

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), 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."

Baptists and the Internet: Are Baptists in Touch or Out of Touch?

Bruce Gourley

The early Baptists embraced a powerful narrative that would ultimately rearrange civilizations and tip the scales of world power: freedom of conscience in a democratic society. Since Constantine's leadership in the fourth century, state and church elites had controlled society, denying both power and voice to everyday citizens. By the seventeenth century, led by Roger Williams, the Rhode Island colony granted freedom of conscience to all citizens, placing government in the hands of the people. In 1776, America adopted Williams's freedom model.

Central to the Baptist advocacy for freedom of conscience and democracy was confidence that the Baptist faith could fend for itself in the marketplace of ideas. Williams, Isaac Backus, and John Leland, Baptist leaders of yesteryear, led the way in these ideals, laying a foundation enabling tremendous Baptist growth following the American Revolution. From the seventeenth century into the twentieth, Baptists swam tirelessly in the currents of faith and culture, first as prophets, then as the establishment.

Yet the waning decades of the twentieth century witnessed new, dangerous undercurrents in faith and culture. Products of fundamentalism, a new stream of religious thought, Baptists like Jerry Falwell departed their faith heritage, championing orthodoxy over soul freedom and Christian nationalism over democracy. Soon, Baptists were fighting for the survival of institutional machinery, historical memory, and religious language and imagery.

In the meantime, a new chapter in the story of human communication began in 1994 when a company called Netscape introduced the "Web browser." Designed for personal computers, the Web browser allowed communication worldwide through a "graphical user interface" (GUI), thus making the "World Wide Web" public domain. Today, the "Internet" is part of our daily life via the Web. We communicate through email. We access information via our cell phones. We download music onto our iPods. We check bank balances online. From news dissemination to social interaction to entertainment to commerce and science, the Internet is now viewed as indispensable.

Where do Baptists fit in the Internet age? Let me suggest we return to the marketplace of ideas championed by Williams, Backus, and Leland. Concepts and ideas, including that of religion, are now traded in the financial marketplace via the Internet, in the buying and selling of search phrases. The "sponsored listings" that are displayed in a search engine query are

purchased on the open market, a market available to any entity or individual. The open (auction-style) market determines the value of any given search phrase, including those religious in nature. Among religious “sponsored listings,” the search phrase “Judaism” commands the highest price, costing the advertiser \$.66 to \$.99 each time an Internet user clicks on the ad. “Methodist” follows closely at \$.67 to \$.96, while “Baptist” runs \$.63 to \$.91 and “Presbyterian,” \$.63 to \$.89. “Catholic” (\$.58 to \$.77), “Atheist” (\$.37 to \$.52), and “Islam” (\$.32 to \$.44) are relative bargains. In short, religion in the twenty-first century is (among other things) a commodity, with some religious ideas and concepts deemed more valuable (dollar wise) than others.

From the digital financial marketplace in which advertisers quantifiably value religion, we turn to the broader marketplace of online searches. About 10 million searches monthly focus on Catholics, compared to about 4.5 million searches related each to Baptists, Methodists, and Muslims. Presbyterians, Jews, and Atheists each garner less than 2 million monthly searches.

These measurements offer a glimpse into religious interests among “wired” American citizens. But what faces are Baptists presenting from within the Internet? The online world places organizations and individuals on a fairly level playing field. Within the digital religious realm, programming skills and technological savvy, rather than money or professionalism, frequently determine the popularity of a given Web site. A search for terms such as “baptist history,” “baptist heritage,” “baptist theology,” “baptist news,” “baptist studies,” and “baptist beliefs” returns a juxtaposition of individuals, churches, and organizations; academia and grassroots; and clergy and laity. Taken together, the diversity of Baptist voices is revolutionary in terms of accessibility, confusing to the uninformed, and constantly evolving. Separating the wheat from the chaff is a challenge requiring diligence.

Effective Baptist church and organizational Web sites serve as marketing and communication tools and maintain visibility in search engines. Yet a site represents only a partial utilization of the Internet. Churches and organizations should also utilize other aspects of the Internet, such as email, text messaging, file sharing, online video, and social networking (Facebook, for example), musts for communicating with and among younger generations.

In short, today’s Baptists face the challenge of voicing their faith heritage and identity in new, evolving ways. In order to rise to the occasion, Baptists must firmly engage the digital marketplace of ideas, bringing collective and individual wisdom, past and present, to the forefront in an information-centric society.

Note: Statistics noted are based on January 2009 data from one search engine, and only apply to Americans’ usage of the Internet.

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