

“Why I Am An American Baptist?”

Daniel 6:10-16 (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=daniel+6:10-16)

Luke 4:18-19 (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=luke+4:18-19)

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In 2009, Baptists around the world are celebrating the 400th anniversary of the founding of the first Baptist church. English Christians living in Amsterdam, Holland began meeting for worship in a bake house, and sometime in early 1609, the group held its first baptismal service.

While planning that service, the group encountered a serious problem. No one in the group had experienced baptism as a believer. They all had been baptized as infants in the Church of England. The leader of this group, John Smyth, suggested that he baptize himself first and then baptize the other believers. Each person baptized was an adult who confessed belief in Jesus Christ.

This small group was committed to the belief that church membership should be based on a personal confession of faith followed by believer's baptism. Their radical decision countered the religious expectations of their homeland of England where, in the seventeenth century, all citizens were required to be members of the Church of England.

Refusing to adhere to this requirement meant being subjected to fines, whippings, and imprisonments. A desire for religious freedom and the study of the New Testament led this small band of Christians to reject infant baptism and found a new church. Thus, in 1609, led by Smyth and Thomas Helwys, these religious dissenters became the first Baptists.

In 1612, Helwys and about ten other members sailed home to England, settled near London at Spitalfield, and planted the first Baptist church on English soil. Shortly after his arrival in England, Helwys published *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, the first document written in English that called for complete religious freedom. Helwys asserted that the king of England had no power to control religious beliefs or practices, but instead each person, regardless of his or her religious beliefs, must have complete spiritual freedom.

Helwys also challenged the king to allow individuals the right to read and interpret Scripture. Failing to allow such freedom, Helwys noted, would result in the people being kept in “woeful spiritual bondage.” For the past 400 years, Baptists at their best have continued to affirm and defend the freedoms embraced by our early Baptist leaders.

As I was reminded of the fact that 2009 marks the 400th anniversary of the founding of the first Baptist church, I found myself asking once again, “Why Am I a Baptist?” I wanted to find out if I really still am one!

I do not claim that my answer should be your answer. In fact, I would contend that your answer must be totally unique to you. God makes Baptists like he makes apples and oranges; all of us have our own shape and color. Conditioning processes vary dramatically; diversity is the stuff that gives us distinctive qualities as individuals and as Baptists.

After careful thought, I have concluded that I am a Baptist for three basic reasons:

First, I was born, reared, and nurtured in a Baptist home and a Baptist church.

Second, I believe that responsible approaches to Baptist history support the essential biblical ideals that have driven the Baptist experience.

Third, I have consciously chosen in recent years to remain a Baptist when, at times, circumstances tempted me to throw in the towel.

The following will flesh out these three reasons in more detail. Rather than offer you a set of abstract explanations, I have decided to get personal. I will reveal names. I will describe special events. I will identify heroes. I will cite values that matter to me. Most of all, I hope to convince you that being truly Baptist acknowledges the Lordship of Christ.

First, I was born, reared, and nurtured in a Baptist home and a Baptist church. I was born into a Baptist family. My mother had me in a Baptist church while still in the womb. My first childhood memories are of Parma Baptist Church in Parma, Ohio where the congregation, in its early years, first met in an old house. I actually studied church history as a young person through study courses, Vacation Bible Schools, and Training Union. That church licensed me to the gospel ministry, and it graciously tolerated all the awful sermons I preached while serving as Youth Week pastor for several years.

I have special memories of Adolph Hoffman. He was the music director at Parma Baptist. He was determined that we know every hymn in the Broadman Hymnal and later, the new Baptist Hymnal. Singspirations were part and parcel of Sunday nights at Parma Baptist. But most of all what I remember is that he cared about me and my friends at church.

Or how could I ever forget Rev. Roger Roberts, my pastor throughout late elementary, junior high, and high school. He talked with me in his office about the meaning of salvation. He baptized me. His preaching made an incalculable impression on me. Why am I a Baptist? I am a Baptist because of a conditioning process. The Baptist laypeople in that little church in Parma, Ohio heavily invested themselves in training me and other youth—and they never got paid a dime for doing their ministry. Baptist voluntarism lay at the heart of their strategy.

Someone might ask, "Wouldn't you likely have received similar training and care if you had grown up in a Lutheran, Methodist, or Presbyterian church?" And that would be a good question since I strongly believe that all of us need to learn more about our neighbors in other denominations than most of us know. But my reply is that anything I would say about that would be pure speculation. The persons whom I have described for you today, Baptist though they be, are real people who told me in thousands of ways that they loved me. These Baptists are my history.

Second, I am a Baptist because I believe that responsible approaches to Baptist history support the essential biblical ideals that have driven the Baptist experience. The best Baptist historians agree that Baptists originated in the early 1600s, first in Amsterdam and later in England. And I share that view. However, I am convinced that at least one Baptist wiggled himself into the Old Testament. His name was Daniel.

Manipulated by his assistants, who were jealous of Daniel's achievements in the king's administration, King Darius threatened Daniel within an inch of his life. He signed a document, specifically intended for Daniel, stating that any person who petitioned any god or man within thirty days, other than Darius himself, would be cast into a den of lions.

Daniel responded to that threat like a Baptist who knows the difference between church and state.

The Revised Standard Version reads: *"When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem; and he got down upon his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously"* (Dan. 6:10). (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=daniel+6:10)

Daniel refused to let the state dictate the nature, content, or timing of his prayer life. He refused to let an earthly king tell him what God he would worship. He refused to violate his personal liberty of conscience in order to please low-minded people around him. He refused to abandon the high and holy gift of voluntarism with which God had endowed him. He refused to suppress the competency of his own soul. He refused to cave in to pressurized faith, even though he knew the consequences would be serious.

Lots of good Baptists across the years have imitated Daniel's carefully calculated decision to be a dissenter and a nonconformist. Never content to follow the crowd, they have chosen to make a difference by denying themselves, taking up their crosses, and following their Lord.

I believe in the value of primary sources. For me the primary sources for my faith are not the writings of John Calvin—or any other theologian. They are not the sermons of Billy Graham—or any other preacher or evangelist. They are not the resolutions or statements of concern of American Baptists—or any other convention or fellowship.

The primary sources of my faith are the life of Christ and the teachings of the Bible. I find amazing similarities between historic Baptist principles and the claims of Christ and biblical ideals. However, I appreciate the fact that members of other denominations read the same Bible and study the same Christ and reach different conclusions. And I respect the right of all Baptists to do the same.

But I believe that when one throws the bedrock principles of Baptist history against the teachings of Christ and the documents of the Bible, they fit together.

- **Believer's baptism** runs throughout the New Testament: that's Baptist.
- **Religious liberty** as a gift of God for all people permeates the Bible: that's Baptist.
- **Calls for voluntarism** in faith and practice characterize the teachings of Jesus: that's Baptist.
- **Recognition of the priesthood of all believers** is a New Testament given: that's Baptist.
- **Jesus' efforts to free women, minorities, the poor, and dispossessed** saturated his life and teachings: that's Baptist. And the list goes on.

Roger Williams, the first Baptist pastor in America, turned New England religion on its ears in the 1600s with his emphases on believer's baptism, religious liberty, and the separation of church and state. Affirming the spiritual and civil rights of all people was his cause.

John Clarke, noted colonial Baptist pastor, spent twelve years in England in the 1650s and 60s patiently securing a charter for Rhode Island guaranteeing religious freedom for all citizens. Church-state separation was his cause.

Luther Rice rode horseback thousands of miles up and down the eastern seaboard in the early 1800s. He crossed rivers, endured bad weather, suffered illnesses. Missions was his cause.

Adiniron Judson – Burma...

Martin Luther King, Jr., African-American Baptist leader, served as a pastor, developed a theology of non-violent opposition to human injustice, received the Nobel Peace Prize, and was assassinated. Civil rights was his cause.

Williams, Clarke, Rice, and King provide models directly from our heritage that I believe are worth imitating. These people were willing to sacrifice themselves for the absolute Lordship of Christ, the authority of the Bible, believer's baptism, voluntarism in faith and practice, religious liberty, the priesthood of all believers, missions, congregational government, and other sacred Baptist teachings. Biblical principles jump from their stories.

Why am I a Baptist? The Bible and Baptist history, approached rightly, place us in the contexts of real heroes, show us how to take up our crosses in pure obedience to Christ's calling, teach us how to defy the negative, and thrust us into the offensive as principled Christians.

Third, I am a Baptist because I consciously chose in recent years to remain one when, at times, circumstances tempted me to throw in the towel. There are those who have moved from being historical Baptist to hysterical Baptist and in the process have given Baptist a bad name in some quarters. I am especially appalled by those who have forgotten their Baptist history and heritage (if they ever knew it) and have become creedal. If you or I do not think like them at every point, they are ready to banish us from Baptist life.

But then my memory kicks in for me. I remembered those seminary professors—like Walter B. Shurden, Ben Philbeck, Randall Lolley and others—who taught me that the proper way to be Baptist was to open one's Bible and one's mind at the same time. Soul competency and freedom of biblical interpretation lay at the heart of their vision for students. For them, being Baptist was a commitment stacked around the priorities of Christ, the same priorities that received full play in the formative experiences and documents of Baptists.

I am reminded that while motifs of control, creedalism, and suppression of women in ministry characterized some segments of Baptist life, historic Baptist principles advocated liberty, voluntary confessionalism, and all-out opportunities for women in ministry.

I remembered that although some Baptists could not be trusted, the Baptist vision could. The Baptist dream was as compelling as ever.

Candidly, I am a Baptist today because I am more convinced than ever that **Baptists have significant messages to share with one another and with the world.**

How Baptist am I? I am Baptist enough that I will not serve on a Baptist board or executive committee whose goal is to control, rather than to facilitate ministry. I am Baptist enough that I will not work in an environment where creedalistic uniformity dominates patterns of belief. I am Baptist enough that I will not use curriculum literature governed by a statement of faith that oppresses women in ministry, downgrades the priesthood of all believers, and disavows Christ as the criterion for interpreting Scripture. I am Baptist enough that I will not run and hide in a closet when narrow-minded fundamentalism raises its ugly head and attempts to oppress me. I am Baptist enough that I will not draw a faith-based circle designed to weed out everyone who disagrees with me.

How Baptist am I? I am Baptist enough to affirm that Jesus Christ is Lord; to acknowledge the Bible as the sole written authority for my faith; to accept God's offer of soul competency; to practice my faith in the context of a healthy sense of freedom, cooperation, and accountability; and to stand firm for the rights of all persons to practice their faith as they choose.

It's time to end this sermon. You have heard the word "I" too many times. So let me invite you to deal with some questions of your own.

Are you Baptist enough to believe that God knew what he was doing when he created Adam and Eve and you and me and endowed us with the intelligence to think for ourselves, to choose our own God, and to forge our own faith?

Are you Baptist enough to believe that the prophet Amos knew what he was doing when he declared the word of the Lord during times of oppression and injustice, thereby setting the stage for scholars like my beloved professor, Walter Shurden to deliver that same message to those who violate Baptist principles in self-serving, opportunistic fashion today?

Are you Baptist enough to take Jesus at his word when he launched his earthly ministry in a synagogue in Nazareth by pulling freedom themes from Isaiah?

Listen intently, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19).

www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=luke+4:18-19

Why am I a Baptist? Because this liberty-based self-identification of Christ in Luke 4 set the pattern for what it means to be Baptist. The foremost contribution of Baptists to world civilization resides in their contributions to freedom. Do you see the link between Christ and Baptists?