

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 81

Baptist History – Part One

INTRODUCTION

Ever heard of the Southern Baptist Convention? Of course! It's the United States' second largest Christian denomination (second to the Roman Catholic Church). How about the National Baptist Convention, USA or the Baptist Association of America? The American Baptist Churches USA? The American Baptist Association (Landmark Baptists)? Maybe the Baptist Union of Great Britain or the Baptist Union of Sweden? There is the Association of Regular Baptist Churches in Canada (but there is no Association of Irregular Baptist Churches!) as well as the Canadian Convention of Southern Baptist Churches. In fact, there are well over 50 separate groups of Baptist Churches in the United States alone. One of every five people in the United States is estimated to attend a Baptist Church or affiliate him/herself as a "Baptist."¹

Consider the diversity of the famous people who are Baptist. We have Presidents Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, Harry Truman, Andrew Johnson, Abraham Lincoln, and Vice President Al Gore. We have the world famous athletes Jim Brown and George Foreman. Hollywood has seen many Baptists including Lucille Ball and Kevin Costner. As for business, James Cash Penney (yes, we know him by his initials, "J. C. Penney") and J. L. Kraft of macaroni and cheese fame were Baptists. How about some more historical Baptists of note like John Bunyan or Charles Spurgeon? Also, those greats of the 20th century including Martin Luther King, Jr. and Billy Graham (who extends into the 21st century!)?

Now, one may fairly ask, "But how could all those people be the same religion?" One might also wonder why there are so many different "Baptist" groups? The answers to those questions are hopefully contained in today's lessons. With the great number of Baptist and the rich diversity that carries the Baptist label, we have a large heritage to explore in the next few weeks. This first lesson will seek to understand the origins of the Baptist church, the early Baptist movements, and a little insight into how the Baptist church evolved over time.

¹ See the American Religious Identity Survey (2001) and the National Survey of Religious Identification (1990). These surveys are accessible online at:
http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris/aris_index.htm.

BAPTIST ORIGINS

When one reads the scholastic world of Baptist history, one finds a number of different theories about the origins of the Baptist church. In the 1800's and early 1900's, it was popular to write that the Baptist Church had existed since the New Testament, although often underground and not really noticed by history. This view (called the "Perpetuity" view) has lost most support of accepted academia and seems more of an effort to read back into history rather than learn from history.

A second view that one can find in the academic literature relates the Baptist Church to the Anabaptist and Mennonite movement (see Lessons 56 & 57). These churches do, after all, share the name "Baptist" and share the belief of "believer's baptism" (as opposed to infant baptism). In spite of these similarities, however, there are enough noteworthy and fundamental differences between these faiths (involvement in government, for example) that most scholars do not attribute the Baptist church to the Anabaptist movement.

A number of scholars are able to use early Baptist material to argue that the Puritans are the genesis of the Baptist church. There is undoubtedly a Puritan connection to the Baptists, but notwithstanding that, most scholars do not consider the Baptists a Puritan break off. Many Puritans sought to win over the Church of England while many others were part of a larger movement within England now called the "Separatist Movement" (see Lessons 66 & 67). From that movement, there were a number of Christians who sought status as a "Free Church" or a church that practiced its faith free and independent of the Church of England. These who separated themselves from England (hence, the name "Separatists") included the Puritans as well as the Baptists.

Before honing in on the historical evidence of Baptist origins within the Separatist or Free Church movement, we should note something of the theories that have minority support in academic circles. One can fairly marshal evidence from the New Testament and early Church history that supports linking the Baptist Church, just as one can find points of identification and contact with the Anabaptists, Mennonites, and Puritans. The reason is fairly simple: most Baptist Churches center themselves on the New Testament as the source of their practice and so will naturally have points of connection both with the New Testament and other churches who have used the New Testament as a rule of practice. Similarity, however, does not equate to genetic history!

To really discover Baptist roots, we need to immerse ourselves (there is a bad pun there!) in the Free Church Movement of 17th century England.

EARLY BAPTIST MOVEMENTS

The Free Church movement gave birth to a number of Christian expressions. One could trace many Anabaptist and Puritan churches to this movement. The thrust of the Free Church movement was to establish a faith and practice that was free from domination and control by “secular” or governmental forces. Until this movement, most churches were expressions of the ruling government, and this had been true since Constantine (see Lesson 18 & 19). While government and the church often struggled against each other for control, there was no doubt that the government claimed its ruling right through divine authority (as opposed to America’s ultimate rule “by the people and for the people”). Similarly, when government stepped out of line, the Church felt itself the proper institution to rectify matters.

Into this political world came the Free Church Movement. This movement believed that the ruling government had no authority over the religious choices of the individual. There was something quite distinct about the religious mentality of the leaders of this movement. Historically, one’s salvation and destiny was deemed controlled by whether one was a part of the “Church.” For the Church was seen as the eternal kingdom of Christ in its earthly manifestation. The particular life of the individual may have made a difference in one’s placement in purgatory once eternity began (see Lesson 44 on Dante’s writings), but salvation itself was dependant on being in the Church.

At the time of the reformation movement, a different direction was setting in, not only in protestant churches, but also in the Catholic Church to some. This change, therefore, I do not link as much to the “Reformation” as to something that *spawned or allowed* the Reformation. That something is the printing press!

With the printing press, books became available to everyone. With the ready availability of books, reading became an important skill that most people sought for themselves and their offspring. As more people were able to read, and as the Bible became available in ordinary languages that people could understand, a change started taking place. This change brought about not only the Free Church Movement, the Baptist Church, but also a direct change in the way old line churches viewed faith and the faithful.

The change was a focus from the Church as the Christian structure and institution into a more personal and private faith on the individual. Before the ready availability of the scriptures for the common man, one could still find the power of individuals who walked with God in a personal and direct way (see, for example, Lesson 42 on St. Francis) but most of these individuals were monks and scholars particularly trained in scripture. Once most everyone had a readable copy of

God's word in their own possession, they began to get a personal understanding of the scriptures and of God. This launched new understandings of what the institutional church should be and a more personal approach to faith.

As people sought to live out a direct personal relationship to God, as opposed to simply affiliating themselves with the recognized Church of their geographic region, there was a strong movement to worship with other like-minded people. This manifested itself in the Free Church Movement.

Early Baptist, Thomas Helwys, put it this way in his plea for freedom to worship apart from the Church of King James (the Church of England!):

Let the King judge, is it not most equal that men should choose their religion themselves, seeing they only must stand themselves before the judgment seat of God to answer for themselves... for men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves; the King shall not answer for it, neither may the King be judge between God and man.²

We might add that to our 21st century mentality, this seems like a gimme!

We might say, "Of course we all appear before God as individuals, no one should dictate our faith. Let the King of England decide for me what I should believe and how I should practice *only* when the King of England stands and takes the heat for me on judgment day!" But in Helwys's day, proclamations such as his were deemed treasonous. It was believed that the King was rightfully dictating the faith of men because God had ordained the King to be God's representative on earth ruling over men. If this were not so, then the King really had no *right* to rule, he merely had the *power* to rule.

This fit hand in hand with the strong Baptist embrace of Luther's doctrine of the "Priesthood of all believers." Recognizing the call of verses like 1 Peter 2:9 ("But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light") the Baptist church always taught individual responsibility before God and man.

Needless to say, the early Baptists, like many in the Free Church Movement, were a persecuted faith. Which brings us back to Church History Lesson 67, Puritans, Separatists and Pilgrims – Part 2. On page 2 of that lesson we discussed a preacher named John Smythe that many recognize as a founder of the English

² Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mistery (sic) of Iniquity*. This book and the attitudes in it resulted in Helwys's imprisonment.

Baptist Church. Smythe was closely affiliated with the people that would become famous as the “pilgrims” that began the community ultimately off Cape Cod. Smythe took his congregation to Holland seeking religious freedom in the early 1600’s. It was in Holland, no doubt influenced by the Anabaptists and Mennonites that Smythe decided in late 1608 or early 1609 that Christ commanded his apostles to make disciples by teaching and baptizing. Since one could not teach and baptize an infant, Smythe saw the divine command as one that applied to those of teachable age!

Because Smythe did not agree with or choose to affiliate with the Mennonites at that time, Smythe made the decision to baptize himself! Smythe then baptized those in the group with him and so began what some scholars consider the first documented Baptist Church! These handfuls of people (including Thomas Helwys quoted earlier) were trying daily to work out and understand this new territory they were blazing theologically and practically. As a result, they frequently disagreed over many theological matters, at times splitting and reuniting. In 1611 or 1612, Helwys took a group of the followers back to England to take their new understanding of faith back to their countrymen. This “mission mindedness” would soon be a hallmark of the Baptist Church as we will see in coming lessons on William Carey and Lottie Moon.

Back on British soil, Helwys wrote four books, including the one quoted earlier, over the next year. In these books, Helwys set out positions that differed from the Calvinists and Mennonites. These books sought religious freedom (which resulted in the imprisonment and death of Helwys around the age of 40) as well as personal responsibility and accountability before God.

As the Baptist churches began to grow on English soil, there was a recognition that each individual was personally responsible to God, and yet there was still a role for the church as a collection of souls. The church itself was understood as an expression of the body of Christ that was a larger picture than any individual or any individual church. Accordingly, the Baptist churches sought to associate themselves together from an early time to give a fuller expression to the body of Christ as well as to coordinate mission efforts.

The earliest Baptist association dates from 1624 when five Baptist churches joined together to repudiate the ideas of Mennonites that Christians should avoid governmental involvement. This association was of “General Baptist” churches.

The General Baptist Churches were already distinct from the Particular Baptist Churches, a distinction still present to some degree in some Baptist churches today. The General Baptist churches took their name from a “general” view of the atonement (Christ’ sacrifice on Calvary). These were the Baptist that took an

Arminian view that Christ died for all, and that salvation was available to all, regardless of the issue of Predestination (see Lesson 64 on Arminianism and predestination). The Particular Baptists viewed the atonement as particular to the chosen, elect. These were Calvinist in the doctrine of predestination.

Over the decades of the 1600's the Baptist would consolidate into a number of Associations based on doctrinal views of various matters. By and large, the doctrine of most Baptist churches was what scholars would call "orthodox." By that we mean the basic tenets of Christian belief as set out in the Nicene Creed (see Lesson 19).³ Baptist Churches have consistently stood for the autonomy of each church (local control as opposed to the control over Bishops or some larger ecclesiastical unit). Understandably, however, differences arose on matters less core to orthodoxy. This is not surprising in light of the genesis of the Baptist Church centered in individual accountability and study before God. So we see many different expressions of perspective on the nature of the end times, predestination, frequency of the Lord's Supper and similar issues.

Over time, these differences caused the "groupings" of Baptist churches to change. This has brought about the hundreds of different groupings that exist worldwide today. Along the way, there have been many noteworthy people whom we will discuss in later lessons. The Baptist Church has left its mark on world missions, on Christian literature (Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*), and on theology. In fact, as early as the 1600's, Baptists produced Confessions of Faith that have stood the test of time. The 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith (a document of the "Particular Baptist" persuasion) was brought into the United States and proudly

³ The orthodoxy of the Nicene Creed in its Arminian version is: We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, of things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the begotten of God the Father, the Only-begotten, that is of the essence of the Father. God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten and not made; of the very same nature of the Father, by Whom all things came into being, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible.

Who for us humanity and for our salvation came down from heaven, was incarnate, was made human, was born perfectly of the holy virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit. By whom He took body, soul, and mind, and everything that is in man, truly and not in semblance.

He suffered, was crucified, was buried, rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven with the same body, [and] sat at the right hand of the Father. He is to come with the same body and with the glory of the Father, to judge the living and the dead; of His kingdom there is no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, in the uncreated and the perfect; Who spoke through the Law, prophets, and Gospels; Who came down upon the Jordan, preached through the apostles, and lived in the saints. We believe also in only One, Universal, Apostolic, and [Holy] Church; in one baptism in repentance, for the remission, and forgiveness of sins; and in the resurrection of the dead, in the everlasting judgment of souls and bodies, and the Kingdom of Heaven and in the everlasting life.

stands next to the Westminster Confession of Faith (see Lesson 65) as one of the Reformations clearest expressions of Christian belief.

The London Baptist Confession is 32 articles of faith with supporting scriptures. It begins with the Holy Scriptures, and writes of God, the Trinity, Creation, the Fall, Justification, Sanctification, Repentance, Baptism, The Lord's Supper, Judgment and the Afterlife, as well as many other subjects.⁴ The confession begins with,

The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith and Obedience; Although the light of Nature, and the works of Creation and Providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and His will, which is necessary unto Salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that His will unto his Church; and afterward for the better preserving, and propagating of the Truth, and for the more sure Establishment, and Comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan, and of the World, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary, those former ways of Gods revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

Scripture is proved for each claim.

The Confession ends with,

As Christ would have us to be certainly perswaded (sic) that there shall be a Day of judgement (sic), both to deter all men from sin, and for the greater consolation of the godly, in their adversity; so will he have that day unknown to Men, that they may shake off all carnal security, and be always watchful, because they know not at what hour, the Lord will come; and may ever be prepared to say, *Come Lord Jesus, Come quickly, Amen.*

In the middle of these two profound sections is a truly incredible condensation of core Christian beliefs.

So, where do we go from here? Historically speaking, there are almost 400 years of Baptists! We are coming up on the 400-year anniversary of the Baptist Church

⁴ See the online version at: <http://www.ccel.org/creeds/bcf/bcf.htm>.

as a denomination. The world wide emphasis on evangelism will no doubt continue with encouragement over how far the church has come in 400 years! Our study of that 400 years will involve some key Baptist personalities, including Carey, Spurgeon, and Moon. We will also take a class and look at Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* before ending our Baptist discussion.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. The Church is the body of Christ. As a corporate body, we are the hands and feet of Christ doing His work on earth. This is why Paul writes of the need to build up the "body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12). As Paul told the Corinthians, "you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Cor. 12:27), and again, "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though the parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12). Yet, the parts of that body seems to be not only each individual Christian but also the general congregations of believers that worship together as well.
2. Understanding the role of the Church, we need to remember that the individual takes its place before God singularly. Each person is accountable for her/his own decisions, and not merely "status" attending a church. God seeks us one at a time. The gospel plea is "whoever believes in him [Jesus] shall not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16) not, "whoever is a member of a church." This is the thrust of the Priesthood of all believers and the Peter passage quoted in the lesson. Everyone stands before God wither on their own merit (not good!) or the merit of the High Priest Jesus (perfect!). There is no other intermediary.
3. There are core issues of faith that set aside God's people and there are many issues of opinion that may further define us in human eyes, but not necessarily in God's! We need to remember the importance of unity even as we seek to define ourselves more specifically on issues of importance, but not faith! "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace!" (Eph. 4:3).