

2015/5: Learning From The Baptists

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What does it mean to be Baptist? What may we learn from the Baptists? These are questions that are relevant to all of us, either because we claim ourselves to be Baptist, or we desire to know something about them and, if possible, to learn from them. There is no doubt that the Baptists are a major denomination that has existed for a long time - in fact for longer than the Methodists, the Plymouth Brethren, the Pentecostals, the Evangelical Free Churches, and many other denominations known to us today. Of course, length of pedigree does not guarantee doctrinal integrity, and we would prefer to be doctrinally and practically sound than to take pride in being an old denomination.

Our aim here is to discover what it means to be Baptist and what we may learn from them. Indeed, for individuals who are not aligned with any historic denomination, there is a possibility that they might want to consciously be aligned with the Baptists. And for newer churches, especially those that are autonomous, there is the possibility that they might want to be recognized as Baptist. As we shall discover, it is not historical pedigree that determines whether one is Baptist, but conscious identification, accompanied by doctrinal and practical alignment, with that movement.

Our emphasis would be upon the Particular Baptists, who are known today as Reformed Baptists. Since they share common characteristics and to some extent, a common history, with the other major grouping known as the General Baptists, the things said here are largely common to the two. Differences between them will be pointed out as we proceed.

Who are the Baptists

Three views of Baptist origin have been advanced: that of successionism, that of Anabaptism, and that of Puritan Separatism.¹ The first view attempts to trace the Baptists to John the Baptist of the New Testament, but lacks convincing historical data to support it. The second view roots Baptist origin in the Anabaptist movement of Europe during the Reformation of the 16th century. The Baptists, however, distanced themselves from the Anabaptists when the two groups were mistakenly identified together by their opponents in 17th century Britain. Instead, the Baptists deliberately identified themselves with the Puritan Separatists, and finally compiled their own Confessions of Faith to show that identification. Furthermore, the Baptists baptized by immersion while the Anabaptists baptized by affusion (i.e. the pouring of water).

Of the two groups of Baptists in the seventeenth century, the Particular Baptists were to produce their second Confession of Faith by adopting and adapting the Westminster Confession of Faith of the Presbyterians as well as the Platform of Church Polity of the Congregationalists. As with the 1689 Confession of Faith of the Baptists, the Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order of the Congregationalists was in most respects identical to the Westminster Confession of Faith. The distinctive views on church order of the Congregationalists, set forth in the accompanying Platform

of Church Order, was adopted by the Particular Baptists with minor amendments. Instead of treating church order as an appendix to the Confession of Faith, it was incorporated as a chapter of the Confession. (The General Baptists developed their Confessions of Faith in parallel to those of the Particular Baptists.²)

The General Baptists were so-called because of their belief in a general atonement, in keeping with their Arminian soteriology. Their beginning may be traced to Thomas Helwys (c. 1575-1616), who founded the first Baptist church in England in 1612, after breaking away from the English Separatist congregation of John Smyth (c. 1570-1612) in Amsterdam.³ Of the two groupings, the General Baptists would seem to have more interaction with the Anabaptists - both in the Netherlands as well as those settled in England. They shared a common Arminian soteriology and the practice of laying on of hands at baptism. The Particular Baptists, on the other hand, derived their name from the belief in the doctrine of particular redemption, consistent with the Calvinism which they held in common with the Reformed and Puritan churches of the day. Their historical origin may be traced to the semi-separatists church founded in 1616 by Henry Jacob (1563-1624), which became known as the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey (J-L-J) Church, after its successive pastors.⁴ The first Particular Baptist churches evolved from the J-L-J Church between 1633 and 1638, while continuing to have links with various Independent congregations.⁵

Both the Particular Baptists and the General Baptists were represented in the new churches founded in the opening of America since the landing of the Pilgrim Fathers in New Plymouth in 1620. In Britain, the two groupings remained distinct from each other throughout their histories. In America, there was a measure of merging together of the two although, today, the Reformed Baptists are distinct from the General Baptists by their adherence to Calvinistic soteriology and covenant theology. As Baptist churches were planted worldwide in the 19th century, the distinction between the two groupings were seldom made clear until the revival of interest in Reformed theology since the 1960s.

Characteristics

When the Baptists arose in Britain, the dominant churches in the nation were the Church of England, the Presbyterian Church in Scotland, and the Independent Non-Conformists who became known as the Congregationalists. Together, they were opposed to the sects called the Quakers, the Seekers and the Ranters. Leaving aside the sects that troubled all the denominations, how were the Baptists distinguished from the other main groupings? How are the Baptists of today distinguished from the denominations around them, e.g. the Methodists, the Pentecostals, the Plymouth Brethren, and the Evangelical Free churches? There are seven characteristics that mark the Baptists from other denominations.

The supremacy of Scripture

The Baptists of the 17th century held seriously to the principle of “sola scriptura” recovered during the Reformation a century earlier. They looked upon themselves as continuing with the work of reforming the church, which they regarded as incomplete and had stagnated. An example of this was seen in the practice of infant sprinkling in the other denominations which was regarded as a remnant of the human innovations of the Roman Catholic Church. The Protestant Bible consists of the 39 books of the Old Testament written originally in Hebrew, and the 27 books of the New Testament written originally in Greek. (The Roman Catholic Bible has the additional books of the Apocrypha, which are rejected by the Protestants.) These books of the Bible were directly inspired by the God and “kept pure through subsequent ages by His singular care and providence”, so that the teaching intended for us remain trustworthy despite copying errors. The sifting disciplines of textual critics have revealed only about 60 words in the entire Bible of which we are uncertain, None of these affect the meaning of any vital passage or our understanding of any biblical doctrine or precept.⁶ This view of Scripture has been described as “the verbal, plenary inspiration of

Scripture” (VPI). We, therefore, maintain that Scripture is entirely factual, accurate and truthful. So high a regard have the Baptists for the supremacy of Scripture that John Quincy Adams, an American Baptist pastor of the 19th century, included “the establishment of the correct principle of biblical translation” as one of their distinctives.⁷

From the beginning of the 20th century, evangelicals began shifting away from this high view of Scripture. They maintained that the Scripture is authoritative but not infallible, not inerrant, and not sufficient. That is just a step away from the Modernist position which claims that the Bible contains errors and contradictions and, therefore, cannot be relied upon. In reaction to the the shift away from the high view of Scripture, there have been those who defend the reliability of Scripture by arguing for the *miraculous* preservation of the copies, instead of their *providential* preservation. It is then argued that those copies culminated in the translation of the King James Version of 1611. This view of the transmission of Scripture has been called “the verbal, plenary preservation of Scripture” (VPP) which, in effect, claims that the KJV of the Bible is the perfect Bible. Those who hold to this view would make the Bible version used a criterion for fellowship. The VPI view holds that the teaching of the Bible has been perfectly preserved, while the VPP view holds that the vehicle used in conveying the teaching has been perfectly preserved as well. Each understood the words of our Lord in Matt. 5:18 differently: “For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.” The VPI view holds that a good version of the Bible must be used while the VPP view holds that only the KJV is to be used. Reformed Baptists have generally held to the VPI position while valuing the KJV above other versions.

The gathered church

Baptists regard the church of Jesus Christ as a purely spiritual organization separate and distinct from the world. Acting upon this conviction, they admit none to baptism and membership but such as profess faith in Jesus Christ and give satisfactory evidence that they have “passed from death into life” (John 5:24). This is commonly referred to as a “credible profession of faith”. Such baptized believers are gathered into churches by voluntarily covenanting together, to worship and serve God in the way prescribed in the Bible. Membership with the church is distinguished from attendance in the congregation. A congregation may be made up of believers and non-believers, a portion of the former being covenanted together as members of the church. In maintaining a regenerate church membership, Baptists are consistent with:

- (i) the teaching of Christ in John 18:36, “My kingdom is not of this world”;
- (ii) the practice of the apostles in baptizing only believers, as seen in the New Testament, and especially in the book of Acts;
- (iii) the New Testament description of church members as spiritual seed, living stones, saints, sincere believers, etc.;
- (iv) the teaching of the New Testament that we are born again by the Holy Spirit, through the word of truth (John 3:7-8; Rom. 10:17; 1 Pet. 1:23), not by parental descent and not by a ritual.

Paedobaptists deny this principle by administering baptism to infants of believers and regarding such baptized infants as members of the church, regardless of whether they grow up to become believers or unbelievers. Many paedobaptists would argue for infant sprinkling from covenant theology, and by comparing baptism in the New Testament with circumcision in the Old Testament. Both the Particular Baptists and the General Baptists in the past have contended for believer’s baptism from covenant theology - argued out consistently and contrary to the conclusion of the paedobaptists. The so-called covenant theology of the paedobaptists has been shown to consist of assumptions and inconsistencies in crucial points. Prominent paedobaptist writers, including John Calvin, Louis Berkhof, BB Warfield, and John Murray, had admitted that there are no express command or examples of infant baptism in the Bible but they upheld the practice based on their understanding of covenant theology.

Subsequent generations of General Baptists have abandoned covenant theology and denied the principle of a regenerate church membership either consciously or unconsciously. Consistent with their Arminian soteriology, they argue that God is unable to regenerate a man unless he is willing, or until he decides “to accept Christ”. This defective view of regeneration naturally leads to defective methods of evangelism in which the hearers are pressured into “accepting Jesus Christ” by saying “the sinner’s prayer”, or by responding to “the altar call”. Many such hearers who are subsequently admitted into the membership of the church are, in fact, unregenerate. The theory of “the carnal Christian” is then invented to account for the lack of spiritual fruit in these members.

The voluntary nature of discipleship

This principle involves *religious liberty* and *the rights of conscience*. The 1689 Confession of Faith says, “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from all doctrines and commandments of men which are in any respect contrary to His word, or not contained in it...The requiring of an implicit faith, an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience and reason also” (21:2). Religious liberty is different from toleration. Toleration is the allowance of that which is not wholly approved. As applied to religion, the term is objectionable because it presupposes the existence of some mere human authority which has the power to grant or withhold from man the exercise of freedom in matters of religion. The free exercise of religious liberty and the rights of conscience is alone compatible with personal accountability, which is taught in the Bible, and it is alone compatible with the spirit of the gospel (Luke 9:49-50; Acts 5:29).

Baptists have always strenuously contended for the acknowledgement of this principle and have laboured to propagate it. They might not agree with what is propagated by others, but they will defend their right in propagating it. In the same way, the Baptists expect others to respect their own right to propagate what they believe, without restriction or intimidation. Such freedom and rights are not without limits. Firstly, such freedom and rights must not encroach upon the freedom and rights of others. Secondly, such freedom and rights are proscribed by the Creator of the human race who has written His law in our hearts (Rom. 2:14-16). There are universal values of morality and decency, of dignity and integrity, which you breach at the risk of disdain and possible isolation from your fellow humans, and the judgement of God on the last day.

Baptists have suffered more than others for upholding the principles of religious liberty and the rights of conscience. To them, coercion is no conversion. Instead, true discipleship is voluntary in nature. God alone saves, by the hearing of His word (Rom. 10:17). For much of the 17th century, the Baptists were persecuted for their faith by the civil and religious authorities who favoured the paedobaptists. The same happened during the founding of America, and in Russia and Eastern Europe during the communist regime of the 20th century. Others had clamoured for liberty and toleration when they were oppressed but as soon as they came into power, began to oppress others. They proved the truth of Milton’s maxim that “new presbyter is but old priest writ large”.⁸ In Britain, the persecutors were Episcopalians and Presbyterians, in America the Congregationalists, and in Russia and Eastern Europe the Greek Orthodox Church. The paedobaptists could not stand the Baptists because infant baptism is inconsistent with the principle of the voluntary nature of discipleship in that:

- (i) the infant is given no choice in regard to his own baptism;
- (ii) the infant is made a member of a church through baptism without the ability to understand the matter;
- (iii) the paedobaptist child who grows up and, upon repentance and faith, is denied biblical baptism because he is regarded as already baptized when an infant.

The baptism of believers by immersion

Baptists have always contended for the baptism of believers by immersion. The subject must be a believer, while the mode is to be immersion. This is because:

- (i) the word “baptizo” in Greek actually means “to dip, to submerge, to immerse”, and not to sprinkle (“rantizo”).
- (ii) all the instances of baptism in the Bible support immersion - not sprinkling - of the believers (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:9-10; Acts 8:38-39).
- (iii) immersion alone correctly pictures our union with Christ in His burial and resurrection, and the washing away of sins (Rom. 6:3-4; Acts 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:11, etc.).

It has been mentioned in connection with the principle of “the gathered church” that paedobaptists have used covenant theology to support the inclusion of the infants of believers in the membership of the church. The Particular Baptists of the 17th century had shown by a more consistent understanding of covenant theology that infants are not suitable subjects of baptism and, therefore, not suitable subjects of church membership. They had also shown that the biblical mode of baptism is immersion, and not sprinkling or pouring. The controversy of those days had about exhausted all possible arguments for and against infant sprinkling. It will not do for a believer to remain neutral on this issue.

To the commonly asked question, “Is the mode of baptism at all important?”, we answer with an unhesitant “Yes!” We will not make an idol of baptism, but neither will we treat lightly a clear teaching of God’s word. We are convinced that immersion is biblical and there is attached to it such a deep spiritual significance. It is, therefore, amazing to hear of Baptist churches today that are willing to administer baptism either by immersion or sprinkling, according to the desire of the candidate! Paedobaptists generally recognize many modes of baptism but normally practise only sprinkling. Also they baptize infants, which to the Baptists, are not suitable subjects of baptism. It is to be noted that Baptists do not restrict baptism to adults only but to believers, which might include children, although generally the children should be of sufficient maturity to show a credible profession of faith.

The headship of Christ

As with other doctrines, evangelicals would agree with the truth that Jesus Christ is the head of the church. It is the degree of emphasis placed upon the doctrine, and the consistency of application of this truth, that result in differences between churches. The Baptists hold to the view that, as head of the church, Jesus Christ fulfills the offices of prophet, priest and king. The outworking of the kingship of Christ leads to the congregational or independent nature of its form, and the autonomy of its government. It also leads to a belief in the separation of church and state.

In Episcopalianism, local churches are linked together in a denomination in which there is an hierarchy of church power vested in individuals, fanning down from the top to the bottom. In Presbyterianism, there is also an hierarchy of church power fanning down from the top, but instead of individuals, there are committees of individuals who hold power. Some historically new denominations practice a combination of these, calling it “modified Episcopalianism” or “modified Presbyterianism”, but is basically synodical, i.e. with a power structure that extends over more than one congregations. Baptists have insisted on the independence of each congregation from others, although there is scope for the congregations to voluntarily associate together for mutual edification and cooperation in missions. Except for the temporary situation encountered in church-planting, each congregation is to be self-ruling, or autonomous, since Christ has given sufficient power to each congregation to govern itself.

Since Christ is the head of the church, and each congregation is to be autonomous, there is a strong emphasis on the non-interference of politics in the life of the church. The state and the church are

two distinct institutions created by God, with their own spheres of authority (Rom. 13:1-7; Matt. 22:21). This state of equality and independence allows for the possibility of mutual benefit between them without one encroaching upon the other's sphere of authority. Historically, the state has interfered with the church by legislation and demanding the right to approve the officers it appoints. Baptists have suffered for resisting this. The Roman Catholic Church believes, at least theoretically, in the extension of ecclesiastical power to the state. Historically, it has attempted to do so and we can be certain it will do so if ever there is the opportunity.

The priesthood and prophethood of all believers

Jesus Christ, as head of the church, also exercises the offices of prophet and priest. He has taught, "One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren (Matt. 23:8)." A local church, of believers covenanted together, has been given the all the authority and power necessary to teach and to admonish one another (Matt. 28:18-20; 1 Pet. 2:5; 1 Cor. 5:12-13; 6:5). This principle of "the priesthood and prophethood of all believers" is often wrongly taken out of the context of the local church, and then applied to the individual Christian. It is used to bolster an independent spirit that smacks of the world rather than of the spirit of the Bible. The correct understanding of this principle is that every member of the church is to be involved in the work of God's kingdom. The church is likened to the human body in which each member has a role and each is dependent on the others (1 Cor. 12). The church does not depend on the officers alone, or the pastor alone, to function well.

Many churches today are faced with problems of discipline as well as countless other matters, not so much because of their failure to recognize this principle but rather because of their failure to implement biblical church government, i.e. elders ruling, with congregational consent (Acts 14:23; 15:6, 22; 1 Cor. 5:4-5). In many cases today, churches are ruled by deacons. Some large churches are ruled by one pastor or elder, the principle of plurality being conveniently ignored. There are other churches that are ruled by an elected executive committee, and the pastor is relegated to the sole job of preaching. Yet others insist on the equality of the elders without recognizing the differences in roles between the pastor-teacher (who is also an elder) and the ruling elders (1 Tim. 5:17; Eph. 4:11). There is, thus, a confusion over either the offices or the roles of the officers.

The abiding relevance of the Great Commission

Last, but not least, among the characteristics of the Baptists is a belief in the abiding relevance of the Great Commission. Baptists have been consistently strong in missions from its beginning. An eminent scholar, Joseph Angus said, "Two peculiarities distinguish the Baptist history of the seventeenth century. It was an age of public disputation; and ministers devoted a large amount of time to evangelistic work."⁹ Preachers were sent out, not only to win souls to Christ, but to gather them into churches. What happened in Britain was repeated in America.¹⁰ In the first half of the 18th century, a number of Particular Baptist churches, though not all of them, fell into Hyper-Calvinism which stifled evangelism and church-planting. They stayed aloof from the revival that was taking place through the preaching of George Whitefield and John Wesley. Towards the end of the century, William Carey (1761-1834) was used by God to stir afresh the historic evangelistic fervour of the Particular Baptists, and to extend it to foreign missions. William Carey has been called "the father of modern missions".

The 19th century was an age of cooperation in missions between the New Connexion of General Baptists and the Particular Baptists. This was for the better, and for the worse, for both groups of Baptists. For the better, there was a recovery of the mission-mindedness of earlier years. For the worse, there was less attention paid to doctrinal integrity and the use of the Confessions of Faith. The Baptists in America were influenced by the controversial revivalist, Charles Finney (1792-1875), to adopt his free-willism and altar call - which became characteristics of modern evangelism. Since the 19th century was the age of modern missions, the Baptist churches planted overseas by missionaries from Britain and America did not make too sharp a distinction between the

General Baptists and the Particular Baptists. It was not until the 1960s that a recovery of Reformed theology triggered off the desire in some individuals to plant distinctively Reformed Baptist churches, and inspired others to recover their Calvinistic roots with an appreciation of the 1689 Confession of Faith.

What it means to be Baptist

We have considered the seven distinctives of the Baptists, viz. (i) the supremacy of Scripture; (ii) the gathered church; (iii) the voluntary nature of discipleship; (iv) the baptism of believers by immersion; (v) the headship of Christ; (vi) the priesthood and prophethood of all believers; and (vii) the abiding relevance of the Great Commission. Some of these characteristics are shared by other groups while they have other distinctives of their own. The Plymouth Brethren, for example, do not hold to the gathered church principle, believing that any professing believer who comes regularly to the church meeting is to be regarded as a member. Furthermore, they would not want to be identified with the Baptists, eschewing denominationalism and preferring to be identified with their founder John Nelson Darby (1880-1882).

Being Baptist, therefore, would require acceptance of the historical origin in the Puritan Separatism of seventeenth century England and adherence to all the seven characteristics of the Baptists. As noted earlier, there are Baptists who would trace their origin to John the Baptist of the New Testament or to the Anabaptists of Continental Europe, but they do not make a convincing case. At best, the General Baptists may claim Anabaptism as one of their roots. It is to be noted that there are nuances in the claim of being Baptist. When someone claims himself to be Baptist, he could mean one of three things.

Firstly, he could mean he belongs to a Baptist church without knowing what it means to be Baptist. He is, in fact, a *nominal Baptist*. This is not a satisfactory position, just as it is not satisfactory to be a nominal Christian, i.e. a Christian in name only, who is in reality not a Christian. A nominal Baptist might be a true Christian, but he is not a true Baptist. Along the way, he might be swayed to join the paedobaptists or another grouping.

Secondly, he might mean he could be considered a Baptist since he believes in believer's baptism and the autonomy of the local church. In reality, he is *baptistic* in his view of baptism and the church but mistakenly considers himself a Baptist. As noted already, the Plymouth Brethren would be baptistic but not Baptist. Similarly, an Evangelical Free Church is baptistic but not Baptist. These churches share in common with the Baptists the practice of believer's baptism and the autonomy of the local church, but they have distinctives of their own and prefer to identify themselves with some founder or movement other than the Baptists.

The third position is the most satisfactory, which is to be *consciously Baptist*. There is no necessity for a church to have historical succession to a Baptist church of the seventeenth century to be regarded as Baptist. There is no necessity for an individual believer to have family history in a Baptist church to be considered Baptist. Instead, it is more important to embrace the doctrine and practice of the Baptists.

Why be Baptist?

Baptists are rightly proud to possess an illustrious history and characteristics that are biblical. There is much they are thankful to God for. There is much to learn from them. There might be those who are now interested to join the Baptists! But there are others who have lingering questions about being Baptist - questions that are pertinent to the Presbyterians, or Lutherans, and others. Some frequently asked questions in relation to being Baptist are as follows.

- (i) *Why call ourselves Baptist, or Presbyterian, or Methodist, etc.? Wouldn't it be better for us to be known simply as Christians? Shouldn't we be united as one instead of allowing ourselves to be divided into denominations?* This line of argument is understandable but idealistic and impractical. It is idealistic because we live in a sinful world and it is impossible to find perfect agreement on all issues. It is not practical to be known only as Christians because discussion on issues require names and labels. We do not have to look upon denominations negatively for there are positive values in them. We may be known as fellow-citizens of a particular country and stand together on issues affecting us as a nation. At the same time, it is legitimate to exist in the same nation as different families. We have family names and family values that we want to pass on to our children. Similarly, it is legitimate to exist as different church families with our own distinctives. We are unable to agree on every point of the Bible's teaching and will have to wait for things to be made clear to us in heaven. Meanwhile, we will fellowship with other churches as we are able, depending on the degree of truth we share in common. The more of the truth we share in common, the more we are able to cooperate together.
- (ii) *Why don't we begin from the Bible and found indigenous churches instead of importing western church models to places like China?* This again is unrealistic and impractical. We have noted that in matters of the faith, it is not the east or the west that we follow, but the Bible. We must humbly acknowledge that we are not the only ones led by the Holy Spirit in the understanding of the Bible. God has led others before us to understand the Bible as well. It will be foolish for us to "reinvent the wheel", for if we were to start everything from scratch, we will find ourselves making the same mistakes as others before us, and we will end up in the same positions they found themselves in, even though we might call those positions by different names. We acknowledge that the Bible is our only authority in all matters of faith and practice. At the same time, we acknowledge that God has guided others in the understanding of the Bible in times past, just as He is guiding us in the understanding of the Bible today. It is to our good that we humbly learn from our spiritual forebears, while examining everything in the light of Scripture.

Conclusion

As noted repeatedly, there were basically two groups of Baptists from the beginning of their history - the General Baptists and the Particular Baptists. With time, there were further divisions into groups known as the Southern Baptists, the Regular Baptists, the Independent Baptists, the Reformed Baptists, etc. The Reformed Baptists consciously identify themselves as the spiritual descendants of the Particular Baptists - holding to its Calvinistic soteriology, valuing its covenant theology, and adhering to the 1689 Confession of Faith. All these groupings share a common heritage and certain common characteristics which identify them as Baptists. May all the tribes of Zion increase!

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