

English Baptists through 400 years (Slide 1)

On 21 January 1525 dramatic events took place in Zürich, Switzerland, which were described by someone who was probably an eye-witness. A group of people had gathered in the home of Felix Mantz, and they united in prayer for God's guidance. The account reads:

After the prayer, George of the House of Jacob stood up and besought Conrad Grebel for God's sake to baptize him with the true Christian baptism upon his faith and knowledge. And when he knelt down with such a request and desire, Conrad Grebel baptized him, since at that time there was no ordained minister to perform such a work.

This event has commonly been taken to mark the beginning of the Anabaptist movement. Here were people who chose to follow Jesus – at great cost, since most were put to death.

Apart from the Anabaptist circle in Zürich there were others in the 1520s who became part of the Anabaptist movement - in Switzerland and Germany. One was Balthasar Hubmaier (Slide 2a), a former Catholic priest and influential teacher and preacher at Regensburg Cathedral who became the leading theological thinker among the Anabaptists. Moving from Germany, Hubmaier became the leader of a large Anabaptist community centred in Nicolsburg (today Mikulov, in the Czech Republic), and in his brief ministry he probably baptised at least 2,000 people.

Anabaptism also owes a great deal to a very significant leader, Menno Simons (Slide 2b), whose name was used to designate the Mennonites. It is now that we make a link to the beginnings in Amsterdam – when the Baptist movement of which we are a part began.

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John Smyth (Slide 2c) is often referred to in older historical writings as the 'self-Baptist', the one who baptised himself. This baptism in 1609 marks the beginning of the

subsequent movement of Baptist churches. John Smyth had studied for Anglican priesthood at Christ's College, Cambridge, where there was a strong Puritan influence. By 1606 he had decided to separate from the Church of England – to join a church of committed believers, the Separatists. Baptist roots, then, were in Separatism (Slide 3).

A number of the members of Smyth's congregation soon became deeply involved in discussion about whether it was right to baptise infants. The conclusion that they reached was that according to the New Testament baptism was to be carried out only on the basis of repentance and faith. This was Mennonite practice. Smyth baptised himself, and following that baptised Helwys and the rest of the congregation.

By early 1610 Smyth had decided to apply to join the local Mennonites and soon thirty-one members of the Smyth/Helwys group made application. Helwys and others, however, decided to return to England. They probably returned in late 1611 and established a Baptist church in Spitalfields, outside the city of London, in 1612 - the first Baptist church on English soil. This was a General Baptist church.

The ideas that Thomas Helwys was developing about church and state and religious freedom were embodied in a book which he published in the same year as the Spitalfields church was established. This book, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, (Slide 4) gave religious toleration the finest defence it had received in England. The 'earthly sword' had no authority in the realm of faith.

In some of the most famous words of the *Short Declaration*, Helwys announced (Slide 5) that 'men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves...Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure'.

Thomas Helwys was, however, not destined to see the fruit of his call for religious liberty. He wrote, significantly, that he and his group had returned from Amsterdam 'to lay down their lives in their own country for Christ and his truth'. Helwys was imprisoned in the dreadful Newgate Prison in London and died there.

A fresh Baptist impetus came out of a church formed in Southwark in London in 1616, with Henry Jacob, who had been a Puritan minister, as the pastor. These were Calvinistic or Particular Baptists. Gradually they spread. John Bunyan and William Kiffin became two of the well known leaders. (Slide 6a – showing Bunyan and Kiffin)

John Bunyan was the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*. Kiffin was a self-made man – who went from being a penniless apprentice to a wool trader and one of the wealthiest merchants in London (able to finance the King's projects). Kiffin was a Member of Parliament for two years. He opposed 'open membership' or 'open communion' in Baptist churches, insisting on believer's baptism as essential for taking communion. Bunyan supported open membership.

Perhaps the most famous debate between Baptists and the Church of England was when William Kiffin and others debated with a Church of England minister, Daniel Featley, who published his side of the argument as *The Dippers Dipt, or the Anabaptists Duck'd and Plunge'd over Head and Eares*. (Slide 6b – several sorts of Anabaptists) He accused Baptists of child abuse by refusing to baptise infants. These debates publicized Baptists. They grew steadily, especially during the Civil War period, but lost ground during the later persecution.

We can trace a number of important features in early Baptist thought:

- (a) The desire to re-model the church according to **the ideals of the New Testament**. John Smyth saw the visible church of the New Testament with all the ordinances as part of the Gospel
- (b) The idea of **covenant**. In England the Separatists had joined 'as the Lord's free people' and 'by a covenant of the Lord' into a church, to 'walk in his ways'. For Smyth the covenant had a central place. God covenanted to be their God. There was a vow by the saints to obey God. And there was a mutual responsibility in the 'duties of love' to one another.
- (c) The concept of **the power of the congregation**. The early Baptists said that the 'brethren jointly have all power both of the kingdom and priesthood immediately from Christ'. So the congregation could preach, pray, sing, administer the 'seals of the covenant', admonish, convince, excommunicate and absolve - and anything else!

(d) **Baptism** of a believer was the way of entry into the church. Baptism was by the consent of the person. In infant baptism there was no such consent.

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Among Baptists as a whole, the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival had a powerful impact. The conversionism of the Evangelical Revival led to the renewal of Baptist congregational life. Dan Taylor, the General Baptist leader, modelled himself on John Wesley. (Slide 7) Another important figure for Baptists was George Whitefield. (Slide 8) Baptists began to adopt new ways of preaching (Slide 9). Robert Robinson, converted under George Whitefield in 1752, told Whitefield that he attended the Tabernacle, where Whitefield preached, 'pitying the poor deluded Methodists, but came away envying their happiness'. The impact of conversionist spiritual experience is clear. In 1761 Robinson commenced ministry at St Andrew's Street Baptist Church, Cambridge. This church had thirty members, but under Robinson's preaching a new building was erected and congregations grew to 600. (Slide 10) Here was the effect of biblical ministry. Prayer for all the members was also central. In typical Baptist church 'covenants', as in Cambridge, members agreed 'mutually to love and pray for each other'. Singing was also important.

Another central figure, who was the main theologian of the Particular Baptists in the later eighteenth century, was Andrew Fuller, minister in Soham and later in Kettering. He was also the first Secretary of the BMS (Slide 11). In 1785 Fuller wrote his ground-breaking theological work, *The Gospel Worthy of all Acceptation*, which argued for 'the free offer of the gospel' to all sinners, and rejected the non-evangelistic 'high Calvinism' which had been prevalent in the earlier eighteenth century. The nineteenth century saw Baptists taking up the conversionist message with enthusiasm and finding in it a source of spiritual renewal for their congregations.

Andrew Fuller also examined the theology of baptism. What about the spiritual significance of baptism? Fuller dealt with this issue, writing in 1802 in *The Practical Uses of Christian Baptism* about 'the influence of this ordinance, where it produces its proper effects, in promoting piety in individuals, and purity in the church'. Baptism, he argued, was also a 'solemn and practical profession of the Christian religion' and for the

early Christians was an 'oath of allegiance to the King of Zion'. This understanding was clearly Christ-centred and also communal.

Baptists also explored the theology of the Lord's Supper. In *Thoughts on the Lord's Supper* (1748), Anne Dutton, who corresponded with British evangelical leaders such as Philip Doddridge, John Wesley, George Whitefield, and Howell Harris, took a high view of communion. She wrote in this way: (Slide 12) 'As our Lord is spiritually present in his own ordinance, so he therein and thereby doth actually communicate, or give himself, his body broken, and his blood shed, with all the benefits of his death, to the worthy receivers'. Dutton saw the Supper as God's way of admitting believers 'into the nearest Approach to his glorious Self'.

Baptists also pioneered in world mission, not least because of a missional theology. John Fawcett was converted at age 16 under Whitefield. He preached for Methodists in Yorkshire but became a Baptist. There was a 'youth revival. John Sutcliffe was a member of Fawcett's church in Hebden Bridge. In 1772 he went to Bristol to train and in 1775 he settled as Baptist minister at Olney, Northampton shire, where he became close friends with John Newton. In 1784 a Prayer Call was issued to the Association by John Sutcliffe. The call was for prayer on the first Monday evening of each month. There was a call for prayer for the spread of the gospel 'to the distant parts of the habitable globe'. William Carey (Slide 13) was a member of Sutcliffe's church in Olney and was influenced by this vision. Carey began to preach but at first the Olney church did not recommend him. But he became pastor at Moulton in 1786 and Harvey Lane, Leicester, in 1789. In 1792 he published his *Enquiry*, preached (on 30 May), which looked at possibilities for mission – with new travel possibilities, which were crucial – and then his sermon on Expect Great Things - Attempt Great Things, and then on 2 October 1792 the BMS was formed with Fuller as Secretary. Carey and others sailed to India in 1793.

In the nineteenth century Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who became known as the Prince of Preachers of the Victorian era, followed in the Fuller tradition. (Slide 14) He described his own conversion in classic terms. He went to a Primitive Methodist chapel one Sunday as a fifteen-year old. Spurgeon later wrote:

In that chapel there may have been a dozen or fifteen people. I had heard of the Primitive Methodists, how they sang so loudly that they made people's heads ache; but that did not matter to me. I wanted to know how I might be saved, and if they could tell me that, I did not care how much they made my head ache...a very thin-looking man, a shoemaker, or tailor, or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach... The text was 'LOOK UNTO ME, AND BE YE SAVED, ALL THE ENDS OF THE EARTH.'...Just fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart, he said 'Young man, you look very miserable...but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved'... 'Young man, look to Jesus Christ'...I looked until I could have almost looked my eyes away...the cloud was gone...I saw the sun.'

Spurgeon was subsequently baptised and became probably the most famous Baptist minister of all time. In his ministry at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Elephant and Castle, London, where he preached to 5,000 people every Sunday morning and evening until his death in 1892, the strongly evangelistic Spurgeon always stressed conversion. (Slide 15)

Spurgeon also encouraged study. 'I am afraid', he commented, 'that this is a magazine-reading age, a newspaper-reading age, a periodical-reading age, but not so much a Bible-reading age as it ought to be.' This exercise in serious reading involved meditation and prayer. Above all, Spurgeon believed that scripture should be read in the presence of Christ. This is how he put it:

He [Christ] leans over me, he puts his finger along the lines, I can see his pierced hand: I will read it as in his presence. I will read it, knowing that he is the substance of it - that he is the proof of this book as well as the writer of it;

the sum of this Scripture as well as the author of it... You will get at the soul of Scripture when you can keep Jesus with you while you are reading.

Spurgeon often preached on the Lord's Supper in the Tabernacle. (Slide 16) A volume of Spurgeon's communion addresses is *Till He Come*. For Spurgeon there was a real presence of Christ at the Supper, and fellowship with Christ was central. Speaking on the subject 'I will give you rest', Spurgeon affirmed: 'By faith, I see our Lord standing in our midst, and I hear Him say, with voice of sweetest music, first to all of us together, and then to each one individually, "I will give you rest." May the Holy Spirit bring to each of us the fulness of the rest and peace of God!' He affirmed his belief 'in the real presence, but not in the corporeal presence'. Spurgeon celebrated the Lord's Supper each Sunday, based on the custom in the early church 'to break [bread] on the first day of the week, and I think oftener, for it seems to me that they broke bread from house to house'.

Out of all Spurgeon's many endeavours, the training College he set up was his 'first-born and best beloved'. 'This is my life's work, to which I believe God has called me', he said, 'and therefore I must do it. To preach the Gospel myself, and to train others to do it, is my life's object and aim.' The College began as a result of Spurgeon's concern to train a young man, Thomas Medhurst, from Bermondsey, who was converted under Spurgeon's early London ministry – after Waterbeach - and was baptised in 1854. Medhurst began to preach in the open air and when two people joined the church through his preaching Spurgeon suggested to Medhurst that he should prepare for pastoral work. He had then just finished his apprenticeship to a rope-maker and was almost twenty-one. Some people had initially complained to Spurgeon about Medhurst's inadequate English. Spurgeon talked to Medhurst who said: 'I must preach, sir; and I shall preach unless you cut off my head.' The critics agreed then that he must preach.

The training was to be practical rather than literary, a down-to-earth affair rather than an imitation of Oxford or Cambridge. Spurgeon opposed sophisticated modes of speech. 'The language of half our pulpits', Spurgeon pronounced in 1870, 'is alienating the working classes from public worship'. Every encouragement was given, however, to the study not only of English but of Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Spurgeon believed that as higher levels of education became more general, preachers with limited knowledge

would find it harder to obtain a hearing. Each student should, therefore, seek to progress. Spurgeon advised one of his former students: 'Never be satisfied with yourself, but go on growing...Stick to your study even when you are in the midst of ministerial work, for you must be replenished continually or you cannot give out.' Hundreds of students were trained during Spurgeon's life time and most planted new churches.

In the 1870s black students came from North America to the College: T.L. Johnson, who had been a pastor in Denver, Colorado, came in 1875; and then Calvin Richardson, from First Baptist Church, Washington, DC. Both Johnson and Richardson went on to undertake mission work in West Africa. Thomas Johnson, who told his remarkable story in *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave*, contacted the American Baptist Union in Boston about his desire to go to Africa. On his first day in the College, Johnson, who was aged forty and very nervous about study, was given 'a very cordial welcome' by the students. Both staff and students gave Johnson extra help. Johnson was, naturally, very keen to speak to Spurgeon, whose sermons he had read in America. Johnson wrote about meeting Spurgeon: 'His first words set me at ease, but his sympathetic kindness was beyond my highest hope. He took me by the hand, asked me a few questions, and wished me success.... I felt so happy in his presence, and so at home with him, that I could not help saying, "Well, thank God he is my friend."' By the late twentieth century ethnic diversity was to be a notable feature of the College.

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The College also had links with a remarkable Baptist mission going on in this period in Germany. (Slide 20a). Johann Gerhard Oncken has often been referred to as the European Baptist 'pioneer' and as the 'father' of continental Baptists. The shaping of German Baptist churches, and also the promotion of pan-European Baptist mission owes an enormous amount to Oncken. (Slide 20b)

Oncken was brought up in the Lutheran Church. In 1813, at age 13, he came under new and dynamic spiritual influences. A Scottish merchant, John Walker Anderson, whom Oncken's father knew, took the boy to Scotland to start him on his working life and to 'make a man of him'. Oncken was to be away from Germany, in Scotland and England, for nine years.

Oncken moved from Edinburgh to London and it was at a London Methodist chapel that he heard a sermon on Romans chapter 8 that brought him to complete surrender to Christ. Oncken immediately began to give out evangelistic tracts and he used much of his spare money - and money he saved by frugal eating - to buy Bibles, which he also gave away.

In 1823 Johann Oncken was accepted by the Scottish-based, interdenominational Continental Society as a missionary to Germany. They recognised Oncken's remarkable potential. One of the co-founders of the Society was Robert Haldane, later a powerful Baptist leader. Oncken's life's work was to be based in the city of Hamburg. He later married Sarah Mann, from London.

Oncken's preaching attracted many people and there was also considerable opposition from the city authorities. In this period he began to think about baptism: 'In a shoemaker's work shop in 1829, those whose hearts were separated from the state church, gathered themselves to study the holy writings, particularly the book of Acts which, alone, is the infallible church history. Here we soon recognised that the church of Christ can only be composed of converted persons who have made a confession of their faith in His death by being baptized; and the desire moved us all to follow this recognized truth, but we had to wait five years.'

After a long wait, on 22 April 1834, Johann Oncken and six others, one of whom was his wife, were baptised by an American in the River Elbe. Oncken's diary describes how 'with joyful heart I stepped into the flood and with praising lips came out of it again onto the land.' On the next day the American visitor completed a historic task formally constituting in Hamburg the first German Baptist church, with Oncken as its pastor. Further baptisms took place, usually in the river Elbe. (Slide 21a)

An important turning point occurred when the growing congregation had a new building. (21b) There was a massive fire in Hamburg and Oncken immediately offered the Baptist meeting place to the authorities for accommodating the homeless. 80 people found food and shelter for eight months. The authorities, who had been persecuting the Baptists, became much more favourable. Rapid growth was experienced following this large-scale social ministry. In the following two years the numbers baptised were 322 and 380. During the reconstruction of Hamburg, people came from many other places in Europe to work. This created a missionary opportunity which the church was quick to

grasp. Over 15 years three-quarters of the men baptised were travelling workers. Those who were converted and returned to their cities often became missionaries.

When a bigger church building was built, C.H. Spurgeon came to preach. (Slide 22) Spurgeon and Oncken had met in London. Oncken had requested the interview. Spurgeon had at first sent a terse message in reply: 'Tell Mr. Oncken, I have no time for chats. If the angel Gabriel should call and wanted a chat, I should say to him, "Most willingly, dear Gabriel, but it must be on the other side of Jordan".' It took more than this rebuff to put off a man like Oncken. Spurgeon relented and the two shared the New Park Street Chapel pulpit in London. Later, at a baptismal service in Hamburg, Spurgeon was deeply impressed by the way Oncken asked each candidate: 'What are you willing to do for Christ?' One of Oncken's most frequently quoted statements was that 'we consider every member a missionary' (leading to the well-known motto *Jeder Baptist ein Missionar*). Spurgeon's Tabernacle supported German evangelists and students who wished further study.

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Baptist life spread across Europe from Germany to the Nordic countries, (Slide 23), to Denmark, Sweden and then to Norway and Finland. Here British Baptists were also involved. After the emerging Danish Baptist community was officially dissolved by the state, English Baptists sent, at the suggestion of Oncken, a deputation of Baptist leaders and a petition with about 400 signatures asking for the release of imprisoned Danish Baptists. Political figures such as Lord Palmerston, as well as the famous Elizabeth Fry, added their weight. Baptist work re-started. The Evangelical Alliance became important.

One of the leaders was F.B. Meyer, who travelled a great deal in Europe. (Slide 24) He became well known for his social ministry, for example, his contribution to the rehabilitation of offenders. During his ministry in Leicester in the 1880s, in a Baptist church which he formed, he discovered that men coming out of prison were quickly drawn back into crime. With the co-operation of the governor, he visited the prison daily, taking discharged prisoners to a coffee house for a plate of ham. Meyer also found ex-prisoners employment. A minority, Meyer admitted, 'turned out very badly', but he

claimed that many were converted and the prison population was reduced. Meyer involved his whole church in ministry to the city of Leicester.

Various parts of Central Europe were affected by Baptist mission. Bible Society workers were very important. (Slide 25) The most significant pioneer of Czech Baptist life was Henry Novotný. He was affected by the Bible Society, studied in Edinburgh, at the Free Church College, and his later work as a Baptist pioneer was supported by Scottish Baptists. Novotný built a chapel in his own garden. Against a background of persecution, Baptist life made progress. During its first ten years the Prague congregation grew to 180 members, with ten linked mission stations.

Hungarian Baptist work took root through the ministry of Heinrich Meyer, a forceful German missionary encouraged by Oncken with support from the British and Foreign Bible Society. Mihaly Kornya and Mihaly Toth became fellow workers with Meyer and church planters. They became known as the 'peasant prophets' of the Hungarian-Romanian Baptist mission.

Kornya became the leading evangelist. He may have baptized over 10,000 people. Meyer also baptised many. At one baptism a woman who was very ill wanted to be baptised. Meyer wrote that at 3.00 am the Baptist group went to a place where there was water. The woman who was ill was transported in a cart, and a hole was cut in the ice that covered the water – this was in the depths of winter. Remarkably, the woman who was ill was healed and was able to walk home.

On one occasion, in 1890, Kornya was arrested and locked up in a building with a fierce bull. Kornya found an area where the bull could not reach him and then managed to make friends with the bull. In the morning people were amazed to see what some took to be a divine sign – Kornya with the bull's head on his lap!

An amazing evangelical movement started in St Petersburg. (Slide 26). Lord Radstock from England spoke about the evangelical faith to several members of the Russian aristocracy who were in Paris. Radstock spoke fluent French. This led to Radstock visiting St Petersburg several times in the 1870s. The effect was extraordinary. Through his preaching several wealthy and influential figures became evangelicals - Count Aleksey Bobrinskiy, at one time Russian Minister of Transportation, Count Korff

and his wife, Princess Natalia Lieven and other members of her family, and Colonel Vasily Pashkov, a former soldier of the Royal Guard, and his wife. A mansion owned by Pashkov on the Neva in St Petersburg – he had several large estates and owned a number of mines – became an important meeting place. Pashkov and others began to print and distribute tracts, and to organise philanthropic efforts. Their ministry on behalf of the poor included hospital and prison visiting, helping unemployed people to find work, and setting up a shelter for homeless children. The movement eventually merged with Baptists. Again Colporteurs were important (Slide 27)

In the twentieth century Baptist growth continued in England and elsewhere, although in England there were many churches that declined. A movement of revival in the early twentieth century was very important. In January 1905 Archibald McCaig, the Spurgeon's College Principal, visited Wales and reported on what he called 'the wonderful works of God'. McCaig made a return visit to Wales with Thomas Spurgeon, who began special prayer meetings at the Tabernacle in March 1905 and at which six College students from Wales were prominent. (Slide 28) Caradoc Jones reported on nearly 800 people converted in his home area. Prayer meetings at the Metropolitan Tabernacle were followed by a mission in the Elephant and Castle area conducted by College staff and students, led by the six Welsh students, and 745 professions of conversion were made. McCaig was fully engaged in open air meetings – in his top hat and frock coat - and emphasised that this was not a passing revivalist phenomenon.

Many leaders continued to have this outward-looking spirit in the 20C. More widely Billy Graham and Martin Luther King Jnr. In Britain and in Spurgeon's College a generation of ministers trained by George Beasley-Murray. (Slide 29) In 1967 Beasley-Murray said that when he was asked to summarise the aim of the College, his answer was: 'To produce pastor-evangelists who can build up the churches.' The answer, he added, was framed with the example in mind of Spurgeon, who was the pastor-evangelist *par excellence*. In expanding on his thinking, Beasley-Murray suggested that pastors needed to preach the whole gospel, which meant grappling with the whole Bible and with the Holy Spirit's illumination in the Church through the ages. 'To achieve that on a significant scale', he considered, 'is an immense task. It is complicated by the fact that men and women today are out of touch with the message of

the Gospel. Their thought is moulded by agencies which take no account of God, and therefore which, for practical purposes, are atheistic.’

Conclusions....

The story is a remarkable one. Here is an invitation to celebrate the history.

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As with all new movements, Baptists are indebted to a number of broader shaping influences. They are part of the wider church. The thinking of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys and the other English refugees who established what we can identify as the first Baptist congregation, in Amsterdam in 1609, came out of English Puritanism and Separatism, and also had Mennonite influences.

The churches were small committed communities. They argued for religious freedom at a time when that was a new concept.

In the eighteenth-century period there was a great deal of new thinking about questions relating to the revival and renewal of church life. Many gifted individuals joined Baptist churches and helped to shape the Baptist community.

The story of Spurgeon and the Tabernacle is, as we have seen, crucial to Baptist growth. There were also links with German Baptist life and mission in many parts of Europe. In the early part of the twentieth century the vast majority of the Baptist membership in mainland Europe was found in communities belonging to the network of churches which Oncken and his colleagues founded.

Social ministry and also political activity on behalf of liberty have been features of Baptist witness and have at times had a significant impact.

In furthering the mission, churches have seen themselves as inter-dependent: the idea of local church independence has not been a mark of European Baptist thinking over the longer term.

At the heart of the Baptist story has been the conviction that a church is a community of believers who take the way of Jesus. They follow him. Baptism is part of that. I believe the Baptist story points powerfully to the continued need for a relevant baptistic witness in Europe today.