



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 3

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 3: Focus on Discipleship

Teddy Oprenov of Bulgaria addressed two interrelated themes of discipleship in Baptist life—the presence of so many divisions within our life and the importance of forgiveness as a spiritual practice.

He began with the old story of a Baptist who came upon a man preparing to jump to his death from a bridge. Engaging the despondent man in conversation, the Baptist soon came to mention that he was a Baptist. "Oh, so am I," said the would-be jumper. "Oh," said the Baptist, "how wonderful! And are you Church of the Living God Baptist or Church of the Almighty God Baptist?" "Church of the Living God Baptist," was the response. "How wonderful! So am I," said the Baptist. "And are you Church of the Living God Baptist of 1843 or of 1917?" he further asked. "1917," said the jumper. "How wonderful! So am I," said the Baptist. "And are you 1917 first covenant or 1917 second covenant?" asked the Baptist. "Oh, second covenant," said the man now much cheered and encouraged. "Jump, you heretic scum, jump," screamed the Baptist, "for I am part of the first covenant fellowship that you left."

The dark humor of this story makes us laugh and wince at the same time because it nails us. Baptists are known for our predilection toward division, hence the old saw, "Baptists multiply by dividing." This predilection is nothing to laugh at. It is a huge blemish on the integrity of our community as disciples of Jesus. Another of Teddy's stories is but one illustration. It is a story of his meeting with an official of the Department of Religion of the State of Bulgaria. "There are 70 different groups of you evangelicals," he was told by the government official, "and 17 of them are Baptist." He went on, "Three of these 17 are registered at the same address." Then with exasperation and disdain in his voice the official said, "And today I received a letter from one of them complaining about the other two."

"Multiplying by dividing" doesn't negatively impact outsiders alone. Several years before the New Baptist Covenant event, Baptists from New Jersey, Philadelphia and Pennsylvania planned a conference we called "Baptists Together." It brought together an impressive array of Baptists including American Baptists, Southern Baptists, Conservative Baptists, Progressive National Baptists, National Baptists, and a few other strains of Baptists in an attempt to highlight our commonalities as Baptists and to publicly bridge our differences. Afterwards I received a letter from a participant telling me they had "had to come" because their family had been deeply divided by the Conservative Baptist split from American Baptists in the 1940s. They had come to see Conservative and American Baptists on the same platform as a part of their own spiritual healing.

Our own recent division marked by the vote of the board of the Region of the Pacific Southwest to leave ABC life has been a painful, wounding experience for many. It was one of the most painful experiences of my 35 years of ordained ministry. Many harsh words were said, especially by a few vicious blog sites that seemed intent on constantly stirring the pot with rumors and innuendoes. And I have seen the same tragic wounding occur in congregations where folks who lived and worshipped together for years became polarized and said deeply hurtful things to and about each other. Such divisions are self-inflicted wounds upon the body of Christ. These raw scars reaffirm for too many skeptics that religion is the source of division and not the springhead of unity.

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Amsterdam 400: Celebrating 400 Years of Baptist Life and Witness—Part 3 (continued)

There is a way forward—a way towards healing that defies division and alienation. Bishop Tutu captured its essence when he remarked about South Africa, “Without forgiveness there is no future.” Teddy Oprentov offered us a pointed insight into the way forward with a story. He related for us how he had tended to a noted elderly Baptist preacher of his country in his final days. This pastor had suffered much during the Communist era because others, even Baptist sisters and brothers, had been frightened into affirming false charges against him. These charges led to his imprisonment for more than eight years. As he lay dying, Teddy asked him what he wished for his false accusers. “My heart is full of love,” the pastor whispered. “They did what they should not have done, but they are still my brothers and sisters.”

Such depth of love is transformative. It mirrors the miracle of reconciliation that has changed South Africa. In my upcoming sabbatical, I will make a pilgrimage to South Africa. I want to learn from the people there how the power of forgiveness can set us free from the wounds we have received and given.

To live shackled by either our anger and hate, or by our guilt and shame is to live as a slave, to live as one who is defined and limited by a past filled with offense given and offense taken. It is to live a life overshadowed by suspicion, darkened by despair, ruled by regret. Thanks be to God that in Christ Jesus there is another way, the path of forgiveness whose destination is reconciliation, a foretaste of the reign of God. May we learn more fully the spiritual practice of forgiveness in every phase of life.



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