

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 Family: What is Going on in Baptist Life?

Lawrence H. Williams

First, it is necessary to define what is meant by "Baptists" and "family." According to H. W. Pipkin, the name "Baptist" came from a mode of baptism practiced by "the free church communion" and distinguished this group from those practicing infant baptism.

Seventeenth-century English Baptists were similar to dissenting Puritans in terms of faith, except in the mode of baptism. Based on New Testament scripture, they contended that believer's baptism was required, along with immersion, as the proper mode. Earlier in Switzerland, a group had been already labeled Anabaptists, meaning "rebaptizers." Their position had led to persecution because children who had been baptized as infants were declared to be unsaved.¹

According to Bill J. Leonard, the term Baptist covers the spectrum from "Calvinism to Arminianism, liberal to conservative to fundamentalist." The first congregation in Amsterdam placed an emphasis upon "free will, general atonement and human participation" in the process of salvation and the "understanding of the faith."²

In other words, any understanding of the word Baptist is extremely broad, with an emphasis on believer's baptism, extreme local church polity, and the Bible as the final authority.

The word "family" is subject to broad definition as well. The family is "a fundamental social group in society typically consisting of parents and their offsprings."³ Some scholars, such as William H. Brackney, have used the term "Baptist family" to discuss various Baptist groups that have developed over the years, and to distinguish them from groups that have split from Baptists. Harvey Cox makes us mindful of the fact that any search for the ideal modern family, in the context of the Bible, also would fall short. In the Old Testament of the patriarchs, polygamy is practiced; the family included concubines and slaves. In the gospel of Mark, when questioned about his family, Jesus replied, "they who do the will of my father in heaven are the same." Neither does the Apostle Paul take a clear position.⁴

With Brackney's definition of Baptist family in mind, by 1984 in the United States alone scholars identified 52 distinct Baptist groups, with a total membership of over 30 million, making Baptists the largest "denominational family" in North America.⁵

Likewise, foreign mission work has increased the meaning of “Baptist family” by pushing it to the international level. In 1905, the Baptist World Alliance was founded in London, England. Its primary purposes were to maintain religious liberty and to spread Baptist principles and tenets throughout the world. Usually the Baptist World Congress met every five years. The BWA includes 136 bodies in 94 nations, along with 126,000 churches and over 32 million members.⁶ Baptist groups span the world. Initially, Western missionaries attempted to teach in accordance to Western standards. However, the lifting of the veil of colonialism, especially in some third-world countries, has caused indigenous practices in relation to family to fill the vacuum. For example, Osadolor Imasogie has noted the problem of biblical interpretation between indigenous Africans and Western missionaries. Africans believed the Bible to be literally true, and missionaries believed it to be filled with metaphors and parables. Stemming from their belief in the Enlightenment, some foreign missionaries believed in the god of science.⁷

With loose conventional and associational polity at work in the United States, the Baptist foreign mission enterprise, in its essence, has caused the ties that bind Baptists together internationally to be loose as well.

Thus, there is no final word in relation to “Baptists and the family.” In part, it depends upon the group and its place on the Baptist spectrum. The American family, in particular, is in trouble, with a high divorce rate, single parent families, teen pregnancies, illegitimacy, absent fathers and mothers, to name only a few. In a nation in which separation of church and state is paramount, these family problems impact every aspect of American life, including the religious sector. Lastly, extreme local polity, as practiced by Baptists, is a blessing and a curse. When an issue does not set well with a certain group, that group has always had the option to leave and form another church. Over the years, a number of Baptists have exercised this option.

Lawrence H. Williams is professor of African studies at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa.

¹H.W. Pipkin in Bill J. Leonard, *Dictionary of Baptists in America* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 44. Also see William H. Brackney, *Baptists In North America* (Malden, MA.: Blackwell Publishing, 2006),

1.

² Leonard, 3.

³ *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 3rd Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993), 493.

⁴ Harvey Cox, *The Seduction of the Spirit: The Use and Misuse of People's Religion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 227-230.

⁵ Leonard, 44.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷ Osadolor Imasogie, quoted in Lawrence H. Williams, “Evangelical Challenges Facing Indigenous African Christians: Rejection and Accommodation,” *Currents in Theology and Mission*, February 2002, Vol. 29, pp. 25-26. Also see Phillip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).