

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 Globalism: What are Baptists' New Frontiers?

Bill J. Leonard

Baptist globalism is nothing new. It began when William Carey and his family landed in India in 1793, sent by the Baptist Missionary Society. For the first time in its almost 200-year history, the insular Baptist movement took the gospel outside Britain and North America. In a sense, the technology of travel paved the way for a global identity and a change in the prevailing Calvinism of the day. The movement spread, and the formation of the Baptist World Alliance in 1905 was clear evidence of Baptists' global identity.

By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, however, a new globalism took shape, impacting Baptists and everyone else, evident in worldwide economics, the Internet, increased international travel, cell phones, the fall of the Soviet Union, the rise of the European Union, and the industrialization of countries such as China, India, Vietnam, and Brazil. For Christians, short-term missionary experience, enhanced by air travel, sent people onto "foreign fields" where they had never been before, linking local congregations in "partnerships" alongside or outside older denominational connections. Likewise, many of the so-called "mission churches" have become the missionizers, sending a new generation of "witnesses" around the globe. Thus, as denominational resources decline and organizational systems redefine themselves, new international networks of churches and individuals are taking shape in ways that influence Baptist theology and practice.

This new globalism is important for several reasons:

- It forces Baptists to recognize their theological and practical diversity as never before. For example, what similarities and differences do Baptists in Japan share with Baptists in Africa or North America? How is Baptist identity shaped by its minority status in most countries of the world? (The United States is the exception.)
- Globalism compels Baptists to confront religious pluralism as never before, revisiting their earliest views on religious liberty and the role of conscience and uncoerced faith.

- A burgeoning non-denominationalism worldwide requires Baptists to reexamine their own historic identity in new and immediate ways. What does it mean to be Baptist in a world where “brand name” religion is often increasingly minimized, overlooked or completely dismissed?

- How can Baptists assert the uniqueness of their commitment to Jesus Christ and their own approach to scripture and tradition while developing honest and respectful ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, an essential element of the new globalism?

- Will the current global economic crisis turn around soon or will it deepen? If it deepens, Baptists like other churches and communities will face rising need amid declining ministry support. In fact, economic realities may force Baptists to rethink the way they “do church,” utilize facilities, organize for mission, and respond to human need.

Given those realities, how might Baptist history and tradition inform the new globalism? A few brief suggestions must suffice.

First, the Baptist commitment to congregational autonomy and localism means that Baptist churches may attract people who are drawn to particular faith communities even if they are wary of national or global denominational or churchly affiliations. Local congregations are free to pursue ministry in ways that engage persons in ministry before they ever look at the name on the door.

Second, Baptists’ historic views on the nature of religious freedom are as insightful now as when first articulated in the seventeenth century. Indeed, the early Baptists conceived a response to pluralism that allowed for unashamed assertion of their Christian convictions while affirming radical religious liberty for the heretic and atheist alike.

Third, early Baptists’ concern to balance individual faith with churchly community opens the door to new global partnerships between groups of Baptists who wish to do ministry together, even when they do not agree on what it means to be Baptist!

Finally, the historic emphasis on the partnership of clergy and laity in common ministry should shape Baptist concern for “voice” and vocation worldwide. Voice means that all Baptists must speak from their consciences and demand the right to present the gospel as they perceive it, even when differences occur. Vocation means that the church is called to help all people, male and female, old and young, clergy and laity, discover their calling, the source of their identity in the world. For Baptists that sense of identity and service is grounded in Jesus Christ, a calling that turns us outward on the needs of the globe, not inward on ourselves. Jesus personified such a vision. At their best, Baptists must mirror that calling in the world, whatever century they may occupy.

Bill J. Leonard is Dean and Professor of Church History, The School of Divinity, Wake Forest University, Wake Forest, North Carolina.