

# **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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### **Baptists and Immigration: Are We Welcoming Strangers in the Gates?**

**William M. Tillman, Jr.**

In his article, "Cowboys and Immigrants," Lance Morrow contended that two dueling archetypes dominated twentieth-century American politics: Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis and the Ellis Island promise.<sup>1</sup> Morrow claimed that the frontier thesis found projection through the presidencies of Teddy Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and George W. Bush. The Ellis Island promise found prominence under presidents like Franklin Delano Roosevelt, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson.

Each of these archetypal dynamics found expression through Baptist life. The literal American frontier was populated by Baptists who were both "plowman and preachers," depending on the day of the week. Preceding the American colonization, John Smyth and Thomas Helwys pressed against the frontiers of the mind and the state-established church. As Smyth and Helwys attempted to perpetuate their part of the Separatist movement, they relocated to Amsterdam, in effect becoming immigrants and theological refugees.

In these early settings, Baptists were among the social minorities and tended to act as those who were the new faces: immigrants and emigrants. Their emphases upon the individual conscience before God provided an inclusive, not exclusive, dynamic for faith practice in daily life and on days of worship.

As Baptists moved into more majoritarian positions in the American culture, their views on immigration moved in more exclusivistic directions. Baptists in the American South pulled away from the Triennial Convention over whether a slave owner could be appointed a missionary. Slavery, if one has not considered it as such, is forced immigration.

In the twentieth century, the changing tide of political platforms in the former Confederate states resulted in developments such as "The New Frontier," "The Great Society," and the Civil Rights Movement. Despite these advances, rejection of people from African-American ancestry continued. In recent years, some inclusion has been made, but segregation is still alive and well.

Recent decades have brought a new face and surge to immigration. Wars, poor economic systems, natural disasters, the search for quality education, and the quest for a place to expand opportunity bring persons from around the globe to the United States. One particular area of

controversy is the border between Mexico and the United States where illegal crossings are out of proportion to other kinds of immigration.

Response to any of these immigrations has been mixed from Baptists, depending upon whether they are Baptists who hold the frontier theory of American culture or the Ellis Island position. The frontier theory-driven Baptists can perceive immigrants as threats to the American economy and security, while the Ellis Island theorists are more accepting and are finding ways to work with the givens of immigration. One model of such action is ISAACS (Immigration Service and Aid Center).<sup>2</sup> The program is the product of joint efforts of the Baptist General Convention of Texas's Christian Life Commission and Buckner International. The intent of the program is to provide timely, legal perspectives to churches and individuals regarding immigration policies. ISAACS also offers literacy and life skills guidance for churches to provide as educational ministries to immigrants.

In addition, Baptist missionaries around the globe have found themselves able to do some of their best work with refugees and immigrants. CBF field personnel Bob and Janice Newell and Arville and Sheila Earl minister with Albanian refugees in Greece. They work within the majority culture and find ways to help these minority people adapt through a welcoming context, demonstrating a contemporary missions model appropriate for Baptists to implement.

Lauren Brewer, a student at Logsdon Seminary has found her mission field in Abilene, Texas. She represents the growing edge of students who are concerned about social injustices and particularly find that working with immigrants resides on the cutting edge of Baptist missions and ministry. Brewer works with an agency that assists the transition of refugees—for instance, from war-torn African countries—in language skills and more.

Are Baptists welcoming strangers at our gates? Yes and no. Exclusivism and xenophobia are alive and well among Baptists. Yet, signs of greeting the stranger are emerging and growing.

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<sup>1</sup> Lance Morrow, "Cowboys and Immigrants," *Smithsonian*, vol. 40, no. 2 (May 2009): 84-93.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bgct.org/texasbaptists/Page.aspx?pid=1292>, accessed June 24, 2009.