

**A HISTORY OF THE BAPTISTS
TOGETHER WITH SOME ACCOUNT
OF THEIR PRINCIPLES
AND PRACTICES**

JOHN T. CHRISTIAN, A.M. D.D. LL.D.

*Professor of Christian History in The Baptist
Bible Institute, New Orleans, Louisiana.*

Preface

IN ATTEMPTING to write a history of the Baptists no one is more aware of the embarrassments surrounding the subject than the author. These embarrassments arise from many sources. We are far removed from many of the circumstances under survey; the representations of the Baptists were often made by enemies who did not scruple, when such a course suited their purpose, to blacken character; and hence the testimony from such sources must be received with discrimination and much allowance made for many statements; in some instances vigilant and sustained attempts were made to destroy every document relating to these people; the material that remains is scattered through many libraries and archives, in many lands and not always readily accessible; often, on account of persecutions, the Baptists were far more interested in hiding than they were in giving an account of themselves or their whereabouts; they were scattered through many countries, in city and cave, as they could find a place of concealment; and frequently they were called by different names by their enemies, which is confusing. Yet it is a right royal history they have. It is well worth the telling and the preserving.

It must be borne in mind that there are many sources of Church History. Broadly speaking we have Eastern and Western; and a want of discrimination in these sources, and frequently an effort to treat Eastern and Western churches as identical, has caused much confusion. A right

understanding of these sources will clear up many dark corners. For example it is undoubtedly true that the Waldenses originated in the West and the Paulicans in the East, and that they had a different history. In later centuries they came in contact one with the other, but in origin they were diverse. Any effort to treat them as one and the same people is misleading. In my judgment both parties were Baptists. The above distinction will account for many minor differences, and even today these sources will be found coloring Baptist history.

It may be thought by some that on account of its length the chapter on "The Episode of John Smyth" is out of proportion with the rest of the book. It must be remembered, however, that any information in regard to the complicated history of the Nonconformists of that period is welcome. As a matter of fact, several subjects are here grouped; and as all of them require notice it is believed that unity of thought, as well as length of discussion, is preserved by the method here adopted. Many questions were then raised for the first time among English Baptists which find expression today among all schools of Baptists.

The question has often been asked: "Were all of the ancient parties mentioned in these pages in absolute or substantial accord with all of the doctrines and customs of modern Baptists?" The question can be answered with unerring accuracy: certainly not. Nor is there anything strange in the reply. It is well known that Baptists, Mennonites, and Quakers in their history have much in common, but while they agree in many particulars there are essential differences. There are marked differences among modern Baptists. Even a superficial examination of the views and customs of Russian, English and American Baptists would reveal to an observer this fact. We need not go beyond the history of American Baptists for a convincing example. At first, Arminian doctrines largely prevailed in this country; at a later date, Calvinistic principles prevailed. Oftentimes the same persons have changed their opinion. Many of the Baptists in Virginia were Arminians, but after passing over to Kentucky some of them became rigid Calvinists. Inside the Baptist denomination today there are persons, and doubtless churches, who are Arminian, and there are other persons and churches who are Calvinists. There are also Unitarians and Higher Critics, as well as Evangelicals among Baptists. One who has a mind for such things could magnify these differences to an indefinite extent.

Adequate reasons might be assigned for all of this. Baptists have never had a common creed, and it is equally true that they have never recognized any authoritative creed. They desire no such standard. Their attitude toward free speech and liberty of conscience has permitted and encouraged the largest

latitude in opinions. Yet none of us would care to increase these differences or make more acute the variations.

One who stops here would have only a superficial understanding of the history and polity of Baptists. Their ties of organization are so slender, their government so democratic in nature, and their hardy independence so universal, that it has been a wonder to some historians and a mystery inexplicable to those who have not understood their genius, how they have retained their homogeneity and solidarity. But holding as they have ever done the absolute and unconditional authority of the New Testament as the sole rule of faith and practice in religious matters, they have had with them from the beginning a powerful preventive to error, and a specific corrective when there has been an aberration from the truth.

All of these things, and more, must be taken into account when we come to consider the various parties and persons discussed in the pages of this history. These parties were persecuted, scattered and often segregated. They lived in different lands and frequently had no opportunity to compare notes. There were great controversies, and frequently new roads were to be blazed out, intricate doctrinal problems to be solved, and complicated questions to be adjusted. In the insistence upon some great doctrine, it may have happened that some other doctrine of equal or relative importance did not sustain its proper position for a time. Wrong views were sometimes maintained, false doctrines introduced and defended. Much allowance must always be made, especially in considering the doctrinal views of Baptists, for the fact we are frequently indebted to a zealous and prejudiced enemy for much of our information. It is not safe without support to trust such testimony.

Many examples might be introduced to show that some of these parties might not be recognized by some Baptists now-a-days. The Montanists, the Novatians, and the Donatists held diverse opinions, not only from each other, but from the teachings of the New Testament; but they stressed tremendously the purity of the church. It is possible that the Paulicians were Adoptionists. There have always been different views in regard to the birth of Jesus. Some of the Anabaptists held that Jesus was a man, and that he did not derive his manhood from Mary, but passed through her as a channel. The Adoptionists held that Jesus was endowed with divinity at his baptism. Most modern Baptists hold that Jesus became incarnate at his birth. There were some Baptists who held the vagaries of Hofmann and other Baptists who followed the more sane and rational course of Hubmaier. No effort is here attempted to minimize, or to dismiss as trivial, these variations.

Perhaps absolute and unconditional uniformity is unattainable. Such uniformity was never, perhaps, more vigorously pressed than it was by Archbishop Laud, with a dismal failure and the tragic death to the prelate as the result.

The wonder, however, is not that there were variations in these diverse conditions, but that there could be any homogeneity or unity. Through all of the variations, however, there has been an insistence upon some great fundamental truths. There has ever appeared the vital necessity of a regenerated life; a church pure and separate from the ungodly; believers' baptism; a simple form of church government; the right of free speech and soul liberty; and the permanent and paramount authority of the New Testament. Whatever may have been the variations in any or all of these parties, on the above or kindred subjects, the voice of the Baptists has rung out clear and distinct.

The testimony here recorded has been taken from many sources. I doubt not that diligent search would reveal further facts of the highest value. As a matter of fact I have a great accumulation of material which would extend into several volumes. In my judgment a Commission should be appointed with ample means to make a thorough search in the Archives of Europe.

I am well aware of the imperfections of this book, but it presents much data never before found in a Baptist history. I have throughout pursued the scientific method of investigation, and I have let the facts speak for themselves. I have no question in my own mind that there has been a historical succession of Baptists from the days of Christ to the present time. It must be remembered that the Baptists were found in almost every corner of Europe. When I found a connection between one body and another that fact is stated, but when no relationship was apparent I have not tried to manufacture one. Straight-forward honesty is the only course to pursue. Fortunately, however, every additional fact discovered only goes to make such connections probable in all instances.

I have an expectant attitude toward the future. I heartily welcome every investigation, for truth has nothing to fear from the light.

THE AUTHOR