

A Church for the Ages

Psalm 107

When the Old Mystic Baptist Church closed its doors on February 11—exactly a month ago today—it brought an end to the 313-year story of the first Baptist church in Connecticut. The final chapter was long-anticipated, though a sad and disappointing reality, as Old Mystic Baptist has been struggling in recent years to maintain their ministry, drawing down to a mere dozen or so members with a part-time pastor. The only business left for them is to sell their building and acreage on Shewville Road, while members find another place to worship—most of whom, I believe, will join their family and friends at Poquonnock Bridge Baptist.

Obviously, times have changed. I'm not referring to when churches like Old Mystic were in their heyday. Actually, when it was first organized here in Groton in 1705, a dozen members would have more than sufficed to establish a church, as few Baptist congregations at that time would have gathered more. Being identified a Baptist in colonial New England was asking for trouble (as trouble you were seen to be); thus, it was limited to those who boldly made a choice to stand out among the crowd, insisting on personal freedom over lawful order and inspired piety over catechetical conformity, as was the case with both Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams in the 1630s. By the end of that century, there were only but a handful of Baptist congregations in New England: six in Rhode Island, three in the area of the old Plymouth colony, and one in Boston. Connecticut, protected by the Puritan Standing Order, had none.¹

One historian describes the Standing Order in this way:

¹ William G. McLoughlin, "The Rise of the Antipedobaptists in New England, 1630-1655", in *Baptists in the Balance*, Everett Goodwin, ed., Judson Press, 1997, pg. 80.

The church was the most important building in...early Connecticut communities. Known as the meetinghouse, it not only served as a house of worship, but might also function as an armory and courthouse and a place to hold town meetings.

Accepted protocols required the entire population to attend church services, but only a small minority earned admittance to full church membership. These church members enjoyed considerable power and influence. They chose and ordained their own ministers and elected elders and deacons to administer the church. They voted to admit new members and to punish or dismiss those who offended against God's laws. Although the Puritans came to America seeking the right to worship as they wished, there was no religious liberty in Puritan Connecticut. Heretics—and that included anyone who was not a Puritan—faced fines, banishment, imprisonment, or corporal punishment.²

Dissenters were ardently pursued for decades, though by the early 1700s, a Toleration Act was finally passed in Hartford to allow for some measure of religious freedom, though taxes were still collected for the benefit of the Standing Order Congregational Church.

In 1813, self-proclaimed Baptist historian, David Benedict, disdainfully described the development of Baptist congregations in our region during the previous century:

Their progress was at first extremely slow and much embarrassed; they had to work their way against the deep-rooted prejudices of a people who had been always taught, with a sanctimonious tone, that these [Baptists] were the vile descendants of the mad men of Munster³; that they propagated errors of a pestilential and most dangerous kind; that they were aiming to subvert all the established forms of religion in the land, and on the ruin of the Pedobaptist churches⁴ to plant their heretical and disorganizing principles; that for the people to hear them preach, or for the magistrates to tolerate or connive at their meetings in any of their towns or parishes, was a crime of peculiar enormity, which would expose them to the famishing and revengeful judgments of Heaven.

Such were the sentiments of most of the Connecticut people, at the period of which we are speaking. But this host of prejudices was only a shadowy obstacle to the progress of the Baptist cause, compared with those religious laws

² Nancy Findlay, "The Importance of Being Puritan: Church and State in Colonial Connecticut," <https://connecticuthistory.org>.

³ Munster, Germany was a town taken over by Anabaptists in 1533 in the three-year Rustic War against the Roman Catholic bishopric, rich landowners, and civil magistrates who oppressed peasants in a tyrannical feudal state. In 1536, the Anabaptists, led by John Leyden, were defeated and the insurrection ended, with the "Baptist" name scorned by monarchical powers throughout Europe, which carried over even to the colonies.

⁴ Churches that practiced infant baptism, which were the established state churches in Europe and in the colonies.

with which the Connecticut rulers had fenced in their ecclesiastical establishment...

In 1705, Mr. Valentine Wightman removed from North Kingston in Rhode Island to Groton, seven miles from New London, where he the same year planted a church of which he became pastor. This remained the only Baptist church in this province for about twenty years. But in 1726 another was gathered in the township of New London...and a minister by the name of Stephen Gorton became their pastor. He was a man of some eminence as a preacher and ministered to this people for many years; but he at length fell into some scandalous conduct, for which he was deposed from his pastoral office, and the church in a short time became extinct...

So slow was the increase of Baptists in this government, that in 1760, fifty-five years after Wightman erected his standard at Groton, they had only eight or nine churches [in Connecticut], which had acquired any degree of permanency, and most of these were small and feeble bodies. ⁵

However, by 1795, the number of Baptist churches had mushroomed to nearly 60 in the state, as more and more dissenting Nutmeggers resisted the tax obligation that came with the Standing Order. But it wasn't easy, as Rev. Benedict explained:

[The civil magistrates] had their eyes on the goods of dissenters more than on their persons. If they would but pay their parish taxes, they might worship when and how they pleased. But if anyone was so heretical as to refuse his money for building a meetinghouse within the parish lines, which might happen to encircle him, or to support a preacher which he never chose, nor wished to hear, then he must look out for writs, constables, sheriffs, courts, priests and lawyers, stripes, prisons, and forfeitures, and the whole sanctimonious procession of ecclesiastical tormentors. ⁶

Yes, it was not easy to be a dissenter, at least until the laws changed two hundred years ago in 1818, removing the Standing Order in the Connecticut constitution. From that time forward and with evangelical zeal, Baptist churches flourished and multiplied.

Though Noank Baptist is, indeed, a granddaughter of the Wightman church and given birth within a few years of Rev. Benedict's tome, a fair assessment is that, by the 1840s, this church was established more out of

⁵ Rev. David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America, and Other Parts of the World*, Boston: Lincoln & Edwards, 1813.

⁶ *Ibid.*

personal convenience for local villagers than with any spirit of dissent or rebellion against the state. With the mere exception of taxes, we haven't strayed far from that original premise to the present day.

The difference between then and now is also evident in how hard-fought Baptist principles, once considered rebellious, are now bread-and-butter American values—something for which Baptists are not given enough credit for by the general public. For instance, religious liberty and freedom of conscience are assumed by most Americans to be baseline constitutional guarantees, wisely conceived of by the enlightened Founders; in fact, Jefferson and company were incorporating concepts around individual rights and freedom of religion already promoted by Baptists and other dissenters for more than two centuries! Along these lines, it was Baptists of the Danbury Association⁷ who sent an appeal to President Jefferson regarding the Standing Order in Connecticut, where Jefferson coined the phrase, “a wall of separation” that should exist between Church and State, meaning that there should no longer be a specific state church in partnership with civil authority.

Then, throughout the 19th century, Baptists both influenced and adapted to the developing American democracy better than any other religious entity, especially in the pioneering spirit and individualism that propelled the westward expansion across the fruited plain. With their beliefs in “soul liberty and competency”⁸ and autonomy for the local church, fueled by an evangelical zeal for missions, small Baptist churches sprouted up and dotted the landscape in rural villages of both the North

⁷ The Danbury Association of Baptists (formed in 1790 in Danbury) consisted of all Baptist churches on the west side of the Connecticut River, from Suffield to Danbury to Stamford.

⁸ “Soul competency” means each person is spiritually and morally competent to relate directly with God, with the Bible and their conscience to guide them. No priest or pastor is required as a “gatekeeper to God”.

and South and across the western frontier, quickly becoming a part of the mainstream of American life.

As independence was a widely-shared American theme and dream, Baptists were the religious expression of it. Baptists touted personal freedom and independence as a religious philosophy as much as it was a constitutional guarantee. In fostering this notion, some Baptist churches declared themselves to be completely independent, untethered to any other church or religious order, while many others chose to operate autonomously and freely within a denominational family.

This organizing license, however, may explain why the label “Baptist” can be descriptive of just about everything that’s out there in the American religious scene. “Baptist” is about as useful as the generic term, “American,” which (depending on your point of view) can mean anything, as Americans cover the entire spectrum of beliefs and opinions pertaining to religion, culture, customs, morals, or politics. Of course, many of us cringe when we get defined in the media by the character of certain other Baptists—a broad brush that’s used mainly out of ignorance of the differences between those who claim that moniker. As we know, there are fundamentalist Baptists and extremely liberal Baptists, and everyone in between. There are “high church” Baptists with ceremonial formality and “low church” ones with folksy, casual style. There are Baptists who celebrate individual freedom and soul liberty, alongside those that impose strict standards of obedience and conformity upon their membership. There are evangelical Baptists who focus on saving individual souls and there are progressive Baptists whose mission is saving the soul of society through social justice. There are Baptists who are biblical literalists and others who are not. There are Baptists who strongly believe in equality for

women and a number that don't. There are Baptists who embrace inclusion for all sexual orientations, and Baptists who will vehemently oppose it. There are Baptists who are political activists and many who support and reflect the status quo.

Frankly, it's not hard for any of us to imagine people with whom we would vigorously disagree on every possible topic or issue and know that somewhere on the other side is another Baptist. It's crazy, but that's reality when freedom exists—people will express their differences with great conviction, often in partisan contradiction to each other. That's the proverbial Pandora's Box Baptists help to open every day in American life. We began as Separatists 500 years ago and rebellious dissent continues to this very day.

Despite this craziness being the bane of our existence, our emphasis on personal freedom and soul competency is also the genius of our religious heritage. By raising the profile and value of the individual conscience, we underscore the place and purpose of the prophetic voice. We resist conformity and “groupthink,” bringing with it the importance of personal choice to believe or not to believe. There are no religious creeds to regurgitate, no catechism or Book of Order to follow, no obligatory rituals to perform; our free church tradition provides a remarkably unvarnished and accessible path to personal faith in God—open your Bible and your heart and read. That's it, in its essence! Faith becomes a choice of the heart, not a religious duty. Each of us is free and equal to read and interpret Scripture and argue about it, and to decide if and how we will accept the gospel message and follow Jesus's way. No one is baptized into a faith they don't want to personally embrace; likewise, no one will take

responsibility for anyone else's spiritual health other than the individual himself or herself.

Granted, this is a risky venture for traditionalists and dogmatists who want to preserve the doctrinal purity and conformity of the historic Church, but I believe without ensuring freedom in our conscience and practice, meaningful faith will not be passed on through the generations with any measure of integrity. We might not agree on what the story means, only that we will do our individual part to live and tell the story of Jesus and the wonders of his love.

For me, this is precisely why Baptists are a church for the ages—not only for sharing the Christian gospel from generation to generation, but for embracing the youngest of minds to the oldest of years in its spirit and grace. As God breathed the Spirit of life into each human being, we are born free as individuals to then choose, or not choose, to follow the wisdom and ways of God. Though individual congregations come and go (even some with very long histories), the Baptist heritage of soul liberty and dissent lies at the heart of the Christian witness in any society and why our call to freedom will remain prophetically vital and essential for generations to come.

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