ministries ideas that continue to be relevant for the 21st century. My goal and my hope is that we will draw guidance and strength from knowing from where we came and applying the lessons from that to the 21st century.

Where is the best place to begin such a series? In the beginning, of course!

I. The Origin of Baptists: The beginnings of Baptists not too many years ago was a fiercely debated topic within the denomination. Determining where we began had an important bearing upon our theology, our influence and our relationship with other groups.

A. In the mid 1800s there arose a movement known as successionism. Quite simply, this movement claimed that Baptists began with the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River by John the Baptist and began to organize following the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the remarkable surge of the church at Pentecost, where more than 3,000 new converts were brought into the fold. Since this beginning there has been an unbroken historical succession of Baptist churches right up to the present day. Many of us were given our first taste of Baptist history from this perspective, albeit a very defective historical interpretation.

B. Successionism underwent an important modification by those who held to what a friend of mine, H. Leon McBeth, calls the Continuous Biblical Teaching view. This view states that although we can't trace an unbroken historical succession of Baptist churches back to the first century, there has been a constant trail of people that have passed on important Baptist and Biblical teachings throughout the ages without actually being "Baptists."

C. One attractive view of our origin traces Baptist beginnings goes back to the Anabaptist movement that arose during the early years of the Protestant Reformation. The Anabaptists appeared shortly after the rise of Martin Luther as a reformer. They appeared in different movements throughout Europe. Most held to believers baptism, Biblical and especially New Testament scriptural authority, congregational church government, and religious liberty. There is certainly a spiritual kinship with the Baptists, although the views of pacifism, non-involvement with civil government, and an opposition to oath taking demonstrated differences with many Baptists.

D. The most accepted view of the origin of Baptists is the English Separatist Descent or Influence theory. This is the position to which I hold, and the position upon which the belief that the first Baptist church was organized in 1608 or 1609. What I have to say today rests upon this interpretation of our beginnings as Baptists.

1. We can begin by asking ourselves "What was the English world like during this time?" England, like other countries in Western Europe, had an established church, the Church of England, which was rooted in Roman Catholicism prior to the English Reformation under King Henry VIII. Some other groups, such as Presbyterians and English Separatists, sought toleration as dissenters or non-conformists.

2. The English Separatists arose in the late-1500s and believed that the Church of England was a false church with false worship and a false ministry and false government (Episcopal). Their name came from the fact that they simply chose to separate from the English state church. The movement can be traced to the publication by Robert Browne in 1581 of a book entitled "A Reformation without Tarrying for Anie," which called for immediate separation from the Church of England rather than waiting upon the civil authorities to bring about the needed changes.

They concluded that the Church of England could not be reformed from within, they believed that congregational church polity was taught in the Bible, and they simply separated from the state form and established their own congregations beginning in the 1580s and 1590s. Their actions were illegal and some were imprisoned and executed, such as Henry Barrowe, John Greenwood, and John Penry.

3. One such Separatist congregation actually had two locations, one met at a place called Scrooby Manor and the other met at Gainsborough. The Scrooby Manor group made their way to the Netherlands, and then a minority of the members sailed for the new world to become the Pilgrim Fathers.

The Gainsborough group emigrated sometime in 1607 or 1608 to Amsterdam, having organized a church based upon a church covenant between themselves and God. They continued to be Separatists. They were led by their pastor, John Smyth, and by a businessman named Thomas Helwys, who provided the resources for the travel by ship across the English Channel.

4. How did these English Separatists become Baptists? Sometime in late 1608 or early 1609, some 400 years ago, Smyth came to the conclusion that baptism was for believers, not for infants. He convinced the church of his position on baptism, and reorganized the church on the basis of believers' baptism. Smyth baptized himself by affusion, or pouring, then baptized the remainder of the congregation. This act established the very first Baptist church, although the name "Baptist" was slow in coming. Because these Baptists believed in a *general atonement*, that Christ died for all, not just the elect or chosen, they became known as General Baptists. Historically, this congregation is considered to be the very first Baptist church.

5. I might add that these first Baptists paved the way for later Baptists by quickly having a split within the congregation. Smyth began to question the authority of his self-baptism and led a majority of the group in an effort to join a Waterlander Mennonite congregation. The rest of the church considered themselves to be the true Baptist church and continued under the leadership of Thomas Helwys. It is to this movement that we trace our lineage.

II. The Heritage of These First Baptists: So, what about these Baptists during the last 400 years, what have we contributed, how have we responded to a changing world. And remember that when Baptists have made a contribution it is because they have drawn from important foundations to respond to a changing world.

And before I go on, keep this thought in mind. If we Baptists who find ourselves in a world 400 years later are to make an impact, to make a difference, we must draw from our foundation and respond to our world in a relevant way. Yesterday is a great teacher. Today is a magnificent challenge. And tomorrow, if it is to be, will be the validation of the truth that we proclaim and practice as it expresses itself in new and changing ways.

What did these first Baptists think and do that made them different from others around them, and what do we draw from them as we seek to be relevant today?

A. They demonstrated a commitment and a resiliency to their faith in God that enabled them to face numerous obstacles in order to worship according to the dictates of their consciences. They were loyal Englishmen and Englishwomen, dedicated to their monarch, James I. But they refused to violate their consciences and worship in a state church, which they considered to have major flaws, which they considered inconsistent with their interpretation of the Scriptures.

It takes courage to pack up and leave one's homeland, even in the face of persecution, in order to worship God according to the dictates of one's conscience. Even moreso, it takes even greater courage to go back home in the face of such persecution in order to worship God in one's own land. But this is what this congregation did in 1612, then under the leadership of Thomas Helwys. The church led by Helwys returned to England and settled in a place called Spitalfield, across the Thames River from London.

And what was the reward for such commitment and conviction? Helwys was arrested, as were others, and imprisoned in the Newgate Prison in London, where by 1616 he died. He along with his fellow members left a legacy of courage for all Baptists to believe in, including those of us here in Boulder. Helwys and his fellow Baptists were committed to living and, if necessary, dying for their convictions. The Spitalfield Church continued to exist into the nineteenth century.

B. The Bible was very important for these first Baptists. Rooted in the tradition of the Protestant Reformation, the Bible was the authority in matters of faith and practice. When you separate from another group, in this case the Church of England, you have to justify it, you have to have an authority for so doing. And that authority was the Bible.

One of the interesting aspects of the commitment of these Baptists was Smyth's insistence that you could not read from a translation of the Bible during a worship service. So, when he preached, he would translate from the original texts that were available into English as he spoke.

If the Church of England was false, then the source for a true church with true worship, a true government or polity, and a true ministry was the Scriptures. They tested their convictions and practices by looking to the Bible for guidance. What is interesting is that these first Baptists were open to new approaches to the Bible. They moved beyond the acceptance of the Latin Vulgate and responded to the publication of the Scriptures in the original languages, and the translation of those same Scriptures into the vernacular, or the language of the people. They also encouraged all believers to study and interpret the Scriptures, not just the priests.

Today, of course, we have the same love and commitment for the Scriptures. But we have no problems with using a translation in worship. In fact, we often will use different translations into English as we determine which one to use. And we also find a model which should encourage us to use developments in the study of the Bible, such as advances in Biblical criticism, Biblical languages, and an understanding of the culture, history of the world of the Scriptures.

C. These Baptists believed in congregational church government. The church had two officers - pastors or elders, and deacons and deaconesses. The roles of the deacons and deaconesses centered around service for the membership. Deaconesses were needed to minister to the female members of the church. Women in ministry was a shocker in the 17th century. American Baptists have moved beyond this and are leaders in appointing women to leadership positions.

One of the surprising aspects about FBC, Boulder is that you do not have a deaconate. This, of course, will not deem you to the lower regions, but it is interesting how you have responded to congregational polity by establishing a different approach to governance.

D. In my mind the most significant contribution of these Baptists is their courageous and unyielding call for freedom of conscience and religious liberty for all! For all! In a world of established state church's and selective toleration for nonconformist groups, these Baptists refused to accept the idea that toleration of diversity was the ideal. They insisted upon liberty, upon freedom - for every person.

These Baptists were radicals; they were revolutionaries. And they had the insight and the wisdom to conclude and believe that the best expression of genuine faith is a free faith. The deepest faith is not a result of birth, or coercion by church or state, or by compromise of one's convictions, but faith by people who come together voluntarily, based upon belief freely gained and principles freely practiced!

E. These Baptists responded to their understanding of their faith in light of their world by calling for change. They were not content to accept things simply the way that they were. They wanted a faith that was Biblical and relevant, that was meaningful in the early 1600s. They may have thought that they were going back to the good old days, and the good old faith. But actually they were calling for a radical change in many ways from what they had been taught and what was happening in their world.

There is a lesson for us today. We stand on the shoulders of these Baptists who appeared 400 years ago. We build upon their foundation. We stand on the shoulders of those Christians who organized in 1872 in Boulder, Colorado.

At the same time, none of us would want to go back to 1609, or 1972. In the para-phrased words of Bob Dylan, the times have always been a-changing. And they still are. If we are to be faithful to those who came before us, we cannot stand pat. We must constantly seek to find new and better ways to practice and share our faith. We must always remember that like those who came before us, we must be relevant in our time, not that of earlier generations.

What a great time to remember this lesson. First Baptist Church of Boulder will soon have a new beginning, a new leader, and a new opportunity. And, if we are attune to God's Spirit and our calling, we can move forward with a meaningful message. We can not only build upon the past but we can dream dreams and have visions, we can make these dreams come true and these visions a reality. Need I remind you of Martin Luther King, Jr., who had a dream. My goodness how we have seen Rev. King's dream explode into reality in our time!

Later on I will preach sermons on several of these topics and others, but for now, let us simply acknowledge them and commit ourselves to refining and living them.

Conclusion: So, besides singing a round chorus of "Happy Birthday" let us on this day commit ourselves anew to the foundations which have laid on our behalf by the Baptists and all of those who followed them. Let us remember that it sometimes takes courage and conviction to practice and authentic faith.

Let us look at ourselves in the mirror and see the faces of these first Baptists. Let us look into our community and our world, and with the echo of their faith imbedded in our minds and hearts, ask of ourselves what we can do in the name of God in the twenty-first century.

Let our response be reflected not in simply an attempt to preserve the past but rather in a commitment to be a ministering and mission people in a world that needs a prophetic and relevant witness to our God and our faith.