

Why I Am a Baptist

Clarence Caukin, 1887

Almost all the Anti-papist denominations date, either directly or indirectly, from the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The Protestant Episcopal, Lutheran, and Presbyterian Churches, came from the Roman Catholic Church, and the Methodist Episcopal Church came from the Protestant Episcopal Church.

The Baptists, however, do not date from the Reformation. Though Anti-papists, they are not, in the technical and historical sense of the word, "Protestants," though they have ever protested, and do now protest, against the heresies and abominations of the Romish Church.

Just before his ascension, Jesus said to his disciples:

"All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen. (Matt 28:18-20) and Mark adds, "He that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." (Mark 16:16).

The requirements of this Divine Commission are:

1. To preach the gospel to all nations.
2. To baptize those who believe.
3. To teach those who believe to observe all things whatsoever Christ commanded.

This the apostles did. That the churches they founded were believed to be composed of regenerated persons, is evident from the fact that they addressed or referred to them as "believers," "saints," "quickened," "the faithful," "the redeemed," "the sanctified," "the saved," etc.

The apostolic churches were also independent bodies; that is, separate from the State and from each other, and self governed. They are spoken of individually as, "the church at Jerusalem," "the church at Antioch," "the church at Smyrna." They are spoken of collectively as, "the churches," "the churches of Macedonia," "the churches of Asia," "all the churches."

They are represented as electing their own officers, admitting, expelling, and restoring members, and acting as distinct, independent bodies.

There is a remarkable similarity between the apostolic churches and the Baptist churches of today, in their modes and forms of worship.

The apostolic churches were distinguished for the plainness and simplicity of their worship. "They had no magnificent cathedrals, gorgeously arrayed priesthood, no prescribed ritual, no splendid religious shows, no pomp of music, no parade of images and paintings."

Quietly, and unostentatiously, they met in some "upper room," or other humble sanctuary, to sing, to pray, to read and expound the Scriptures, and to exhort one another to faithfulness in the Christian life.

History of the Baptists

The Baptists claim to have descended from the apostles.

It is true that the line of descent cannot always be traced. Like a river, that now and then in its course is lost under the surface of the ground, and then makes its appearance again, the Baptists claim that, from the days of the apostles until the present time, there have not been wanting those persons, either separately or collected into churches, and known under different names, who, if now living, would be universally recognized as Baptists.

Since the origin of the Baptists, long and eventful ages have elapsed. Some of them were ages of ignorance and darkness. Men were afraid to speak or to write — almost to think. The principles for which the Baptists contended were fiercely denounced as heresy and treason. To speak, was to be hushed in death. Had they not been immortal, all vestiges of them, save in the records of courts and councils, would have perished. Their existence and continuity can be traced down the ages by "the stains of their martyr's blood, and the light of their martyr's fires."

Since the days of the apostles, they have come to the surface in the Novatians, the Donatists, the Paulicians, the Paterines, the various communities of Waldenses, the so-called Anabaptists of Germany, Dutch Baptists, the Baptists of England; and are seen today in the Baptists distributed all over the world.

Dr. Cramp says, "When Luther blew the trumpet of religious freedom, the Baptists came out of their hiding places to share in the general gladness, and to take part in the conflict."

The Baptists have suffered, in common with other Christian denominations, at the hands of wicked rulers, and of the Roman hierarchy. They have also suffered by themselves for their peculiar views as Baptists, at the hands of Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists; and for no one thing more than their rejection of infant baptism.

In Germany they were plundered, thrust into dungeons, banished, and numbers of them beheaded or burned alive. Torture was frequently employed to wring from the sufferers the names and abodes of their associates, or to force them to renounce the faith. In Switzerland, in 1526, it was ordered that if any baptized others, or submitted to baptism (re-baptism, they called it), they should be drowned without mercy.

Many Baptist ministers were drowned; and they held their meetings in secret, in the woods, and under cover of the night. Finally, they left the country in large numbers, going to Moravia, where, for a season, they were tolerated; but at length a law was passed expelling them, and they left, some going to Hungary, some to Transylvania, some to Wallachia, and others to Poland.

In the Netherlands, the hand of oppression was heavy on the Baptists. In 1532, three were burned at the Hague. By edicts, published in the following year, all persons were forbidden to harbor Baptist preachers in

Holland; and Baptists refusing to recant were to be slain. The torture was constantly resorted to. The victims were stretched on the rack, or thumb-screws were employed, or a similar instrument applied to the ankles. No regard was paid to sex, station, or age. Under Bloody Mary, a good proportion of the martyr blood that flowed was from the veins of Baptists; and many passed to heaven through the fire.

In the early settlements of America, Church and State were united by law, and the Church sustained by taxation and State appropriations in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Virginia; and persecutions against Dissenters were violent and severe.

In 1620 (December 20), the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock, and founded the first colony in New England. They were Independents, or Congregationalists; and on board the "Mayflower," they had made a provision for the support of the church and ministry by taxation. The Pilgrims, or Puritans, did not come to this country to establish religious liberty; they came to establish their own faith, and to exclude all others from their colonies; and they were more intolerant in their colonial enactments against dissenters than either England or Holland, whence they had fled from persecution.

Roger Williams landed at Boston, February 5, 1631. He had been a minister of the Church of England; but becoming disgusted with its corruptions, he sought a home in the Puritan colony of Massachusetts. But when he found the Puritan Church at Boston still holding communion with the Church of England, he refused to unite with it, and went to Salem. But his sentiments were quite in advance of the Puritans. He boldly preached religious liberty, liberty of conscience, liberty of worship, and declared that the civil magistrate had no right to coerce the consciences of men, nor inflict civil penalties upon men for their forms of religious faith and worship.

In January, 1636, he was banished; but his persecutors, fearing that he would establish another colony, determined to send him back to England; but when the officers went to his home to arrest him, he was gone. He had fled into the wilderness among the savages, who furnished him with a home.

"For fourteen weeks," he says, "I knew not what bed or bread did mean."

He had made the acquaintance, and secured the friendship of Massasoit, and the Narraganset chiefs, Canonicus and Miantonomoh. By the last two he was welcomed to Narraganset Bay, where he founded the city of Providence. In March, 1639, he became a Baptist, and was baptized by one of his own members; and then he in turn baptized others. Thus was organized the first Baptist Church in America. But the method was never repeated.

Though persecuted by others, the Baptists have never persecuted. They have always opposed the union of Church and State. In Virginia, in 1784, when they had almost conquered in their struggle for religious freedom, a compromise was proposed in the form of the famous "Assessment Bill." Every one was to be taxed to support religion; but to have the liberty of saying to which denomination his tax was to be applied. The Baptists saw that this was an alliance of Church and State, and opposing it, secured its defeat.

In Georgia, in 1785, a law for the establishment and support of religion was actually passed, through the influence of the Episcopalians. It embraced all denominations, and gave all equal privileges; but the same year, the Baptists remonstrated against it, sent two messengers to the Legislature, and it was promptly repealed. The first modern treatise ever written upon "Religious Liberty," was by Leonard Busher, a Baptist, in 1614.

The Baptists have not only been the firm friends of "Religious Liberty," but of "Civil Liberty" as well.

Thomas Jefferson had much to do in shaping the government of Virginia, and of the United States. He was not a Baptist, but he was brought up in close relations to them; and about ten years before the Revolution, he attended, for several months, the meetings of a small Baptist church near Monticello, his country seat, and became much interested in their church government; and declared that it was the only true democracy existing in the world; and that he believed it would be the best plan of government for the American Colonies.

A National Constitution for the United States was adopted in 1787. Its provisions were satisfactory so far as they went; but many felt that "Religious Liberty" was not sufficiently guarded. The Baptist General Committee of Virginia, in 1788, expressed their disapproval of this important omission, and, after consultation with James Madison, they wrote to President Washington, saying, that they feared that liberty of conscience, dearer to them than property or life, was not sufficiently guarded in the Constitution. Washington sent a kind and encouraging reply, and in the very next month, Virginia proposed that immortal "First Amendment" to the Constitution of the United States:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and petition the government for a redress of grievances.