

Happy Birthday, Baptists!

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost Sunday

May 31, 2009

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Happy birthday, Baptists! To be 400 years old, you look pretty good, I must say! Most of you anyway!

Today we celebrate the 400th anniversary of the formation of the first identifiable Baptist congregation. In 1609 a group of men and women hungered for spiritual vitality. They cried foul when the king of England meddled in the affairs of their church. They insisted that every individual must be free to determine his or her own beliefs. They maintained that the freedom of the individual must not be hampered by the government, church creeds, or heavy-handed clergy. And they were willing to be beaten, imprisoned, and even die for that freedom. That group of men and women laid everything on the line in 1609, took a leap of faith, and started the first Baptist church. It is a story we need to know and celebrate. It is a history about which we may hold our heads high. We are Baptist. The older I get and the more I know of our heritage the more I believe that I am Baptist. Deep in the core of my being there is something that resonates with the spirit of those men and women in 1609. And today I want to re-tell our story.

It's hard for most of us to imagine what England was like in the early seventeenth century. From William the Conqueror to Henry VIII, some 500 years, England was Roman Catholic. It was the law of the land. If you were a citizen of England, you were a member of the Roman Catholic Church. By the sixteenth century, though, "England was a cauldron bubbling with revolutionary changes in economics, politics, and religion" (Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*, p. 22). The Protestant Reformation was in full swing. Reformers like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin were preaching a message that empowered the laity. That empowered laity was thrilled when Henry VIII separated from the Roman Catholic Church and started the Church of England. It was a dramatic move. However, this empowered laity said that Henry didn't go far enough. The church, they insisted, needed more reform, more spiritual renewal. These men and women who lifted voices of dissent came to be

known as the English Separatists. They believed that the Church of England would never become what they wanted, so they *separated* from it and started their own congregations, which was against the law. They met in secret, battled government authorities, endured beatings and prison until they couldn't stand it any longer.

Rev. John Smyth, ordained in the Church of England, became an outspoken, articulate Separatist clergy. One of his contemporaries called him “a learned man, and of good ability, but of an unsettled head” (Ibid, p. 33). Perhaps it was that latter quality that led him to move his congregation from England to Holland, where laws governing religion were much less strict. With the support of a key layman in the church, Thomas Helwys, Rev. Smyth convinced the entire congregation to move to Amsterdam. Once there, they decided to start over—completely! This is one of the great stories of our tradition. Here is a classic passage from our Baptist history. It describes the radical faithfulness that is the beginning point of our denomination:

Pastor and deacons laid down their office, the church disbanded or avowed itself no church, and all stood as private individuals, unbaptized. All being equal, Smyth proposed that Helwys their social leader should baptize them, but he deferred to his spiritual leader. Smyth baptized himself, then baptized Helwys and the others. The mode was apparently triune affusion, pouring water three times in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. The first Baptist church in the world was born with John Smyth's self-baptism. (Bill Leonard, Baptist Ways: A History, p. 25)

Isn't that a wonderful story? It's one we all need to know. As wonderful as the story is, it took an unfortunate turn. John Smyth did not remain a Baptist, and the new church did not stay in Amsterdam. Most of the church members moved back to England and started the first Baptist church in England. Nevertheless, a movement began with those people in 1609. By 1650—forty-one years later—there were at least forty-seven Baptist churches in England. There would be no stopping an empowered laity.

It was Roger Williams who took another leap of faith in 1630 and set sail for “ye wilderness,” as the American colonies were known. He too was ordained in the Church of England but became a strict Separatist. Williams

expected the churches of Boston and New England to welcome his Separatist teachings, but they did not. New England, he found, was almost as bad as old England. Nevertheless, he called for religious liberty and freedom of conscience. He challenged civil and ecclesiastical authorities. Finally, he was brought before a Boston court to answer for teachings that were found to be objectionable. Roger Williams was found guilty and driven into the New England wilderness. He lived that winter with the Native Americans, and had it not been for their friendship and care he likely would have died. In 1636, he and some friends ventured into the wilderness together, believing that they were led by the providence of Almighty God. They established a new community in a part of the country that eventually would be named Rhode Island. The community would be called Providence. There in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1639 Williams and others established the first Baptist church in the new world. A dear friend of mine is now pastor of the First Baptist Church of America in Providence, Rhode Island. Kelly, Clara and I visited that church a few years ago while on vacation.

The Baptist witness spread through New England, the Middle Colonies, and eventually made another leap of faith and pushed its way southward, first to South Carolina, to “Charles Town.” By 1672 historians believe Baptist services were held in Charleston, South Carolina. According to the web page of the First Baptist Church of Charleston, believed to be the first Baptist church in the south, a church much like ours, a group of Baptists from Boston moved south and started the church in 1682. Through its early years, the First Baptist Church of Charleston had some distinguished clergy: William Screven, who led them to erect their first meeting house; Oliver Hart, who introduced the use of a pulpit robe; Richard Furman, who became a leading citizen of Charleston and served that congregation for thirty-eight years. The first Baptist college in the South bears his name: Furman University. The form of worship we practice here at Weatherly is called “the Charleston Tradition.” It values an educated clergy, downplays excessive emotion, and prefers a sense of order. It comes from the First Baptist Church of Charleston, South Carolina.

Another worship tradition spread throughout the South is called “the Sandy Creek Tradition.” It is traced back to a church in Sandy Creek, North Carolina, and to two Baptist preachers: Shubal Sterns and Daniel Marshall. The Sandy Creek worship tradition did not prefer an educated clergy. Their services were characterized by extreme emotion. And they preferred ardor over order, Dr. Buddy Shurden says. That tradition spread across the Deep

South like wildfire. I grew up in the Sandy Creek Tradition, as did many of you.

One more leap of faith occurred in 1845. It was in Augusta, Georgia. Baptists in the North had grown uncomfortable with a particular practice of Baptists in the South—the owning of human slaves. Richard Furman, the prominent pastor of the First Baptist Church of Charleston, was one of the larger slaveholders in South Carolina. He wrote a detailed defense of slavery. He used logic and history, but the heart of his argument was the Bible. “The right of holding slaves,” he wrote, “is clearly established in the Holy Scriptures, both by precept and example” (McBeth, p. 384).

The Baptists in the South finally decided to break away from the brethren in the North. They met in May of 1845 at the First Baptist Church of Augusta. There they formed the Southern Baptist Convention. In a variety of settings over the past twenty years, our denomination has repented of its participation in human slavery.

And now four hundred years after it all started, we gather in a Baptist church to remember the good and the bad. We are a people not afraid to lay everything on the line and take a leap of faith. We are a people who will not tolerate someone else thinking for us or speaking for us or working out our salvation for us. We are men and women created by God and answerable to God. We believe that the Holy Spirit who fell on Pentecost and empowered the early disciples is still falling upon Baptists and others who faithfully listen for God’s leading.

So happy birthday, Baptists. I hope you join me in being proud to be a Baptist. Let us remember and be grateful for John Smyth, Roger Williams, Richard Furman, William Carey, Lottie Moon, Harold Shirely, David Burhans, Todd Wilson, Bert Carpenter, Earl and Francis Davis, Nancy Malone, Jerry Siniard, Bill Gerstlauer, Ray Elliott, Bill Heflin, Bruce Gilbert, Nancy Garrett, Bill Threlkeld, Opal Slay, Katie Davenport, Tom Foster, Beverly Cornelison, Bob Gunter and others who labored for the name Baptist. And now it’s our turn. Be an empowered congregation. Listen to the Holy Spirit’s leading in our day and time. It’s Pentecost Sunday again, and may we hunger for spiritual vitality.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we stand on the shoulders of giants, men and women who insisted that the human heart be free before you. May we too demand that freedom and use it responsibly. Amen.