

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer

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Happy 400th, Baptists! Now What?

Romans 6: 1-5

If only Henry VIII and his wife Catherine of Aragon had been able to produce a male heir that survived infancy, then perhaps Henry would not have petitioned the Pope for an annulment of his marriage to Catherine. If Pope Clement VII had not been beholden to Charles V, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire army – and maybe if Charles V had not been Catherine's nephew -- the Pope might have granted Henry's request anyway.

Maybe if Henry had received his divorce, he would not have felt it necessary to initiate a new church movement,

the Anglican (Episcopal) movement, and without that opening some Christians in England wouldn't have seen an opportunity to purify the church and start a movement known as Puritanism.

If there had been no Puritans, perhaps a smaller group of English Christians wouldn't have felt compelled to say No, the church is too corrupt to purify, genuine Christians have to separate from it.

Had there been no Separatists, perhaps there would have been no Baptists.

But as events played out, there was a young man educated at Cambridge to become an Episcopal minister, who, upon his graduation was elected as town preacher for the town of Lincoln,

though the town magistrates could tell that he might be a troublemaker, for the vote to approve was 8-7.

Within two years he would be fired from his job, for his sermons were deemed too disturbing, a point the young minister might have conceded, because his views were evolving in a direction at variance with the established church.

The young minister joined a congregation that was large enough to break into two groups, both of which made history.

One of the groups went to Holland briefly, then returned to England to board a ship known as the Mayflower, landing at Plymouth Rock.

The other group, led by that young man, whose name was John Smyth, also went to Holland, and set up residence there.

John Smyth became convinced that a genuine believer must be baptized as a willing believer, of his or her own volition,

not as an infant, so he baptized himself, then baptized a group of about eighty people.

The first Baptist church in history was formed.

The year was 1609. Happy 400th Birthday, Baptists!

In truth, Baptists did not give themselves the name "Baptists."

It was attached as a derogatory term -- but that is another sermon entirely.

These people knew they were not Catholics; they knew they were not Anglicans, they knew they were not Puritans;

knew they were not Separatists. They knew they were something else.

They formed out of obedience to the call of that something.

In so doing they established a theme that has been a hallmark of Baptists throughout our heritage, an emphasis on liberty, liberty of conscience. Liberty of conscience!

John Smyth, that first Baptist minister, didn't remain a Baptist very long, soon becoming a Mennonite – soon to be followed by the bulk of the eighty people within that small group.

But a remnant of about twenty people decided to remain separate from the rest, led by Thomas Helwys.

Even knowing that they would face persecution, these Baptists headed back to England,

where Thomas Helwys penned the first plea for complete religious liberty in the English language. Helwys wrote:

“The King is a mortal man and not God; therefore he hath no power of the immortal souls of his subjects to make laws and ordinance for them . . .”

For those brave words, Thomas Helwys died in the King’s prison.

But the theme of liberty of conscience became a principle for which Baptists were willing to die.

Think about the first Baptist preacher in America, Roger Williams.

Even as Thomas Helwys was the first English writer calling for complete religious liberty, Williams and other Baptists were founding the small state of Rhode Island, the first political entity in the New World to offer complete religious liberty.

The first Baptists were unconcerned with doctrinal purity.

They invited anyone and everyone to come within their state’s borders, promising them freedom to believe what they wanted to believe without any government coercion. Liberty of conscience!

Throughout colonial history, Baptists preferred to be flogged and imprisoned rather than pay taxes to a state church

they did not attend. Once the American colonies emerged as an independent nation,

Baptists were in the forefront of the movement to lobby the early American government

to amend the American Constitution with a Bill of Rights that among other things guaranteed freedom of religious affiliation. Liberty of conscience has been a theme for which Baptists have lived and died.

Second, in their collective core of values Baptists have insisted on *liberty of conviction*.

As Baptists we believe that every believer performs a ministerial function.

We believe that every believer has been endowed by God with the power and competency of soul to make ultimate decisions of the spirit for him/herself.

Listen to me carefully: as a spiritual leader I can attempt to guide you,

but whether you are a nine year-old who has just made a profession of faith in Christ,

or a eighty-nine year-old who has been a Christian for over seventy years,

each of you has been endowed by God with the freedom, privilege and responsibility to identify the spiritual principles by which you will govern your life.

Liberty of conviction has been a part of our identity from our very inception.

Third, Baptists have also been distinguished in history by their emphasis on *liberty of confession*.

The great Baptist thinker Walter Rauschenbusch said years ago:

“The Christian faith as Baptists hold it sets *spiritual experience* boldly to the front as the one great thing in religion.”

For Baptists, spiritual experience is the one great thing in religion!

What are the implications of this belief?

To join this church, or any Baptist church, you will not be asked to recite a creed.

You will not be asked to give assent to a particular doctrine.

You will not be asked to agree with a particular interpretation of a Bible verse.

You will not be asked to affirm a particular view of Biblical inspiration.

All that will be asked of you is, “Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?”

All that matters for membership in a Baptist church is, “Is your experience of God authentic and genuine?”

Your experience of God can be as dramatic as the Apostle Paul’s on the road to Damascus

or it may be as subtle as Elijah listening to God’s still small voice.

All that matters is that your experience is a genuine encounter with God; no one can judge its authenticity.

No one automatically belongs to a Baptist church.

You belong to a Baptist church when you join it voluntarily and experientially.

That is what it means to exercise liberty of confession.

Finally, Baptists have been distinguished by their *insistence on liberty of community*.

When John Smyth and a few friends formed that first Baptist church four hundred years ago, they did not ask any ecclesiastical hierarchy for permission to do so.

When Roger Williams and a few friends formed that first Baptist church in the New World less than thirty years later, they did not ask any ecclesiastical hierarchy's authority for permission, they just did it. This insistence of liberty of community has remained a distinctive Baptist hallmark. In my capacity as the Director of Missions for the United Baptist Association I received a call a few years ago from some man in Texas saying that he had received funds from the Southern Baptist Convention to start Cowboy Baptist churches throughout the great cities of America, and he wanted me to do research on starting a "Cowboy Church" in Charlotte.

I said, "Can you run that one by me one more time?"

He said, "I'm looking to start a church for cowboys in the Charlotte area."

I said, "Sir, we don't have any cowboys in Charlotte. What we have in Charlotte are bankers."

(This was back in the day when we had bankers in Charlotte.)

"Besides," I told him, "none of the churches in our association are affiliated with the SBC, so you'll need to call the other association instead." I hung up the phone and laughed. One more crazy moment in another crazy day.

But two years later, I was riding way out Albemarle Road, and I passed a dilapidated building near an open field and saw a sign that said, "The Cowboy Baptist Church Meets Here. Everyone welcome."

I thought, "That is the genius of Baptists."

Individual churches may or may not be flexible.

Individual associations may or may not be flexible.

But Baptists enjoy the liberty of community to create churches in response to the needs of people, to respond to the needs of the market.

If we want to create a church for bankers or lawyers, or cowboys, or bikers, Baptists are freed to do it.

Liberty of conscience; liberty of conviction; liberty of confession; liberty of community – these are the themes of our Baptist heritage. These are the rich principles for which people have shed their blood.

We can look upon great Baptist saints of the past and know they have lived these themes with courage, creativity and heroism.

We should not look upon our heritage as a dry and dull thing, for our past is suffused at certain moments with divine light.

Yet I am aware that even as Baptists celebrate their 400th birthday and look forward, there are many aspects of the Baptist name that conjure up connotations neither pleasant or positive.

Baptists must now ask ourselves, "Where to from here?"

Some years ago a young man in the north Atlanta area decided he wanted to start a church.

He rented a school, created a team to distribute flyers, hired a band, assembled a core nucleus of believers, and started a fellowship in a populous section of town. Within a short period of time that church had several hundred members, and soon its numbers swelled to a thousand.

Interestingly, when they named their fellowship they labeled themselves a "Community Church."

Here's the irony: that young man's name was Andy Stanley,

whose own father was former Southern Baptist Convention president Charles Stanley.

When he was asked why he didn't put "Baptist" in the name, he said that the Baptist name was freighted with too much bad baggage. Baptists, he said, resonated with too many negative connotations.

Jimmy Carter made a similar observation just a few months ago.

He noted that people around the world do not associate Baptists with terms like "harmony," "peace," and "cooperation."

Rather, he noted, Baptists emanate an "image of division." He said Baptists are marked by words like "animosity," and "argument," and they present a "negative image of Christianity." Those are strong words.

When my daughter Clara was just a young girl, someone asked her if she was a Southern Baptist, and she answered with a precision honed from living in a ministerial household.

“No,” she answered, “I am a Baptist who lives in the South.”
Clearly the name “Baptist” has become a freighted word.

Indeed, the current state of Baptist life today is sufficiently confused as to create some delicious ironies. While I was on sabbatical I worshipped in churches where young people were attending, and I visited one church

whose theme for the month was classic Christian doctrine, which they combined with classic rock.

I happened to have lunch with the pastor and asked him how they came to be started and he said, “We got started with funds from the North Carolina Baptist State Convention.” I had to laugh.

I was thinking of little Providence Baptist Church in Hendersonville, which is part of our association.

The North Carolina State Baptist Convention would not give any funds to Providence Baptist because they had called a woman minister.

But Providence Baptist in Hendersonville was singing “Amazing Grace” on Sunday morning, while this other church was singing songs by “The Who,”

yet Providence Baptist in Hendersonville was considered outside the Baptist fold, while this other church was considered on the inside.

Obviously, some strange litmus tests have been devised of late to determine who is a Baptist in good standing and who is not.

I think of the Oklahoma Baptist who called me some years ago to ask

“Good buddy, I hear you have an open associate minister position at your church.” I admitted that we did.

“Wa’ll, good buddy, how many deacons do you have?” Forty eight, I replied.

“Wa’ll good buddy, I don’t suppose any of those deacons are women?”

I said, “You’d have to ask our chair of deacons, Margaret Almond that question.”

“Wa’ll, good buddy,” the man said abruptly, “I’ll be getting back to you.” But I knew he wouldn’t.

He was part of the creeping creedalism that has come to characterize Baptist life and stands in opposition to and abrogation of the principles of liberty by which Baptists have been defined.

So, where do Baptists go from here?”

I offer a couple of suggestions.

First, I would suggest that as Baptists move into their fifth century, we need to, as the phrase goes, “bark less and wag more.” Bark less, wag more!

I mean by that we have a public persona as a contentious and querulous people, and this persona has undermined and marred our articulation of the Christian Gospel.

We must once again become a people of liberty.

We need to become less concerned with righteousness and more concerned with gracious inclusion.

We need to become more concerned with saying to people, you can come into our church and work out your salvation with fear and trembling, and we will not try to coerce your conscience.

We as Baptists must once again become a people who emphasize liberty.

And we as Baptists must emanate a spirit of cooperation with and openness to other Christians.

In an era where denominational labels mean less and less,

we must strive to be more Christian as we seek to embody our Baptist principles.

We need to strive to emanate a spirit of cooperation rather than opposition to other Christian groups.

But even more importantly, Baptists must recover our heritage as a people of spiritual experience.

Two great tributaries primarily formed the Baptist identity.

One of them was the Regular Baptist tradition.

These people were Calvinists, semi-Presbyterians, who shaped much of our early identity.

They were known as Regular Baptists because they were regular in worship.

They valued education, form, decorum, and tradition.

But they were not the Baptists responsible for the explosion of Baptists throughout the South, and, then throughout the country.

No, that honor fell to the so-called Separate Baptists, who were not nearly as polished as the Regular Baptists, but they were experiential. They were enthusiastic in their faith – and they brought the Gospel home to people where they lived.

They turned theology from an abstract concept into an active force in people's everyday lives.

We must recapture that experiential aspect of our faith heritage.

We must make our faith once again an active force that penetrates the heart, invigorates the mind and enlivens the soul.

Our faith must become a real and viable force that touches people where they live.

Our worship, our service, our study must have an experiential component that makes the Spirit of God a real and active force and presence in people's lives.

We must become a people once again who live with an awareness of what Paul means when he says that "in God we live and move and have our being."

A Charlotte church recently made *Time Magazine* because their pastor encouraged those attending to Twitter their friends as they listened to the Easter sermon.

I can't ask you to do something that I don't even know how to do!

But I realize that that church was underscoring the fact that faith in the modern world has to be participatory and experiential.

Liberty of conscience.

Liberty of conviction.

Liberty of confession.

Liberty of community.

These are the great themes that have shaped Baptist life for four hundred years.

How we live these themes in the next century,

in an era when every religious denomination is examining its core values and identity, is the challenge that faces Baptists in this very moment.

Happy Birthday, Baptists. Happy 400th birthday!

May you enjoy many, many more.

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