

October 2009 The Practical Side of Baptist History

It was Homecoming Sunday at Yates Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina. The church, founded in 1878, was steeped in the traditions of Baptist life in the south, from towering white columns on the portico of the sanctuary to covered dishes carefully placed on tables in anticipation of dinner on the grounds. This Sunday was extra special because three new disciples were being baptized. Following a handbell prelude, a reading from Psalm 46 for the call to worship, and an invocation given by one of our deacons, the baptismal service took place.

I stepped into the baptistry in my black robe and spoke to the congregation of 300 people about the importance of baptism. Baptism was an anti-dote to our modern penchant for individualized, privatized faith under the motto "My faith is between Jesus and me." Baptism is a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ as we openly identify with the church he established. In doing so we are following the teaching and example of Jesus.

The first baptismal candidate coming into the water was, Cathy, one of our Sonshine class members. These are adults with varying kinds of special needs and disabilities. At the age of 55, Cathy had walked down the aisle in our church, told me she believed in Jesus and wanted to be baptized. According to her testimony, she had never been baptized although she had been a long time believer in Jesus.

Ever since that profession of faith, Cathy had been calling my home at night to ask me when she was going to be baptized. I had never encountered someone who was so eager to be plunged beneath the waters of baptism. I would tell her the date of the baptism and that would satisfy her. She was excited.

When it was time for Cathy to be baptized, I exited the baptismal pool from the sight of the congregation to help her down the steps into the water. She moved slowly as she descended those eight long steps. Finally in the water, I introduced her to the congregation, and informed them John Frederick, our Minister of Adult Discipleship, would read her testimony. Her testimony was simple, telling of her love of Jesus and this church.

I whispered to Cathy, "Hold your wrist like we practiced," as I tried to help her hold her hands in a way that would enable me to immerse her. It took a little longer than normal, but finally she had a grip of her wrist. I held her wrist and hand with my right hand, raised my left hand behind her head, and said, "Cathy, having heard your profession of faith in Jesus Christ our Lord, and in obedience to his commands, I baptize you, my sister, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." I lowered my left hand to her back and begin to immerse her into the water. She resisted. She tried to grab ledge of the baptistry. I knew she wasn't going down.

I asked her softly, "Will you bend down into the water?" She didn't respond. Again, I tried to push her down, but she wasn't going.

I had no sense of panic, but later would learn many in the congregation were anxious about how this was going to turn out. They could foresee a panicked adult creating an uncomfortable scene. Suddenly, a thought came to me. Was it from God? Was it my church history professor or some late night reading I had done on my own? I remembered the first Baptists in 1609 didn't immerse. It would be another generation, about 1644 when the Particular Baptists would recover the

practice of baptism by immersion. The first Baptists used the method of affusion, or pouring, to baptize professing believers.

So I whispered to Cathy, "Can I pour some water on your head?" She nodded yes. I took my left hand, scooped up some water, and poured it on her head as I said, "I baptize you in the name of the Father" (took another scoop and poured again "and of the Son" (took a third scoop and poured) "and of the Holy Spirit."

She stood there and calmly received the waters of baptism. Then she smiled and waved to the congregation. This traditional Baptist crowd responded with robust applause, an uncommon practice for them at baptisms. Cathy walked back up those steps with a giddy in her step. Following the worship service she was beaming, as person after person came to congratulate her on being baptized.

So, for all those souls who believe that church history, or Baptist history in particular, has no practical value, I present to you as empirical evidence, Cathy Collins, a baptized believer made in the image of God. Every now and then, the immersion study Baptist history will come in quite handy, ...one handful at a time!