

# **HISTORY SPEAKS**

## **To Hard Questions Baptists Ask**

The year 2009 is the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Baptist tradition. To help celebrate this big year, the Baptist History and Heritage Society has created a new 24-article series, HISTORY SPEAKS. Readers of these articles are urged to print copies for themselves and even to duplicate copies for distribution and study. Please include the following permission statement: “Used by permission of the Baptist History and Heritage Society and its website ([www.baptisthistory.org](http://www.baptisthistory.org)), Atlanta, Georgia. Because the articles are produced by free-thinking Baptists, the BH&HS staff and board may or may not agree with the content of each article.”

### **The Baptist Name: What Does It Mean?**

**Charles W. Deweese**

In the 1600s, Baptists acquired their name through their practice of believer’s baptism by immersion. That practice directly countered the heart and soul of the state churches in England and Colonial America that demanded infant baptism. Thus, those state churches severely persecuted Baptist dissidents. Baptists did not stroll into human history as some innocuous faith alternative; rather, they marched straight into the jails of the 1600s defending religious liberty for all people. Continuing defenses of believer’s baptism and religious liberty make the Baptist name a respectable model of faith for today.

The Baptist name, in its largest and most meaningful sense, depicts a movement, not a denomination. Denominations, with varied structures and theologies, come and go and constantly change. The Baptist movement, based on biblical values, has surged through four centuries of history, has risen above crises and controversies, and will exert itself as a viable option for expressing the Christian faith in the twenty-first century.

The Baptist name, at its best, represents a powerful set of values for the Baptist movement:

- Baptists stand for solid affirmation of the Lordship of Christ.
- They view the Bible as Baptists’ sole written authority.
- They defend religious liberty and the separation of church and state.
- They insist on the baptism of believers only.
- They stand for a regenerate church membership.
- They emphasize the priesthood of every individual believer.
- They support dissent and nonconformity when necessary.
- They ring the bells of liberty for the oppressed.
- They offer democratic possibilities for the tyrannized.
- They sound out justice against violence.
- They offer peace for those weary of war.
- They call for integrity against the invasions of secularism.
- They engage in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue.
- They urge voluntary ministry and missions by all.

- They highlight trust as a hallmark of Christian identity.
- They recognize that the church and/or the state can be as wrong as an individual in decision-making and that individuals should never sell their souls to any institution or organization; they are responsible to God alone.

But let's not kid ourselves. Today, the Baptist name, including the content and relevance of the Baptist story, faces serious challenges on many fronts. Seven selected examples include:

- (1) Fundamentalism, with its doctrinal rigidity, exclusive spirit, and opposition to the ordination of women to pastoral ministry
- (2) The perceived irrelevance of Baptists by a postmodern, post-denominational generation
- (3) The removal by many churches of the word "Baptist" from their church names
- (4) Controversies and splits in Baptist ranks that make Baptists look petty in the public eye and that have resulted in dozens of varieties of Baptists
- (5) The growth of mega-churches that feature surges of pastoral authority and declines in congregational church government
- (6) The corruption of academic freedom in theological education
- (7) The failure of pastors and educational ministers to emphasize Baptist heritage and contributions.

Have some individuals and organizations forfeited the right to call themselves Baptists, particularly those who have attacked the separation of church and state, minimized the priesthood of all believers, escalated the control of pastors, converted voluntary confessions of faith into forced creeds, and excluded women from key ministry positions? Without question, such individuals and institutions have twisted Baptists' 400-year-old links of freedom into a growing chain of bondage for some Baptists.

Does the Baptist name still have meaning, and will it continue to have meaning in the future? Contrary to all challenges and in spite of the apparent forfeiture of the name by some, the Baptist name has more potential meaning today than ever. The biblical and historical traditions that lie behind and support the name hold enormous potential for providing life-changing experiences for people who will fully engage Baptist history and values.

Conceived in a spirit of sacrifice and determination to represent the spirit of Christ, the Baptist name stuck. Today, that name has increasing global dimensions and possibilities. The Baptist name and movement have much to offer the future of humanity—in open and constructive relationship with other expressions of the Christian faith and even other religions.

*Charles W. Deweese is executive director, Baptist History and Heritage Society, Atlanta, Georgia.*