

*'Baptist beginnings in South Africa exemplify the concept of the priesthood of all believers. It was a small group of laymen who laid the foundation'* Sydney Hudson-Reed

There are three things we can do with our past: ignore it, idolize it or listen to it. As Baptists reach the anniversary of their presence in Southern Africa in May 2020, it is hoped that this brief account of Baptist beginnings will help us listen to the past in order to become better Baptists in the future.

There is a grave stone in South Africa which is inscribed with the most unusual and unique epitaph. It reads as follows:

*To the memory of WILLIAM MILLER  
who departed this life 29<sup>th</sup> November 1856  
aged 77 years and six months.  
Deceased was one of the British Settlers of 1820  
and founder of the Baptist Church of South Africa*

Everyone of Baptist belief in South Africa owes a debt of gratitude and responsibility to the 'founder of the Baptist Church in South Africa' and the ten persons who arrived with him in May 1820. Brother Miller was one of God's pioneers, and it is fitting for us to remember him at this time. He embodies both in character and conviction that particular version of the Protestant faith that was planted on southern African shores in 1820. He, and the other English Baptists, brought something new to our shores and pioneered in the history of Christianity in South Africa the Baptist version of Protestantism. The Christianity he and others transplanted from England took root in the sandy soil of Albany Eastern Cape. The sapling was fragile and required diligent nurturing, but after five years it had taken root. We today who call ourselves South African Baptists are part of that 200 year old tree and it is appropriate that we cherish those formative years which have given us so much. Our pioneers initiated, as all pioneers do, new departures from the norm and created unprecedented precedents for future generations. They laid foundations at great cost and their followers reap what they have sowed. We do well at this time to honour them and contemplate where we would be without them.

Hoping to vitalize the branches of bicentennial Baptists with some nourishment from the roots, I want to provide you with a few extracts from a valuable letter of William Miller which he wrote in 1854, as he looked back on the genesis of the Baptist movement in South Africa (preserved for us in Sydney Hudson-Reed's *Baptist Beginnings in South Africa 1820-1877*). They concisely capture for us some key events of earliest period of the Baptist story.

## **Why the Baptists Came**

*"This necessity of increasing the population of the frontier led the home government to propose the granting of 100 acres of land to emigrants willing to locate in the part of the frontier called 'the Zuur Veld', or sour country, immediately in front of Kaffraria"*

Baptist history exists in South Africa because ordinary people were emigrating. They had no grand resolve to plant churches in the Cape Colony or evangelise the indigenous peoples of Africa. Many, if not most, came ashore unaware of some of the geo-political factors that had shaped the offer of free land in the Albany region. Their outlook and horizons were narrow, and the issues between the

Rharhabe and Gcaleka Xhosa tribes and the Colony appear to have been of little concern to them. Amongst them were no William Careys or Hudson Taylors. The first Baptist church was not the brainchild of any Missionary Society. Baptist history began in our land with ordinary people who like most of us were going about the demanding business of making a living and caring for their families. However, these ordinary Christians had extra-ordinary beliefs. Their ordinary lives were dominated by beliefs that were generally unpopular in their homeland and were certainly unprecedented in their adopted country. They carried with them the resolve to live out their particular Christian beliefs regardless of the opinions of others and or pressures of their circumstances. This faithfulness to their unpopular principles was the gift they gave to the Church in South Africa.

Miller's letter reflects a problem that arose in the early 1800's in the Cape Colony. Xhosa tribes were



moving south over the Great Fish river into the Colony. After military repulsions by the English they were forced back beyond the Great Fish, leaving a vulnerable vacuum of real estate that needed to be populated by the right people. So with Parliament back in England contributing generous grants, the opportunity to obtain land to farm in sunny Africa was extended to applicable Englishmen. Life had been extremely hard in post-Napoleonic Europe and the possibility of a better life was naturally attractive to many. Oblivious to the real reasons for the invitation – to be a buffer-zone for the Cape Colony in a very infertile region - about 4 to 5000 people left for the far-off Colony

in 1820 and 1821. Amongst the many Christians who immigrated, the Baptists were, in the words of Miller, 'perhaps the smallest religious community'.

So why did the Baptists come to Southern Africa? For outside observers such as ourselves we could say that most Baptists came to our land in the hope of giving their families a better life. But this 'better life' for them meant being part of a local and independent congregation that practiced church in the Baptist way. Ordinary motives and extra-ordinary faith combined and were the means God used to bring Baptists to Algoa Bay in May 1820. They are a testament to how God works in history to accomplish his purposes, for though human motives are never exactly aligned with God's purposes in history, yet as the old Afrikaans proverb says *God kan reguit slaan met 'n krom stok!* ('God can strike accurately with a skew stick').

### The Company of Baptists

*"It was in October 1819, that the following persons being baptists formed themselves into a company, and chose as their leader, Mr. William Shepherd, intending immediately upon arrival at the land of their adoption to establish that form of doctrine and discipline to which from choice they had attached themselves, viz: Mr. and Mrs. Temlett, Mr. John Miller, Mr. William Miller, Mr. and Mrs. Shepherd, members of York Street Chapel, London, Mr. and Mrs. Trotter, Mr. and Mrs. Prior, members of Eagle Street Chapel, under the pastoral care of the Rev. Mr. Ivimey. Through a kind and gracious Providence the emigrants arrived in safely in Algoa Bay, now Port Elizabeth, in the month of May"*

Our pioneering Baptist party put foot on African soil at Algoa Bay on Monday the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 1820. With that, the Baptists had arrived! They made history because up till then there were no Christians in

South Africa (as far as I know) who believed Christ wanted his believing followers to be baptised by immersion. This company of baptised Christians came from two independent Baptist 'chapels' in London: York Street Chapel and Eagle Street Chapel. The York Chapel, founded in 1790, was in central London and apparently the home church of the famous missionary Robert Moffat. William Miller, his wife and brother and two couples came from this congregation. Eagle Street Chapel (founded in 1736) was in north London and the home church to two emigrant couples. They brought with them the convictions, practices and theological divisions characteristic of English Baptists at that time. Most were probably Particular (Calvinistic) Baptists and the others General (Arminian) Baptists. Though this theological divide would raise its head later, our company of Baptists attests to a precious sense of congregational living which they brought with them to South Africa. Their friendship in Christ and their shared vision of the church was immensely valuable for these ordinary Christians. Besides the positive impetus this solidarity produced in the church covenant they formalized at Salem, it also prevented an almost natural assimilation of individuals into the established Christian networks already existing in South Africa, such as the Methodist, Anglican and Congregational. Their theological convictions and ecclesiological kinship ensured the transmission of Baptist principles in our country of which we are the grateful inheritors.

### **The Ministry of the Holy Spirit**

*"No sooner had the little party of baptist arrived...than they at once betook themselves to erect an altar to the God of their fathers, and because they had no better place for this purpose, they held their first religious service in the tent of Mr. W. Shepherd. It was at this time and place that I first opened my humble but solemn commission. I had for many years past felt a strong desire to do good to the souls of my fellow men, yea, I may say from the day that I was baptised... I not only said of the people of God, This people shall be my people, and their God shall be my God, but that I was willing to take the gospel to the beds of the sick and the dying, to prisons and workhouses and this desire was strengthened by a strong impression made upon my mind as though by a voice spoken above me saying, 'You must fly with the gospel'. It was now in the end of the earth, in the midst of a very few names, that I commenced my humble labours.....At Salem Mr. W. Shepherd erected a small settlers cottage, and it was in this cottage that we held our religious service, entered into a church union, and...I became their pastor, and, for the first time in South Africa, administered the ordinance of the church, and soon after one was added to the Lord, who I baptised in the small river running through Salem, being the first adult baptised by immersion in South Africa."*

What prospects did these middle-class artisans have going for them? They were too small a party to warrant an ordained minister to accompany the flock into this strange land. Compared to the numerous Methodist immigrants who were served by the competent and godly Rev. William Shaw, the prospect for the Baptist party was not at all promising. They had no formal church support behind them and agricultural and economic hardships lay ahead of them. Yet the emergence and action of the Baptists of Salem is eloquent witness to the reality of the sufficiency of Christ to lead his flock and of the ability of Holy Spirit to equip them for the work at hand. William Miller had no formal theological training and since he was not ordained he could not be titled 'Rev. W. Miller'. Though the first Baptist minister in South Africa was a farmer and a carpenter he was recognized by his congregation as a man of compassion and conviction who knew his (KJV) Bible and his (Calvinistic) theology. His contemporaries described him as 'a man of strong sense and a ready speaker'. I think in brother Miller we see the truth of Paul's parting words to the elders of Ephesus, 'keep watch over

yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers' (Acts 20:28). Though without so much that is normally seen as necessary for successful church work, it was the work of the Spirit that proved the essential ingredient in the ministry of Christ's church.

In his account mentioned above we see the preparation of the Lord in Miller's life. He had, no doubt, expected to serve in some ministry in England, visiting 'prisons and workhouses', yet it must have dawned upon him that the Lord was introducing him to a future somewhat different to earlier expectations. Perhaps the words of Mordecai to Esther had entered his mind in those early Salem days '*And who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*' The burden of the Spirit in William Miller's life and the belief of those immigrants that 'every believer is a priest' allowed much needed Christian leadership to emerge and feed and direct the flock at this embryonic period.

The company of Baptists now had a pastor, and one of his first tasks was to baptise one of the English settlers, Mrs. Martha Rayner. So in the little stream in Salem something ground-breaking was done, introducing into the stream of South African history the practise of believer's baptism by full immersion. This mode of the Lord's ordinance is now practised by most Evangelicals in our land, though with little remembrance of that Baptist company and certainly not of Martha Rayner. The Lord was bringing something new into our land, reminding us of the prophet's words 'not to despise the day of small things' (Zech 4:10).

### **Hardships yet Rooted**

*"My temporal circumstances having met with a sad reverse, I was driven from Salem to Graham's Town that I might provide for my household, and thus my labours in this town became more frequent.....It now became needful to have a more convenient place of worship, and as the greater Master had honoured me in making me the instrument of establishing the baptist church, so was I requested to lay the foundation stone of the first baptist chapel"*

The hardships experienced by these pioneering Baptist settlers brought many changes but the ministry of the gospel never stopped. In 1821 pastor Miller lost his wife, and sole care for his children, 9 year old Elizabeth, 7 year old Mary Ann and 3 year old John now rested on him. He worked hard as a carpenter and conducted services in a Graham's Town carpenters shop for about 22 members and 20 children. He would walk great distances to care for his flock. Being by nature sturdy, hardworking, and diligent, brother Miller persevered as he looked after family and church. Being a preacher of Calvinist principles and having a firm faith in God's providential sovereignty over all things good and bad, Miller had valid reasons for this perseverance. Added to this hardship were three years of failed wheat crops. The effect of the agricultural disaster was to bring more people to town for support, and attendance at services increased. Miller's brother soon bought land on Bartholomew Street for the building of a chapel. On 7<sup>th</sup> September 1824 the first Baptist chapel in South Africa was erected. The Baptists were here to stay!

What sort of weekly ministries occupied these Baptists in these early years? In a letter written two years later by the deacons, informing Baptists back in England of the work undergone in Graham's Town, we have the following description:

- Two services with preaching on Sunday mornings and evenings.

- A Sunday school next Sunday (60 children).
- A Wednesday evening meeting with preaching.
- On Monday night and Sunday morning at 7:00 a prayer meeting for all.
- A members prayer meeting on Friday night for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit
- On the first Monday of the month there is a Missionary Prayer Meeting.

This activity shows us that these frontier pioneers were seeking to follow in the footsteps of the apostolic church that 'devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer' (Acts 2:42). Congregational gathering for preaching and prayer marked the activities of the first Baptist church in South Africa.

Very sadly amidst all the preaching and the praying some of the deacons and members were dissatisfied. Internal discord had arisen prior to September's opening, and by June of 1825 pastor Miller was suspended from the pastorate over 'inconsistencies of conduct'. Mostly likely the issue was one of doctrinal principles, since history bears witness to the pastor's upright character. Miller was described as a bold English Puritan and a champion of his creed. His inflexible adherence to his Calvinistic principles was probably the issue underling the division. Discontent all too easily set in and the pastor's lack of formal ordination and training provided a good reason in the minds of some for him to step down. So after five years of service to his flock, the pastor was asked to leave. After his suspension a man Miller had baptised out of Congregationalism into Baptist belief was installed as his successor. Yet the discord had not settled down and by 1830 this second pastor, Mr Samuel Duxbury, left for America amidst divisions within the diaconate and church. This resulted in 1831 in a suspension of services at the Baptist chapel for a while. Gratefully with the coming of Rev. William Davies, sent from the Baptist Missionary Society, a new period of consolidation and growth began.

Though this first Baptist church has left us this shameful testimony of discord and had nearly dissolved, a new Christian leader with courage, endurance and evangelical focus solidified the gains and ensured that the Baptist work in South Africa took root. The first pioneering season was now passed and the next chapter was underway. All the weekly praying and preaching that was heard in the new chapel was remembered by God, and a new season had begun.

### **Final words**

*"Thus the baptist church became established in Albany, on the frontiers of the colony of the Cape of Good Hope. This cause still retains its position; several of those who assisted in its formation have removed to the house of their Father above and I am old and grey-headed, and waiting till my change shall come. But glory be to God, the cause is young, fresh, vigorous and prosperous; instead of the carpenter's shop, or the tent of William Shepherd, we have now in Graham's Town two large and substantial chapels, having respectable, and in some instances, wealthy members, with good congregations and Sunday Schools. The two churches are under the pastoral care of Rev. Alexander Hay and the Rev. Thomas Bolton. To God be all the glory. William Miller, Thorn Cottage, Graham's Town"*

With no note of spite or disaffection, William Miller closes his account. Instead of seeing the division of the mother church as detrimental, the great pioneer gives glory to God. He was able to see the fruit of his hands and the growth of the Baptist work in the Albany region and beyond. The first Baptist

pastor had done what he was called to do and rejoiced to see others continue what he had begun in the Lord.

His words also bring us to the end of this brief description of the genesis of Baptist work in South Africa. As with most history (including our own lives) *'we have this treasure in jars of clay'*. Yet our pioneers deserve to tell their story and we need to listen with one ear tuned to human sympathy and the other to critical discernment. The Baptist story in South Africa began with very commonplace people who wanted to maintain a way of doing church that was uncommon. Their need to gather as the congregation of Christ for mutual edification by prayer and Scripture established a biblical pattern of being the church that was both vital and strategic. Mission outreach would come with the German Baptists in 1867. But even though sinful pride contaminated the simplicity of their congregational independence, the strong convictions of these Baptist pioneers remained, leaving for the wider church in South African a witness to a biblically principled way of doing church. May we keep their flame burning!



*"The significance of the founders of the first Baptist Church in South Africa is not to be measured in outstanding personalities or achievements nor in the multiplication of numbers. It is to be found in their adherence, however imperfectly, to basic Baptist principles"*

Sydney Hudson-Reed.