

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 84

Baptist Expansion in America

“Baptist” – Where did that label come from? Who decided to call certain Christians “Baptists”? Why? Are Baptists named after John the Baptist? Was John a “Baptist” in the way we think of Baptists today?

In the 21st century, most Baptists proudly use the Baptist label when describing their religion or on their church signs. But, it was not always so. We have studied the origins of the Baptist denomination through the Free Church Movement in England, and we have also seen the Baptist label used in association with a number of churches in that movement. The label “Baptist” was not at first considered a compliment! It was a derogatory label that, either by itself or in combination with other words, was used in an insulting manner. The “Catabaptists” were so called because they “perverted baptism.” The Anabaptists were so labeled because they “rebaptized” their members (see Lesson 56). The simple term “Baptist” was originally used to describe those who were considered overemphasizers of baptism.¹

What makes a Baptist a Baptist? The answer is not easy to give. Albert Henry Newman, the early Baylor professor of Church History wrote in 1915² that there were a number of consistent factors in most Baptist churches. He listed 5:

1. Scripture is the absolute authority for belief and practice of the Church and the Christian.
2. Infant baptism is contrary to Scripture and cannot lead to church membership.
3. Church membership belongs only to those who are saved.
4. Salvation is a personal issue of faith and belief or faith cannot be forced on anyone, and
5. Baptism should be by immersion.

¹ “Baptist” itself comes from the English term “baptize” or “baptism.” The English words “Baptize” and “baptism” have evolved from middle English (*bapteme*) and Old English (*baptisme*). Most likely, the Old English came from the Old French (*bapteme*, *baptisma*, and *baptiser*). The French, no doubt, came from the Latin (*baptisma*, *baptizare*). The Latin came from the Greek where in the New Testament we have the actual words *baptisma* as a noun meaning an immersion or dipping in water and *baptizo/baptizein* a verb meaning to immerse, submerge or dip.

² Newman, *A History of the Baptist Churches in the United States*, (American Baptist Publication Society: Philadelphia 1915) at 1-4.

History has shown us that these 5 are not fully absolute on all who claim the label “Baptist,” but they are fairly representative of most Baptists historically. There are many other points that can be made about Baptist beliefs. Almost all Baptists have embraced the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed (see Lesson 18). Baptists would say, however, that these creeds are accepted not because they were a consensus opinion of the church, but rather because the creeds accurately explain Christian doctrine found within scripture.

Within this description of the Baptist church, we can fairly concentrate on the baptism issue as an early line of demarcation. This line not only sourced the Baptist label, but also sourced much of the controversy that went with early Baptist churches.

The Baptist church arose at a time when the Catholic, the Lutheran, the Anglican, and the Calvinistic churches were all baptizing infants. Baptist scholars pointed to the New Testament as teaching and illustrating only baptism of believers who had placed their faith and trust in Christ (which, by definition, an infant could not do). The scholars also pointed out that New Testament baptism was, again by definition, an act of immersion. This was understood as the symbolic meaning of going down into the water as signifying the death of Christ, and coming out of the water as signifying Christ’s resurrection.

Baptist scholars would assert that the influx of infant baptism into the church came out of a phase where the church was seeing baptism as a magical effect on sinners rather than simply the “response of a good conscience toward God” (1 Pet. 3:21). “By the close of the second century the pagan view that water baptism possesses in itself magical efficacy begins to find expression.”³ The step from this to infant baptism was seen as logical. If one needed the magic waters of baptism to save from sin, and if one was born with inherited sin from Adam, then one must be baptized soon after birth, lest one die in an unregenerate state.

The Baptists took issue with this doctrine. Because the Baptists denied the doctrine that baptism itself was a regeneration act, the baptism was seen as appropriate only in the New Testament exemplars of people who put their faith into the sacrifice of Christ as their atonement. This brought the “Baptists” into direct conflict with the Church of England and most Reformation churches.

BAPTISTS IN THE UNITED STATES

While the Baptist churches were forming in England in the 1600’s, they were also taking shape in the English colonies that we now call the United States. In

³ Newman at 9.

understanding the shaping of the Baptists in the U.S. as well as the critical role the Baptists took in the formation of our country, we shall look first at several key individuals:

ROGER WILLIAMS

Roger Williams was born a Puritan somewhere between 1600 and 1603 in London, England. He took his degree from Cambridge in 1627, a first rate scholar. Williams not only knew English, but also Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Dutch, and French. During Williams' studies at Cambridge, he joined up with the "Separatist" movement in England (see Lesson 60). He considered the Church of England apostate and sought to worship outside its control.

Out of a concern for personal safety, Williams fled England in 1630 and left for the colonies of New England in an effort to find religious liberty. Williams came to the Boston colony and was actually offered a job leading the Boston Church, but Williams considered the church tethered too closely to the Church of England and refused to take the job. Williams also took the bold step of telling the people why he would not take the job and the strident separatist arguments he had against the established church. As a result, Williams left the Boston church and his notoriety accompanied him. Williams later tried to get a job pastoring the church at Salem (which had separatist sentiments), but the rumor mill caught up with him and the Church withdrew its offer.

Williams spent a few years teaching the separatists at the Plymouth colony and used the time to learn the Indian languages of the various local tribes. Because Williams viewed the Indians as rightful landowners that the King had no right to rob of land, the Plymouth church soon ousted Williams from their ranks. Williams returned to Salem where he was allowed to pastor the church. Williams' knowledge of the Indian language came in handy when just a few years later, Williams was banished from Massachusetts because of his renegade views on the church and religion. Massachusetts had an official church and failure to ascribe to the views of that church resulted in banishment.

Williams went to the Indian tribes and negotiated for his own land on Narragansett Bay. There, Williams set up his own town with a strong declaration that any who settled there would have the freedom of conscience to worship as they liked. Williams was adamant that the truth of the church and Christ could withstand the presence and influence of those who failed to believe or understand true Christianity. In 21st century speak; Williams believed that "truth will out." In William's own tongue, who wrote it thus:

Is the religion of Jesus Christ so poor and so weak and so feebly grown,
so cowardly and base, that neither the soldiers nor commanders in

Christ's army have any courage or skill to withstand sufficiently in all points a false teacher, a false prophet, a spiritual cheater or deceiver?⁴

So, Williams founded his territory on the principles of liberty of conscience and civil democracy. Because of his belief that God had led him to that place and provided for him, Williams named his town, Providence. Within a matter of a few years, the territory would get official chartering from England (during the time when the Puritans ruled England with the King having been beheaded. See Lesson 66) and would bear the name "Rhode Island."

Rhode Island quickly became a refuge for those persecuted for their faith, be they Quaker, Baptist, or Jew. In fact, so concerned was Williams for the freedom and liberty of all, that Rhode Island passed the first law in North America that made slavery illegal in 1652! (Over 200 years before the Civil War.)

During the time of this moving into Providence, Williams studies and interactions led him to a number of new conclusions about his faith. Williams had long believed the Church of England to be corrupt. In Williams' understanding, the true church is made up of regenerate (modern term: "born again") believers. Because Williams had received baptism through the Church of England, Williams repudiated that baptism in 1639. This was two years after Williams was banished from Massachusetts.

A man named Ezekiel Holliman baptized Williams whereupon Williams then baptized Holliman and 11 others. Williams is credited with beginning either the first or second Baptist church in America.

Williams died in 1684 estranged from the church he started. Later in life, Williams got caught up in reading Revelation and the end time passages in the Bible in a way that forced an understanding of the passages as fulfilled in his time. This and other personal views and issues were a part of what kept him from staying within the fellowship of that Baptist church he started.

One can go to Providence, Rhode Island today and play in the Roger Williams National Memorial, a park in downtown Providence. Among the famous descendants of Williams was the Baptist Nelson Rockefeller, Vice President under Gerald Ford.

⁴ Quoted by Newman on 73.

JOHN CLARKE

Earlier it was mentioned that Roger Williams started either the first or the second Baptist church in America. The other contender for the title of first is that church started by John Clarke.

John Clarke was born October 8, 1609 in England. Although scholars are uncertain where Clarke received his education, he certainly got a good one! When Clarke came to America in 1637, he was trained in theology, multiple languages, and medicine. While Williams was settling Providence, Clarke bought land from the Indians and began the town of Newport some 20 miles away. Clarke started his Baptist church in Newport somewhere in the range of 1640-1645. The uncertainty in the date is why scholars cannot decide which Baptist church started first.

Clarke traveled with Williams to England to secure the charter for Rhode Island and is recognized as its co-founder by historians today. Like Williams, Clarke was highly opinionated on the issue of religious liberty. He also emphasized that everyone should have the freedom to worship as they deem proper without state interference. Clarke came by this belief through personal turmoil. In 1651, Clarke had returned to Lynn, Massachusetts where he was arrested and imprisoned for conducting an “illegal” worship service.

The arrest and imprisonment is credited with affecting a significant man in Massachusetts at the time – Henry Dunster.

HENRY DUNSTER

Henry Dunster was born November 26, 1609, in Lancashire, England. After receiving two degrees with an emphasis in Asian languages (he was proficient in Hebrew, Greek and Latin) from Cambridge in 1634, Dunster soon came to Boston (1640). Almost immediately, Dunster was made President of Harvard College.

Dunster had been at Harvard just over 10 years when Clarke was arrested for the illegal worship service. Clarke, of course, was a well-known “Baptist” and his arrest brought attention to that fact. Sometime in this same period, Dunster became convinced that the infant baptism of his upbringing was not scriptural. So when the Dunsters had a child born in 1650 (some scholars reckon the child at issue was born in 1653), Dunster opted not to have the child baptized as an infant. This put Dunster at odds with the government and the school.

On February 2 and 3, 1654, a debate of sorts was held on the issue between Dunster and 9 leading ministers from the vicinity. By all accounts, Dunster

pressed his views with clarity and bluntness, but history shows that the views did not persuade the judges. Dunster was forced to resign from Harvard, most likely not just for the views, but also for Dunster's refusal to keep silent on those views.

A year later, Dunster would be tried for disturbing public worship with his heretical views. Dunster would then leave Massachusetts for the religious toleration of Plymouth Colony.

Before we leave the Northeast, we should note that the strong contingency of Baptists in the Philadelphia area had formed an association of Baptists called the Philadelphia Association. In 1762, this group met and a year later sent James Manning back into Rhode Island to start a Baptist College. The school was to have non-sectarian admission, but 22 of the school's 36 trustees were to be Baptists. That school? Brown University!

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

By the time of the American Revolution, there was still religious turmoil in Massachusetts involving the Baptists. The King of England was assessing taxes on tea (remember the Boston Tea Party?) and paper. Not leaving well enough alone, the Massachusetts government was also taxing Baptists for being Baptists! A Baptist activist named Isaac Backus wrote the Massachusetts Congress:

Great complaints have been made about a tax which the British Parliament laid upon paper... That which made the greatest noise is a tax of three pence a pound upon tea; but your law of last June laid a tax of the same sum every year upon the Baptists in each parish.⁵

Concerns over such issue were not limited to Massachusetts. In Virginia, the clergy of the Church of England were paid from taxes with the rate set in tobacco prices. When the tobacco price went up, the Anglican clergy pay went up. There were a number of Presbyterians (including Patrick Henry) and Baptists who were upset at having to pay for the clergy of a church with which they so vociferously disagreed. In 1775, the Baptist General Association met in Virginia and adopted a platform to abolish the state run/funded church and allow full religious liberty to the people. Thomas Jefferson pushed this platform during the legislative assembly of Virginia the following year.

As the Revolution came and went, the new country established, the United States of America, had a number of Baptists very concerned with the issue of religious freedom. While the war ended in 1778, the United States did not have an agreed

⁵ Newman at 359.

upon Constitution until 1787. The Constitution had a provision for religious liberty under Article VI that sets out that “no religious test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” The Baptists in Virginia did not consider that provision strong enough or complete. In fact, before Virginia voted to adopt the Constitution, this limited religious liberty provision was subject to a major dispute.

As Virginians were nominating and electing the men who would be the delegates to the Virginia convention to ratify the Constitution, the Orange County delegate was set to be either the Baptist leader and spokesman John Leland⁶ or the man who would become the 4th president, James Madison. The night before the election, Madison paid a visit to Leland. A man named Eugene Bucklin Bowen documented the meeting:

They finally met under a certain oak tree near Orange which has been carefully preserved to this day, and fought it out. It was a battle royal with Leland insisting that there should be an article in the Constitution guaranteeing religious liberty. Madison, however, was afraid to put it in on account of the opposition of some of the colonies, Massachusetts in particular. A compromise was agreed upon. This was that Leland should withdraw and advocate the election of Madison. This, they thought, would ensure the adoption by Virginia. It was a tough battle but on the vote of 168 they won out by a margin of 10 over Madison's remaining opponents....This agreement between Madison and Leland was conditioned upon Madison's joining Leland in a crusade for an amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing religious liberty, free speech and a free press.⁷

The Constitution was ultimately ratified by the colonies, and then the Baptists set to work on an amendment to more adequately secure religious liberty. In 1788,

⁶ Leland taught that, “Every man must give an account of himself to God and therefore every man ought to be at liberty to serve God in that way that he can best reconcile it to his own conscience.” (Leland, *Virginia Chronicle* 25 – 26).

This same John Leland introduced a resolution in a meeting of the Virginia General Baptist Association on May 8, 1790 asserting, “Resolved, That slavery, is a violent deprivation of the rights of nature, and inconsistent with a republican government; and therefore recommend it to our Brethren to make use of every legal measure, to extirpate the horrid evil from the land, and pray Almighty God, that our Honorable Legislature may have it in their power, to proclaim the general jubilee, consistent with principles of good policy.” (Virginia Baptist General Committee, *Minutes*, 6 -7)

⁷ J.M. Dawson, *Baptists and the American Republic*, Nashville: Broadman Press, 1956, p. 108-109 quoting the Bowen manuscript on file in the Library of Congress.

the Baptist General Committee of the Virginia Association drafted a letter to President George Washington. In the letter, the Baptists wrote:

When the Constitution first made its appearance in Virginia, we, as a society, feared that the liberty of conscience, dearer to us than property or life, was not sufficiently secured.⁸

President Washington wrote back that,

If I could have entertained the slightest apprehension that the Constitution...might possibly endanger the religious rights of any ecclesiastical society, certainly I would never have placed my signature to it; and if I could now conceive that the general government might ever be so administered as to render the liberty of conscience insecure. I beg you will be persuaded that no one will be more zealous than myself to establish effectual barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny and every species of religious persecution.⁹

It was shortly after this that James Madison, with the approval of the President, submitted for voting the first amendment to the Constitution mandating “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof....” Thus, religious liberties have been assured for all Americans since. (By the way, Massachusetts did not vote for that first amendment!)

POINTS FOR HOME

1. Study the scriptures to find answers to your faith and practice. For example, on the issue of baptism, consider what the scriptures say. Take out a concordance, look up “baptize” and “baptism” and read the passages. Read them in context. Read them prayerfully, asking God to reveal his truth and enlighten your mind. Then, do not be afraid to do those things that you see God teaching. This is the practical application of Paul’s admonition that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). So, we “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

⁸ Newman at 372.

⁹ Newman at 373.

2. Find heroes of the faith. See the things that are good in them and be inspired. By the same token, do not hesitate to flee from things not so attractive! Paul urged the church at Philippi to “Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.” (Phil. 3:15) Then, just one chapter later Paul adds, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you” (Phil 4:8-9).

3. Be amazed at how our church heritage has affected government for good. Consider the stewardship obligation to take a role in our democracy. God has put much at our disposal as citizens of this country. He must expect much from us! “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12:48). The Constitutional lawyer Michael Farris pointed out, “Ideas matter. And not all religions are created equal. The ideals of religious liberty were found in the Word of God by those who believed that salvation was individual and personal, and that the church was first and foremost a spiritual institution. The advocates of freedom did not believe in liberty in spite of their Christianity, but explicitly because of their individual faith in Christ, which had been molded and instructed by the Bible.” *From Tyndale to Madison*, (B&H Publishing Group 2007) p. 389.