

400 YEARS OF BAPTISTS: BATTLES OVER THE BIBLE

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June 7, 2009

Text: 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 4:12

INTRODUCTION: Not all of you here today are Baptists. Most of you are, but some of you are simply Christians from some other group, and some of you may simply be "seekers" in the sense of wanting to worship God and to learn more about yourself and God. Some of you may even be "observers," people who like to take a good look at all of the options and approaches that are out there. Although my sermon is addressed to Baptists, I hope that all can benefit from it (a hope that applies to all of my sermons).

Today, I want to continue on the theme "400 Years of Baptists," since we are celebrating the 400th anniversary of our beginnings. We started about 400 years ago when a small congregation of exiles from England migrated to Amsterdam and reorganized their church upon the principle and practice of believer's baptism. I want to speak about Baptists and the Bible, and to do so from the perspective that we who are Baptists have spent a lot of time and energy in battles over the Bible.

Throughout Baptist history we have expressed an uncompromising commitment to the Scriptures. We have often been called the people of the Book. When asked a question related to God, man, our mission and ministry, theology, and ethics, we more often than not have responded by saying "What does the Bible say?" This simple answer conveys our commitment on the one hand, yet also reveals a rather shallow approach on the other. And so, when our interpretations vary, then we do *battle* with one another over the Bible.

The question is "*Why do we fight over the Bible?*" The answer is pretty simple. Baptists have throughout our history stressed the importance of being a free people, of each believer having the right and the responsibility to study, to interpret, and to apply the Scriptures to the lives of individuals and the life of the church. If we have and exercise such freedoms, then we are prone to disagree and to do battle at times.

Whether we realize it or not, we usually are influenced by someone else, someone who conveys authority when it comes to matters like the Bible. It might be a pastor, a Sunday School teacher, a friend, or someone that we don't even know.

We fight over words like inerrancy, infallibility, authoritative, reliable, or just the phrase "the Word of God." In our interpretations we have battled over free will and predestination, over the local church vs. the universal church, over missions and how to do missions, over church and state issues, over the role of women, over ethical issues such as dancing, slavery, social justice, etc. We will do battle over almost anything. And usually, we look for some Biblical proof-text to justify our position.

I. I will begin with a question - What do you believe about the Bible and why?

Introduction: The Bible (from the Greek word *biblos*, which translates "book") is composed of 66 books. Thirty-nine are in the Old Testament, which was written primarily in Hebrew, with a few parts in Aramaic. The New Testament contains 27 books, and was written in *Koine* (common) Greek. We as Baptists often fight over the original manuscripts, or autographs. But no original

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autographs or manuscripts exist that we know of. Therefore, copies of available texts must be compared to determine the most suitable Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible. These texts then must be translated into the languages of contemporary readers.

And because the meaning of words changes from generation to generation, we need to update our translations. And, we have fought over translations. All of us have stories about those who have defended the KJV to their last breath. A proper understanding of the work and the need of translations are always needed. Words and phrases change in terms of their meaning. So must our translations. For example, when I played basketball in junior college, if someone said that I was "bad," they meant that I was not a very good player. Today, if you say that a basketball player is "bad," you mean that he or she is one tough dude that you don't want to tangle with.

In the King James Version of 1 Peter 3, the author speaks of the "filthy conversation of the wives." We read that and imagine women running around shouting obscenities or four-letter words. But actually, the reference was to conduct, not speech. The meanings of words change, hence we need to continually be engaged in translating anew the Scripture in order for its message to be relevant and understood.

We as Baptists have fought over the meaning of inspiration. We all say we believe that the Bible was inspired. Or, were the writers inspired? And, just what do we mean when we say "inspired?"

Some use the term "Verbal Plenary" inspiration - they stress the inerrancy of the wording of the Scriptures in the original manuscripts. Some use the term "Dynamic" inspiration - they emphasize the message in terms of thought and the freedom, personality, language, style, and cultural environment of the writer.

We battle over context vs. proof-text, over selective literalism and selective ethics.

We debate Biblical principles vs. Baptist principles - do we have to choose? We do not, if we understand that the writers presented their messages in the context of their progressive view of God, a changing world, and the needs of the community of believers.

Paul when discussing the diversity of views toward eating food sacrificed to idols, a topic on which he spent three chapters in I Corinthians, And . . . whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." (I Cor 10:31) Or, when dealing with controversy over gifts of the Spirit, especially *glossalalia*, Paul wrote "But let all things be done decently and in order." (I Cor. 14:40)

What all of this means to me, at least, is that we are free to respond to a changing world by seeking through our Christian freedom to determine what brings glory to God and to do what we do peaceably and orderly.

We can be Biblical and Baptist only as we respond in faith and freedom to a living God in a changing world.

Conclusion: The Bible is important to those of us who are Baptists, and to all who call themselves Christians. On the one hand, we need to have a solid, stable view of the Bible as we seek to make it relevant to our lives and our world. At the same time, we need to be open to new understandings, new applications, new ideas that enable us to apply Biblical principles to a rapidly changing world. The Bible expresses life, energy, hope in the context of two and three millennia ago. And we must do more than simply regurgitate its message. We must interpret, we must apply, we must seek relevancy that makes sense in the 21st century.

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Fighting over the Bible may not be the negative that we assume that it is. It may be that our fights, our battles, our conflicts reflect a commitment to understand and live the Bible. It may be that in our wars over the Bible, we may be able to move toward a consensus on what it is saying to us, that we may be able to realize that Biblical principles might result in different forms, different programs, and different approaches in different communities. We may realize that we can all be committed to the Bible and yet have different views in our different worlds. In that regard, ladies and gentlemen, draw your swords.

Addendum: Thoughts on the contemporary debate in Baptist life over the Bible: The main issue is Biblical inerrancy. Several factors must be considered. First, the issue is not over acceptance or rejection of the Bible. The issue is over the Bible in the original manuscripts, not in what is now available. Second, most of the staunchest supporters of inerrancy recognize that there are some concerns with the available manuscripts. Therefore, the debate is over what one thinks about the original autographs. Third, the original manuscripts are missing. All that are extant are copies of copies of copies, etc., of manuscripts in the original languages. We don't have the originals, we probably never will have the originals, and most of us could not translate the originals if we had them.

Therefore, the relevant and primary issue is what do we as Baptists believe about what we do have more than what we don't have. The question is "Do Baptists accept the Bible as they have it as authoritative, do they study it and seek to understand it, and do they attempt to live by its teachings, minister and serve in light of its instructions, and apply its message to the contemporary world?"

The Bible as now available, including translations into numerous languages, always has been and always will be sufficient for our faith and practice.

Final observations: Some early Baptist confessions of faith reveal limited use of the term inerrancy. Infallibility was used in a Baptist confession for the first time in the Second London Confession of 1687. In this confession the Scriptures is described as the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience. The Second London confession also sees the Bible as containing all things necessary for his (God's) Glory, Mans Salvation, Faith and Life.

A study of other important confessions reveals that the emphasis on the Bible relates to salvation, conduct, and practice of the faith, not upon arguments over terms like inerrancy and infallibility, and especially as applying to issues related to science, history, math, and other matters.