

Turning Points in Baptist History

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In 2009, Baptists celebrated a huge 400th birthday party. Born in 1609, they began, as all infants, struggling to survive. Today, however, Baptists number 43 million people in more than 200 countries in every continent of the world. Hassled, heckled, and persecuted both in England and America in the seventeenth century, Baptists of the twenty-first century have become the largest Protestant denominational family in North America. Baptists have come a long way!

A diverse group from their beginning, Baptists express themselves today in such a variety of ways that many who claim the Baptist name will not claim others who claim the very same name! Baptists differ today—and they did from their beginning—in what they believe, how they worship, their attitudes toward other Christians, and their understanding of what is important in Christian discipleship. A history of four centuries of fragmentation and controversy has only compounded the complex appearance of the Baptist family. It is, therefore, impossible to speak of Baptists as a monolithic group. No single tradition or group of Baptists captures the enormous variety in Baptist life.

One can, however, identify some of the more prominent “convictional genes” of Baptists generally. One way of identifying these genes is to understand some of the pivotal turning points in the history of the Baptist people. The following discussion describes six such pivotal points which go a long way in characterizing many of the people called Baptists.

The Turn Toward a Believers’ Church: 1609

The Lutherans have Martin Luther. Presbyterians have John Calvin. Methodists have John Wesley. But whom

do Baptists have? In keeping with their description as a “common” people, Baptists appropriately trace their origin to an Englishman with the most common of names: John Smyth.

A clergyman of the Church of England and a graduate of Cambridge University, Smyth pioneered the Baptist tradition. Thomas Helwys, a wealthy layman, worked side by side with Smyth. Eventually, Helwys became even more important for later Baptists than Smyth.

Reared as Anglicans (Episcopalians), Smyth and Helwys, like many Christians in the early seventeenth century, wanted genuine reform in their church. Using the Bible as their guide, they sought to restore what they believed to be the biblical model of the church. They wanted to “purify” the Church of England, as did other Puritans, of all traces of Roman Catholic practices. So Smyth and Helwys were Anglicans who became Puritans. But they even went beyond Puritanism.

Some Puritans became so impatient with the church’s reforms that they “separated” from the Church of England, setting up independent congregations of believers. Smyth and Helwys became part of such a group of Separatists in Gainsborough, England, in 1606. These Separatists had three beliefs that shaped later Baptists:

1. The Bible, not church tradition or religious creeds, was their guide in all matters of faith and practice.
2. The church should be made up of believers only, not all people born into the local parishes.
3. The church should be governed by those local believers, not by church bishops.

Harassed and hounded by both the Church of England and the civil government for their beliefs, Smyth and Helwys, along with their small congregation of believers, sailed in 1607 to Holland to breathe the fresh air of religious freedom. There, Baptists met and were influenced by Anabaptists. While in Holland, Baptists experienced their first major turning point. In fact, the Baptist movement marks its beginning in Amsterdam.

In 1609, John Smyth performed a radical and scandalous act. He baptized himself by pouring water on his head! In turn, he baptized Helwys and others of the congregation. Smyth, Helwys, and their church came to believe that their infant baptism was no baptism at all. Why? Because, they said, it was performed by a false church, and it was performed on infants—people who could not believe.

Many people think that the single most important characteristic of Baptists is the way they baptize—by immersion. However, when Baptists began in the early seventeenth century, they were first concerned with *whom* rather than *how* they baptized. Baptists wanted churches made up of people who sincerely, deliberately, and freely affirmed Christ as the Lord of their lives. They wanted a Believers' Church.

The Separatists had also wanted a church made up of only “saints.” But they did so by retaining infant baptism. Smyth and Helwys left the Separatists and began the Baptist movement when they rejected infant baptism in 1609. They concluded that believer's baptism was the best way to guarantee a believers' church.

In the tradition initiated by Smyth and Helwys, only believers made up the churches. But for these Baptists, believers alone also governed the churches. Separatists had believed in congregational church government, but they often gave a superior role to the

clergy over the laity. Not Baptists! Each believer had an equal voice in the affairs of the church.

Likewise, each believer was looked upon as a minister within the church. Known as the universal ministry or the priesthood of all believers, Baptists utilized this concept to argue that the work of Christ belonged to all Christians, not merely the clergy. In Baptist life the “clergy” have a respected place but not a unique place, for all Christians are ministers.

The Turn Toward a Free Conscience: 1612

Religious fussing and fighting dominated the seventeenth century. Contention led to division. As Smyth and Helwys had separated first from the Anglicans, next the Puritans, then the Separatists, they finally ended by separating from each other. Why? Because Smyth eventually questioned the authenticity of his self-administered baptism since it had no succession with the larger Christian church. Helwys and a few others disagreed, thinking that succession of baptism was not necessary. They retained their newfound baptism, nurtured their small church fellowship, and courageously returned to England and established the first Baptist church on English soil in 1612.

The return of Thomas Helwys to his native England cost him his life. Just as John Smyth had the audacity to baptize himself, Helwys had the spunk to write a fiery little book on freedom of conscience in an era when freedom was scarce and individual conscience suppressed. Brashly, Helwys autographed a personal copy and sent it to, of all people, the king of England!

The publication in 1612 of Helwys' book, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, was the second turning point in Baptist history. Based upon Paul's phrase in 2 Thessalonians 2:7, Helwys interpreted “the mystery of iniquity” as the spirit of domination and oppression in matters of conscience that existed in his native land.

Lauded as the first full plea for religious freedom in the English language, Helwys' *Mystery of Iniquity* is surely one of the classics of Baptist history. It contains one of the most oft-quoted lines from Baptist history. Said Helwys: “For we do freely profess that our lord the

king has no more power over their consciences [Roman Catholics] than over ours, and that is none at all. For our lord the king is but an earthly king, and he has no authority as a king but in earthly causes. And if the king's people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all human laws made by the king, our lord the king can require no more. For men's religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it. Neither may the king be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure. This is made evident to our lord the king by the scriptures."¹ With such strong language, one is not surprised to discover that Helwys died in prison.

In this Baptist classic, Helwys moved in and out of several other themes related to the Baptist emphasis on freedom of conscience. Those themes included:

- the freedom of the local congregation to mind its own affairs
- the freedom of individuals to interpret Scripture
- the importance of believer's baptism and the freedom of the individual to choose that baptism
- the freedom of and the need for the churches of Jesus Christ to live from voluntary support of their members
- the freedom from coerced uniformity in worship practices
- the freedom of the churches to acknowledge Christ as the sole "king" of the church, rather than being bound by creed or clergy or civil government.

During the first half of the seventeenth century, Baptists in England peppered both royalty and religion with some of the first and most forceful tracts ever written on religious liberty. Baptists in America, especially Roger Williams and John Clarke, joined their English counterparts in this war on religious tyranny. Baptists led the parade for universal liberty of conscience. Thomas Helwys, Roger Williams, John Clarke, and a host of other Baptist leaders were the Baptist drum majors for freedom in the seventeenth century!

The Turn Toward Believer's Baptism by Immersion: 1641

The earliest Baptists, the Helwys group, came to be known as General Baptists. They believed that the death of Christ was effective for any and all people who claimed Christ as Lord. Another group, known as Particular Baptists, developed shortly after Helwys returned to England in 1612. Particular Baptists got their name from the fact that they believed the death of Christ on the cross was only for the predestined or elect. The Particular Baptists were Calvinists, while the General Baptists rejected Calvinism.

Whereas the General Baptists had affirmed believer's baptism, they had done so without practicing it by immersion. By 1641, however, the Particular Baptists of England took another momentous step regarding baptism. They began to practice believer's baptism by immersion. This is the third turning point in Baptist history.

Baptists began to practice believer's baptism by immersion for the same reason they had affirmed their belief in a believers' church and freedom of conscience. They thought the New Testament taught immersion as the form of baptism. Willing to be corrected from Scripture, early Baptists would not have any belief imposed upon them but that commanded by Christ. They said they would never go "against the least tittle of the truth of God, or against the light of our own consciences."² Baptists wanted to be free to follow their consciences in obeying Holy Scripture.

Following their reading of Scripture, especially Colossians 2:12 and Romans 6:4, Baptists concluded that the manner of believer's baptism should be by dipping the body into water, resembling death to self and resurrection to the Christian life. To this day, all Baptist churches practice believer's baptism by immersion, though some Baptist churches will accept Christians from other churches who have been baptized by other modes.

The Turn Toward Cooperative Christianity: 1707

Baptists from their beginnings cherished congregational church government. Often referred to in Baptist

life as the “autonomy” (self-rule) of the local church or as the “independence” of the local church, congregational church government simply meant that the congregation of believers was the final authority in determining the will of God in Baptist church life. No bishop or pastor or pope or conference of churches or civil government had a say-so over the religious affairs of a Baptist congregation.

A fourth major turning point for Baptists in America occurred in 1707. In that year, they formed the Philadelphia Baptist Association, the first major Baptist organization through which several local churches worked together without compromising their congregational independence. Baptists in England, both General and Particular, had organized associations as early as the 1640s.

With the formation of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, Baptists in America, therefore, affirmed their belief in both the interdependence as well as independence of local churches. Following the basic pattern of organization laid down by the Philadelphia Association, Baptist associations evolved all over America. Later, Baptists formed other Baptist organizations such as societies, state conventions, national conventions, the Baptist World Alliance, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and the Alliance of Baptists through which they cooperated and pooled their resources.

Baptists often vaguely defined the purposes of Baptist associations in such language as “to promote the interest of the Redeemer’s kingdom and the good of the common cause.” Usually, one could identify four main objectives of these non-local church Baptist organizations:

1. to promote fellowship among the churches
2. to affirm commonly held beliefs
3. to provide counsel and assistance to local churches
4. to establish a structure through which churches could cooperate in their broader ministries, such as theological education, publications, and mission work.

In terms of church government, Baptists viewed associations and other such Baptist organizations as autonomous bodies functioning in an advisory role for the churches. Baptists, however, have been far more interested in the freedom and independence of local churches than in extending the powers of associations and other denominational bodies. On the other hand, Baptists in America began stressing in 1707 the interdependence of the churches and denominational cooperation. Additionally, English Baptists, American Baptists, and several of the black Baptist groups in America have cooperated extensively with other Christian denominations in ecumenical activities. Christian cooperation does not begin and end with Baptists.

The Turn Toward Missionary Responsibility: 1792

During the 1700s, Baptists in both England and America profited from the spirit of revivalism that dominated much of that century. In England the Wesleyan revival led by Methodists John and Charles Wesley indirectly helped to revitalize the Calvinistic Particular Baptists and virtually resurrected the dying General Baptists.

George Whitefield, an associate of the Wesleys and maybe the greatest English preacher of the eighteenth century, toured America seven times, fanning the fires of revivalism begun under Jonathan Edwards. Baptists in America varied in their reactions to the emotional preaching of Whitefield; but when the revivalistic fires waned, Baptists had reaped as many benefits from revivalism as any denomination in America. No Christian has symbolized the continuing emphasis of revivalism as has evangelist Billy Graham, A Baptist.

While revivalism massaged a somewhat sagging Baptist denomination in the eighteenth century, global missions fired the Baptist spirit near the end of that century. Christian denominations at this time were not taking seriously the missionary mandate of the New Testament. But a poor shoe cobbler by the name of William Carey could not get Jesus’ words of “Go ye into all the world” off his heart and mind. Preaching, pleading, sometimes nagging, Carey urged Particular Baptists to “expect great things from God” and “attempt great things for God.”

As a result of Carey's influence, Baptists in England formed a missionary society in the town of Kettering on October 2, 1792. The purpose was simple: to take the gospel of Christ to people in distant lands. This is the fifth significant turning point in Baptist history. This act on the part of British Baptists revolutionized Baptist life and influenced much of the rest of Protestant Christianity toward missions.

William Carey sailed as a missionary to India in 1793, and there he devoted the rest of his life. His letters aroused the missionary ardor of Baptists in both England and America. By the end of the century, Baptists in America began organizing and contributing in support of foreign missions. In 1814, under Luther Rice's leadership, Baptists in America formed their first national convention whose sole purpose was to send missionaries overseas. Since the time of Carey and Rice, Baptists have been at the forefront of sharing the gospel and ministering in Christ's name through the world. A famous German Baptist, Johann Oncken, adopted as his motto: "Every Baptist a missionary."

The Turn Toward Social Justice: 1955

In 1955, a bright, young Baptist preacher in Montgomery, Alabama, led a bus boycott that turned into a national struggle for racial justice. Martin Luther King Jr., pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, symbolized the Baptist struggle for social justice as much as Billy Graham personified evangelism, William Carey embodied foreign missions, and Thomas Helwys and Roger Williams incarnated liberty of conscience.

One should not assume by any means, however, that all Baptists agreed with King. Many of King's white Baptist kinfolk, especially in the South, and some of his black Baptist brothers and sisters resisted his efforts and strategies to rid the nation of racial segregation. But as King moved the conscience of the nation, he also moved the hearts of many of his Baptist people. Arrested twenty-nine times for challenging the cultural status quo in America, he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. King, a victim of hatred, died of an assassin's bullet in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1968.

The Baptist concern for social justice reached its apex with King, but it did not begin with him. Even

his strategy of civil disobedience had been practiced by Baptists such as Isaac Backus in the struggle for religious justice in America years before King came on the Baptist scene. Also, Roger Williams and John Clarke served as prophets for justice in the seventeenth century.

Walter Rauschenbusch, a New York Baptist with a warm evangelical faith, was the father of the Social Gospel in America. Before he died in 1918, he had advocated, among other things, social reform of poverty and economic injustice based upon biblical and theological principles. Likewise, the Baptist World Alliance, founded in 1905, has put much of its energy and effort in the struggle for human rights around the world. No Baptist, however, has been the cheerleader for justice as was Martin Luther King Jr.

Conclusion

No Christian denomination is well served by thinking it is the only one God has. No denomination is well served by wallowing in delusions of its own righteousness while minimizing the values of other religious groups. Baptists, like other Christian groups, have suffered from those delusions periodically. We Baptists have our sins to confess. But Baptists also have some significant gifts to bring to the larger Christian table. Among those gifts are our struggle for a believers' church, our devotion to liberty of conscience, our desire for a baptism freely chosen and reflective of biblical teachings, our confession of both the independence and interdependence of local churches, our commitment to the missionary mandate, and our commitment, though checkered, to social justice. Upon these hinge issues, Baptist history has turned.



Notes & Questions for Discussion

Notes

1. Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of The Mystery of Iniquity*, edited with an introduction by Richard Groves (Macon, GA.: Mercer University Press, 1998), 53.
2. As cited in William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 149.

Questions for Discussion

1. Can one have a Believers' Church without the practice of baptism by immersion?
2. Does the act of baptizing young children threaten the concept of a believers' church?
3. How many non-resident members does your church have? What does that say about the struggle for a believers' church?
4. The Baptist emphasis on liberty of conscience has issued into the separation of church and state. At what points in American society are these twin Baptist emphases endangered?
5. What are the current dangers to the independence of local Baptist churches?
6. How can Baptists regain the missionary passion of William Carey?
7. How can Baptists continue the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. regarding racial justice?

Baptist Timeline

- 1609 The Turn Toward a Believers' Church
- 1612 The Turn Toward a Free Conscience
- 1641 The Turn Toward Believer's Baptism by Immersion
- 1707 The Turn Toward Cooperative Christianity
- 1792 The Turn Toward Missionary Responsibility
- 1955 The Turn Toward Social Justice
- 2009 Baptists Celebrate Their 400th Birthday

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