

## **BLEST BE THE TIE (AND NOT THE CLONE) THAT BINDS!**

*Baptist Times* 28 July 2005 [not printed in this revised form]

This week the world comes to Birmingham, as Baptists from all over the world gather in the National Exhibition Centre to mark the centenary of the Baptist World Alliance.

What I wonder will be the high-light of the 2005 Congress? Will it be the great music? Will it be the speakers? Or will, it be the fellowship?

If my experience is anything to go by, then what people will remember most will be meeting with fellow Baptists from all over the world. We shall discover afresh the truth of that great Baptist hymn, "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love". Incidentally, although I have yet to see a copy of the Congress hymnbook, if such a book exists (for I guess all the hymns and songs will be beamed up on vast screens), I would bet my last copper dollar that we will be singing of the "fellowship of kindred minds", which is "like to that above". For Baptists this hymn has become the equivalent of the national anthem. And rightly so, for when Baptists come together in this way they do not form a church (for Baptists the church is always local), but a 'fellowship of believers'.

If we are honest, this 'fellowship of believers' can be a pretty motley crew. There is an old joke that goes around that for every hundred Baptists, there are a hundred, if not one hundred and one, different opinions! As we shall discover again at Birmingham, Baptists, thank God, are not monochrome, but rather the Baptist label covers a wide variety of views. Some Baptist groups, alas, have found this very variety disturbing – and yet surely unity in diversity is of the essence of the Gospel?

So what then makes Baptists 'Baptist? Strange as it may appear, there is no one distinctive Baptist belief. So although many people think of believers' baptism as the primary Baptist distinctive, Baptists are in fact not the only Christians to practise believers baptism - believers baptism is practised by Pentecostals, the 'new churches', and many other Christian groups too. Another key Baptist distinctive is the concept of congregational church government - however, as the very term implies, this concept is shared too by Congregationalists (most of whom in Britain have now become part of the United Reformed Church) and by other Christian churches too. Likewise, other important Baptist distinctives such as the priesthood of all believers or the separation of church and state, are not peculiar to Baptists, but are shared by many other Christians too. What makes Baptists 'Baptist' is the way in which these various beliefs are combined. These distinctives can be likened to a set of genes, which because of their particular arrangement produce a family likeness wherever Baptists are to be found. Yes, there are differences – just as there are differences within any family – and yet we belong to one another. Woe betide those who would impose uniformity on us – cloning is an unnatural and ultimately God demeaning process.

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