

Scripture: Galatians 5, John 8

At the same time the Pilgrims went to Holland to be free of Anglican and British control of their worship, a man named John Smyth also went to Holland. John Smyth did not join the Pilgrims, but he was trained in the Separatist and Puritan ideas of the day. Smyth was heavily influenced by the Mennonites, who were also in Holland as refugees from Germany. Mennonites, who were, and are, what are known as Anabaptists, believed in only adult baptism. This idea made sense to John Smyth and he incorporated those ideas into his Puritan understandings. In 1612, the first Baptist church was established in London by some of John Smyth's followers. Then, as today, the defining characteristic of the Baptist movement was simple: adult baptism by confession of faith, and separation of the church from the state.

One of the people who came to ascribe to this way of thinking was Roger Williams, who came to America with the Pilgrims in 1620. Roger Williams was trained at Cambridge University as well and was an extremely knowledgeable, wise, and personable man. He was, however, very much his own man. He was very popular in the Massachusetts Bay Colony (MBC) and when his ideas about baptism and the church became well-known, he caught the attention of the Puritan leaders of the MBC. There is some historical suggestion, but no direct proof, that one of the people who influenced Roger Williams was the wonderfully colorful and highly intelligent Anne Hutchinson.

Because of Williams' radical ideas and associations, he ran sideways of the Puritans in MBC. Williams was set to be deported by the authorities, but Williams had friends in the Wampanoag Indians. This was another reason Williams ran afoul of the governing body of the MBC – he was an outspoken opponent of the way the native peoples were being treated by the new colony. So instead of being deported, the Wampanoags gave Williams sanctuary near Narragansett Bay.

Eventually, Williams bought the land from the Wampanoag tribe and established Rhode Island as a new colony.

Williams took seriously our reading from Galatians: *“For freedom, Christ has set us free”*. So, he set up RI with that in mind. Freedom of belief and lack of imposition from the state were the foundations of the Rhode Island colony. Citizenship was not dependent on religious belief in Rhode Island, which became a foundational idea in the Constitution 150 years later. Quakers, renegade Puritans like Anne Hutchinson, Anabaptists, Jews, and of course, Baptists all found a welcome home in Rhode Island without interference from the governing body of Rhode Island.

When Roger Williams was setting up Rhode Island, he considered himself a Baptist. His very good friend John Clarke was a Baptist minister in England and Williams brought him over and together, they established the first Baptist church in America in 1639.

There is some argument about this in the historical record, but Williams is the better story, so I am going with this one.

What is important for us today is understanding the simple foundation of the Baptist movement – adult baptism and separation from the state.

The Baptists spread very quickly, just like the Congregationalists, except they spread more in the South than in the North.

WORSHIP

Baptists share many of the concerns of the early Congregationalists, and one of those concerns was freedom. Like the Congregationalists, and all our Protestant brothers and sisters, the first authority for faith for the Baptist movement is Scripture. It is perhaps more appropriate to say, Scripture was and is the only authority for Baptists. In Scripture, of course, we discover Jesus, and there Jesus says, “The truth shall set you free” (John 8). That freedom extends to all aspects of our life – family, community, government, church, and worship.

Because the primary focus of the Baptists is adult baptism, and because they are highly decentralized, much like Congregationalists, there is great freedom in a Baptist church as to how to worship. A Baptist service is often very scaled down to the simplest elements – prayer, hymns and preaching. The Lord’s Supper is at the discretion of the deacons and minister, and so is done whenever they decide to do it. Since baptism is a symbolic expression of one’s confession of faith, a similar sensibility moves over to communion as well – it is a symbolic remembrance of Christ’s Last Supper, and nothing more. But again, it depends on the church.

THEOLOGY

It is not really fair to speak of a single Baptist theology. Rather there are Baptist theologies, and the only element that links those theologies is the idea of adult baptism. Like Congregationalists, the early Baptists placed a very high value on education and having an educated pastor in their church.

Baptists are fond of systematic theologies, following the model of John Calvin, and so there are many deep, dense, and profound systematic theologies written by Baptist theologians.

For reasons I don’t fully understand, Baptists do not deal well with holding multiple perspectives in one church. As a result, there are over 90 different Baptist associations world-wide, and probably more. The largest Baptist association in the world is the Southern Baptist Convention, which numbers almost 16 million people in America. The only denomination with more adherents is the Catholic Church. But after the Southern Baptist Convention, there are many other associations.

Very generally, they break out like this:

You have your **General Baptists**, who believe that Christ's sacrifice and salvation is meant for all people. Whomsoever attests to faith in Christ and is baptized in his name is saved.

There are the **Particular Baptists**, who are hard Calvinists and believe Christ's sacrifice and salvation are only meant for God's elect. There are a limited number of saved people and that is by the will of God alone.

There are the **Free-Will Baptists**, who believe we have the freedom to choose our own salvation. The Free-Will Baptists reject the Calvinist view of the Particular Baptists. So, you could be a Free-Will General Baptist.

There are what are known as **Landmark Baptists**, who believe that only the local gathered church is the true expression of God's church. It is conceivable that one could be a Landmark Free-Will General Baptist, or a Landmark Particular Baptist.

There are **King James Only Baptists**, who believe the 1611 King James Version of the Bible is the single purest expression of God's Word on earth. So, you could be a King James Only General Landmark Baptist, a King James Only Free-Will Baptist, a King James Only Particular Baptist, or a King James Only Particular Landmark Baptist.

There are **Primitive Baptists**, who seek to worship in what they understand to be the simple and direct style of the churches in Acts. So, you could be a KJV Free-Will Landmark Primitive Baptist, a Primitive General Baptist, a Primitive Particular Baptist, or a Landmark Particular Primitive Baptist.

I am being a bit facetious here, but I find these different expressions thoroughly fascinating. Many of the Baptist churches around us are American Baptist Churches, which is a more moderate, theologically fluid association. But several of the ABC Baptist churches around us are breakaway churches because of doctrinal disputes at the prior church.

In the South, until after the Civil War, most African-Americans were a part of whatever the white Baptist association was in the town. As the possibility of secession became possible, the Southern Baptist Convention formed for a primary purpose – to be the theological justification for slavery in the Confederate states. In the North, Baptists were at the forefront of the Abolition movement.

It should also be noted that Martin Luther King, Jr. was the minister for Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA, when he rose to the leadership of the civil rights movement.

So socially and theologically, the Baptists were not only influential and deeply involved, but right at the heart of social change and social preservation in American history. In 1994, the SBC issued a blanket apology and call for general forgiveness for their participation in the evils of slavery and racism in America. And just this year, the SBC rejected all language and past work that promoted 'white privilege' and language of supremacy in their doctrine.

Baptist theology therefore covers the waterfront. The only real through-line for any of the Baptist associations is the adherence to adult baptism and the authority of Scripture. What those things mean and what they mean for each church member is all over the theological map.

STRUCTURE

The structure of a Baptist church is very much like the Congregational tradition, but with even more emphasis on the autonomy of each individual local church. This is part of why there are so many Baptist associations – a breakaway church can create a new association based on its doctrinal focus and either create new churches or find other like-minded churches to associate with.

Structurally, the polity of most Baptist churches are like ours, except that the minister appears to have more power than a minister in the Congregational tradition. I think this is because of the doctrinal focus of so many Baptist churches. Doctrine, by the way, is defined as *the conclusions we derive from the ideas expressed in Scripture*. Those ideas expressed in Scripture are clarified to the congregation by the minister of the church and understanding doctrine means understanding Scripture. This, I think, gravitates power to the minister of the church more than it might in a Congregational church, but as with all things Baptist, it completely depends on the individual church.

Like Congregationalists, Baptist churches are organized around a commitment to a covenant, which is written by the church itself. From their formation in the early days, Baptist churches are often democratically run organizations, like their Congregational brothers and sisters.

OUTREACH

Baptists take very seriously the commission of Jesus to the disciples in Matthew 28: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit*. Ever since the formation of the Baptists, they have been concerned about the benefit of others. The missionary zeal of Baptists is legendary and that is why there are Baptist churches in virtually every country on the planet.

The missionaries we support – Joshua, Ruthie, and Isaiah Perry – come out of a Baptist church and are supported by a Baptist organization. If you want to learn about how to do mission work well, study the Baptists.

In the late 1800s, the Baptists determined the best missions are missions run by people who are from the area the mission is being formed, and so most of the large Baptist missionary organizations have this as a primary focus.

The Perrys, for instance, are not in Bihar, India to just figure out how to bring people to Christ. No, their primary work is to teach people who live permanently in Bihar how to bring people to Christ. The Baptists have known for a long, long time you can only do that work of bringing people to Christ by empowering the local population – teaching them to read, to write, giving the children an education, providing foundational training

to build sustainable business and agricultural practices. Empowered people become Christian people.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

The spiritual disciplines of the Baptists are very simple. Prayer and reading Scripture are the spiritual disciplines of the Baptist movement.

Anything else approaches idolatry in their eyes. Everything is scaled down.

The similarities between Congregationalists and Baptists are strong. Both Congregationalists and Baptists share a strong devotion to the ideas of freedom in Scripture and therefore in the culture. Both Congregationalists and Baptists believe Scripture and the model of Jesus Christ call us to be active, engaged participants in the church and in the community which surrounds our churches. Both believe the Holy Spirit is active now in the daily lives of our families, friends, communities and world. Both place a high premium on the individual's conscience and freedom of interpretation according to their understanding.

The differences are few. The primary difference is that most Congregationalist churches affirm infant and child baptism; Baptists do not. The other difference is more nebulous and is worthy of consideration: somehow most Congregational churches maintain theological differences under one roof and accept a multiplicity of expressions in one place.

In freedom, and in truth, let us worship this day in fellowship with our brothers and sisters who have confessed their faith in God, Christ and the Holy Spirit and have been baptized into the gathered community of believers in Christ's Holy Name. Amen.