

Baptist Principles and History

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Baptist principles have nothing sectarian in them. They are the simple principles of the New Testament, which offer themselves at once to the mind of every reader. They tally with the results of the most rigid grammatical and historical interpretation; but, though corroborated by philological science, they speak for themselves to every believer in Christ. Abandoned, with the Bible itself, in the night of the great apostacy, by the ruling powers and priest-ridden masses of Christendom, they still gleamed out like the changeless stars of heaven in the midst of surrounding gloom — steadfast and glorious witnesses for God.

Whenever men have been for any length of time favoured with the Word of God, and the ability to read it for themselves — whatever the precious prejudices entertained, or customs established, or proscriptive laws enacted — there Baptists begin to appear. Witness the Cathari, the Paulicians, the Paterines, and the Albigenses and Waldenses of the middle ages. The argument of polemics, the anathemas of councils, and the bloody edicts of princes, from the fifth century downward, while "the whole world wondered at the beast," show clearly how spontaneous and how strong was this tendency to recover lost truth, and what antichristian methods were resorted to, to repress and exterminate it.

This vital tendency re-appeared at the Lutheran Reformation. *Baptists, or as they were then opprobriously called, Anabaptist*, instantly sprung up in all directions. The chief reformers themselves at first felt the conscious impulse, impelling them by a logical necessity to advance to Baptist ground, as the true issue of their own principles; but alas! the fatal tie of Church and State still bound them. The excesses of a few fanatics were imputed to the Baptists as a body, and the *Martyr's Mirror* reveals the result. The reformers made many concessions to Baptist principles in theory, but clung to infant baptism in practice. This vital inconsistency checked the reformation. It was irresistibly urged against it then, as it is now, by its keen-sighted antagonists. This stumbling block remains to this day, to frustrate the efforts of pedobaptists against Romanism. Hear the decisive language of Moehler, the ablest Roman Catholic writer of our age. "Infant baptism, according to the Protestant view of the sacraments, is an act utterly incomprehensible, cannot be doubted; for if it be through faith only that the sacrament takes effect, of what value can it be to an unconscious child? The Anabaptists, against whom Luther was so incensed, drew but the natural inference from the premises which he had laid down, and could not be refuted by him, without his proving unfaithful to his own principles." — (Moehler's *Symbolism*, p. 290.) This simple fact, independent of all other causes, explains why the arm of civil power was everywhere invoked against them. Baptist principles were never yet put down by argument. Instances innumerable are on record where the attempt has issued in the conversion of the opponent, or at least many of his hearers. So self-evident is their scriptural character. So spontaneous is their energy of growth.

Another era marked by the same triumphant tendency of our principles is that of the English Commonwealth. In 1611, Thomas Helwys and his church had returned from Holland, to support them in the face of persecution on their native soil. In 1612, Edward Wightman, a Baptist, died for them, the last

martyr who perished at the stake in England. In 1614, the masterly treatise, "Religion's Peace: or, a Plea for Liberty of Conscience," was addressed by Leonard Busher, a (General) Baptist, to James I and the High Court of Parliament in 1620-21, even while the Pilgrims were seeking refuge over the ocean amid the snows of Plymouth Rock. These are traces of the rising influence of our principles in England before the time of the Commonwealth. Then came their beautiful efflorescence, like a sudden and startling spring, bursting from the cold bosom of winter. Take the testimony of a Presbyterian — sagacious and sharp-sighted. The Scotch Commissioner Baillie, writing on the spot, says of the Baptists in 1645: "Under the shadow of independency they have lifted up their heads, and increased their numbers above all sects of the land. They have forty-six churches in and about London." He adds the *characteristic* note: "*They are a people very fond of religious liberty, and very unwillingly to be brought under bondage of the judgment of any other.*" This is important testimony. And its importance is heightened by recollecting the names of some of the men who then embraced our principles. Besides many educated ministers, as Hanserd Knolly, Thomas De Laune, John Tombes, and Dr. De Veil, there were in civil life Sir Henry Vane, John Milton, Major Generals Harrison and Hutchinson, Admiral Penn, and that stalwart soldier of Christ, whose fame as a religious writer runs parallel with the English language in every shore, the immortal tinker of Elstow — John Bunyan. These are among the names that England will not willingly let die. That such men, at such a time, should appear as Baptists, in one cluster, like the luxuriant grapes of Eschol, is proof positive of the vitality of the stock, as well as the fertility of the soil, and is a sure pledge of spontaneous growth in the future.

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