



Thomas Helwys

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Thomas Helwys is credited for establishing the first Baptist Church on English soil in late 1611 or early 1612, when he and a handful of followers returned from Holland. Helwys and a company of believers fled governmental persecution of Separatists in 1607 with John Smyth.

The church led by Helwys upon his return to England was "General Baptist" in doctrine: i.e., they believed in a general atonement in contrast the belief of the later "Particular Baptists" who believed that the atonement was only for those predestined for salvation. Helwys lived out his short life in the theological tension between the doctrines of election and free will. This is a theological tension that most of us Baptists live in today.

Perhaps the main contribution of Thomas Helwys and his persecuted Baptist minority to us today is their call for religious liberty. That minority knew something that is easily forgotten by the church when it becomes a powerful majority, namely, that the conscience must be entirely free from outside perks or pressure if it is going to make a valid, voluntary faith response to God's inviting grace.

In 1612, when the state was insisting on religious conformity, Helwys wrote *A Short Declaration of the Mistery of Iniquity*, in which he made his claim for freedom of worship. In 1613, he included the following inscription which brought him imprisonment in Newgate Prison by order of an irate King James I:

The King is a mortal man and not God, therefore hath no power over the immortal souls of his subjects to make laws and ordinances for them and to set spiritual Lords over them.

Helwys died sometime between his imprisonment and 1616, but spiritual descendants such as John Bunyan and John Milton in England and John Clarke, Roger Williams, Isaac Backus and John Leland in the Colonies continued the cry for religious liberty and its logical corollary, the separation of church and state.

Through out our history we Baptists have insisted upon the complete separation of church and state. By this we have meant that the state has no right to interfere with the religious beliefs and practices of individuals or congregations; and that the church on its part, has no claim upon the state for favored status or financial support.

Religious liberty - separation of church and state - it is our Baptist birthright that comes to us from Thomas Helwys and our English beginnings. We would do well not to sell our birthright for a "mess of government pottage."

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