

TOWARDS A NEW VISION OF BEING BAPTIST: A NORTH AMERICAN STATEMENT.

Baptists have never quite known how to deal with history. Although in common with most people a sense of origins is important to many of us, we have little vision for history in our theology. Time and tradition are not accorded the active role that is found in some other ecclesiologies. Indeed Baptists will often proclaim their desire to leap across time to an Apostolic era of supposed freshness, innocence and clear purpose.

Yet like it or not history has a habit of dealing with us. On the one hand we cannot escape the ambivalence of our past. The story of our churches is a decidedly mixed tale. Whatever individual emphasis one wants to claim as the key to the Baptist genius, it will be found to be ignored or even actively denied by some groups or in some periods. Perhaps more importantly Baptists, like all communities, are directly affected by the change which inevitably comes with the passage of time. Our distinctive messages must be re-stated, re-packaged, sometimes even abandoned as the surrounding conditions alter. An example is the issue of freedom of conscience. In the seventeenth century Baptists were at the forefront of those who rejected religious oppression by state authorities. In particular the right of the congregation to choose its own minister and to determine the limits of its own fellowship were affirmed. This was always a plea for freedom from outside interference. But time marches on and now, at least in the democratic West, this demand has been met. Ironically, as the victory has

been won, the usefulness of political religious freedom as a defining theme of Baptist life has declined. A similar fate has attached to believers' baptism itself. Once a radical act of civil disobedience it is now regarded from outside as a quaint variation, though one which carries faint connotations of spiritual arrogance. We now need a fresh sense of baptism's meaning and significance.

Mixed messages and the oxygen of change - Baptists in every generation have to take history seriously. We must both own the truths of our heritage and respond creatively to new environments. Thankfully the first challenge informs and enables the second. The very ambiguity of our past gives permission for creativity in the face of the future. To be responsive, to return to first principles over and over again, to reinvent ourselves in the awkward space between Gospel and constantly evolving culture - perhaps that is what it is to be truly "Baptist".

This task is always urgent because it is relentlessly necessary. If Baptists are to survive in New Zealand we must address it with vigour. We are not alone. The statement which follows is the recent attempt of a group of North American Baptists to describe a vision for being Baptist in the new millennium. As such it properly reflects their context. As its authors concede, the statement is not perfect. There is room, for instance, for a more specifically eschatological framework for understanding the sacraments. Nevertheless, its rigorous attention to the biblical witness is welcome and the theological questions it raises are fundamental and worthy of wide debate. It is printed by permission.

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