

A Brief History of the Baptist Church

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In order to comprehend Baptist history, we must first know what Baptists believe. Did the apostles believe what we believe today? The answer to this question is, “Do we believe like the apostles believe?” These beliefs are known as Baptist Distinctives. Different from all other denominations, the Bible is the final authority for the Baptist. All doctrines and instructions are from the Scriptures and not some hierarchy. Secondly, Baptists hold to the autonomy of the local church. Thirdly, believing in the priesthood of every saint makes the Baptist different, especially from the Catholics. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are the only two ordinances that the Baptist ancestors held. Biblical interpretation is left up to the individual reading the Word and not some association. Separation of church and state, another Baptist distinctive, means that the state will stay out of the church affairs. Pastors and deacons are the only two officers recognized in the Baptist church. Finally, in order to be a part of the Baptist church, an individual must be born again and scripturally baptized.

When tracing Baptist history, we must remember that much of the accounts may vary from book to book. The Baptist did not have time to write their own history because they were too busy fleeing from persecution. Scriptures reveal the birth of Baptist churches, starting with the Apostles. From there, our ancestors carried on the Baptist beliefs. One of these was known as Tertullian. Through watching the martyrs of Christians, he noticed something different about them. They were courageous, lived holy lifestyles, and did not compromise in their belief in only one God. Shortly after his conversion, he joined the Montanists and became one of their leaders.

Meanwhile, the Paulicians were derivatives of the Apostle Paul. They spread west in search of religious freedom. Many of the converts of Christianity became a Paulician. Other names of the Paulicians were “Baptist” and “Sabians”. The term “Sabians” is an Arabized term meaning Baptist. They held to the sound doctrinal teaching of the Scriptures. Preaching salvation clear, and baptism

for regenerated people, they drew attention to themselves, thus bringing persecution.

Paulicans were the ones that cleared the path for the Albigenses. Because of the settlements of the Paulicans in Italy and France, Albi of France became their headquarters. Although the Catholics labeled the Albigenses heretics, their beliefs were Baptist beliefs. Their beliefs were that a man should not be required to be converted, that faith produced works, the law was not a regulation for Christians, priests were not needed, sacraments and ordinances were useless, and baptism of converted sinners by immersion was the only means of baptism. As a result, this brought great persecution to the Albigenses.

Another leader that arose from France was Peter of Bruys. He sternly took the position that the Bible is what we should base our beliefs on. Because of this conviction, the Roman Catholics burnt him at the stake in 1126 A.D.

Despite persecution, truth was continued in the haven of the Alps. Peter Waldo, in his search for the truth, became converted after studying the Scriptures. Although his own wife forsook him for his desire for the truth, Waldo continued in what he learned. He led the believers in the Alps into evangelism and they became known as the Waldensians. Roman Catholics recognized them as the continued group of the apostolic days. Waldensians held to the clear Scriptural teachings of salvation, baptism, the local church (claiming that the Catholics were the harlot church), denying purgatory, and rejecting the mass.

How did the term Christians arrive into existence? It came from unbelievers that had a desire to be derogatory to the “Christ group”. This is the same situation of the term Anabaptist, or re-baptizers. They derived their name from sarcastic comments of unbelievers. Anabaptist became prominent in Switzerland during the sixteenth century. Their descendants were the Waldenses and the Petrobrusians. Due to their denial of infant baptism, persecution was their payment. Zwingli, leader of the Anabaptist persecution of the early 1500s, pronounced the sentence of drowning to anyone that denied infant baptism.

Because of the banishment of Balthasar Hubmaier, he wound up in Germany. Shortly, he became the leader of the Anabaptist

there. His thoughts and writings provoked a reformation in Germany headed up by Martin Luther. Did the Anabaptist and the Lutherans agree? Through history, we see that the two did not agree nor get along with each other. It was Martin Luther that would not hold to the Scriptures and completely separate from the Roman Catholic Church. Actually, Luther influenced persecution on the Anabaptist. The Lutherans, not the Catholics, commenced the maltreatment and discrimination of Bible believing Christians in Germany.

In Baptist history, we must realize that not everyone that used the term “Anabaptist” or “Baptist” were genuine Baptist. One such individual is John Smyth. Leaving the Church of England, he joined with the “Separatists”. Through the teachings of Arminius and the Mennonites, he arrived at the conclusion that infant baptism was wrong. He then formed another church with 37 other people that were similar in the Baptist’s beliefs. This was not the first church in England formed with the Baptist doctrines, but it was a well-known one in history. Shortly, John Smyth became confused again about baptism and along with his congregation, was re-baptized. Fortunately, no other churches were birthed because of his.

Other English preachers were John Bunyan and Charles H. Spurgeon. Not only did their preaching influence many, their writing still lives today. This reveals to us the importance of writing and getting out the printed page.

How did the Baptist arrive in America? Many historians credit Roger Williams with starting the first Baptist church in America. Although Williams was a pioneer, John Clarke (1609-1676) came ahead of him. In 1639, Clarke was the leader and founder of the first Baptist church located in Newport, Rhode Island.

Later, seeking religious freedom, Roger Williams arrived in America. After arriving in America, Williams began to pastor a church in Salem, Massachusetts. Because of his Baptist beliefs, he was banned from this church and before long made his way to Providence, Rhode Island. Other followers went to Plymouth, Massachusetts.

The history of the religious background of Roger Williams is interesting. Starting as an Anglican, he later joined the Puritans.

Then, after a careful study of the Scriptures, he denied infant baptism, which led to the departure from the Puritans. Ezekiel Holliman, in March of 1639, baptized Williams, which led him to baptize ten other believers. This event was the commencement of the second Baptist church in America.

Shortly, Williams tried to trace his baptism back to the baptism of Jesus Christ. He could not do this. Therefore, he began to become confused and even left the church labeling himself as a “seeker”.

Did the advancement of Roger Williams lead to religious freedom in America? The sad answer to this question is no. Persecution plagued the Baptist believers, even on American soil. Once again, the rivers of persecution flowed with the blood of Bible believing Christians. During the middle 1600s, anyone that was not affiliated with the state church of Massachusetts was denied citizenship. In 1644, anyone that would not baptize his or her babies was banished. Those that denied the state church and infant baptism quickly saw the persecution of the Puritans.

Before the Great Awakening that swept America (1725-1760), there were only 47 Baptist churches in the Colonies. Only seven of these churches were below the Mason Dixon line. God used Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) and George Whitfield (1714-1770) to turn America from their “enlightenment” era (or error) back to God. Scores of people were saved, congregations grew, scriptural doctrines were reviewed, and Baptist churches grew rapidly, especially in the south.

Then the Revolutionary War came. This war was different from most wars. It did not consist of country verses country, but rather the Episcopal Church of England sent the Irish Catholics to fight against the Baptist in America. Even George Washington stated that the Baptist played a major role in the Revolutionary War.

Another impact that the Baptist played in the history of religious freedom in America was during the writing of the Constitution. Baptist pastor John Leland influenced James Madison of the Virginia convention to accept the Constitution. Virginia was the ninth state to ratify this historic document. By the way, it took nine states to ratify it.

The only problem with the Constitution was that it lacked guidelines for religious freedom. Baptist began to appeal to President George Washington to amend the Constitution. Pastor John Leland met with James Madison in 1788 to discuss this issue. Orange County, Virginia is the historic place where Madison was influenced to present the Bill of Rights. Due to the influence of a committee of Baptist in Virginia, the Bill of Rights was passed issuing religious freedom in America.

How did the Baptist in America become missions minded, even to the point of foreign missions? Three men are accredited for this great feat. William Carey, Adoniram Judson, and Luther Rice are the ones that influenced missions in the local church.

Although Carey was poor, God used him in a mighty way for foreign missions and printing. Carey was able to gather enough money to print a Bible tract in support of missions. Its idea was to expect and attempt great things for God. On October 2, 1792, the English Baptist Missionary Society was formed. His burden led him to go to India where he translated the Bible into about forty different languages.

Adoniram Judson, a Congregationalist, formed the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. In 1812, with several other missionaries, Judson set sail for India. On his voyage, he began to study on the subject of baptism. He knew that some Baptist missionaries were already there and he was preparing to battle with them over infant baptism, which he believed. During his study, he learned how infant baptism was heresy and he recanted his view. Judson became a Baptist.

Meanwhile, Judson's friend Luther Rice sailed to India aboard another ship. Unknowingly, Rice began to study the same subject. Rice arrived at the same conclusion that Judson did. Once he arrived in India, Judson and Rice conversed about the subject. Both agreed that they needed to deny their affiliation with the Congregationalist and turn to the Baptist for help. Luther Rice sailed to America to rally the support of the Baptist. This burden of foreign missions fell on the Baptist in America and some of them began to support foreign missions. The Devil fought amongst some Baptist, because they did not understand missions, but they soon

dwindled down to nothing. God was able to move on the American Baptist in missions.

Is it important for the modern day Baptist to continue to fight for doctrinal purity? If our ancestors shed their blood over the final authority of the Scriptures and infant baptism, then we should hold the fundamental doctrines without error also! Paul demonstrated this stand when he withstood Peter to the face (Galatians 2:1-14), and believers should not be tolerant of error today. We should completely sell out to the truth and not sell the truth. God help us to continue to hold to the fundamental doctrines that brought about our ancestors persecution and martyrdom!

What Baptist church holds to the truth during the present time? Is it the Southern Baptist, Freewill Baptist, American Baptist, etc.? Unquestionably, the Independent Baptist movement, influenced by Dr. J. Frank Norris, is the Baptist church for today. They are independent from any association thus making them an autonomous body of baptized, born again believers. Like our forefathers, the Scriptures are their final authority and they do not have to look to any association or convention for a statement of faith.