



# “What Is A Reformed Baptist Church?”

## Study 3: Development And Decline (Rev. 7:1-8)

In Revelation 7:4-8, the tribe of Dan is missing, while the name of Ephraim has been changed to Joseph. We do not want to become apostate, and desire to maintain a name — Reformed Baptist — that reflects our desire to be faithful to God’s word. The Reformed Baptists of today are the spiritual offspring of the Particular Baptists of the 17th century.

Non-Baptists tend to lump all Baptists together when, in fact, there were two streams of Baptists that emerged independently of one another - the General Baptists and the Particular Baptists.

### **I. English Baptist History**

1. The General Baptists trace their origin in John Smyth (d. 1612) who had strong Puritan leanings. Persecution drove Smyth and his Separatist church to Amsterdam in 1608. Smyth gradually departed from Calvinism. Common ground brought contact with the Mennonites with whom he sought union. This, however, caused Thomas Helwys and several others to separate from him and they returned to London in 1612 to establish the first Baptist Church in England. This church was Arminian in doctrine. The General Baptists corresponded and sought fellowship with the Mennonites of Continental Europe.

2. The first Particular Baptist church arose through secession from the Congregational Church founded by Henry Jacob (1563-1624), a Puritan. The Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey (J-L-J) church, named after its successive pastors, was Calvinistic in theology and Independent in the form of government, but retained infant baptism. The first Particular Baptist Church had John Spilsbury (1593-1699) as its pastor. Between 1633 and 1638, a number of other groups left amicably from the J-L-J church to become Particular Baptist churches. The Particular Baptists had no close fellowship with the General Baptists.<sup>1</sup>

3. Growth continued despite persecution of the Dissenters (or Nonconformists) from 1662-1672 and from 1680-1685. When Parliament passed the Act of Toleration in 1689, granting partial religious liberty to the Nonconformists, things became much easier. The first Particular Baptist Confession was published in 1644. In 1677, during a respite from persecution, an assembly of pastors and elders met and as a result of their deliberations a second and fuller Confession of Faith was published. It was not signed at this stage, but twelve years later it was republished by the General Assembly of 1689. It became known as “The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689”, or “The 1689 Confession” in brief.

4. During the first half of the 18th century many of the General Baptists lapsed by way of Socinianism into Unitarianism,<sup>2</sup> while in the same period hyper-Calvinism began to raise its ugly head among the Particular Baptists. From this period on, the hyper-Calvinist churches began to develop into another stream of Baptists — the Strict Baptists. They denied that saving faith is the duty of unbelievers, and asserted that communion should be restricted to believers of the same faith and order (strict communion). The Gospel Standard Strict Baptists also believed that the gospel, not the moral law, is the rule of life for believers.

5. Revival took place in Britain and in America because of the preaching of George Whitefield and John Wesley, who crossed the Atlantic a number of times to preach. In America, Jonathan Edwards was also blessed with revival in his preaching. While many Particular Baptists churches distanced themselves from the revival, others happily joined in and were blessed. This was particularly so among the ministers trained at the Bristol Academy.<sup>3</sup> William Carey pressed for his fellow-ministers to engage in overseas missions. A missionary society was formed 1792 which sent Carey and his friends to India a year later.

6. During the early 19th century, as many Strict Baptists moved to a more rigidly hyper-Calvinist position, others in the Particular Baptist group were diluting their Calvinism. C. H. Spurgeon was preoccupied mainly with his great work of reaping the harvest of revival. The Particular Baptists began to compromise with the new learning of higher criticism (Modernism or Theological Liberalism). In 1891 the General Baptists joined the Baptist Union, thus uniting the two streams of Baptists for the first time.

7. The downward decline of the Particular Baptists continued from Spurgeon's time. Modernism crept into most churches (except the Strict Baptist churches). From the 1960's, there began a renewed interest in the doctrines of grace among Baptist and Presbyterian churches. With the renewed interest in reformed theology came also interest in missions.

## **II American Baptist History**

1. To escape religious harassment in Europe, the Mayflower Pilgrims set sail from Plymouth in England to the New World (America) in 1620. In the 1630's a much greater Puritan migration took place. Roger Williams (1600-1685), the founder of the first Baptist church in America belonged to this group. He ministered among the Congregationalists but was banished from Massachusetts in 1635 for objecting to the principle that the magistrate might punish a breach of the first four commandments. In 1636 he founded a new settlement at Providence, in a territory which soon became known as Rhode Island. In March 1639, twelve persons were baptised — including Roger Williams who was first baptised by one of the men — thus constituting the first Baptist Church in America.

2. In 1727 a revival took place in the Moravian community in Herrnhut in Germany, and at the same time there was a spiritual awakening under the ministry J. Frelinghuysen, a Dutch Reformed minister in New England. When the force of this awakening seemed to be on the decline the Holy Spirit came upon the congregation of Jonathan Edwards at Northampton in 1735. When it seemed that the impetus of the Edwards awakening was declining, George Whitefield's second visit to America was used by God to spread the fire of revival (1740-1741). The Baptists benefitted greatly from these revivals.

3. As the years went on, Theological Liberalism (Modernism) began to affect the churches. The decline in doctrinal standards brought division and separation in some of the missionary societies. Modernism questioned the veracity of Scripture and rejected the miraculous and supernatural of the Bible in the name of proud scholarship. During this period, the idea of “the carnal Christian” arose, in which is claimed that one could have Christ as Saviour but not as Lord. The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy (or Evangelical-Modernist Clash) took place between 1910-30. Books were written on key subject and circulated — called “The Fundamentals” — which were sponsored by a wealthy Christian businessman. From then on, the spread of Modernism was checked, while the Evangelicals fragmented into the fundamentalist, Reformed, and Neo-Evangelical camps.

5. As in the United Kingdom, the Reformed Baptists began to make their presence felt during the revival of interest in Reformed theology in the 1960’s. An increasing number of churches in the Southern Baptist Convention are returning to Calvinism of its founders, while new churches are founded. More church groups have begun to take on the name “Reformed”, some of them without a clear understanding Reformed theology and its implications.

### **III. Baptists Worldwide**

1. Before the Reformation the Christian Religion in Western Europe was Roman Catholic while that in Eastern Europe was Greek Orthodox, which then divided into the various “Orthodox Churches” (the Egyptian Orthodox Coptic Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church, etc.). In Russia the monolithic structure of religious orthodoxy carried on unchallenged after the Reformation in Western Europe. The Protestant religion was eventually to arrive in Russia from other parts of Europe. During the years of persecution under the communism regime in Russia, the name of Pastor Georgi Petrovich Vins (1928-1998) who was involved in a network of Independent Baptist churches, was well-known throughout the world.

2. Baptist work has spread to various parts of the world due to the efforts of British and American missionaries. William Carey did extensive work in India, Adoniram Judson in Burma, and Lottie Moon in China. Migrant Christians from China gathered themselves into churches in the countries of South east Asia. After the communist takeover of China in 1949, western missionaries shifted their attention to South East Asia, resulting in many churches being established. These churches are largely Arminian. Most of them succumbed to the charismatic movement which arrived in the 1970’s, while some are now re-examining their stand after the charismatic excitement abated.

3. With the renewed interest in Reformed theology in the 1960's, the Reformed faith spread to New Zealand, Australia, South East Asia, and other parts of the world. It is difficult to keep up with the effects of Reformed books which spread to all nations. The advent of the internet is giving another spurt of interest in Reformed theology. Sadly, there are those who profess to be Reformed who are only Calvinistic in soteriology, failing to grasp the fullness of the Reformed faith and its practical implications.

= There has been numerical growth, and doctrinal decline. Will there be a revived Reformed faith, as more Reformed churches are planted? How will the Reformed Baptists fare?

### **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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**Footnotes:**

1. Key leaders among the Particular Baptists, including William Kiffin, wrote in 1692 about the General Baptists, "...those Persons... are such as we have no Communion with, being such as are called Free-willers (or Arminians) holding a falling away from true Grace..." quoted in B. S. Poh, "A Garden Enclosed", p. 182.
2. Socinianism held to a rationalistic approach to Scripture and faith, reject the orthodox view of the divinity of Christ, and claimed that the Son of God did not exist until He was born a man. Unitarianism rejected the doctrine of the Trinity and held to the absolute unity of the Godhead.
3. Roger Hayden, "Continuity and Change", Baptist Historical Society, 2006.