

Experiencing Baptists' roots and fruit in England

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Reflections

September 2005

Attending the Baptist World Centenary Congress in Birmingham, England, this summer made me proud to be Baptist.

Here in the States we tend to think that all Baptists look and think like us. Spending several days with 13,000 Baptists from around the globe reminds us that Baptists come in all shapes, sizes and colors. For me, Jimmy Carter's powerful call for unity among our amazing diversity was the highlight of the meeting.

My two weeks in Birmingham and traveling through the Cotswolds helped me get in touch with my Baptist *roots*. Baptists originated as an outgrowth from English Separatists in the early 17th century. One group, under the leadership of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, went to Holland in 1609 where they formed a Baptist church. Some of them became involved with and absorbed by Dutch Anabaptists, while others, led by Helwys, came back to Spitalfield, near London, and formed the first Baptist church on English soil.

Helwys authored a cutting edge treatise on religious liberty titled *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (1611-12). In his inscription to the copy he sent to King James I were the audacious words that the King is a mortal man, not God, and has no power over the immortal souls of his subjects. For his trouble, Helwys and his wife Jane were thrown into Newgate prison in London where they later died.

On a side trip to Regents Park College at Oxford University, our tour group (ably led by premiere Baptist Historian, Buddy Shurden, and Georgia Baptist leader, Drayton Sanders) had the opportunity to view one of the four known extant first edition copies of *The Mystery of Iniquity*. What a powerful link with the past and a tangible connection to the first Baptist martyr for freedom.

We also traveled to Kettering to visit the Fuller Baptist Church. The church is named for one of its early pastors, Andrew Fuller (1754-1815). A strong strain of hyper-Calvinism resulted in an anti-missionary mentality among 18th and early 19th century Baptists. Fuller was the theologian who broke the back of hyper-Calvinism and cast the theological vision for the modern missionary movement. It was thrilling to step into Fuller's pulpit and to visit his grave behind the church.

We then traveled a short distance to Moulton to see the Carey Baptist Church, named for William Carey (1761-1834). A cobbler and school teacher by trade, Carey served as pastor in Moulton and was instrumental in forming Baptist Missionary Society in 1792. If Fuller was the theologian of the modern missionary movement, Carey was the leading

missionary. He traveled to India in 1793 and spent more than 40 years the rest of his life in mission work there. The connection with this ordinary man who accomplished extraordinary things was overwhelming as we toured Carey's small, one-room schoolhouse and stood in his humble pulpit.

While in England I also experienced the *fruit* of our Baptist beginnings. Helwys' fight for religious liberty and the missionary enterprise spawned by Fuller and Carey have resulted in a world-wide Baptist diaspora. Baptists from more than 100 countries and more than 200 unions worshiped, studied and had fellowship together.

I participated in an insightful focus group session led by British Baptist Frederick George on persecution and religious liberty. Baptists from Germany, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Georgia, Indonesia and Latvia all told stories of religious persecution in their countries and regions. I was struck by how, in 400 years, we could come from persecuting early Baptists to electing one president of the United States while Baptists continue to be persecuted in other parts of the world.

I found particularly striking the common thread among nearly every story from all these countries: the boot heel of persecution came not so much from the forces of hostile atheism as from the oppressive policies of established or semi-established state churches. The rights of conscience and the free exercise of religion have been denied throughout history and are denied today as much by people of faith seeking to impose their brand of religion as by people of no faith seeking to deprive us of ours.

These stories from around the world reminded me of the crucial importance of the two protections for religious liberty in the Bill of Rights one prohibiting the interference of the free exercise of religion but the other keeping government from trying to establish religion. Without either one of these, religious liberty is endangered.

In a word, my trip to England encouraged me to bless my roots and to redouble my efforts to preserve the fruit of religious liberty for everyone in the world.