

CELEBRATING 400 YEARS OF BEING BAPTIST *Baptist Beginnings, 1609*

In 2009, Baptists around the world are celebrating the 400th anniversary of the founding of the first Baptist church. English Christians living in Amsterdam, Holland, began meeting for worship in a bakehouse, and sometime in early 1609, the group held its first baptismal service. While planning that service, the group encountered a serious problem. No one in the group had experienced baptism as a believer. They all had been baptized as infants in the Church of England.



John Smyth

The leader of the group, John Smyth, suggested that he baptize himself first and then baptize the other believers. Each person baptized was an adult who had confessed belief in Jesus Christ.

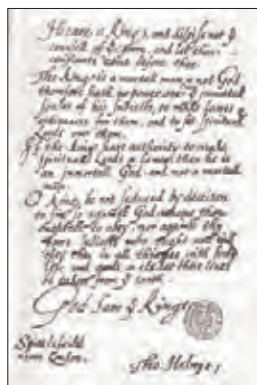
This small group was committed to the belief that church membership should be based on a personal confession of faith followed by believer's baptism. Their radical decision countered the religious expectations of their homeland of England, where in the seventeenth century, all citizens were required to be members of the Church of England. Refusing to adhere to this requirement meant being subjected to fines, whippings, and imprisonments.

A desire for religious freedom and the study of the New Testament led this small band of Christians to reject infant baptism and found a new church. Thus, in 1609, led by Smyth and Thomas Helwys, these religious dissenters became the first Baptists.

In 1612, Helwys and about ten other members sailed home to England, settled near London at Spitalfield, and planted the first Baptist church on English soil. Shortly after his arrival in England, Helwys published *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, the first document written in English that called for complete religious freedom. Helwys asserted that the king of England had no power to control religious beliefs or practices, but instead each person, regardless of his or her religious beliefs, must have complete spiritual freedom. Helwys also challenged the king to allow individuals the right to read and interpret scripture. Failing to allow such freedom, Helwys noted, would result in the people being kept in "woeful spiritual bondage."

For the past four hundred years, Baptists at their best have continued to affirm and defend the freedoms embraced by our earliest Baptist leaders.

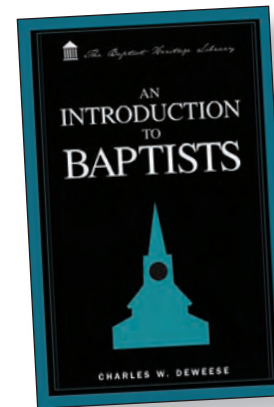
Flyleaf of Thomas Helwys's
Mystery of Iniquity



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