



“What Is A Reformed Baptist Church?”

Study 2: Origin Of The Reformed Baptists (1 Cor. 3:1-15)

Various theories of Baptist origins have been held: (i) The idea of a succession of *ministry* from apostolic times to the present day, based on an unprovable chain of ordination; (ii) The idea of a chain of *baptisms* carried on by men immersed as believers; (iii) The idea of *church* succession, based upon historical evidence for a long series of local churches bearing the true spiritual marks; (iv) The idea of the succession of *principles* exemplified in individuals or groups who have held to the essentials of Baptist witness.

- We do not hold to any of these theories because in any attempt to prove a definite continuity, the straining of historical accuracy is involved. We believe it is the succession of truth that matters supremely. It is not so much ecclesiastical pedigree or historical lineage that matters, but adherence to the doctrine of Holy Scripture. Doctrine governs practice.

I. The Reformation

1. After the apostolic era, the Reformation in the sixteenth century formed the most important epoch in Christian history. The Church of Rome had held the Christian world in its grasp of superstition for over a thousand years. After prolonged internal struggle, Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic priest and a professor of theology, decided to follow Scripture rather than church dogma. He began to teach “justification by faith” instead of “justification by works”. On October 31, 1517, he nailed his “95 Theses” to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg, Germany. The Reformation had begun! In the same period, John Calvin ministered in Geneva, Switzerland, and Ulrich Zwingli ministered in Zurich, Switzerland.

2. The Reformation consisted of two great movements:

- (i) The Magisterial Reformation, represented by the Lutheran, Calvinist, and Zwinglian sections. They are called “Magisterial” because of their reliance on civil magistrates to maintain the cause of religion.
- (ii) The Radical Reformation, represented by the evangelical Anabaptists, the revolutionary Anabaptists, and the contemplative Anabaptists. They are called “Radical” because they believed that the Church of Rome was beyond reform and the apostolic church needed to be restored. It should be observed that the Anabaptist movement was very extensive and diversified in character, as the historian G. H. Williams demonstrated. A vast Anabaptist literature beckons researchers.

2. The extremism of a small section of the Anabaptist movement brought unjustified abuse upon the whole Anabaptist community. For example, in Munster in the years 1533 to

1536, fanatics anticipated the Second Coming and the setting up of a Christian commonwealth there, which they saw as the location of the New Jerusalem. Soon polygamy appeared, and sins punishable by death included blasphemy, seditious language, scolding one's parents, backbiting, spreading scandal, and complaining. When government forces later attacked the Munsterites, they put up a fight, resulting in many of them being killed and others captured and executed. The magisterial Reformers were intolerant and harsh towards the Anabaptists. In 1536, Luther signed a document clearly stating that the Anabaptists were to be put to death, not because they were given to physical violence, but because their programme entailed a complete reorientation of church, state, and society. In Zurich, Zwingli made no attempt to prevent the Zurich Council from imprisoning, torturing, drowning, and burning to death the Anabaptists. Calvin had little contact with the Anabaptists, but his impression of them was no better. He caricatured one of them as "giving himself with raised head and rolling eyes the majestic aspect of a prophet," and referred to them as "furious madmen". Tens of thousands of Anabaptists were killed during the Reformation. Misrepresentation of them continues to today.

II. The Evangelical Anabaptists

1. The orthodox evangelical Anabaptists of the Reformation should rightly be called Baptists. Most modern scholars locate the emergence of the evangelical Anabaptist movement at Zurich during the years 1524-1525. The leaders of the movement were former supporters of Ulrich Zwingli, who not only disagreed with his policy of gradual reform but desired the restoration of the primitive, apostolic church composed of visible saints. Three prominent leaders were Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and George Blaurock. The first evangelical Anabaptist church was founded in 1525 when they baptised one another by effusion (pouring) and began worshipping God together. The Anabaptists spread with amazing rapidity due to their emphasis on the Great Commission. This alarmed the Magisterial Reformers.
2. An outstanding leader among the evangelical Anabaptists was Menno Simons, born in 1496 at Witmarsum in the province of Friesland. He became a Roman Catholic priest in 1525, the same year that the evangelical Anabaptists of Zurich founded their church. After searching the Scriptures and a long struggle remaining in the Church of Rome, he was converted. In 1536, he renounced his priesthood and embarked upon a life of danger, ministering to the scattered flocks of Anabaptist believers in Northern Netherlands and North-West Germany until he died in 1561. Mennonite churches can be found to this day in countries like the United States of America and France.
3. The evangelical Anabaptists came to an understanding of discipleship and the nature of the church through searching the Scriptures. This was worked out chiefly in contrast to the teaching of the Magisterial Reformation. But they had to fight the battle on another front, namely against the extremism of the revolutionary and the contemplative Anabaptists. The magisterial Reformers were, in their view, still maintaining a Romish doctrine of the church, while the Munsterites and others were exalting the Holy Spirit at the expense of the written word of Scripture.

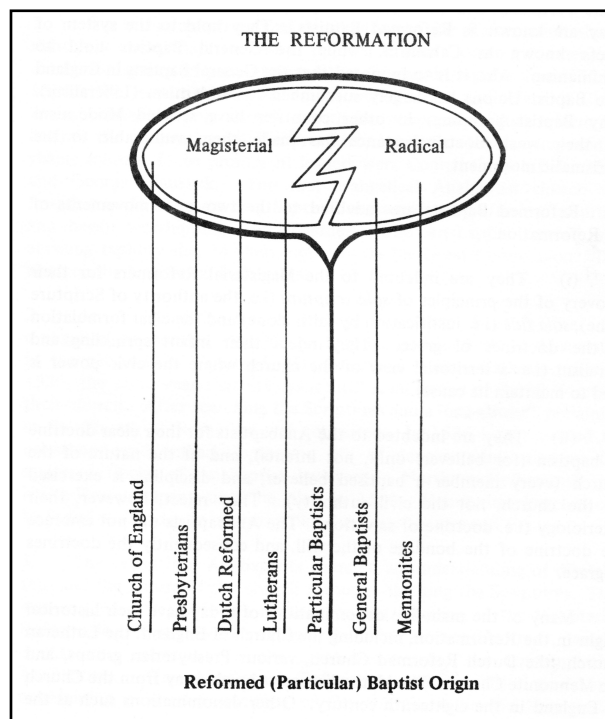
III. Reformed Baptist Origin

1. Two streams of Baptists were to develop from the Reformation in Britain - the Particular and the General Baptists. They spread to the United States of America, India, and other

parts of the world. The Particular Baptists of today are known as Reformed Baptists. Their historical origin may be traced to the semi-Separatist 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. They hold to the Calvinistic system of salvation, while the General Baptists hold to Arminian system. In Britain, the General Baptists, under the Baptists Union, have largely succumbed to Modernism (Theological Liberalism). Many Baptist groupings in other countries have resisted Modernism but their weak doctrinal stance has made them vulnerable to the charismatic movement.

2. The Reformed Baptists are indebted to the two great movements of the Reformation.

- (i) They are indebted to the Magisterial Reformers for their recovery of the principles of “sola scripture” (i.e. the authority of Scripture alone) and “soli Deo gloria” (i.e. everything is to God’s glory alone), and the clear formulation of “the doctrines of grace”. They reject their infant sprinkling and sacralism (i.e. a territorial view of the church where the civic power is used to maintain its cause).
- (ii) They are indebted to the Anabaptists for their clear doctrine of baptism (for believers only, not infants), and of the nature of the church (every member a baptised believer, and discipline is exercised by the church, not the civil authority). They reject, however, their Arminian soteriology (i.e. doctrine of salvation). The Anabaptists did not embrace the doctrine of the bondage of the will, and consequently the doctrines of grace.



3. Many of the mainline denominations of today have their historical origin in the Reformation, including the Church of England, the Lutheran denominations, the Dutch Reformed Church, various Presbyterian groups, and the Mennonite Church. The Methodists are a breakaway from the Church of England in the eighteenth century. Other denominations such as the Brethren (sometimes referred to as the Plymouth Brethren), Evangelical Free, the United Reformed and Pentecostal churches, emerged later in history. All these denominations are today largely not “reformed” in the sense that we mean. There are Presbyterian denominations like the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in the USA and the Free Church in Scotland which are reformed in doctrine and the only issues that separate them from the Reformed Baptists are baptism and the form of church government.

= We eschew sectarianism but uphold the imperative of striving for doctrinal and practical purity.

Questions

1. As members of a Reformed Baptist church, what attitude of heart should we have towards other churches?
2. How may we allay the fears and suspicion of other churches toward us?
3. A Methodist church has, over the years, become more and more reformed and baptistic so that it is now virtually indistinguishable from our churches far as the main beliefs and practices are concerned. Has that church the right to call itself a Reformed Baptist church? Should it?

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