

EDITORIAL: What makes Baptists so ... Baptist?

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Happy Birthday, Baptists. Don't faint trying to blow out all those 400 candles on your cake.

Of course, some Baptists contend we are celebrating our 1,983rd birthday—or something in that neighborhood. The exact number depends upon when they think John “the Baptist” and/or Jesus planted First Baptist Church of the Universe. Careful and reasonable readings of church history, however, suggest a tiny band of English Separatist exiles founded the first-ever Baptist church in 1609 in an Amsterdam bakery.

You can read all about the debate over when Baptists began, as well as other aspects of Baptists' story, in this issue. To help us celebrate our four-century heritage, New Voice Media partners—of which the Baptist Standard is a grateful member—have compiled a package of Baptist history articles.

Right now, I want us to think about Baptists' defining characteristic. Of course, the linguistically focused among us say it's our insistence upon believer's baptism by immersion. However, (a) Baptists didn't always immerse, and (b) plenty of other groups also immerse. Some folks would say it's our passion for missions and evangelism, and they can build a solid case. But scores, if not hundreds, of Christian groups promote missions and evangelism. Others say it's our inclination toward cooperation, but the dissolution of southern U.S. Baptists debunks that notion.

Editor Marv Knox

So, I'd like to suggest the quality that, for 400 years, has made Baptists Baptist is—drumroll, please—dissent.

That's right, our perpetual penchant for pronouncement-as-pugilism. Our enduring inclination toward discordant discourse. Our craving for cacophonous chaos. Our ... well, you get the point.

Dissent comes naturally to Baptists. It's part of our DNA, both theologically and historically.

From the theological side, Baptists are born dissenters because we affirm the twin doctrines of soul competency and the priesthood of all believers. We understand each individual is capable of approaching God directly, searching Scripture, seeking the mind of Christ and making spiritual and moral decisions. We don't need any intermediary—preacher, priest or pope—to tell us what and how to think. So, we think for ourselves. And often disagree.

Historically, the first Baptist church also split. One of the founders, Thomas Helwys, died in prison for telling King James, who also headed the Church of England, where to get off. The first Baptist in America, Roger Williams, vigorously protested the Puritans' stranglehold on Massachusetts. We've been dissenters ever since.

Some Baptists deplore dissent. You can see why. We've all seen dysfunctional churches wracked by disagreement. The "Baptist battles" of the late 20th century embarrassed the cause of Christ. And faith just feels better when we all get along.

Still, Baptists' predilection for dissent is our heritage. Sure, it's disconcerting, uncomfortable and just plain cringeworthy. But it offers distinct advantages. Dissent:

- *Fuels our passion. At root, dissent springs from our affirmation of soul competency. Disagreement isn't fun, but we stay vitally engaged when we know our beliefs and ideas matter—not only to each other, but to God.*

- *Opens us to new ideas. We debate. We argue. Sometimes, we change our minds.*
- *Helps us stay honest. Dissenters tend to say, "Hey, the emperor has no clothes." Embarrassing for naked emperors; healthy for everyone else.*
- *Maintains democracy. Dissenters present alternatives, which break bureaucratic logjams and staid thinking. Power to the people.*

O Lord, thank you for 400 years of dissenting Baptists.