

Baptist History and Their Distinctives

Lesson #6 Baptist Theological and Cultural Contributions

I. Origin of Baptist Religious Ideals:

Baptist came late out of the Protestant Reformation. They were part of a continued reformation (referred to as the “Radical Reformation”) in that they continued developing the principles of the Reformation beyond what the “Magisterial Reformers” did.

i.e. They continued trying to achieve:

- A more perfect worship of God (*e.g. a personal piety based on a relationship with God*)
- A more Scriptural approach to the life of faith within a local church (*e.g. a first century church*)
- Freedom from spiritual coercion (*e.g. governmental or ecclesiastical authority cannot coerce faith*)

During the 16th century, Confessions of faith came out of the early Reformation to try to identify and to differentiate these reformation believers. Over time, various believer’s identified themselves with a particular confession. By the 17th century Denominations started to form around these early foundational confessions.

In the 17th century, Baptists drew many of their ideas from the Reformation principles that had already been established throughout Europe to include such things as:

- Luther’s teaching on 1) The Love of God, and 2) The Priesthood of the Believer
- Calvin’s teaching on 1) The Sovereignty of God; and 2) God’s Sovereign Grace
- Zwingli’s teaching on 1) The Simplicity of Worship; and 2) The Authority of Scriptures

II. The Baptist Record of Faithfulness:

Baptists have generally been a stubborn bunch. During the post-reformation years, the general pattern of denominations has been to become **secularized*** and to pull away from the word of God, leading ultimately to a denial of:

What the Bible is: Is it God’s revelation of Himself to man? (or Something less?)

Who God is: Is He transcendent and omnipotent, and righteous, and just? (or Something less?)

Who Christ is: Is He God, very God, eternal in being, & one with the Father? (or Something less?)

& What the role of the Church is: Is it the bride of Christ, a holy nation, & a chosen people?
(or Something less?)

* **secularized** – meaning to see that understanding of existence is based on man’s reason as the highest authority. In this case, it means to adopt that which the culture believes apart from the authority of Scripture. This is a denial of the Reformation principle of Sola Scriptura.
i.e. Scripture is without error and it is entirely sufficient for faith and life.

This secularization occurs when men create “logical constructs” that are influenced by the culture (rather than Scripture itself) and to use these to judge Scripture. When men judge Scripture, they are judging the very character and nature of God.

Perhaps more than any other denomination, Baptists have stubbornly held to the correct answers to these 3 understandings that the church has held down through the 2000 years since Christ Pentecost.

Why have Baptist generally fared well in this battle over the “Essentials of the Faith”?

1. Baptists have believed in the “Autonomy of the Local Church”. This principle has helped Baptists to avoid excessive influence from the outside forces of the culture. There is a sense in which an autonomous local church stands alone against the cultural influences as opposed to Biblical knowledge.
2. Baptists have made a point of ignoring cultural trends and sources of authority due to their inclination to be separate from the world in their daily practices of living.

3. To some degree, the independence of Baptist Churches has acted as a bulwark against the spread of corrupting unbelief throughout Baptist Churches. No person or Church directs how other Churches must interpret Scripture or practice their faith. The Christian faith is not perceived to be a team effort except within the confines of the local Church.

III. Baptist Contributions to the Faith and to the Culture:

A. Religious Liberty:

Gal 5:13-14 *For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*^{Lev 19:18b}

In the 17th and 18th centuries, there were 2 radical movements which changed our world forever. In southern Europe, there was the "**Enlightenment**", and in northern Europe, there was the "**Reformation**". These two movements shared a common breaking away from old sources of authority, but the **Enlightenment** was secular and the **Reformation** was a return to Biblical authority – "**Sola Scriptura**".

The **Enlightenment** was a period dominated by largely secular, naturalistic philosophical ideas and cultural application of those ideas. Today we are still the inheritors of this naturalistic philosophy/world view.

The Enlightenment's view of "freedom" was (and still is) the idea that a free man had the ability to choose any lifestyle choice without any authority restricting one's behavior. Today, many evangelical Christians have a false, Enlightenment understanding of what the Bible means by freedom. Many Christians would say that freedom is based on an individual's exercise of his own autonomous will. We will see that what Baptists originally meant by the term religious freedom is very different than the Enlightenment view.

The Biblical idea of freedom says that:

1. Natural man is dead in his sins and is trapped in bondage to his sin nature and has no ability to choose in such a way as to be free from this bondage of sin.
Rom 7:14 *For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.*
2. In the new birth, the heart of a man is released from this bondage of sin. This new man in Christ has the ability to choose to obey God. He still has a sin nature, but the bondage is broken. The Holy Spirit indwelling the believer is able to empower men to live godly lives in righteousness. The inclination to sin still remains in this life. Sanctification is that process whereby we learn to submit to God and deny the old man, putting him to death for the glory of Christ.
3. No magistrate, no priest, no pastor, no human can force this new birth on a man, only God through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore it is ludicrous for magistrates and priests to impose anything spiritual on any man beyond what civil society requires for the benefit of all.
4. The born again Christian has repented of his sin, turned from it, and has the ability to serve God out of gratitude and love. In this sense this new man has been freed from the bondage of sin and is in right relationship with God. No human authority can impose faith on a man.

It is clear from historical records that much of the impetus for "religious freedom" in Western Europe and the United States came from the influence of the Baptists. The requirement for freedom of the conscience comes from Calvinistic principles of early Baptist beliefs.

1. The local church is the "gathered church". It is the local body of regenerate believers who have gathered together to worship and serve God because of their newly regenerated hearts (new birth). This new birth is the work of God through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. No man can manipulate God's work and make himself nor anyone else a believer. God acts sovereignly in this matter of salvation as to who is saved, when they are saved, and how they serve God. No one should

be coerced into belonging to a church because the very process of coercion brings “tares” (unfruitful, corrupting weeds) into the church.

2. God is the one who adds to the church, not the civil magistrate, and not the ecclesiastical leadership of the Church. God acts sovereignly. For man to put his hand to the plow of salvation is a corruption of God’s method and purpose in redemption.
3. Christians are called to be slaves to righteousness. In their new state (Holy Spirit indwelt believers), they are slaves to Christ now. This is not the Enlightenment concept of being autonomously free from any and all moral obligations. We have become slaves of Christ through the New Birth.

Eph 6:5-8 *Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; ⁶not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as **slaves of Christ**, doing the will of God from the heart. ⁷With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, ⁸knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, **whether slave or free.***

Rom 6:15-18 *What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! ¹⁶Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? ¹⁷But thanks be to God that though **you were slaves of sin**, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸and **having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.***

“The early English Baptist appeals for religious liberty were radical for restricting the state’s power to civil matters. They said that the state had no authority to compel religious belief, because this would ‘usurp **not the rights of the autonomous human** individual, but **the sovereignty of God,**’” - taken from *The Baptist Contribution to Liberty in Christian Reflection, a publication of Baylor University.*

This freedom was not for the protection of man’s autonomous free will, but that churches and magistrates would not interfere with God’s purpose. Baptists wanted to avoid any interference with God’s sovereign activity in calling men and women to Himself and wanted to avoid the corruption of a Church full of tares.
(The Baptist distinctive of “Regenerate Membership”)

B. Baptist Missions:

Early Baptists played a critical role in the establishment of foreign missions. It is curious that Baptists who avoided traditional ecclesiological structures of denominations would take the lead in early foreign mission efforts through the use of voluntary associations of Churches as opposed to denominational authority structures.

This demonstrated that early Baptists had a strong inclination to obey the great commission and a heart for lost souls. Certainly part of this early effort at missions was their comprehensive understanding that all men are “Totally Depraved” in their sin and are slaves to Satanic deception and are in desperate need of regeneration of their hearts so that they can hear and respond to the gospel.

C. Education:

Baptists led much of the introduction of Sabbath Schools (Sunday Schools) while establishing publishing houses to produce Sunday School training materials.

Weekday schools and Academies were established to educate the youth.

Publishing houses were established to print training materials:

1824 – Baptist General Tract Society was established.

Later changed to the American Baptist Publication and Sunday School Society,

1845 – A publishing house was added as the American Baptist Publication Society

1865 – Established the National Baptist, a periodical which specialized in multilingual resources for

use amongst immigrant peoples.

These published materials were carried by foot and by horse to distribute them to communities of people.

Colleges and Universities founded by Baptists:

- Hamilton Literary and Theological Institution (New York, 1819 - LKA – Colgate University)
- Franklin College (Indiana, 1834)
- University at Lewisburg (Pennsylvania, 1846 – LKA – Bucknell University)
- University of Chicago (Illinois, 1857)
- Georgetown College (Kentucky, 1829)
- Wake Forest College (North Carolina, 1834)
- Richmond College (Virginia, 1840)
- Mercer University (Georgia, 1837)
- Howard College (Alabama, 1841)
- Baylor College (Texas, 1856)
- Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (South Carolina, 1859 moved to Kentucky, 1877)

And yet, these schools are now largely secular and liberal theologically. How does that happen? It happens as a natural (but wicked) progression of men and women away from Biblical truths. Academic Professors are responsible, Pastors are responsible, teachers are responsible, and congregations are responsible.

We tend to not struggle with the hard concepts about God, about Jesus, about the gospel, about the Scriptures. We tend to be lazy intellectually and accept “common sense” answers and clichés to all the great doctrines of our faith. Faithful men have written volumes about these difficult subjects, but most of us would rather read a “Christian” version of “How to” books.

D. Jerusalem Ministries:

Baptists have generally had a clear understanding of and have responded to the needs of their communities for the love of Christ and that the local gathered Church is to be that visible evidence of the love of Christ. This idea has found its expression in:

- Home support assistance: mowing, shoveling snow, assisting with repairs, etc.
- Food supplementation: Food banks, food baskets, monetary contributions, benevolence, rescue missions, etc.
- Prison ministry: Visitation, after prison support, etc.
- Rest home ministry: Visitation, entertainment, field trips, etc.
- Child Outreach ministry: After school care, Bus ministry for children, etc.

Some Important Quotes

“The god of modern thought exceedingly resembles the deities described in this Psalm [115:8]. Pantheism is wondrously akin to Polytheism, and yet differs very little from Atheism. The god manufactured by our great thinkers is a mere abstraction: he has no eternal purposes, he does not interpose on the behalf of his people, he cares but very little as to how much man sins, for he has given to the initiated “a larger hope” by which the most incorrigible are to be restored. He is what the last set of critics chooses to make him, he has said what they choose to say, and lie will do what they please to prescribe. Let this creed and its devotees alone, and they will work out their own refutation, for as now their god is fashioned like themselves, they will by degrees fashion themselves like their god; and when the principles of justice, law, and order shall have all been effectually sapped we may possibly witness in some form of socialism, similar to that which is so sadly spreading in Germany, a repetition of the evils which have in former ages befallen nations which have refused the living God, and set up gods of their own.”

Charles Spurgeon

“A thousand errors can all march together. Truth must walk alone.”

Henry Mahan

“It can be exalting to belong to a church that is 550 years behind the times and sublimely indifferent to fashion; it is mortifying to belong to a church that is five minutes behind the times, huffing and puffing to catch up.” **Joseph Sobran**; quoted by Cal Thomas in an address to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (June 25, 1991).

The strong linkage between politics and religion in the late nineteenth century was having a profound social impact, one that deeply troubled Marx and Engels. The following story illustrates just how it incensed them. While playing a well-known Victorian parlor game with Karl Marx’s daughter, Engels answered with a single word a “Confessions” question (“What is your favorite motto?” “What is your favorite color?” etc.) that asked whom he most hated in life. “Spurgeon,” was Engels’s curt, one-word answer, referring to the English Baptist... whose sermons in the 1850s to the 1880s drew as many as twenty thousand people, many of them working-class folk. Why did Engels hate him so? Because Spurgeon was diverting England’s urban working class away from atheist revolutionary socialism to Christian parliamentary reformism.

David Aikman; *Delusion of Dis-Belief*

Ministers deliver Christ through their ministry of the Word, not only in well prepared sermons but throughout the service. In fact, the main purpose of singing in church is not to express our inner experience, piety, and zeal but to serve each other by making "the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." Col 3:16

Michael Horton; from *Christless Christianity*, p. 229

In the cross, God glorifies Himself in the death of His Son. To preach evangelically is, by definition, to preach the doctrine of the Cross in its full theological sense. This means that preaching on marriage, family, or finance without the word of the Cross at the center is a new form of legalism. It is a modern moralism without Christ and the Cross. It is not, fundamentally, evangelical.

John H. Armstrong; *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*; p. 23