

Baptists at 400: Where have we been and where should we go?

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Introduction

I am going to largely limit myself to looking at my context, the Caribbean particularly Jamaica. My presentation on the topic ‘Baptists at 400: Where have we been and where should we go’ is not the first attempt at such a topic. My name is Devon Dick from Jamaica and I am a romantic person. Recently, I was on a train in England and I heard a song which was a favorite of my wife so I sent her a text message telling her I was thinking about her and love and kisses . . . Well as you know that is the fable of David Coffey, president of the BWA, and you do not want me to repeat his romantic story. Neither will I repeat what Karen and Daniel shared yesterday but to say Amen to those presentations which reminds us that my presentation is not a first attempt at this topic. Others have left their Baptist theological footprints; their Tracks and Traces; their Baptist Ways; Their Positive Baptist Vision and I am following in those big shoes hoping that this 25 minutes offering may advance the Baptist cause on this journey of God’s mission.

The theologizing and interpretation of the Global South Baptists have often been overlooked in the writing of the history of Baptist work and witness. Thankfully, there is American Historian Bill Leonard in **Baptist Ways: a History** and Jamaican-born historian, Horace Russell in **Baptist**

Witness who have given world views of Baptist work including the Global South. In addition, Merlyn Hyde Riley, Jamaican theologian, looked at Ian Randall's five crucial theological convictions which marked the early Baptist communities, namely 'Reading the Bible', 'Resisting the Powers' 'Living the Life', 'Nurturing the Community' and 'Telling the Story' and gave it a Caribbean perspective' in her paper "'Tracing Baptist Theological Footprints-A Caribbean Perspective" (BWA Netherlands 2009).

Nevertheless, more needs to be done so that the jewels of the Global South and the black gold of the Jamaican Baptists can enrich the treasure trove of the wider Baptist family. It is also true that the hermeneutical practices of the colonized of the Asian, African and South American continents and the Caribbean and the Pacific are not normally seen as sophisticated enough to be studied within biblical disciplines. This paper will therefore offer the interpretative insights from Jamaican Baptists and recommend the beliefs and practices of the Caribbean as a paradigm for what Baptists should emphasize.

ANABAPTIST ROOTS/SEPERATIST BRANCHES

In 2008, Neville Callam, now General Secretary of the BWA, in response to historian Ian Randall's '**A review of Baptist genealogy and look beyond the horizon**' at 2008 BWA conference in Prague asked "To what extent did early Baptists owe their theological emphases rather to tendencies in English Separatism than to the Anabaptist movement?"

When one reads Randall based on the many quotations from Anabaptist sources you would tend to believe Baptist origins, influences and

theological emphases should be traced to Anabaptist roots, although he seems to offer a disclaimer when he said, ‘I am not subscribing to any particular view of Anabaptist influence on Baptist beginnings.’ And British theologian Paul Fiddes in **Tracks and Traces** claims that Anabaptists have left a ‘spiritual heritage to Baptists’ 259. However, British historian Nigel Wright in **Free Church Free State** leans towards English Separatism. He stated that the founders of the first two Baptist churches were previously part of a Separatist congregation (Free 251). Perhaps he is wary of aspects of Anabaptism that were considered heretical, unorthodox and violent (**Free 33**). Wright claims that the influence of Anabaptists on English Baptists was a matter for debate but he does not deliberately enter the debate (**Free 37**). Suffice it to say, I cannot understand how it is claimed that the first Baptist church was formed as the English Baptist church in Amsterdam, ‘The first English Baptist congregation was formed in 1609 in Amsterdam under the leadership of John Smyth’ (**Free 37**). Wright probably meant first English-speaking Baptist congregation in Amsterdam rather than English representing British. Interestingly, Smyth ended his days repudiating his self-baptism while awaiting admission to the Mennonites, an offshoot of Anabaptism which would suggest influence of and or admiration of the tenets of Anabaptists.

Significantly, George Liele, founder of the Baptist work in Jamaica in 1783, did not appear to make a distinction between Anabaptist and English Separatism thinking and influences. Both streams appeared influential in his theological emphases. George Liele considered himself an Anabaptist “because we believe it agreeable to the Scriptures” (**Cross and Machete 100**). And an analysis of his Covenant in **Cross and the Machete** (100-

105) showed that the Bible was foundational and an outworking of their Biblical principles such as protesting societal norms in a pragmatic restrained manner. In addition, their interpretation of the Bible made ethical demands and made them socially conscious. Liele also invited English Baptists to Jamaica and co-operated with them, reported to them and identified with them.

According to Leonard the Anabaptists emphases were Christian discipleship which meant a commitment to pacifism, opposition to capital punishment, refusal to serve as agents of the state and religious liberty to heretics and atheists alike (**Baptist Ways** 20). Separatist churches were founded on the basis of covenant as well as congregational appointment of leaders as prescribed by the Word.

And the common thread in Anabaptists and English Separatism would be the primacy given to the Bible, in particular the New Testament. They were seeking to re-create as far as possible a Church that resembled the Early Church; to observe the teachings and practices of the New Testament community. Baptists claimed a ‘direct continuity between their own form of church and the commands of Christ in the New Testament’ (Fiddes, **Tracks and Traces** 2). They believed there was correspondence between the world of the New Testament and Baptist life. They were trying to track the New Testament Church to determine if there were traces in their present day church. Leonard added insightfully that Smyth’s theology was in constant flux ‘as he searched for clearer revelations from the Bible’ (**Baptist Ways** 24).

PRIMACY OF THE BIBLE

For all Baptists the Bible is the final authority for faith and practice (**Free 42**). There is no doctrinal statement that is universal to all Baptists, save and except, that Jesus is God and therefore a belief in the Triune God. And none should come between the Christian and the Bible. The primacy of the Bible in Baptist life in Jamaica is symbolically demonstrated by locating the pulpit in the centre of the altar and the time allocated to sermons in relation to other aspects of the worship.

The Roman Catholic Church gives equal prominence to Tradition as to the Bible, which tradition represents a consistent Spirit unfolding of the truth of Scripture. But for Baptists it is a particular hermeneutical approach to the Bible from which all other theological emphases and distinctives flow. Randall states it profoundly, “I wish to argue that what has been distinctive for Baptists has not been a doctrine of biblical authority but rather a particular way of using the Bible. “

This paper affirms that a particular reading of the Bible is a Baptist feature and in the case of the early Baptists it was a participatory reading. This participatory reading was noticed among Reformers and Anabaptists, “The Swiss brand of Anabaptism originated in the home Bible studies that were encouraged by Ulrich Zwingli, the Swiss reformer’ (**Free 35**). It was also seen among Liberation Theologians in Latin America of the twentieth century. Callam asked of Randall ‘what account does he really offer of the hermeneutical methods employed in the participatory reading of the Bible among early Baptists?’ The answer according to Wright is that the early Baptists hermeneutical method resembled a literalistic approach (Wright,

Free Church). The early Baptists seemed to have used the historical critical approach of trying to determine what the author of the Biblical text meant. Hence Smyth's shifting theological and doctrinal positions. Nevertheless, there appears to be elements of a Reader Response Approach with the participatory reading and space for many readers to interpret in a given congregational worship experience.

This same Reader Response Approach was discerned, in retrospect, in the Native Baptists of Jamaica of the nineteenth century who were of African origin. The Reader Response Approach places greater emphasis on what the reader takes to the text and the perspective of the interpretative community rather than restricting itself to ascertaining what the author of the text meant then and what the text meant at that time (**Cross and Machete 5**).

The Native Baptists were those Baptists of African origin who rejected the racial prejudice of English Baptists who claimed they could not pastor congregations because they had no theological training. They are the forebears of present day Baptists. Using their own hermeneutic key they were attracted to texts, issues and events that addressed themes of equality and justice and rejected the missionaries who legitimized their oppressive conditions as God sent. Oral Thomas, Jamaican Bible Scholar, classifies Sam Sharpe's and other nineteenth Baptists as engaging in "resistant reading" Riley. In a word it is what scholars called a hermeneutic of suspicion.

HERMENEUTIC OF LIBERATION

Wright rightly acknowledged that the church needs to be engaged with its social and political environment (**Free** 252). While Fiddes warns against using the bible 'as a collection of proof texts which are applied to back up a set of rules and regulations.' He is against the legalistic use of sacred texts to bolster inflexible convictions on one hand and on the other hand post-modern relativism which attacks Christian understand of reality (**Tracks and Traces** 50-51). In a word there is a need for meaningful hermeneutical approach.

I am suggesting that a hermeneutic of liberation as used by the Native Baptists of the nineteenth century has valuable lessons for today. The hermeneutic of liberation is from the Reader Response Approach which places emphasis on what the text means to the interpretative community and their understanding of self and their experiences. The hermeneutic of liberation is an interpretative technique which focuses on Biblical texts and Bible related texts that emphasis full freedom (**Cross and Machete** 164). It focuses on liberation of peoples who are enslaved by inequalities and injustices.

Paul Bogle and George William Gordon, National Heroes of Jamaica and Native Baptists, in utilizing this hermeneutic of liberation focused on themes of equality and justice which informed their prophetic response to the oppressive British colonial rule. At that time in Europe equality was not an accepted concept for all human races not even in the Anti-Slavery Society. However, Dr. Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), father of the Chinese republic, who made Honolulu the birthplace of the modern Chinese

revolution, had a dictum, 'All under heaven are equal' (Monument at Chinatown Honolulu).

But before Dr. Sun, ordinary, untrained seminary preachers in Jamaica, Bogle and Gordon et al in responding to British colonial oppression recognized that all were equal in the sight of God and before the law and all stood equally in need of salvation. They also perceived that God was a God of justice who will judge all fairly and every one will get their just rewards. Furthermore, justice had a holistic dimension and an eschatological outlook. Justice means having a fair share of God's resources and that in the end the just will be vindicated (**Cross and the Machete** 152-62). As Baptists seek to engage powers (be it to redeem or confront) this hermeneutic of liberation would be helpful.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND HERMENEUTIC OF LIBERATION

It is possible that a hermeneutic of liberation could enrich the concept of religious liberty. Denton Lotz, former BWA General Secretary, believes that "one of the greatest contributions that the Baptist movement has made to the church universal, that is, freedom of religion." 'Religious freedom' is the freedom of the individual to hold and practice his or her religious beliefs without government interference. Religious liberty considered to be the most important of all liberties and foundation of all the rest" (**Free** 228).

It is often overlooked that religious freedom was an individual relationship between God and the person to which no-one whether church or state should interfere. It is a personal decision for Christ to which we should be

free to engage. But it was not a broad commitment to freedom in all its dimension, otherwise the English Baptists would have been against slavery in the British West Indies from the beginning, and perhaps Liele would not have owned slaves.

Wright calls for a Free Church and Free State (**Free** xxi). Lotz agrees with Wright that this religious liberty needs a “free church over against a state-supported church” (xii-xiii). He offers examples of none free States and claims that there is a causal relationship between that and religious conflicts, “the tragic religious conflicts between countries such as Armenia and Azerbaijan, Serbia and Bosnia, following the fall of communism, and Israel and Palestine, are only a few examples of what happens when religion and the state are not separate. It is the Baptist conviction that such wars can be avoided if religion is free from state control and the state is free from religious control.” (xiii). Does Free States guarantee no religious wars? Is England a free state and isn't the Anglican Church a state church? Is USA a free state?

In Wright's vision of the future he has a preference for the “stable liberal democracy of the United Kingdom” (xxvi). It is based on a concept that democracy represents the social application of the priesthood of all Believers (**Free** 205; see also 209). But is socialism democratic? Wright also argues that the Trinity is a democracy, ‘a communion of co-equal persons begin to sound suspiciously like a democracy” (Free 233). Why not communism? In **Cross and Machete** my vision for the future hopes for an end to colonies, dependencies, departments of former colonial powers based on perceiving issues and events through the lens of liberation (207-208). Thankfully, recently, there was an earth shattering announcement in

France of reparations to Haiti. Hopefully more colonial powers will hear the Spirit. There needs to be equality of all and justice for all. There needs to be a commitment to work towards a just and responsible society.

ECUMENICAL ENGAGEMENT

Wright argues for the ‘ecumenical imperative of working towards a united church’ (**Free** 252). He desires getting involved in the ecumenical discourse and warns Baptists against sectarianism which “fails to see the importance of the whole body of Christ and imagines that its own local expression of church is all that matters” (**Free** xxv). Many Baptists believe that and want it.

To achieve this wonderful goal, the worldwide Baptist family could learn from the Caribbean where there is co-operation between Catholics and Baptists which eludes those denominations at the international level. Jamaica and Caribbean ecumenical movements are good examples of ‘unity from the roots’ (Fiddes 193) in a sharing of resources for worship, witness and social action. At the grassroots level, there is recognition of the validity of the other Christian ministry. [Last night at the Evening Worship service there was this acknowledgement by the remarks of representatives of the Mennonites, Lutherans and Seventh Day Adventists although the SDA found a way to mention Saturday Sabbath.]

The Caribbean is the first place where Roman Catholics were integrated into Ecumenical church councils as equals with other denominations. In 1971, the Roman Catholic Church was accepted as a member of the Jamaica

Council of Churches which included the Anglican Church, the Jamaica Baptist Union, the Moravians, The United Church of Jamaica and Grand Cayman, the African Episcopal Methodist Church (Edmund Davis, **Men of Vision** 8-9). In addition, only in the Caribbean ten denominations formed an ecumenical theological college in 1966 which included the Methodists, the Anglicans, the Baptists, the Moravians and Presbyterians. This was reflective of a nationalistic feeling subsequent to Jamaica gaining political independence from Britain and the return of ex-patriates to European centres. The overseas European metropolitan centres opposed such a move and predicted that it would not last but forty four years later the experiment is still working.

And again in 1973, the Roman Catholics and Baptists among others were on Church Councils as equals in the formation of the Caribbean Council of Churches (CCC). This was subsequent to Vatican II (1962-65), and ‘was widely regarded as unique’ (**Ecumenism** 61). The CCC emerged at a time when there was widespread discussion of the issues of justice and liberation in many countries (**Ecumenism** 57).

And within the Caribbean, all territories have Ministers Fraternal even where Nation Church Councils do not exist (**Ecumenism** 43). This would have included Baptists and Roman Catholics working together. Cuthbert argues that the middle class leadership of the Caribbean churches has tended to strengthen denominationalism and it is realities of the economics such as in theological education that lead to co-operation (**Ecumenism** 42). And it is the laity that has led the way in ecumenism in programs. These ecumenical groupings issue statements on public morality and co-operate on developmental programs and theological education and

Christian education publications. Importantly, the Sunday School material produced by Caribbean Christian Publications [Baptists] is used by other denominations.

1993 witnessed arguably the greatest example of ecumenism in Jamaica with the formation of LOVE FM, a successful and leading radio station, which included in the ownership structure Baptists, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Jesus Only Pentecostals, Orthodox and Charismatics and Seventh Day Adventists. They co-operate in the promotion of the spreading of the gospel through the media. This station has garnered 14% of the Jamaican audience at its peak (**Rebellion** 72-73). This accomplishment was based on years of learning together at seminaries, developing friendships and engaging in social actions against all forms of gambling and also a government policy that would only allow one religious station.

There needs also to be an engagement with the charismatic community. This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Charismatic movement in historic churches and this 20th Baptist World Alliance Congress has as its theme 'Hear the Spirit' which means that there needs to be an engagement and assessment of the Charismatics on Baptists life. Clearly they have influenced changes in worship services as witnessed by the two evening services of the BWA Congress. There has been liturgical renewal. There are similarities with Baptist thought with the emphasis on personal commitment and a deepening of a relationship with God. They are known for working on communion with God, a strong conviction about relationship with God and celebration as an important aspect of worship. There needs to be in dialogue as the Charismatics are not going away.

The ecumenical movement of the future, with Baptists playing a significant role, ought to be driven by accepting unity as a gift of God. The Baptists should engage in talks at different levels towards functional unity which would allow for sharing the same worship space and engage in joint spiritual, pastoral, social, and fundraising activities. The Baptists should also intentional work towards organic unity with Independent Baptist churches and Mennonites.

CONCLUSION

Baptists in Jamaica are known for its historic struggle against slavery and the establishment of villages, educational opportunities for the less fortunate and economic empowerment of the marginalized and will continue to be. The next generation will have to be part of the struggle for a just and responsible society. The Bible was central, is central and should be central in Baptist practice. There has been a particular reading of the Bible that gave Baptists their identity in the formative years. Going forward we need a hermeneutic of liberation that might inform how we respond to our contemporary challenges and future responsibilities and roles.

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