

## Being Baptist on the Fourth of July

The modern Baptist movement arose in England (and among English exiles in the Netherlands) when men such as John Smyth and Thomas Helwys proclaimed a simple evangelical faith rooted in scripture alone, and denied – in dramatic opposition to both the Protestants and the Catholics of their day – that rulers and government could dictate to the conscience of believers or enforce an official religious practice.

Here in the United States we celebrate the memory of Roger Williams, who was recruited from England in the 1630s to pastor a congregational church in Massachusetts Bay Colony, was estranged from his congregation over his new-found embrace of believers baptism, and travelled with a small group of followers to the head of Narragansett Bay where he founded Providence Plantation, precursor of the state of Rhode Island. There in Providence, Williams had himself baptized as a believer by one of his elders, then baptized the others himself, thus constituting the First Baptist Church of Providence, which has been continuously active since 1638. (Rev. Dan Ivins, former senior pastor of this congregation, is the current pastor of that church.)

Williams espoused absolute freedom of conscience and religious practice in Providence Plantation – welcoming Jews and “Musalmans” as well as proponents of every expression of Christian faith – while embracing personally other “radical” positions such as the abolition of slavery and fair and equal relations with the Native Americans. Ironically, William’s own conscience led him to separate from his little congregation after only a few months, and he spent the rest of his long life (he lived into his 80s) wandering New England as a self-proclaimed “seeker”.

Today there are more than forty self-identified Baptist bodies in the United States and Canada. These Baptists are theologically and culturally conservative *and* liberal; they are leaders in ecumenical Christianity and separated on principle from churches that are not of “like faith and order”; they are Calvinist and Arminian; they are among the founders and strongest supporters of the global missionary movement of the last two hundred years and they reject missionary activity as a usurpation of God’s sovereignty (so-called “primitive” Baptists). But they – **we** – all have some things in common.

We emphasize the personal faith relationship of each individual believer with Christ (Romans 10:8). We affirm the unique and sufficient authority of Holy Scripture in all matters of faith and practice (Baptist don’t do creeds). We celebrate Believers Baptism, according to the New Testament model (Acts 2:37-39, 8:26-40). We affirm a “gathered church”, the body of those who have decided to follow Jesus (Acts 2:43-47). And we practice the autonomy of the local congregation. Baptists do not have hierarchies or mandatory connections, but we *do* form voluntary relationships for ministry and mission beyond the local setting. The common thread through all of these Baptist distinctives is

**freedom** – the freedom of individuals to follow Jesus, to interpret and apply scripture in their own lives, and to voluntarily associate in congregations and larger bodies to do the Lord's work.

To some extent, these Baptist distinctives, though grounded, as we believe, in scripture, seem to be a reflection of central themes in American history and a reflection of the tenor of the times. For example, given the Lordship of Christ, what truer example of democracy is there on earth than a local Baptist congregation? And the Baptist concept of "soul freedom" is a necessary presupposition for American democracy.

But given the rampant individualism of contemporary American culture, I have attempted to proclaim and promote a "Whole Gospel" here at First Baptist, Portland. We actively invite *individuals* to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (Matthew 28:16-20); at the same time we reflect our *solidarity* with the human family by lifting up Jesus' proclamation of God's kingdom of justice and mercy (Mark 1:14-15), and we strive to anticipate that Kingdom in works of loving kindness (Matthew 25:31-40).

On this Independence Day, we love and honor our nation; at the same time we acknowledge that our ultimate and abiding loyalty is to Christ and his Kingdom.

**Dr. David L. Wheeler**