

A History of the Baptists

By John T. Christian

CHAPTER I THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES

AFTER our Lord had finished his work on earth, and before he had ascended into glory, he gave to his disciples the following commission: "All authority is given to me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo I am with you always even unto the end of the world. Amen" (Matthew 28:18-20). Under the terms of this commission Jesus gave to his churches the authority to evangelize the world.

A New Testament Church is a company of baptized believers voluntarily associated together for the maintenance of the ordinances and the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The distinctive characteristics of this church are clearly marked in the New Testament.

Such a church was a voluntary association and was independent of all other churches. It might be, and probably was, affiliated with other churches in brotherly relations; but it remained independent of all outward control, and was responsible to Christ alone, who was the supreme lawgiver and the source of all authority. Originally the teachers and the people conjointly administered the affairs of the church.

In the New Testament sense of the church there can be no such an organization as a National or General Church, covering a large district of country, composed of a number of local organizations. The church, in the Scriptural sense, is always an independent, local organization. Sister churches were "united only by the ties of faith and charity. Independence and equality formed the basis of their internal constitution" (Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1.554. Boston, 1854). Gibbon, always artistic in the use of material, continues: "Such was the mild and equal constitution by which the Christians were governed for more than a hundred years after the death of the apostles. Every society

formed within itself a separate and independent republic; and although the most distant of these little states maintained a mutual, as well as friendly, intercourse of letters and deputations, the Christian world was not yet connected by any supreme or legislative assembly" (Thid, 558).

The officers of the church were first, pastors, indifferently called elders or bishops, and, secondly, deacons. These were the honorable servants of a free people. The pastors possessed no authority above their brethren, save that by service they purchased to themselves a good degree of glory.

The more recent Episcopal writers, such as Jacob and Hatch, do not derive their system from the ancient Scriptural form of government, but always acknowledge the primitive congregational form of government, and declare that episcopacy is a later development. In the New Testament, elder and bishop are different names to describe the same office. Dr. Lightfoot, the Bishop of Durham, in a very exhaustive discussion of the subject, says:

It is clear, that, at the close of the Apostolic Age, the two lower orders of the three fold ministry were firmly and widely established; but traces of the episcopate, properly so-called, are few and indistinct.

The episcopate was formed out of the presbyterial order by elevation; and the title, which originally was common to all, came at length to be appropriated to the chief of them (Lightfoot, Commentary on Philippians, 1~276).

Dean Stanley represents the same view. He says:

According to the strict rules of the church derived from those early times, there are but two orders, presbyters and deacons (Stanley, Christian Institutions, 210).

Richard B. Rackham (The Acts of the Apostles cii), A. D. 1912, says of the word bishop (*episcopos*):

We may say at once that it had not yet acquired the definite sense which it holds in the letters of Ignatius (A. D. 115), and which it still holds today, viz., of a single ruler of a diocese. From Acts xx. 28, Titus i. 6,7, and comparison with I Timothy iii. 2f., we should conclude that

epescopus was simply a synonym for *presbyter*, and that the two offices were identical.

Knowling (The Expositors Greek Testament, II. 435-437) reviews all of the authorities, Ilatch (Smith and Chcetham, Dictionary of Christian Antiquities, 11.1700), Harnack (Gebhardt and Harnack, Clement of Rome, ed. altera, 5), Steinmetz, etc., and reaches the following conclusion:

This one passage (Acts 20:28) is also sufficient to show that the "presbyter" and the "bishop" were at first practically identical.

Jerome, at the end of the fourth century, reminds the bishops that they owe their elevation above the presbyters, not ac much to divine institution as to ecclesiastical usage; for before the outbreak of controversies in the church there was no distinction between the two, except that *presbyter* was a term of age, and *bishop* a term of official dignity; but when men, at the instigation of Satan, erected parties and sects, and, instead of simply following Christ, named themselves of Paul, of Apollos, or Cephas, all agreed to put one of the presbyters at the head of the rest, that by his universal supervision of the churches, he might kill the seeds of division (Hieron. Comm. ad Tit. i. 7). The great commentators of the Greek Church agree with Jerome in maintaining the original identity of bishops and presbyters in the New Testament. Thus did Chrysostom (Hom. i. in Ep. ad Phil. i. 11); Theodoret (ad Phil. i. 1); Ambrosiaster (ad Eph. iv. 11); and the pseudo-Augustinian (Questions V. et N. T. qu. 101).

There were two ordinances m the primitive church, baptism and the Supper of the Lord. Baptism was an outward confession of faith in Christ. It thus expressed a belief in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and a subsequent resurrection of all believers through the eternal Spirit.

Only believers were baptized and that upon a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ. The church was composed of believers or holy persons. The members were called in the New Testament "beloved of God, called to be saints"; "sanctified in Christ Jesus"; "faithful in Christ"; "God's elect, holy, and beloved." The conditions of membership were repentance, faith, righteousness, and the initiatory rite of baptism, which was symbolical of the changed life.

In this connection it is interesting to note that all the Pedobaptist Confessions of Faith include only believers in the definition of the proper

members of a church, The following definition of a church is taken from the Augsburg Confession of Faith of the Lutheran Church. It fairly represents all the rest. It says:

To speak properly, the church of Christ is a congregation of the members of Christ; that is, of the saints, which do truly believe and rightly obey Christ.

So universal is this definition of a church in all of the Confessions of Faith that Kostlin, Professor of Theology in Halle, say's: "The Reformed Confessions describe the Church as the communion of believers or saints, and condition its existence on the pure preaching of the Word" (Kostlin, Schaff-Herzog Religious Encyclopaedia, I. 474).

The above definition, consistently applied, excludes infant baptism, since infants are incapable of faith, which always, in the New Testament, is a prerequisite to baptism. The New Testament teaching is quite clear on this point. John the Baptist required that those who were applicants for baptism should experience repentance, exercise faith, make a confession of sin and live a righteous life (Math. 3 :2; Acts 19:4). Jesus first made disciples and then baptized them (John 4:1), and gave distinct commandment that teaching should precede baptism (Math. 28:19). In the preaching of the apostles repentance antedates baptism (Acts 2 :38): the converts were filled with joy, and only men and women were baptized (Acts 8:5, 8, 12). There is no account or inference implying the baptism of an infant by Jesus or his apostles.

This is generally conceded by scholars.

Dollinger, a Catholic scholar, Professor of Church History in the University of Munich, says: "There is no proof or hint in the New Testament that the apostles baptized infants or ordered them to be baptized" (John Joseph Ignatius Dollinger, The First Age of the Church, 11.184).

Dr. Edmund de Pressense, a French Senator and Protestant, says: "No positive fact sanctioning the practice (of infant baptism) can be adduced from the New Testament; the historical proofs alleged are in no way conclusive" (Pressense, Early Years of Christianity, 376. London, 1870).

Many authors of books treating directly on infant baptism affirm that it is not mentioned in the Scriptures. One writer only is here quoted. Joh. W. F.

Hofling, Lutheran Professor of Theology at Erlangen, says: "The sacred Scriptures furnish no historical proof that children were baptized by the apostles" (Hofling, *Das Sakrament der Taufe*, 99. Erlangen, 1846. 2 vols.).

A few of the more recent authorities will not be amiss on this subject. The "Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics," edited by Professor James Hastings and Professor Kirsopp Lake, of the University of Leyden, says: "*There is no indication of the baptism of children in the New Testament.*"

The "Real Encyclopadie fur Protestantische Theologie und Kirche" (XIX. 403. 3rd edition), the great German encyclopaedia, says:

The practice of infant-baptism in the apostolic and post-apostolic age cannot be proved. We hear indeed frequently of the baptism of entire households, as in Acts 15: 32f; 18: 8; 1 Cor. 1: 16. But the last passage taken, 1 Cor. 7:14, is not favorable to the supposition that infant baptism was customary at that time. For then Paul would not have written "else were your children unclean."

Principal Robert Rainy, New College, Edinburgh, Presbyterian, says:

Baptism presupposed some Christian instruction, and was preceded by fasting. It signified the forgiveness of past sins, and was the visible point of departure of the new life under Christian Influence' and with the Inspiration of Christian purposes and aims. Here it was the "seal" which concerned a man to keep inviolate (Rainy, *Ancient Catholic Church*, 75)

The form of baptism was dipping, or an immersion in water. John baptized in the river Jordan (Mark 1:5); and he baptized in Aenon near to Salim "because there was much water there" (John 3 :23). Jesus was baptized in the Jordan (Mark 1:9), and he "went into the water" and he "came up out of the water" (Matthew 3 :16). The symbolical passages (Rom. 6:3, 4; Col. 2 :12), which describe baptism as burial and resurrection make it certain that immersion was the New Testament act of baptism.

This, indeed, is the meaning of the Greek word *baptizein*. The word is defined by Liddell and Scott, the secular Greek lexicon used in all colleges and universities, "to dip in or under the water." In the lexicon of J. H. Thayer, the standard New Testament lexicon, the word is defined as an "immersion in water." All scholarship confirms this view. Prof. R. C. Jebb,

Litt. D., University of Cambridge, says: "I do not know whether there is any authoritative Greek-English lexicon which makes the word to mean 'sprinkle' or to 'pour.' I can only say that such a meaning never belongs to the word in Classical Greek" (Letter to the author. September 23, 1898). Dr. Adolf Harnack, University of Berlin, says: "Baptism undoubtedly signifies immersion. No proof can be found that it signifies anything else in the New Testament, and in the most ancient Christian literature" (Schaff, *The Teaching of the Twelve*, 50).

Dr. Dosker, Professor of Church History, Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Louisville, says:

Every candid historian will admit that the Baptists have, both philologically and historically, the better of the argument, as to the prevailing mode of baptism. The word *baptizo* means immersion, both in classical and Biblical Greek, except where it is manifestly used in a tropical sense (Dosker, *The Dutch Anabaptists*, 176 Philadelphia, 1921).

Nothing is more certain than that the New Testament churches uniformly practiced immersion,

The Lord's Supper shows forth the death of the Saviour till he shall come again. It is a perpetual memorial of the broken body and the shed blood of the risen Lord. In the Scriptures the Lord's Supper is always preceded by the act of baptism, and there is no account of any person participating in the Supper who had not previously been baptized. That baptism should precede the Lord's Supper is avowed by scholars of all communions.

Dr. William Wall sums up the entire historical field when he says: "*For no church ever gave the communion to any persons before they were baptized. . . Since among all of the absurdities that ever were held, none ever maintained that any person should partake of the communion before he was baptized*" (Wall, *The History of Infant Baptism*, I. 632, 638. Oxford, 1862).

The Baptists have always insisted that the ordinances were symbols and not sacraments. Indeed this is the heart of their contention.

President E. Y. Mullins has concisely stated the historical contention of Baptists in the following words:

They have seen with great vividness and clearness of outline the central spiritual elements of Christianity. With a like vividness and clearness they have perceived the significance of the outward form,,,. For them it has seemed as if the very life of Christianity depended upon keeping the spiritual and ceremonial elements in their respective places. Christian history certainly justifies them in their view. Forms and ceremonies are like ladders. On them we may climb up or down. If we keep them in their places as symbols, the soul feeds on the truth symbolized. If we convert them into sacraments, the soul misses the central vitality itself, spiritual communion with God. An outward religious ceremony derives its chief significance from the context in which it is placed, from the general system of which it forms a part. If a ceremony is set in the context of a spiritual system of truths, it may become an indispensable element for the furtherance of those truths. If it is set in the context of a sacramental system, it may and does become a means for obscuring the truth and enslaving the soul. It is this perception of the value of ceremonies as symbols and of their perils as sacraments which animates Baptists in their strenuous advocacy of a spiritual interpretation of the ordinances of Christianity (McGlothlin, *Infant Baptism Historically Considered*, 7).

The early churches were missionary bodies. They were required to carry out the great commission given by our Lord. The obedience to the missionary program laid out by the divine Lord, the disciples in a few generations preached the gospel to the known world.

The first church was organized by Jesus and his apostles; and after the form of this one all other churches should be modeled. The churches so organized are to continue in the world until the kingdoms of this earth shall become the kingdom of our Lord, even Christ. Prophecy was full of the enduring character of the kingdom of Christ (Daniel 2 :44, 45). Jesus maintained a like view of his church and extended the promise to all the ages. He said: "Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). The word church here is doubtless used in its ordinary, literal sense as a local institution; and in the only other passage where it is found in Matthew (18 :17) it must be taken with the same signification. The great mass of scholarship supports the contention that this passage refers to the local, visible church of Christ (Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew*).

The critical meaning of the word does not differ from this (Thayer, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 197). The word "church" was used by our Lord and the apostles not so much in contra-distinction to the Jewish Theocracy, as to the Jewish synagogue, and the synagogue was always local (Cremer, Biblico-Theological Lexicon of the New Testament Greek, 330, 331). The Roman Catholics have always denied the existence of a universal spiritual church (Aizog, Universal Church History, 1.108, 109). Until the German Reformation there was practically no other conception of a church. When Luther and others split off from the Roman Catholic Church, a new interpretation of this passage was adopted to suit the new views; so they held that Matthew 16:18 merely pointed to the ultimate triumph of Christianity. But manifestly this interpretation was remote from the meaning of the Lord.

Paul gives a large promise: "Unto him be glory in the church of Jesus Christ throughout all ages, world without end. Amen" (Ephesians 3:21). Ellicott translates the passage: "To all the generations of the ages of ages." The glory of Christ was to exist in all of the ages in the church. The church was, therefore, bound to exist in all of the ages. Even the redeemed in heaven are described in the Scriptures as a church.

The author believes that in every age since Jesus and the apostles, there have been companies of believers, churches, who have substantially held to the principles of the New Testament as now proclaimed by the Baptists. No attempt is made in these pages to trace a succession of bishops, as the Roman Catholics attempt to do, back to the apostles. Such an attempt is "laboring in the fire for mere vanity," and proceeds upon a mistaken view of the nature of the kingdom of Christ, and of the sovereignty of God, in his operations on the earth. Jesus himself, in a reply to an inquiry put to him by the Pharisees (Luke 17:20-24), compares his kingdom to the lightning, darting its rays in the most sovereign and uncontrollable manner from one extremity of the heavens to the other. And this view corresponds to God's dealings in the spiritual realm. Wherever God has his elect, there in his own proper time, he sends the gospel to save them, and churches after his model are organized (William Jones, The History of the Christian Church, xvii. Philadelphia. 1832).

The New Testament recognizes a democratic simplicity, and not a hierarchical monarchy. There is no irregularity, but a perpetual proclamation of principles. There is no intimation that there was not a continuity of

churches, for doubtless there was, but our insistence is that this was not the dominant note in apostolic life. No emphasis is put on a succession of baptisms, or the historical order of churches. Some of the apostles were disciples of John the Baptist (John 1 :35), but there is no record of the baptism of others, though they were baptized. Paul, the great missionary, was baptized by Ananias (Acts 9:17, 18), but it is not known who baptized Ananias. Nothing definite is known of the origin of the church at Damascus. The church at Antioch became the great foreign missionary center, but the history of its origin is not distinctly given. The church at Rome was already in existence when Paul wrote to them his letter. These silences occur all through the New Testament, but there is a constant recurrence of type, a persistence of fundamental doctrines, and a proclamation of principles. This marked the whole apostolic period, and for that matter, every period since that time.

This recurrence of type is recognized even where error was detected. The disciples desired Jesus to rebuke a man who walked not with them (Mark 9 :40), but this Jesus refused to do. The church at Corinth was imperfect in practice and life. The Judaizing teachers constantly perverted the gospel, and John the Evangelist, in his last days, combated insidious error, but the great doctrines of the atoning work of Christ, conversion and repentance, the baptism of believers, the purity of the church, the freedom of the soul, and the collateral truths, were everywhere avowed. At times these principles have been combated and those who held them persecuted, often they have been obscured; sometimes they have been advocated by ignorant men, and at other times by brilliant graduates Of the universities, who frequently mixed the truth with philosophical speculations; yet; always, often under the most varied conditions, these principles have come to the surface.

Baptist churches have the most slender ties of organization, and a strong government is not according to their polity. They are like the river Rhone, which sometimes flows as a river broad and deep, but at other times is hidden in the sands. It, however, never loses its continuity or existence. It is simply hidden for a period. Baptist churches may disappear and reappear in the most unaccountable manner.. Persecuted everywhere by sword and by fire, their principles would appear to be almost extinct, when in a most wondrous way God would raise up some man, or some company of martyrs, to proclaim the truth.

The footsteps of the Baptists of the ages can more easily be traced by blood than by baptism. It is a lineage of suffering rather than a succession of bishops; a martyrdom of principle, rather than a dogmatic decree of councils; a golden chord of love, rather than an iron chain of succession, which, while attempting to rattle its links back to the apostles, has been of more service in chaining some protesting Baptist to the stake than in proclaiming the truth of the New Testament. It is, nevertheless, a right royal succession, that in every age the Baptists have been advocates of liberty for all, and have held that the gospel of the Son of God makes every man a free man in Christ Jesus.