

Amsterdam, July 24, 2009: Celebrating 400 Years of Baptist Life

- Teun van der Leer -

Building our Future on Gods History with us

2 Kings 2 : 1-15

'The king is a mortal man and not God, therefore has no power over the immortal souls of his subjects...'¹

When Thomas Helwys wrote these famous words in 1612, Baptist life had just begun as a mustard seed, as a little cloud like a man's hand. His writing was prophetic and courageous. One century before the Enlightenment, almost two centuries before the French Revolution, more than three centuries before the Declaration of Human Rights, he pleaded for freedom of consciousness for 'heretics, Jews, Turks and them of the Romish religion'. 'For men's religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it'². The price was high: imprisonment and death in prison a few years later, but the fruits are still being harvested today.

It is a heritage to be proud of, the more when we realise that it was not a coincidence, since Roger Williams instituted the First Baptist Church in the US on Rhode Island on the principle of soul-liberty and 'the wall of separation' between church and state in 1639. And still one century later Isaac Backus - termed by Mary Mitchell as 'the father of American Baptists'³ - strongly advocated that Christians must be free from state and ecclesial coercion: 'In religion each one has an equal right to judge for himself, for we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ'.⁴ (Take note of the Christological and eschatological grounding of his resistance to coercion!). It is the judgement seat of Christ that decides, *no one else and no one earlier*. As a Dutch comedian said: Every judgement before the final judgement is a prejudice! Helwys used the same argument in 1612: 'O, let the king judge, is it not most equal that man should choose their religion themselves, seeing they only must stand themselves before the judgement seat of God to answer for themselves'.⁵

Again: 400 years ago. And I say to you tonight: It is a human right, the right of every human being on the face of the earth, to have the gospel clearly presented to him or her at least once in his or her lifetime, to make a free choice, either to accept or to reject it. *Freedom of consciousness means freedom of religion which means the freedom to preach the gospel everywhere and to change religion*

¹ Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, Classics of Religious Liberty, edited and introduced by Richard Groves (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998), p. xxiv

² Ibid, p. 53

³ Quoted in Stanley Grenz, *Isaac Backus - Puritan and Baptist* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1983), p. 2

⁴ Isaac Backus, *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty*, in: Curtis W. Freeman, *Baptist Roots. A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1999), p. 163

⁵ Ibid, p. 37

where ever and when ever people choose to do so. Whether it is in Europe or in the US, in Saudi-Arabia, or Cuba, or Nigeria, or Iraq or Azerbaijan: everybody has the right to *hear* the gospel and to *respond* to it in full freedom.

In this city – that has been known through the centuries for its hospitality, its freedom and its tolerance - it should be possible today that a Christian becomes a Muslim and a Muslim becomes a Christian *without problems*, let alone persecution or death. That's what we have stood for these past 400 years and continue to stand for: *freedom to preach, freedom to choose, freedom to change!*

Now let me be very clear about this: this wasn't easy and it isn't easy. And I do not just mean the sacrifices made by this group of about 50 people from Gainsborough and Scrooby that fled to Amsterdam: material sacrifices, emotional sacrifices (think of the separation of some of the men and their wives and children), physical sacrifices (arrests and imprisonment). What I have in mind is their courage to think differently and to act differently and to really change their thinking and doing in obedience to their new insights in the Word of God.

Try to imagine what it really meant to leave the Church of England and start a new church themselves. In our time – a time of 'recycling of the saints', of people easily 'hopping' from church to church – we have no idea how extraordinary and exceptional this was! En what a faith and courage it took to – and I quote William Bradford – 'shake of the yoke of antichristian bondage, and as the Lord's free people, join them selves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel, to walk in all his ways, made known or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them'.⁶ Here Bradford quotes the famous covenantal words the people of Scrooby and Gainsborough used in 1607 after a day of prayer and fasting, just a few months before they fled to Amsterdam.

They changed their minds in the literal meaning of that word and accordingly changed their attitude and lifestyle, *they were free to change*.

Mark these words: 'Made known or to be made known'. Behind these words is this 'further light' principle that goes back to earlier non-conformists⁷ and was also mentioned in 1620 by John Robinson when he said his farewell to some of the Pilgrim Fathers who were about to sail on the Mayflower to America: 'I am confident the Lord *has more truth and light to break forth* out of his holy Word'.

The 'further light' idea was: God has given us new insights now, so He can give them again. We have not yet 'arrived'. We're still *pilgrims*. We're still 'on our way'. 'Negatively' said 'We do not know everything already', and 'positively' said 'God has still new things in store for us!' There is still 'new land' ahead of us. I do hope and pray that this pilgrim-spirituality is still part and parcel among us!

For John Smyth it was crystal clear that you *had* to change your religion as soon as you discovered you had been wrong. 'To change a false religion is

⁶ William T. Davis, *Bradford's history of Plymouth Plantation, 1606-1646* (New York 1952), p. 31

⁷ Browne and Barrow

commendable, and to retain a false religion is damnable' he writes in *The Character of the Beast*⁸.

So being open to change is in our Baptist-genes, it's in our DNA. Part of our *tradition* is that we regularly *change* our tradition, in the light of new insides and in the light of the challenges of the day.

There is nothing wrong with tradition, I *love* (our) tradition. I always say to my students: yes, you are allowed to criticise tradition, to change it, even to reject it, *but not before* you have studied it and really know what it says and why it says what it says. You have to *know* what you reject (or accept!).

Tradition *can* be very valuable and enrich our life and our faith. Tradition is not a problem, *traditionalism* is, as the famous church historian Jaroslav Pelikan said: 'Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living'.⁹

So our tradition is valuable and especially because it is open for change. What would have become of the (General) Baptists of the 18th century were it not for Dan Taylor who had the courage and the clearness of mind to set up the *New Connexion* 'to revive Experimental Religion or Primitive Christianity in Faith and Practice'?!

En think about Wiliam Carey! What if he had adjusted himself and his thinking unto the course of his time and had accepted the rebuke by dr. John Ryland who called him an 'enthusiast' and told him to sit down, when he suggested that the Great Commission was not just for the apostles but also for his time. What a joy it is to read his *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (1792) and read his arguments for a change of mind among his fellow Baptists. If we are not called to preach the gospel to all nations according to Matthew 28, he writes, then we better stop baptizing too, because its in the same passage! That is an argument to help Baptists to turn around! And if we are not called to preach, then forget about this promise that Jesus will be with us always, because it is in the same passage! But it can't be, because the promise is 'to the close of the age', and if the promise lasts till then, then the command to go and preach too! No 'lo' (I am with you) without 'go' (go therefore

⁸ John Smyth, *The Character of the Beast*, in W.T. Whitley (ed.), *The Works of John Smyth* 2 (Cambridge: The University Press, 1915), p. 752. The whole quote is: 'For a man of a Turk to become a Jew, of a Jew to become a Papist, of a Papist to become a Protestant are all commendable changes though they all of them befall one and the same person in one year, nay, if it were in one month. So that *not* to change religion is evil simply and therefore that we should fall from the profession of Puritanism to Brownism, and from Brownism to true Christian baptism, is not simply evil or reprobable in itself, *except it be proved that we have fallen from true religion*. If we therefore being formerly deceived in the way of pedobaptistry, now do embrace the truth in the true Christian Apostolic baptism, then let no man impute this as a fault unto us. This therefore is the question: whether the baptism of infants be lawful, yea or nay, and whether persons baptized being infants must not renounce that false baptism and assume the true baptism of Christ which is to be administered upon persons confessing their faith and their sins'.

⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition. A History of the Development of Doctrine. 1, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 9

and make disciples of all nations)! This helped Baptists, *Particular* Baptists even, to change their minds and get a vision for world mission *till today!* And today we are proud that 'our' William Carey is called 'the father of the modern mission movement'.

Now, these are some examples of God's history with us and here we are, 400 years later. How will we build our future on it? Are we just spectators of that history or are we partakers? What will we do with this 'mantle' of our history?

I have been fascinated for years now by this story of the succession of Elijah by Elisha in 2 Kings 2. And I wonder, every time I read it: am I a spectator or a partaker? For that's the difference between Elisha and all the other prophets.

The Lord is going to take away Elijah. And everyone knows: Elijah knows, Elisha knows, the prophets know. Elijah is going back to the opposite side of the river Jordan, where he once came from: Gilgal, Bethel, Jericho: down, down, down.

And while Elisha insists on staying with his master and not leaving him, 50 prophets follow and look 'at some distance'. Hold this picture: The great prophet Elijah standing by the Jordan, Elisha beside him and 50 prophets at some distance.

There is history in the making here. Elijah had made history. All alone he had stood up against the Baal-worship, against the godless king Ahab and his godless wife Jezebel, and had won that battle at Mount Carmel. The fire of the Lord had fallen from heaven and the people had shouted 'The Lord, he is God'. And then he had prayed – seven times – till a 'little cloud like a man's hand was rising out of the sea'. This man had made history in the name of his Lord. And the people had seen it, the prophets had seen it, Elisha had seen it.

There is something to look back on, there is something to look forward to. They are standing at a crossroads in history. They are standing by the Jordan. We are standing by the Jordan these days. We are looking back and we are looking forward. God made his history with us. Do we only *look at it*, or do we want to be *part of it*?!

Elijah says: Ask what I shall do for you. What do you need?
Well, that is some question. And some opportunity. What would your answer be?
Please, a better prophet's salary than just bread and meat from the ravens.
Please a better king and queen, not so godless, not so hard to handle.
Please a growing church with many baptismal services and no quarrels whatsoever in church meetings (the utopic dream of every Baptist minister).
Please a handful of good and dedicated deacons who energize me instead of draining the energy out of me.
And especially: please no hardships, no persecution, no hatred.

Elisha said: 'Let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me'. Let me be a prophet like you, whatever the costs. Let me inherit your calling. That's the meaning of the double portion, it is the right of the first-born when it comes to the heritage of his father¹⁰. Elisha wants to *participate* in God's history.

¹⁰ See Deut. 21:17

And here he is coming back to the Jordan river. He has seen Elijah's ascension and has found his mantle at his feet. The mantle of the prophet, the mantle of God's call upon his life. His heritage. And here he stands now by the Jordan again, alone now, and the 50 prophets looking 'at some distance'. And he takes that mantle and raises it above his head and shouts: where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? He *wants* to be a partaker, not just a spectator. He *dares* to be a partaker, and not a spectator. He wants to be part of God's history and of God's future.

Elisha took a big risk. What if Jordan hadn't divided? What if nothing had happened? With these 100 prophet-eyes at the other shore?! But he'd rather took the risk of failure, than no risk at all. The safety of nothingness. The burying of his talent, saying: here it is, I kept it for you. Elisha wanted to be a partaker, whatsoever.

Now, what about us? What about our heritage? Here we are by our Jordan of 400 years Baptist history. Here are the mantles of our forefathers and foremothers, who paid high prices and bore much fruit for the cause of the gospel. Do we want to be spectators of this history and speak proudly about it and that's it ('we celebrated and went home and all remained the same') or do we want to be partakers, builders of the future on God's history with us?!

Do we dare to take these mantles of faith and courage, of freedom to preach, to choose, to change?!

Who dares to take up the mantle and say:

'Where is the Lord, the God of Thomas Helwys?'

'Where is the Lord, the God of William Carey?'

'Where is the Lord, the God of Charles Haddon Spurgeon?'

'Where is the Lord, the God of Lottie Moon and of Ann Judson?'

'Where is the Lord, the God of Martin Luther King?'

'Where is the Lord, the God of Billy Graham?'

'Where is the Lord, the God of...', and fill in all these names of known and unknown men and women, who dared to follow in Christ's footsteps in their times and their circumstances, whatever the cost.

Here we are and the mantle of our history is laying at our feet. What is our calling today? Prof. Johannes Verkuyl, the missiologist of the Free University here in Amsterdam in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, wrote about Matthew 28: 'When Jesus promises: And lo, I am with you always (in Dutch more literally translated as: every day¹¹), then it is our responsibility to ask ourselves: and what day is it today?' What are we called to as a church in this particular time and in this particular situation? What is 'das Gebot der Stunde', the command for the hour?

I think if ever there was a call for change and adaptation to new circumstances and new missionary challenges and opportunities, it is now. And I hope and trust that we will hear a lot about this in the coming days, when we talk about mission (Saturday) and discipleship (Sunday).

¹¹ The Greek text uses *tas hēmeras*

Let me mention one thing. The role of prayer. It is fascinating to see what the role of prayer has been on several occasions in our history. I mentioned already the day of prayer and fasting when the covenanting of Scrooby and Gainsborough took place. In 1649 the Glazier' Hall, a London Particular Baptist Church, held a day of prayer 'to seek the Lord that He would send labourers into the dark corners and parts of this land'¹², which led to church planting in Wales. And the *Baptist Mission Society* and the work of William Carey cannot be seen apart from the monthly 'concerts of prayer' that John Sutcliff started in his church in Nottingham in 1784, after having read Jonathan Edwards' *A Humble Attempt to promote (...) extraordinary prayer for a revival of religion and the advancement of God's kingdom on earth...*¹³

This is very important, for prayer is not so much about *us* telling God what we want Him to do, but about us discovering *what God wants* us to do. When we pray, we enter the heart of God and share in the thoughts and passions that are there and we are touched by it. His passion becomes our passion and his program becomes our program, so that his will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

That's why we set up this prayer-chain in our churches in Holland, 24/7 prayer throughout our jubilee-year, every week another church. That's why we wanted a prayer-room here in the RAI-centre as a 'power-station' for this conference. That's why there will be prayer ministry-teams later this evening and the coming days, available to pray with and for you. Because we believe in the importance and power of prayer. Remember what James wrote: 'Elijah was just as human as we are, and for three and a half years his prayers kept the rain from falling. But when he did pray for rain, it fell from the skies and made the crops grow'.

Building the future on God's history with us. Let's take the mantle of these 400 years and call upon the Lord, the God of our history, so we will be:

Free to pray, free to preach, free to choose, free to change, free in Christ!

¹² James M. Renihan, *Edification and Beauty. The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675-1705* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), p. 58

¹³ The whole title is *A Humble Attempt to promote the agreement and union of God's people throughout the world in extraordinary prayer for a revival of religion and the advancement of God's kingdom on earth, according to scriptural promises and prophecies of the last time*, published by Jonathan Edwards in 1747