

The Old Hickory Bulletin

Old Hickory Church of Christ

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Jackson, TN 38305

oldhickorycofc.com

January 31, 2016

Volume 36, # 05

The Baptist Church: An Historical Perspective

I grew up among kindly people of the Baptist affiliation. My father's family was of this persuasion. A more gracious, benevolent group of folks could scarcely have been found. It was heartbreaking, therefore, to eventually discover that the church of my ancestry was unknown to the New Testament.

An Historical Overview

The Baptist movement was started with the best of motives by a sincere people who were discontented with the religious corruptions of their day. But their understanding of the nature of genuine Christianity was lacking considerably. Hence, without biblical authority, they founded a new denomination that merely cluttered the landscape of prevailing religious confusion.

It must be noted that the man "sent from God, whose name was John" (John 1:6), who was called "the Baptist" (Mt. 3:1) — because he administered the rite of immersion, bore no relationship to the modern movement that has adopted that designation. For one thing, John immersed "for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk. 1:4), while the Baptist denomination finds this concept abhorrent.

We must point out, at the commencement of this discussion, that there are those, identified with the Baptist movement, who allege that this

denomination is the true New Testament church, and that its genealogical record can be traced back to the days of Christ himself.

A.B. Barret, founder of Abilene Christian College, once authored a book titled, *The Shattered Chain* (Henderson, TN: 1942-43). In this volume the author demolished the notion, advocated by Ben M. Bogard and others, that Baptist history can be plotted back to the first century. All such efforts have been failures, and today, most Baptist historians have surrendered this position altogether, acknowledging that the movement had its formal genesis many centuries this side of the establishment of primitive Christianity. It would be a remarkable historical oddity indeed if the Baptist Church existed in the days of the apostles, and yet was never alluded to, even remotely, in the New Testament record.

Baptist churches were born out of the English Reformation movement of the early 1600's. Around 1606, certain Puritan Separatists in Great Britain had withdrawn from the Church of England, protesting the civil control of that body. Some within the movement also objected to various theological ideas of the Puritan system. Hence, in about 1608 several left the Separatists and formed a new coalition. One of the leaders of this movement was John Smyth (c. 1554-1612), who went to Holland to avoid persecution.

As Smyth studied the New Testament, he became convinced that the practice of infant baptism was erroneous. He contended that baptism should be administered only to those who professed repentance of their sins. Accordingly, Smyth decided to "baptize" himself, though he still had no clear concept as to the form of baptism, because he "baptized" himself by pouring water upon his own head. He then similarly applied water to the heads of his companions (some forty in number) and a new religious entity was initiated — the Baptist Church, with John Smyth acknowledged as its "Pastor."

A.H. Newman, a Baptist historian, comments: "Immersion seems not to have been practiced" (A.H. Newman, *A Manual of Church History*, Philadelphia: The American Baptist Publication Society, 1931, II, p. 280). Smyth died in 1612, and a remnant of the group moved back to England.

While some attempt to find a shadowy image of the Baptist Church earlier in Christian history, most writers concede that:

“The first regularly organized [Baptist] church among them, known as such in England, dates from 1607...” (Edward T. Hiscox, *The Standard Manual for Baptist Churches*, Philadelphia, The American Baptist Publication Society, 1890, p. 168).

Some of the “links” in the “chain” which our Baptist friends attempt to trace back to the time of John were so radically different in theology from today’s Baptists that it is amazing that a connection would ever be asserted. Hiscox mentions such sects as the Montanists, the Novatioans, and the Donatists. For a discussion of the doctrinal positions of these groups, see Newman (Vol. I, pp. 202-10).

And so, at about this time (1607-8), a new sectarian body made its entrance into the world. Strange indeed is the fact that Smyth’s church is considered to be “Baptist,” yet not a soul among them had been immersed.

One of Smyth’s co-laborers was Thomas Helwys (c. 1550-1616). These two men entertained differing views about fellowship with the Mennonites, and so Helwys led off a small group, which resulted in a separate sect. Both Smyth and Helwys held the view that in his atonement for sin, Christ died for all. The movement that grew from this beginning became known as the “General Baptists.”

Another group of Baptists arose in 1616. It was established by Henry Jacob (1563-1642) in London. This group acknowledged some association with the Church of England at first, though eventually a severance was effected.

In about 1638, a separate group was formed by John Spilsbury; they were known as “Particular Baptists,” adhering to the strict Calvinistic view that Jesus died only for the “elect,” i.e., those chosen to be saved by God before the foundation of the world. By 1644, this group had committed itself to baptism by immersion. But as one scholar notes,

“Most of [these Baptists] were ecumenical in spirit Some even practiced open membership, not requiring Christians from non-Baptist churches to be rebaptized”(Jerald C. Brauer, Ed., *The Westminster Dictionary of Church History*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971, p. 85).

The Baptist cause originated in America in 1639 when Roger Williams established a church in Providence, Rhode Island. Eventually, though, Williams left the movement, and “for the rest of his life was unconnected with any religious body” (H.C. Vedder, *A Short History of the Baptists*, Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907, p. 292).

While it seems apparent that these early reformers were quite sincere, and driven by noble motives, it is equally clear that their concepts about some of the most fundamental matters of New Testament teaching (e.g., obedience to the gospel as a process for becoming a genuine Christian) was lacking considerably. They succeeded, therefore, in doing no more than adorning the early religious terrain with a new denominational body that did not conform to New Testament standards.

Today, the Baptists (with some 100 or so different branches wearing this name, according to a Baptist web site – <http://www.baptist.org/>), constitute the largest Protestant body in America. There is considerable diversity of doctrine among these people — from the liberal American Baptists, and the more conservative Southern Baptists, to the ultra-conservative, exclusive Primitive Baptists. Most Baptists, however, are joined in sentiment by strong Calvinistic tendencies.

Doctrinal Problems

While many of our Baptist neighbors are to be applauded for their sense of moral responsibility (some have voiced admirable opposition to abortion, pornography, etc.), the movement is riddled with doctrinal error. A few significant items are worthy of mention.

(1) Baptist philosophy partakes of the spirit of partyism, such as that condemned at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:10-ff). They prefer the appellation “Baptist”

to “Christian” (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16), commonly claiming that the divinely bestowed name was invented by the enemies of the ancient faith.

(2) Baptist churches are un-scripturally organized, generally having a “pastor” (cf. Acts 14:23) and a board of deacons. Though congregations claim independence, certain works and policies, in some cases, are controlled by “conventions” (e.g., the Southern Baptist Convention). In individual congregations, a majority vote of the members makes congregational decisions (J.M. Pendleton, Baptist Church Manual, Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1867, pp. 101ff). The biblical concept of elders is alien to this system.

(3) The Baptist movement, as a general rule, engages in forms of worship that do not fit the New Testament pattern. The use of instrumental music in worship is the prevailing practice (an addition to apostolic authorization — Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), and the Lord’s day communion, observed weekly in the first century (cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2, NASB), is relegated to random times of congregational determination.

It is a matter of some amazement that one may not partake of the Lord’s supper in most Baptist churches, unless he has been immersed in water, yet the case is vociferously argued that baptism is not requisite for entering heaven!

(4) The Baptist theory of the plan of salvation is woefully skewed. It is asserted that salvation is “solely through faith.” Yet, because of man’s inherited “total depravity,” he cannot believe, unless supernaturally empowered by the Spirit of God.

Baptist theologians contend that faith is preceded by repentance, which is a logical impossibility, if one is employing “faith” with reference to the same object. [NOTE: In Mark 1:15, Jesus admonished the Jews: “repent ye, and believe in the gospel.” These Hebrews already had faith in God, which would serve as the motivation for their repentance (cf. Rom. 2:14; 2 Cor. 7:10). They then were to embrace the gospel system, which would involve belief in Christ.]

Baptism, as a condition of salvation, is repudiated vehemently (contrary to Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16), yet the rite is required for Baptist affiliation. Members actually are received into a church by a “vote” of the membership, though it is conceded that this is “different” from the practice of the apostolic church (Hiscox, p. 22).

(5) Many Baptists adhere to the dogma of the impossibility of apostasy, i.e., the regenerated person can never so sin as to be lost, though he may become corrupt enough to be excluded from a church’s fellowship (Hiscox, p. 30). Elsewhere we have dealt with this doctrine in some detail (see our booklet, *Eternal Security — Fact or Fiction?*).

Conclusion

Again, we must emphasize this point: We have the highest regard for honest people of the Baptist movement; over the past couple of centuries, thousands of these good folks have abandoned that religious commitment and have embraced primitive Christianity. We must ever plead with our Baptist neighbors to lay aside those doctrines unique to that system, and embrace pure New Testament Christianity — not in part, but in whole.

Finally, we are forced to make this concluding comment. It is a tragedy of enormous magnitude that some of our own brethren now are granting authenticity to this humanly-devised denomination. May these erring brothers hear the words of God’s apostle: “For if I build up again those things which I once destroyed, I prove myself a transgressor” (Gal. 2:18).

- Wayne Jackson, via ChristianCourier.com.

THIS WEEK’S LESSONS: Sunday morning: *“Four Tests of Character!”* (Text: 2 Cor. 10:12, 18; 13:5); Sunday evening: *“He Makes Me Lie Down In Green Pastures!”* (Psa. 23:2).