

LESSON 6 IT'S TIME...To Rediscover the Baptist Heritage and Renew the Baptist Witness.

LESSON AIM: To help pupils understand what it means to be a Baptist.

SCRIPTURE RESOURCE: Romans 10:9-13.

CREATING LEARNING READINESS: Today I'm going to tell you a story. Everybody loves a good story. Once upon a time (actually it was in 1594) in the far away country of England there lived a man name John Smyth. John was an Anglican priest. Before we go on with the story we have to remember that the Anglican church came about when Henry VIII rebelled against the Catholic Church in 1534 because it would not give him an annulment. He declared himself head of the church which became known as the Anglican Church (we know it as the Episcopal Church) but Henry kept many of the Catholic trappings.

In the mid 1500's a group arose that wanted to reform the Anglican Church since they thought it had not broken far enough away from the Catholic Church. During the days of Oliver Cromwell they controlled the Anglican Church. This group were called Puritans because they wanted to "purify" the church. But the Puritans still maintained that there should be a state church and that all should conform to their ways. Now back to our hero. John Smyth was the model Puritan priest for a few years and then he began to criticize the Anglican Church. He thought infant baptism equated spiritual adultery and he rebuked prominent sinners from the pulpit. He ended up in the Clink. The Clink was a notorious prison in London. One of his contemporaries said of him: "a learned man, and of good ability, but of an unsettled head." He moved into the religious group called "Separatists" who separated themselves from the Puritan movement declaring it was not separated far enough from the Anglican church.

By 1606 he was living in Gainsborough. When he filled in for an absentee pastor in an Anglican church, his sermons so infuriated the church leadership that he was banned from the Anglican priesthood. He joined a group of Separatists there who included John Robinson, William Brewster and William Bradford who have a story of their own called, "The Mayflower." Another leader was a well-to-do layman, Thomas Helwys.

Persecution was a constant threat to the Separatists. King James, for whom the King James Bible is named, threatened to "harrie them out of the land." Smyth and Helwys and their followers went to Amsterdam where the government was more lenient. They tried joining forces with a group called the Ancient Church but Smyth soon fell out with them because he felt true worship must come from the heart. For him all prayer, singing of Psalms and preaching had to be entirely spontaneous. (Probably a reaction against the Prayer Book of the Church of England from which many ministers read their prayers in worship.) Smyth met some folks called Anabaptists or, as we now know them, Mennonites. They were profoundly against infant baptism, believing in believer's baptism only. This reinforced Smyth's position on infant baptism. Eventually he baptized himself and then Helwys and their 40 followers. Their firm belief in **separation**

of church and state, no hierarchy in the church, freedom to worship as they choose and believer's baptism became the basis for their church beliefs.

Eventually Smyth began to doubt the validity of his baptism and decided they all needed to be baptized again and join the Mennonites. Helwys rebelled because he did not believe in the pacifist, withdrawal attitude of the Mennonites. Most of the followers sided with him. Smyth approached the Mennonites but they would not accept him. He died a few years later in 1615 a member of no church. His few followers were eventually accepted by the Mennonites.

Thomas Helwys led his followers to return to England in 1611. The following year he published his famous work **A Short Declaration of the Mistery of Iniquity**. An attack on the Church of England, it was a defense of religious liberty for all. It got Helwys in trouble because he attempted to present a copy personally to King James. Failing that he sent him a copy inscribed with a personal note on the inside flap. The king was offended by his bluntness and Helwys was sent to Newgate Prison where he died in 1616.

But it was not over for the Baptists as Helwys' followers became known. By 1624 there were five Baptist churches in England. By 1650 there were at least forty seven such churches.

In 1630 another Anglican priest who was feeling the pressure of the King, left England for Massachusetts. His name was Roger Williams. When he met opposition there from the local authorities who, although they had fled from the same thing in England, were just as intolerant of any dissident voice in the new colony. William Brewster, who had been John Smyth's friend many years before, commented that Williams was headed in the same direction as Smyth. Eventually Roger Williams did just that. He left Massachusetts to form a new colony called Rhode Island where he established the first Baptist church in America. The End.

Now you know where you came from if you are a Baptist. What was it that made these people and their church unique...and if we are Baptist in the true sense of the word, make us unique. Obviously—number one--- from the name they assumed they believe in **believer's baptism**.

In the pupils's book Dr. Dan Vestal list some reasons why he is a Baptist so let's look at those.

WRITE on the board "**I am a Baptist because I believe in a:**" Add each of the four topics as you discuss that section of the lesson.

A. NON-HIERARCHIAL APPROACH TO DOING CHURCH

(No one above handing down directions as to beliefs or church polity)

Ask: 1. What's the advantage of a hierarchical approach to doing church?

Decisions are made for you

Limited controversy
You know where you stand
There's someone to fall back on

Ask 2. What's the advantage of a non-hierarchical approach to doing church?

There's no one telling me what I have to believe or what I have to do
I'm responsible for my own decisions
I can be in direct contact with God through my prayer life without a human intercessor.

B. A NON-CREEDAL APPROACH TO FAITH

Ask: 3. What's the difference between a creed and a confession of faith?

Creed is a prescribed set of beliefs to which all members must subscribe or be subject to expulsion. Creeds are exclusive.

Confession of faith is a statement of beliefs to which the majority of the group agrees but which is not binding on all the members. Confessions are inclusive.

READ Romans 10:9-13. ..because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified and he confesses with his lips and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek: the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For everyone one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved."

COMMENT: Paul use the word "confess" several times. He says all we have to do is confess Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead to be saved. That is the only requirement and that anyone who does that, no matter what background, is saved. No paper needs to be signed, no long list of beliefs subscribed to. It is a simple act of making this statement.

Because of their strong belief that each person can interpret the scriptures for themselves, Baptist have rejected the idea that everyone in their group must agree on all things. Baptist began using Confessions of Faith in the 1600's as a public relation tool to counteract information accusing them of heresy and weird behavior, to clarify their basic beliefs for their own members, and to discover other churches with similar ideas. Individuals, churches and groups of churches wrote covenants.

ASK 4. What problems arise when you require people to sign or adhere to a creed?

Who is going to enforce it?

Who is going to interpret it?
What's the penalty for not keeping the creed?

ASK: 5. Some have said that Baptist are anti-intellectual. Why? What's your response to that?

Education was not for the masses for centuries. Only the clergy and limited wealthy people had access to books and education prior to the Reformation. Resentment of the educated and the rich was reflected by many in the churches that emerged from the Reformation. Since the clergy had suppressed the masses for so long and since their approach to worship was in language not understood by the congregation, Baptists and others were often anti-intellectuals in the beginning. For more than a hundred years, some churches refused to have anyone with any education preaching. Everything had to be "spirit led." Eventually those folks faded from the scene. Baptists became great advocates of education and started some of our great institutions of higher learning: Example- In 1664 Harvard's first president was basically a Baptist because he refused to allow his son to be baptized until he reached the age of accountability. He eventually got fired because of his position. George Washington University was begun by Baptist Luther Rice. Furman University was begun by Baptists and was one of the first colleges in the South. NC alone had 7 Baptist Colleges.

C. BELIEVE IN FREEDOM

Ask: 6. Historically Baptist have allowed their members and sister churches to have a lot of freedom as to what they believe. What is the end result of that positively and negatively?

Positively

Allowed folks with different ideas to work together to accomplish what they could not do on their own.
Allowed a lot of creativity

Negatively

Caused some conflict because of differing points of view
Given a perception of wishy washy

D. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S GRACE IN JESUS BINDS US TOGETHER

Ask: 7. Even though traditionally Baptists have diverse outlooks, what beliefs are generally common to true Baptist?

- Belief in Jesus Christ necessary for salvation
- Baptism as an act of witnessing one's faith though not necessary for salvation
- Priesthood of the believers
- Autonomy of the local church
- Virgin Birth
- Trinity
- Bible as truth of God

Ask: 8. What is the difference between being a Christian and being a Baptist? Which is more important?

Basically it is a question of polity more than theology. The essence of Christianity flows through all real Christian religions. The one great thing in Christianity is a personal experience with God's grace revealed in Jesus Christ. This is the center. This is what binds us together. It's in the area of **how we do church** that we differ.

We have a lot of different kinds of Baptists. Mead's **Handbook of Denominations in the US** list 25 organized Baptist denominations. That's **groups**. There is no telling how many independent Baptist churches not affiliated with any group there are. The same thing binds us together as Baptist that binds us together as Christians. Again, it's in the area of how we do church that we differ.

The great commission is very open. It tells us what to do, not how to do it. Jesus gave us the basis for Christianity and told us to go, baptize and teach. That leaves the door wide open for us as a church and me as an individual to be missional in my own way.

CONCLUSION Ask for class members to participate in a "sound off." In a "sound off" folks will spontaneously finish the sentence in a few short words expressing their feelings. Anybody can speak and in any order.

The sentence for the "sound off" is – **I'm glad I'm a Baptist because...**

Second sentence for "sound off" is – **I'm glad to be a Baptist at 'Your church name'**

Finish it off with your own "sound off."

CONCLUDING PRAYER thanking God for all those who have made it possible for us to be Baptists right here at this church.