

Living So that God Is Well Pleased
Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11

January 11, 2009
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A Moment in Baptist History

In Celebration of the 400th Anniversary of Baptists, 1609-2009

It's time for a celebration, an anniversary, or we might call it a birthday. And this is not just any anniversary. This year marks the 400th anniversary of the formation of the first Baptist church. Throughout this year we will be celebrating this important anniversary. In May and June, we will have some special services to commemorate it. Each month I will take a few minutes to remember an important moment in Baptist history.

This first moment takes us back to the beginning, to 1609 and to Amsterdam, Holland. A small group of dedicated Christians left their homeland of England, believing that the laws governing religion were too oppressive. They needed to be free to practice their faith as they believed God was leading. They believed that the human conscience and every expression of religion must be utterly free from coercion from the state and the church. If faith was not freely chosen and practiced, then it was not genuine. They found that freedom in Amsterdam.

The pastor of the church, John Smyth, had come to believe a most radical idea—that only believers should be baptized. The Church of England and the Catholic Church practiced infant baptism. Not only was that the law of the church; it was the law of the land. Pastor Smyth discussed the issue of believers baptism with the people. The people agreed and they decided to disband their church and start over. The pastor resigned. The deacons resigned. Everyone disavowed his or her baptism. They stood before God with no baptism or church membership. Then the pastor baptized himself as a believer. Then he baptized the other members, and they constituted what historians believe is the first identifiable Baptist church.

It was a start, a very rocky start. But the insistence upon freedom of conscience, voluntary religion, took hold and did not let go. They paid a dear price to form the name and practices of our church. This year we will remember them and celebrate 400 years of Baptist freedoms.

Sermon, Living So That God Is Well Pleased

There is a footnote to that wonderful story of Rev. John Smyth's self-baptism that we don't always tell. As you might imagine, the notion of self-baptism received enormous criticism from outsiders. One observer lamented, in modern English, "Tell me how you can baptize yourself into the Church when you are out of the church, and where there was no church." (Leonard, Bill, *Baptist Ways*, p. 25) John Smyth defended his actions by claiming that the true church had ceased and restarting it required a radical act, namely his self-baptism.

However, here's the part we don't always tell. Rev. Smyth grew restless and concerned about the validity of his self-baptism. He ended up leaving the Baptist church and renouncing his new baptism. Now that was the second baptism he renounced. He sought membership in the Mennonite Church, but before he was accepted he died. He died with no valid baptism and no church membership. It's a sad footnote in Baptist history.

As our name suggests, baptism was a big deal to our founders. They argued vehemently about the mode and timing of baptism. The watery war, they called it. However, some today argue—Dr. Glenn Hinson being one—that the real issue was not so much the act of baptism itself as it was the right to choose baptism for oneself. To choose baptism for oneself, of course, meant that you had to be old enough to request it personally—in other words no infant baptism—and free from government and church restraints. Glenn Hinson maintains that it was really about religious freedom. (*So Tell Me, Why Were Baptists Born, Anyway?*, Baptists Today, January 2009)

I can't help but wonder what Jesus intended. In our text for today he was baptized. Why? Certainly not to "wash away" his sins. And did he intend for all of us to be baptized too? I like the way the New Revised Standard Version identifies the man who baptized Jesus. It doesn't call him John the Baptist, as we're accustomed to calling him, as if Baptist was his last name. It correctly identifies him as John the baptizer, which is descriptive of his actions. His name was John, and he baptized people. And, of course, the most famous person he baptized was Jesus.

Mark, which was the first gospel written, places Jesus' baptism by John at the beginning of his gospel. No birth narrative. No wise men. No

Word become flesh. Mark opens with John and the baptism of Jesus. There is a theological reason for this, and I'll come to that in a moment. According to Mark, John was in the wilderness, a prophet-like figure, preaching that everyone needed to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. And Mark says that people from all over were going into the wilderness to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. I've always imagined the Jordan River as something like the Tennessee River or the Mississippi River, large and powerful. I was shocked last year when we visited it to see that it is more like the Flint River than the Tennessee River. While it is large in significance, it is not particularly large in size, according to our standards here in the southeastern United States.

Before John baptized the people, he told them to just wait. One was coming, he said, who was greater than he. This One was so great that John said that he wasn't even worthy to untie his sandals. That was a task so menial that a student was not required to remove his rabbi's sandals. One was coming, John was saying, who was so great that he was not even worthy to be his slave. I will baptize you with this water from the Jordan, he said, but this great One will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

Then it happened. Jesus too went into the wilderness seeking baptism by John. We Baptists get a little smug when we talk about this. It says, "just as [Jesus] was coming up out of the water," suggesting that their mode of baptism was immersion, like ours. Let's not be too prideful about that! A Presbyterian friend once told me that another example of immersion is when the Egyptian army was drowned in the Red Sea. More important than that is what Mark says next. When Jesus came up out of the water, "he saw the heavens torn apart..." I said earlier that there is a theological reason for the placement of the baptism at the beginning of Mark. When we turn to the end of Mark, to Jesus' crucifixion, we see the veil in the Temple torn apart. The heavens torn apart at his baptism and the veil in the Temple torn apart at his death are the bookends of Mark's gospel. Mark was doing all he could to say that in this man, baptized and crucified, God was available. God became known and accessible in the person and work of Jesus. Centuries earlier Isaiah longed, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence." (64:1) And God did. In the life and work of this man John didn't feel worthy to baptize, God was making God's self known and accessible. That's Mark's point.

Then something else important happened. The Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove. There is irony here. John said that Jesus would baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit. Here at Jesus' baptism the Holy Spirit descends upon him. It is God's confirmation. What John said is true. What Jesus will do is baptize with more than water. He will baptize people into the Spirit of the Almighty.

One more thing. The voice from heaven. The heavens are torn apart, the Spirit descends, and a voice from heaven declares, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." With that Jesus was baptized by John the baptizer in the Jordan River.

So why was Jesus baptized? It was confirmation here at the beginning of what would occur through to the end. This was his inauguration, so to speak. It was validation from God of the work he was beginning and to which he would be faithful to the end. His faithfulness to his mission earned him this blessing: "with you I am well pleased."

Isn't that what we too desire? That in our efforts, feeble though they may be at times, God would be well pleased? Wouldn't we all say that when we get to the end of our days that we would love to have that blessing: with you I am well pleased?

I'm indebted to one of our members who put me onto this story. You may have seen it on ABC news the day after Christmas. It's about a football team in Grapevine, Texas, that did an extraordinary thing. They were playing the Gainsville State School, which is a maximum-security prison for youth. The Gainsville State School had not won a game. They had only two touchdowns all year. They had plenty of players, kids with convictions for drugs, assaults, robberies, and other felony crimes. They never played a home game, and they had no fans. Most people, including their families, had given up on them. So no one ever showed up to cheer for them.

Here's what happened. The coach for the team from Grapevine, Kris Hogan, sent word to his fans and the parents that for this one game he wanted half of them to sit on the other side of the stadium and root for the other team. The fans and parents loved the idea. At the start of the game they made a 40-yard sprint line for the other team to run through. They made a banner for them to crash through. Over 200 fans sat on the other

side and pulled for the kids from the prison...by name. Parents were cheering for someone to tackle their own kid! Can you imagine?

The players from the state prison school couldn't believe it. They turned around, and there were hundreds of fans pulling for them. They even had cheerleaders.

Gainsville lost the game, but they scored two touchdowns that night. Granted the other team had in its third string, but still....

At the end of the game, both teams gathered in the middle of the field. A young man from the prison school named Isaiah—for obvious reasons they could use only first names—asked to say something. Coach Hogan said he had no idea what was going to happen. Isaiah bowed his head and said, "Lord, I don't know how this happened, so I don't know how to say thank You, but I never would've known there were so many people in the world that cared about us."

As the team went back to its bus under the watchful eyes of their guards each player was handed a bag for the ride home. It contained a hamburger, fries, a soft drink, some candy, a Bible and an encouraging letter from a player on the other team.

Another irony. Or maybe not. The other team was named Faith High School. (Story by Rick Reilly, ABC News web page, December 26, 2008)

I cannot speak for God, but I cannot help but think that God would see that game and say, "Well pleased."

Our baptisms start us on a journey of living so that God is well pleased. I don't care to argue with anyone about mode of baptism or timing of baptism. I hope we're past that. Here's what I think Jesus intended. He intended that we would come to a point in our lives when we would say, "I want to live like that. I want to live like that man named Jesus." Baptism then is our inauguration into that way of life—where God is well pleased. Have you begun it?

Closing Prayer

Lord, our hearts are warmed when we see examples of grace in action.
So live in each of us that we *are* examples of grace in action. Amen.