

Baptistsâ grass-roots identity helped spread key ideas

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HUNTSVILLE, Ala. (ABP)—While Baptists may not be able to claim sole credit as the originators of ideas such as religious liberty and the modern missionary movement, the denomination's identification with common folk helped them become "popularizers" of these and of other significant ideas, Baptist historian Carol Holcomb suggested.

Often dismissed, ridiculed and sometimes persecuted by the more educated and wealthier religious establishment in their early days, Baptists took advantage of their humble origins to "cast their lot with the common people," Holcomb said. She noted that even the great preacher and writer John Bunyan, later praised as perhaps the most famous 17th-century Baptist, was widely considered in his own day to be little more than a "tinker and a poor man"—the title of one biography of his life.

In a keynote address at the annual meeting of the Baptist History & Heritage Society in Huntsville, Ala., Holcomb "sprinted" through 400 years of Baptist history to identify some of Baptists' distinctive contributions to Christianity.

She offered four examples—one from each of the four centuries—to illustrate how Baptists' hallmark contributions were grounded in their appeal to the grass roots:

- *Thomas Helwys and his influential pamphlet, "The Mystery of Iniquity," during the battle for religious liberty in the 17th century.*
- *William Carey, often considered the father of the modern missionary movement, during the campaign for global missions in the 18th century.*

- *Ann Judson, missionary to Burma, whose name “became a synonym for faith and sacrifice in the cause of missions” and whose hand-written letters to supporters in America made her a pivotal leader in the women’s ecumenical missionary movement of the 19th century.*
- *The remarkable combination of growth and controversy among Southern Baptists in the United States during the 20th century.*

Historians, she said, are divided in their analysis of the Baptist role and contributions of the past century in America, especially during the last 30 years. No consensus has emerged, leaving many unanswered questions, she said.

“While denominational historians have been focusing on the demise of Baptists in the South, other historians have been noting the massive expansion of evangelicalism,” she said. “In fact, I would say the growth of evangelicalism after 1970 has been ‘the’ story in American religious history for nearly 30 years. But I’m not completely convinced that evangelical historians have painted the clearest picture of Baptists in their depiction of the movement. Perhaps we need a meeting of the minds to get a panoramic view of Baptists in the 20th century.”