

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.

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Ecumenical/Interfaith Dialogue and Ministry: Are Baptists Ready for the Excitement?

John M. Finley

In the four centuries since the founding of their first congregation, Baptists have experienced both negative and positive relationships with other Christians and other world religions. Arising in the aftermath of the English Reformation, early Baptists were opposed to many beliefs and practices of Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and even Puritan believers. With respect to Jews, Baptists were often as prejudiced as their European contemporaries, while at the same time largely isolated from other religions and uninterested in them. Many such negative attitudes passed to the New World.

Still, evidence suggests that early Baptists enjoyed positive interactions with Anabaptists on the European continent and with other English Separatists like the Quakers. In the Rhode Island colony, Roger Williams's grand experiment produced a climate of religious freedom in which Baptist congregations flourished alongside other churches and also alongside the second oldest Jewish synagogue in America. Later, in cities as well as rural areas of the new republic, Baptists practiced a limited ecumenism with certain Protestants, notably Methodists and Presbyterians, and shared frontier revivals, fifth-Sunday worship services, and the ministry of clergy. Many such positive attitudes continued throughout the nineteenth century.

A number of factors in the twentieth century encouraged additional ecumenical and interfaith good will. Baptists in the American South gradually began to move away from the bias against other denominations that had been popularized by theological Landmarkism, and some Baptists began to take seriously the high priestly prayer of Jesus "that they may all be one" (John 17:21). Military service and a mobile society placed many Baptist laypersons in close contact with members of different churches and faiths, often for the first time. Baptist clergy benefited from broadened attitudes by way of theological education. The number of ecumenical and interfaith marriages increased dramatically. In the second half of the century, Baptists worldwide noted recent conflicts in Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East—many of them fueled

by ethnic and religious hatred—and sought greater understanding among people of differing religious traditions.

Yet, one of the most important factors in Baptists' enlarging vision for ecumenical and interfaith relationships resulted, ironically, from the decision by Pope John XXIII to convene an ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church. Held in 1962-65, Vatican Council II produced important statements on the Catholic Church's desire to participate in ecumenical efforts and to improve relations with non-Christians. The Council prompted a series of dialogues around the world. Several Baptist groups participated in these conversations, some of which continue today. Similar work continues through the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches, Christian Churches Together in the USA, the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies, the World Council of Churches, the Baptist World Alliance, and other groups.

As important as this larger stage may have been, much of the growing Baptist involvement in ecumenism and interfaith work has typically occurred at the local level. Baptists have forged relationships with other Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, and Muslims by working alongside them in homeless shelters, soup kitchens, mentoring programs, and other social ministries. Following 9/11, many Baptist churches expressed an interest in other world religions, inviting Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist persons to engage in dialogue or to participate in interfaith worship. All such conversations have given Baptists the chance to explain their heritage to other Christians and non-Christians alike and to view their own tradition through the eyes of others. Baptists have discovered that while they have much to learn from other churches and faiths, they also have much to offer.

At the heart of these developing ecumenical relationships is the recognition that all Christians belong to the one body of Jesus Christ in the world, and that the witness of the universal church requires unity among all Christians. With respect to persons of different faiths, there is the recognition that every human being is created in the image of God and that our common future may well be determined by our ability to live peaceably with persons whose faith commitments differ from our own.

The editor of this series of articles asks if Baptists are ready for the excitement of ecumenical and interfaith relationships. The current landscape suggests that many not only are ready, but they are running toward it with arms wide open.

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