

# **The Baptists as a Global Faith Community**

It is with great pleasure that I can stand before you representing a Baptist congregation virtually on the other side of the world and yet partake of the fellowship that results from being part of a global community. The spiritual tie that binds us together is one of joy and love and mutual appreciation for what our risen Lord and Saviour has done by giving us eternal life through faith in him. But there is also a historical tie. The features that distinguish us as Baptists from other Christian communions are the result of our common roots.

We can give thanks to God that the numbers of our fellow believers around the world are growing, in some places exponentially. According to the 2000 figures on the Baptist World Alliance website, 201 Baptist conventions and unions from countries on all six continents now belong to our cooperative organization. This comprises 165,264 congregations with 44,077,715 baptized members. Just how accurate these figures are, I cannot judge. But if one includes the children of members and those who attend but have not formally joined, the total of Baptists worldwide may be as high as one hundred million.

By profession I am an academic historian and I have spent my entire adult life working in this field, either as a student or teacher at tertiary institutions. Although I was not trained as a church historian or as a specialist in Baptist history, from the beginning of my career I have been interested in the history of Christianity and have devoted a considerable amount of my attention to this area. As a Baptist, I naturally was curious

about the backgrounds of my own church and so I easily gravitated toward Baptist history. However, I will not concentrate on some narrow aspect of my research, but rather on two broader themes of Baptist history.

### **The World Wide Interest in Baptist History**

The first topic I will address is the growing interest among Baptists throughout the world in learning about their history, preserving the documentary records of their past, and engaging in research into their origins and historical development. Often times, this takes place within an individual congregation, particularly when a major anniversary occurs, and an individual or a group of people is delegated to write a commemorative historical work about the body. However, the increasing number of Baptist historical societies, such as the New Zealand Baptist Research and Historical Society, which celebrated its fiftieth anniversary a year and a half ago, reflects the larger corporate interest within the community with respect to learning about our past.

Let me address this salutary development and offer some comments about Baptist study and research enterprises. I happen to be a member of the Board of Managers of the American Baptist Historical Society, founded in Philadelphia in 1853 and now headquartered at the American Baptist Churches USA building in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. As far as I know, this was the first distinctively denominational historical society anywhere. The next oldest society in the U.S. is the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, founded in 1875. The Baptist Historical Society in Britain was founded in 1908, the first such body in Europe. In 1938 the Southern Baptist Historical Society was formed, which became an independent corporative entity after a denominational reorganization in 1995. In 2001 it changed its name to the Baptist History and Heritage Society as that better reflected its broad range of

interest. There are also some state societies in the American South, in addition to the already mentioned Virginia one, most notably in Alabama, Georgia, and Texas; the Whitsett Historical Society aligned with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship; and the Seventh Day Baptist Historical Society.

Elsewhere is the society here in New Zealand, a South African society, a Strict Baptist society in the U.K., and across the Tasman Sea, state organizations in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, and Western Australia. Since I am currently engaged in a project to locate and identify Baptist historical societies, I see this list merely as indicative of what is out there. It should not be considered as exhaustive.

Besides educating their constituencies about their histories through lectures and publications, most of the societies maintain libraries and archival collections of Baptist materials, and some publish journals as well. The ABHS manages the American Baptist-Samuel Colgate Library in Rochester, New York, the largest Baptist historical collection in the United States, as well as the archives of the American Baptist Churches. The Southern Baptist Historical Library in Nashville, formerly under the SBC Historical Commission but since 1995 under the aegis of the Council of Seminary Presidents, is the second largest Baptist library in the U.S.

Other important North American collections include the Canadian Baptist Archives at McMaster University in Ontario, the Center for Baptist Heritage and Studies and Virginia Baptist Historical Society in Richmond, the Mercer University Center for Baptist Studies in Macon, Georgia, and Program in Baptist Studies at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. The Baylor group inaugurated a web site, [BaptistHeritage.com](http://BaptistHeritage.com), that provides resources for the study of Baptist history, principles, and traditions, while the Mercer group has initiated a very informative and free on-line *Baptist Studies Bulletin*. Two widely circulated historical journals, the *American Baptist*

*Quarterly* and *Baptist History and Heritage*, are sponsored by the ABHS and BHHS respectively.

In Britain the Centre for Baptist History and Heritage is at Regent's Park College in Oxford. Here is housed the Angus Library, the largest Baptist collection in Europe, the Oxford Hypertext Project for Baptist and Anabaptist Resources that is making major Baptist works available electronically, and the editorial offices of the historical journal *The Baptist Quarterly*. Its editor, Professor John Briggs, has just assumed the directorship of the Centre. At the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague is a chair in Baptist and Anabaptist Studies, and in 2001 they launched the *Journal of European Baptist Studies*. A large and quite significant body of material dealing with Baptist work on the continent is in the Oncken Archive at the German Baptist Theological Seminary in Elstal near Berlin. Some of the smaller European Baptist unions have archival holdings at their headquarters or theological seminaries.

Concerned with helping its constituent bodies to preserve their historical records and communicate their histories to their members, the Baptist World Alliance in 1985 created the Baptist Heritage and Identity Commission. The appointments to this body have been made on a global basis, and it links veteran scholars together with new people just beginning their work. To assist in communication among the various groups a web site was created, managed by David Parker in Brisbane and assisted by Geoff Pound in Melbourne. Parker himself demonstrated the great potentiality of a web-based finding aid with his 'National Guide to Australian Baptist Historical Resources and Services' (1999).

The commission has published a number of works that encourage the preservation of historical materials and inform people of Baptist scholarship going on in various parts of the world. Eljee Bentley's *Manual for Developing a Baptist*

*Archives* has been put on the Heritage and Identity Commission site and may be downloaded. This work is a practical and very useful resource for those wishing to set up a congregational or even denominational archive. Somewhat dated is the *International Directory of Baptist Archives/Libraries* which the late Lynn May prepared for the commission in 1990. Still, one-quarter of the 85 archives and libraries listed in there are in non-Western countries. Another work even more in need of revision is the *Bibliography of Selected Histories of BWA Member Bodies in Countries Other than USA*, produced in 1992. There is a keen awareness among the commission members, of which I am one, that we need to do a whole lot more about telling the story of Baptists outside the heartland of Great Britain and North America.

One attempt at broadening the understanding of Baptist history has been the International Conferences on Baptist Studies which David Bebbington and Bill Leonard organized at Regent's Park College in Oxford in 1997 and Wake Forest Divinity School in North Carolina, U.S.A. in 2000. These meetings have brought together Baptist scholars from a number of different countries. The papers of the first meeting have been published as *The Gospel in the World* (Paternoster, 2002), and the second one in *Baptist History and Heritage* during 2001. The third conference is scheduled for July 2003 at the Baptist seminary in Prague.

A noteworthy step in that direction was the publication of Albert W. Wardin's *Baptists Around the World* by Broadman Press (Nashville) in 1995. It is the most comprehensive listing of Baptist bodies ever put together. It includes historical descriptions of the groups as well as membership statistics and bibliographical information. In an effort to minimize bias, Wardin invited representatives of the various bodies included to prepare the accounts of their groups. But as one might expect, many of those ignored his request, thus necessitating

him to write a number of the essays himself. An interesting feature of the book is that the various bodies are listed by countries, and in turn the countries are placed in alphabetical order by continents. This is in contrast to the traditional surveys of Baptist history, including such recent ones as Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1973), and H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), that focus heavily on Britain and the United States. Baptist endeavours outside the heartland, particularly ones in regions where significant white settlement occurred, are subsumed under such rubrics as 'British Dominion Baptists' (Torbet) or 'British Baptists' (McBeth) and works elsewhere are treated under the category of missionary work. It would be much better for the textbook surveys to acknowledge that each of the former British possessions has its own unique varieties of Baptist witness. A new history, which Bill Leonard of Wake Forest University is writing for Judson Press, will help to rectify this situation.

The unfortunate reality is that we tend all too much to look at the stories of the churches in Africa, Asia, the Pacific Islands, and Latin America from the standpoint of the history of missions rather than from the perspectives of the people directly involved. This is not to denigrate the work of the missionaries; they were the important first step in the process. But what often was an imbalance will be corrected as the indigenous Christians themselves gather and sift through the historical materials of their own experiences. Sensitive expatriates can help, for example, the books by Frederick S. Downs, *Christianity in North East India: Historical Perspectives* (Delhi: Indian SPCK, 1983) and Herman G. Tegenfeldt, *A Century of Growth: the Kachin Baptist Church of Burma* (South Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1974), but in

the long run the Christians on the scene will have to tell their own story.

Perhaps the most worthy attempt to rectify the deficiency in our knowledge of Baptist history in the Two-Thirds world was made by the Southern Baptist missiologist and historian, Justice C. Anderson. He spent many years in Latin America, mainly as a teacher at the International Baptist Seminary in Buenos Aires, and closed out his career as director of the World Missions Center at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. He wrote an excellent three volume history of the Baptists, with the first two volumes covering the standard themes of Western Baptist history, but more importantly the third one deals with Baptist beginnings and expansion in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Unfortunately, the book is in Spanish, but he said to me that the third volume is going to be translated.

### **Why should we be so interested in Baptist history?**

My second topic is that of why should we want to know about our heritage. I would suggest three good reasons for such a concern. First, it helps us as Baptists to keep focused on the traditions we cherish. One is the emphasis on believer's baptism. We believe this is the biblical form of baptism and this was that which was practiced in the early church. We remember the opposition that established churches had to this, because for them baptism was a sacrament that conferred grace upon the recipient. We do not see it as a sacrament but an action commanded by Christ, that symbolizes his death, burial, and resurrection. By participating in the rite of baptism by immersion we confess our faith before the watching world. We proclaim that we have been raised to new life through our faith in Christ.

Even more, this was the initiatory or introductory rite into the Christian commonwealth, the political community that corresponded with the Christian community. So to refuse baptism was a political as well as a religious act, and for this unwillingness to conform our forebears were persecuted. They were revolutionaries, something which people today, who are bastions of the status quo in our societies, do not realize. Baptists once were once a rebellious bunch and defied the state's demands on them. One recalls the story from the history of the German Baptists in the nineteenth century when children were actually forcibly taken from their homes and brought to the local Lutheran church for baptism, or the Baptist preacher Obadiah Holmes who was publicly flogged in Boston by the Massachusetts Bay Colony authorities for unauthorized preaching.

Moreover, Baptists upheld the freedom of every believer to interpret Scripture for himself or herself. They did not submit to the authority of artificially imposed creeds or of religious figures who said they were speaking in the name of God. Instead, they placed themselves under the discipline of the Word of God, and like the Bereans of Paul's time they examined the Scriptures to determine what was being said was true or not. In colonial Virginia Baptists were jailed for preaching the Scripture as they knew it, in defiance of the church that had defined what the truth was. This belief, inelegantly labelled by some American Baptists 'soul freedom' or 'soul competency', was not, however, a situation where the individual did as he or she saw fit, or as Judges 21:25 put it: 'The people did what was right in their own eyes'. Baptists had to test their views by the Scriptures, and others in the community could challenge them to demonstrate that their teachings were scriptural. If the teaching was shown to be false, they either had to repent or they could be expelled from the community.



Baptists also upheld the principle of congregational church government. If practiced properly, authority was diffused. The community chose the minister and he (or today she) was responsible to it. The pastor was to lead his sheep, not fleece them. He was to be their servant, not their lord. The congregation could expel those whose beliefs or lifestyles were not in accordance with biblical norms. A Baptist congregation was to be a democracy, comprised of godly people who sought God's leading. This, of course, was not always the case, and our history often revealed what happened to churches that were led by authoritarian preachers who tyrannized their members. They usually turned out to be ineffective bodies, whose evangelistic zeal flagged and divisions led to fragmentation and even a congregation's demise.

Our final distinctive was the emphasis upon separation of church and state. We learned from the Anabaptists that the church and state can never be one and the same. They are concerned with two different realms. The state is ordained to keep order so that we may all be able to live peaceably with one another. Where we differed from the Anabaptists was in our conviction that individual Christians can serve the state, that participation in political life can be as much of a calling as any other vocation, including that of the pastoral ministry.

However, we do not feel that the church can take the state captive for God and make it into a 'Christian' state. This is not the calling of the church. The early Baptists were outsiders in this regard. They would respect the king, but they knew his limitations. When he started to meddle in spiritual affairs, they responded with a firm 'NO' and some, such as Thomas Helwys, suffered imprisonment and even martyrdom for refusing to submit to the illicit demands of the ruler.

On the other hand, we did not look to the state to carry out the duties of the church - proclaiming the gospel and upholding standards of morality that we felt were 'Christian' and should

be imposed upon all members of the public community. We wanted a religiously 'neutral' state, one that allowed us to carry on our duties as Christians without compulsion or prohibition. History teaches us that when we turn from our responsibility to proclaim the gospel message and seek power in the political order to reshape the society as we would wish it to be, we get into trouble spiritually. This is especially revealed in the United States, where in some places today Baptists have virtually become an 'established' church, and their efforts to impose their values on the entire society and to elect people to public office who share their view have the result of the church being held up to ridicule. A biblical people should cause offence by preaching the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ, not a 'political gospel.'

We can also learn from history of the dangers we incur when we look to the state to support our institutions. Somehow there are Baptists who feel that they can look to the government for help but yet avoid the controls that come with this. Unfortunately, it does not work that way. The late W. A. Criswell, pastor of the influential First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, was dead wrong when he said in an interview on a national television news program in September 1984 that 'separation of church and state is the figment of an infidel's imagination.' In reality, it is one of the most precious doctrines of our faith, but like Esau who sold his birthright for a bowl of lentil stew, so Criswell bartered away his Baptist birthright for the approval of Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party and the possibility of being able to impose his moral and political beliefs on the United States. He was unable to do so and in the process compromised his position as a preacher of the gospel.

The second reason for studying our history is to assure that our faith is properly grounded in the culture. It is important for us as Baptists to be indigenised, to be a part of the social scene in which we exist. We should not seek to be carbon copies of

Baptists elsewhere and slavishly imitate methodologies that work in other situations. If we are to witness within our social context, then we will have to adapt to the conditions about us. The missiologists call this 'contextualization' and it is vital to delivering an effective witness. This means that our music, words, worship styles, and behaviour toward others must be rooted in the culture where we find ourselves. By knowing our history, we can understand the distinctive qualities of the faith as it is expressed within our particular environment, and not feel inferior to Baptists in other places who outwardly seem to be more 'successful' than we.

The third reason for studying our history is the flip side of point two. By looking at the history of Baptist communities in various parts of the world, we discover the oneness as a people of Christ. It helps us to avoid falling into the trap of ethnocentrism - that our way is the only way and our people are the only ones God cares about. We learn just how interconnected we are. Each of us has something to teach the other about how we can be more faithful in the service of Christ. Missionary work then becomes not a movement of cultural imperialism but that of sharing the gospel with other people who are just like us, but living in different contexts. We discover that we are all sinners in need of redemption. Although we manifest our Christian faith in different ways, underneath it all we are all the same.

The bottom line is that we are a global faith community. Some of us may feel, rightly or wrongly that we are more advanced in our understanding of the implications of the gospel than others are, and thus we have a responsibility to minister to them. Or we have the technological means at our disposal to achieve things in communicating the Word of God that would have been inconceivable only a short time ago. But this gives us no grounds for boasting. Very often we find that the people

we regard as 'backward' have had unique experiences with God that they can share with us and enrich our spiritual lives.

Because of our door to the past, we Baptist historians have a good opportunity to appreciate the differences that exist in our global community. Let us continue our efforts to understand who we are and to help our sisters and brothers elsewhere to do likewise. We are engaged in an exciting and rewarding endeavour where we affirm one another even as we honor our distinctives. The Baptist faith is a rich mosaic and we historians can play our part in helping to construct it - to the greater glory of our God and Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Richard Pierard**