

## **Baptists en France**

### **Text for Françoise Roux**

I am certainly not qualified to speak about Baptists in all of Europe, let alone in the rest of the world. But I'm glad to be able to share one or two specific points about Baptists in France.

First of all, let me say how much I appreciated the clarity and completeness of Dr. Wichary's lecture. I could have signed almost every line on every page. Here and there I gleaned a few details I didn't know, such as why in 1609 the non-Anglican refugees in Amsterdam did not become outright Anabaptists/Mennonites. Summing up Baptist (and evangelical) piety with what St Augustine heard in the next-door garden was brilliant. Sooner or later I would like to use this historic *tolle lege* (take, read) in my sermons.

### **Evolution**

On one point, it seems to me that French Baptists are not on the same wavelength as their Polish or American counterparts. Since the work of Henri Blocher, French mainline Baptists are less hostile to the theory of evolution. His book *Révélation des origines* (published in English under the title *In the Beginning*) was a watershed. The Faculté Libre de Théologie Evangélique (Free Faculty of Evangelical Theology) of Vaux-sur-Seine is representative of a position that would say that the first chapters of Genesis, properly understood using careful exegesis, do not teach a recent creation in six days. This would also be the position of Lydia Jaeger, director of studies at the Institut Biblique (Bible Institute) in Nogent-sur-Marne. In the Baptist Federation, as in my own Baptist Association, creationists are probably in the minority. In the third Baptist family, the independent Baptists, who are more fundamentalist, a recent creation in six days would be a dogma.

### **Baptists and Catholics**

Concerning the relations between Baptists and Catholics in France, I find that Dr Wichary described a Polish situation that is similar to ours. Overall, I don't think that 70% of the Baptists in France are former Catholics, so relations can be simpler. It is in the Assemblies of God (Pentecostals) that one would probably find a figure of this order. And again, Pentecostalism arrived in France in the 1930s, so there must be many second and third-generation Pentecostals. But as Henri Blocher has said in various articles – and I take up the idea in my forthcoming book on the subject – the presence of former Catholics in our churches can make local relationships delicate. When some say, "I was lied to, I wasn't told about salvation" and others say, "I found Christ there, I am eternally indebted to Father so-and-so", the local pastor is in a difficult position. I think the idea of respectful dialogue is gaining ground, and relationships at different levels are being built, despite some resistance here and there.

In the Groupe national de conversations catholiques-évangéliques, (National Catholic-Evangelical Conversation Group), which I am leaving at the end of this year, we are well aware of the pitfall of dialogues that do not dare to address the difficult issues. In the joy and surprise of finding brothers and sisters in unexpected places, what we have in common will inevitably come to the fore. The most difficult subjects will not be the first to be discussed. But when there is trust, we can talk about everything. This implies interpersonal relationships that are built up over a period of time.

### **Charismatics**

I think that Dr. Wichary described well the diversity of the charismatic movement and the different types of relationships that charismatics and non-charismatics have within evangelical

circles. The books (in French) by the Dominican Michel Mallèvre and by the protestant sociologist Sébastien Fath describe this diversity well. The creation of the Conseil national des évangéliques de France (National Council of French Evangelicals) in 2010, after 10 years of discussions, testifies to the reconciliation of two worlds that did not mix much, except to go hunting for followers. A serious cause of division would be the doctrine, formerly that of the Assemblies of God in France, which affirms that the baptism of the Spirit is necessarily followed by speaking in tongues, hence the obligation to go and announce it to second-class Christians, who are only disciples of John the Baptist (cf. Acts 19). This line of thought has lost much of its force, but it can be found on the Internet, it remains problematic, and prevails especially in circles without serious biblical training. Otherwise, I would say that in Evangelical circles the theological gap between charismatics and non-charismatics is minimal, while the cultural (and liturgical) gap is quite large.

## **Conversion and baptism**

When pastor Mateusz Wichary talks about conversion, he does so in terms that are very familiar to Evangelicals, and he draws conclusions that many French Evangelicals would agree with. But there are nuances that are made evident in the second chapter of *Évangéliser Aujourd'hui : Des catholiques et des évangéliques s'interpellent*. It is a chapter I worked on with sister Anne-Marie Petitjean.

For many Evangelicals the conversion model, called “initial conversion” by my Catholic friends, is Saint Paul’s conversion. We associate it with the “new birth” found in John 1.12-13 which links it to faith, rather than to baptism, and in John 3, where a link to baptism fails to convince us.

Timothy’s conversion was quite different from Paul’s, being the fruit of his mother’s and his grandmother’s testimony. It was first of all that of a child growing in faith. There is certainly a moment of change in the life of children of Christian parents, but it is sometimes a time that can’t be identified exactly, and is known to God alone. The “Damascus road” model is not valid for everyone.

Does the baptism of little children prevent a real conversion of the heart later on? Yes and no. Many Catholics would say that baptism received in the first weeks of a child’s life has to bear fruit later, must be confirmed later, or else there is a problem. But there are two ways of understanding that. I have a quotation from John-Paul II which says that baptism is effective whatever the person does to deny it. Others would say on the contrary that people can choose freely not to commit to a life with Christ, that baptism can be rejected. In John Paul II’s approach, we can easily understand that too many people consider themselves to be safe for all eternity without having shown any signs of commitment to Christ. And in this case the baptism of little children is a major obstacle to self-examination and conversion. But in other cases, a little child’s baptism can be the first step in the long path of faith.

Gordon MARGERY, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2021