



**THE MESSAGE BOARD**  
*A Newsletter from*  
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Personal Reflections

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**Amsterdam 400: Celebrating 400 Years of Baptist Life and Witness**

**Part 1**

Recently, Baptist delegates from around the world gathered in Amsterdam to celebrate the founding the first Baptist congregation by English dissenters who had fled England. Led by John Smythe and Thomas Helwys, they were welcomed and sheltered by the Mennonite community in Amsterdam. What follows are thoughts generated by the day's presentations.

**Day 1: Focus on Freedom**

Greetings from Alle Hoekema of the Mennonite Churches reminded us that the earliest Baptists were not only religious pilgrims who dared chart a new path of Christian faithfulness, but that they were also religious refugees seeking the precious freedom of religion. They found that freedom 400 years ago under the aegis of the Mennonite Anabaptists who had settled in Amsterdam, they themselves having fled persecution in their native lands. In his remarks, Hoekema graciously noted that the Mennonites were influenced in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century by William Carey to take up the cause of mission and that their first missionaries served under the auspices of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society in India.

The evening's sermon focused on freedom: the freedom to preach, the freedom to choose and the freedom to change. Teun van der Leer, rector of the Dutch Baptist Seminary, was the preacher. His remarks spoke especially to the European context where there has recently been conflict between immigrant Muslims and the understanding of religious liberty—hence, “freedom to preach, freedom to choose, freedom to change” were his three points.

Rev. Van der Leer reminded us that Thomas Helwys' treatise on religious liberty was prophetic, preceding the Enlightenment and the concept of human rights. The Baptist argument for religious liberty, he pointed out, is eschatological and Christological in focus, having as its base the fact that each shall stand before God who shall judge us all.

Therefore, Baptists have argued for the freedom to preach, the freedom to choose and the freedom to change. Without these there is no true faith. And being present in Amsterdam with a large Muslim population, he reminded us forcefully that in this setting freedom of religion means that some will choose and change to become Muslim; some will choose and change to become Christian; and that each should do so without fearing reprisal or punishment by the government or their respective religious communities.

The Baptist argument for freedom was costly, he said, because it caused Helwys' contemporaries to rethink their understanding of scripture on this matter. In a time when the church and the political system were one, and in a time when the divine right of kings over subjects and church was understood to be ordained of God, Baptists brought a new understanding of scripture. They could not have done this without an understanding that God “had further light to shine on scripture,” he said. Van der Leer went on to explain that the principle of further light says, “God gives new insights. We are pilgrims, and we have not ended our journey. God can still give us new things. This is pilgrim spirituality.”

“Being open to change is Baptist,” he declared. “To be faithful to our tradition as Baptists is to change our tradition.” He gave the example of William Carey, who struggled to change the Baptist tradition of his day that believed the Great Commission was given only to the apostles. He advocated for an active missionary endeavor to take the gospel to all peoples. His fellow Baptist critics charged him with being an enthusiast. Carey's response to his detractors was that one could not claim the promise, “Lo, I am with you always,” without also claiming the command, “Go and make disciples of all nations” as they are found in the same verse. Carey challenged how scripture was read and understood by his Baptist contemporaries.

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## Amsterdam 400: Celebrating 400 Years of Baptist Life and Witness—Part 1 (continued)

“Lo, I am with you always,” Van der Leer pointed out, “is translated more pointedly in Dutch as ‘I am with you every day.’” Verkhuyl, the modern Dutch missiologist, building on that text, reminded the church that it must always ask, “What day is today and what is our task today?”

As I listened to Van der Leer, I wondered how our movement with such an emphasis on freedom, a tradition of change, and an understanding that God gives new insights into the meaning of scripture could have produced such a large number of fundamentalist progeny. It is a great irony that Baptists are so identified with fundamentalism which is the exact opposite of the pilgrim spirituality that Van der Leer describes as core to Baptist life.

At our best there is an adventurous pilgrim spirit to Baptist life. We have been marked by a spirit that seeks and expects God to do and reveal new things, a spirit that seeks and expects that our tradition will be fluid, a spirit that believes that “Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow” is at work now and in the future to bring forth the new thing that God is doing.

Acceptance of this pilgrim spirituality requires a stance of openness and trust. It requires openness to God. Van der Leer recalled for us the pivotal role of prayer in Baptist life. “Prayer is about us discovering what God wants us to do, for in prayer we enter the heart of God.” It requires openness to accept that God might be bringing new light to bear upon our understanding of scripture by the power of his Spirit. It requires openness to others in my faith community, for the new light that I perceive requires prayerful testing by what the Spirit is saying to other believers through scripture.

Being open and adventuresome is quite difficult for most of us. While we dream of getting out of the boat to meet Jesus, when the moment comes, we are afraid. Folks don't walk on water. Fear and freedom are antonyms. Fear limits God's possibilities in our lives. Fear demands certainty and control. Freedom in Christ opens new vistas and a new and richer imagination and requires trust and a willingness to surrender control. That is what pilgrim spirituality offers us.

It is a peculiar construct of the Judeo-Christian tradition that God leads, that is, that God moves ahead of us into the future. When we live out of fear, whether as persons, congregations or denominations, we furl our sails against the prevailing winds of the Spirit and drop anchor where we are.

Those who exchange their pilgrim tents for residential mortar risk becoming as fossilized as Lot's wife who was immobilized when she looked back in fear to all that she was leaving and losing.

Pilgrim spirituality, Baptist spirituality, even if sometimes hesitantly, steps out of the boat onto the water, placing our hand in Christ's in risky freedom.



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