

TALKING POINT #2

BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES #1: AUTONOMY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO US!

This year, we celebrate 400 years since the first "Baptist" Church was founded in Amsterdam in 1609 - our Quadricentenary! Four hundred years on, this movement continues to proclaim the message of Christ and Him crucified.

To celebrate this anniversary, we're going to look at five Baptist distinctives throughout the rest of 2009. The purpose of these papers is neither to "convince" you of Baptist positions nor to elevate ourselves as "right" compared to other denominations. We are, first and foremost, Christians who proclaim the Risen Christ with our brothers and sisters of all denominations. Rather, the purpose of these papers is to give you a picture of why we are the way we are, to help you appreciate your rich heritage and to understand the implications for each of us as part of this congregation. The first distinctive we'll explore is the "Autonomy of the Local Church."

As we look at these distinctives, you will see that none of them is particularly Baptist - we share each of them with other denominations. What is unique is the Baptist combination.

A ROCKY ROAD

Baptists grew out of the religious, political and social milieu of the 16th and 17th Centuries. Since the outbreak of the Protestant Reformation in England and on the Continent in the 16th Century, there had been a growing movement to restore the Bible to its rightful position of authority in the Church. In England, this had already meant a long and painful struggle to disconnect the Church from Roman Catholicism. For many who held the political power of the Church, this was as far as they wanted the revolution to go. However, as people began reading the Bible in their own language and started seeing the corruption of many of their leaders, a new groundswell began to apply the Bible to every part of Church life.

This revolutionary movement continued to assert the primacy of the Bible and the direct Lordship of Christ. The question came "How does Christ exercise that Lordship?" The Episcopal model (bishops) asserted the authority of the hierarchy of the Church. Presbyterians asserted the authority of the local Presbytery. Dissenters (of which Baptists were part) asserted the direct lordship over the local congregation as a distinct principle. This was revolutionary and also led to Dissenters being persecuted to the point that some fled the British Isles to Holland and the New World in America.

In spite of that persecution though, Baptists asserted the direct Lordship of Christ over His Church and the primacy of the Bible as our rule of faith and practice. While the autonomy of the local Church may now seem obvious and even old-fashioned, the first Baptists proclaimed it in an era when dissenting religious views were met with fierce opposition. We are the beneficiaries of a remarkably revolutionary heritage!

BUT IS IT BIBLICAL?

History is one thing but, if we're going to proclaim the primacy of Scripture, we need to hold the autonomy of the local Church up to the scrutiny of Scripture.

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First, Christ is the head of the Church (Matthew 16:18-19). It's His Church and the testimony of Scripture proclaims He is superintending, leading and empowering His Church by the Holy Spirit. More than that though, we see Christ interested in the local situation, being present at local Church processes (Matthew 18:20) and directing the local work (Revelation 2 & 3). He leads the Church through Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16) and the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:17).

Second, Scripture teaches that every believer is a 'priest' in the sense that, once we've acknowledged Christ as our Saviour and Lord, we have direct access to Him (1 Peter 5:1-5), we're given the Holy Spirit to understand Scripture (2 Corinthians 3:15-18) and we're gifted for ministry (1 Corinthians 12:27-31). On that basis, then, each believer has the privilege and obligation to interpret Scripture - we don't need a bishop or priest to give the authoritative understanding. That is not to say that we shouldn't submit to the teachers and leaders God gives to the Church (Hebrews 13:7-8 & 17) but what an amazing privilege of access we're given!

Finally, Paul's ministry reflects the principle of local Church government, given that he established elders and deacons in local assemblies (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5) and wrote letters to local Churches. These elders were given to lead the Church in the mission of spreading the Gospel and equipping the saints for good works.

IMPLICATIONS

So, as Baptists, we believe we hold the Biblical position of the Direct Lordship of Christ over the local Church - a position that had significant implications for the first Baptists but now also has some important implications for us today:

1. As the local expression of Christ in our area, we have a responsibility to shine Christ to our neighbours, friends and relatives. We don't wait for a bishop or presbytery to appoint someone to our area - the imperative is with us!
2. Every member has a role in us being the Church God wants us to be.
3. Church membership becomes important because it is through the collective voice of the membership that we discern God's will.
4. It is up to us to preserve our doctrine & practice and continually assess it against the Bible.
5. We should always endeavour to work with other Churches and remember that the Church is ultimately universal - rather than being independent, we should aim to be interdependent with other Churches.

CONCLUSION

The Autonomy of the Local Church is one of the great hallmarks of the Baptist movement. Thoroughly Biblical and historically costly, it empowers us to be the local expression of Christ. This paper has been necessarily brief and if you'd like more or would like to talk, please see me.

FURTHER TALKING POINT TOPICS

The next Talking Point in September will continue our series on Baptist Distinctives by looking at Baptism and the Lord's Supper.