

# The Difference between a Baptist Church and All Other Churches

By Thomas Henderson Pritchard

Taken out of the book entitled, "Baptist Doctrine", 1870

"...It was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." Jude 1:3

"No religious denomination has a moral right to a separate existence unless it differs essentially from others. Ecclesiastical differences ought always to spring from profound doctrinal differences. To divide Christians, except for reasons of great import, is criminal schism. Sects are justifiable only for matters of conscience, growing out of clear Scriptural precept or inevitable logical inference. Human speculation, tradition, authority of pope, or council, or synod, or conference, or legislature, is no proper basis for an organization of Christians. Nothing short of the truth of revelation, the authoritative force of God's word, rising above mere prejudice, or passion, or caprice, can justify a distinct church organization."

We accept this luminous statement of an important truth, made by Dr. J.L.M. Curry in a recent premium tract, and claim the right of a Baptist church to exist on the ground that it differs from all other churches in its constitution, membership, ordinances and doctrines, and that these differences are authorized by the Word of God. If other denominations, which hold sprinkling and pouring as baptism, teach infant baptism, infant membership, and open communion, can justify themselves in maintaining a separate ecclesiastical organization, then much more can the Baptists, who differ from all in many essential and important points, vindicate their right to existence, and free themselves from the charge of bigotry, schism and intolerance. I propose to answer today the question, How do Baptists differ from other Christian denominations? I will first present a brief summary of our distinctive doctrines, as given by Hiscox in his Baptist Church Directory, p. 118, and then discuss the principles on which they are based:

"*First*—As to *Baptism*, we believe that *immersion* or *dipping* is the only way of administering this ordinance as taught in the New Testament, and practiced by Christ and the Apostles, and the only way in which Christians can obey the command to be baptized. Consequently, the mode essential to the ordinance, and nothing but immersion is baptism. Therefore, persons poured upon or sprinkled upon are not baptized at all."

"*Second*—As to the *subjects for baptism*, we believe that the only suitable persons to receive this ordinance are those who have exercised a saving faith in Christ, and are regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Consequently, unconscious *infants* ought not to be, and cannot be scripturally baptized, since they can neither exercise, nor profess that faith in Christ; and to baptize such is contrary to

the teachings and practice of Christ and the Apostles, and most hurtful and injurious to the spiritual welfare of the children so baptized.”

“*Third*—As to the *subjects for church membership*, we believe that such persons only as are truly regenerated, and have been scripturally baptized on a profession of faith in Christ, can properly become members of a Christian church. Consequently, neither persons sprinkled, instead of being baptized, nor unconscious infants, nor unregenerated persons, are suitable to become members of a church. To receive the unregenerated to its fellowship would destroy the distinction between the Church and the world, and contradict between the entire spirit and genius of the gospel.”

“*Fourth*—As to the *subjects for communion*, we believe that the Lord’s Supper is to be partaken by members of the church alone, being such persons as are regenerated and baptized on a profession of their faith in Christ, and are walking in the faith and fellowship of the gospel. Consequently, neither unregenerated persons, nor unbaptized persons, though regenerate, nor persons walking disorderly and contrary to the gospel, even though baptized, can properly be invited to partake of this ordinance. Therefore, Baptist do not invite sprinkled members of Pedobaptist churches to their communion, because such persons are not scripturally baptized; nor do they admit immersed members of Pedobaptist churches, because such persons are walking disorderly as the disciples of Christ, by holding membership in, and walking in fellowship with churches which receive sprinkling instead of baptism, thereby sanctioning and sustaining a perversion of Christ’s ordinance and a disobedience to his commands. For the same reason, they decline to commune in Pedobaptist churches, as being contrary to good order.”

“*Fifth*—As to *church government*, we believe that each separate and individual church is entirely independent of all other churches, persons, and bodies of men, either civil or ecclesiastical, and is to be governed by its own members alone, without aid or interference of any other person or persons whatever. Consequently, churches governed by popes, bishops, synods, presbyteries, conferences, or in any other way than by their own members directly and exclusively, are not constituted on the model of the primitive churches, nor governed according to the gospel rule.”

“*Sixth*—As to the scriptural *offices* of a church, we believe there are but two, viz: the pastor, called in the New Testament “bishop” or “overseer,” “presbyter” or “elder,” and deacons. Consequently, those churches which admit more than two officers or orders in the ministry, have departed from the gospel rule and the construction of the primitive church.”

This plain statement of our principles shows clearly that there is a wide difference between a Baptist church and all other denominations—a difference which affects, not a few unimportant points, but which enters into the very constitution of a gospel church, and which, from the very nature of the case, places the Baptists in opposition to all other professing Christians. The world, therefore, has a right to ask, By what authority do you array yourselves against all Christendom in maintaining these doctrines? The question is pertinent and reasonable, and I will endeavor to answer it. In the first place, I reply, that it is not because of sectarian bigotry. There is a spirit of sectarianism among us, as there is and must be among all denominations, so long as they maintain a separate existence; and a certain measure of this feeling is by no means to be condemned, though when carried to excess it is hurtful to Christian character. I am ready to

grant, too, that the Baptists are under greater temptation than other Christians to cultivate the spirit of sectarianism unduly, by reason of the fact that they stand alone in maintaining their principles, and necessarily antagonize all other churches; but I am at the same time very sure that I speak the truth, when I declare that we cherish as kindly and as Christianly a spirit towards other denominations as they do toward us, or as they do towards each other. I venture to assert that there is today as much, if not more, good feeling between myself and the pastors of the Pedobaptist churches of this city, and between this church and the churches they represent, as among themselves; and this notwithstanding we maintain closed communion, while they enjoy the gracious influence of open communion, usually regarded as an unfailing source of union and good fellowship. It is, therefore, no want of Christian charity which makes us hold these doctrines. Not is it because aught of earthly honor or earthly interest ever has or ever will accrue to us in holding this exclusive and independent position among the Christians of the world, for they that hold these doctrines must suffer persecution. Their maintenance in all ages past has cost untold sacrifices of treasure and of blood. History will prove that of all the people who have suffered for conscience sake the Baptists have been the victims of the most unremitting and relentless persecution. The first and the last martyrs who sealed their faith with their blood on British soil were Baptist; and it is even true now, that while many of their principles have fought their way to an honorable recognition among the best thinkers of the world, "this is still the sect everywhere spoken against," as in the days of the Apostles.

No, my brethren, it is not that we do not hold the members of other churches to be Christians; not that we do not esteem them for their works of faith and labors of love; nor that we would profoundly rejoice if we could see eye to eye and face to face, and think and speak the same thing, and thus form a united army of "the sacramental hosts of God's elect"; but because we believe the great principles of respect for God's Holy Word compels us to differ from those we love, and constrains us to maintain and vindicate what we regard as important and imperishable truth.

And this brings us to the great cardinal principle of all Baptist churches:

*First—The Sovereignty of God's Holy Word.* We hold that the Bible is the supreme, the sufficient, the exclusive and absolute rule in all matters of religious faith and practice, and it is a rigid adherence to this principle which separates us from all other churches, Romish and Protestant, and constrains us to hold and propagate at all hazards, the doctrines which distinguish us as a people.

To quote authorities (and I this I do freely, for my object in this discourse is usefulness, not originality), the great Francis Wayland says, in his *Principles and Practices of the Baptists*, page 85: "We propose to take as our guide in all matters of religious belief and practice, the New Testament, the whole New Testament, and nothing but the New Testament. Whatever we find there we esteem as binding. No matter by what reverence for antiquity, by what tradition, by what councils, by what consent of any branches of the church or of the whole church at any particular period, an opinion or practice may be sustained, if it be not sustained by the command of Christ of the Apostles, we value it only as an opinion or a precept of man, and we treat it accordingly. We disavow the authority of man to add to or take from the teachings of inspiration, as they are found in the New Testament. Hence, to a Baptist all appeals to the Fathers, or to

antiquity, or general practice in the early centuries, or in later times, are irrelevant and frivolous. He looks for divine authority as his guide in all matters of religion, and if this be not produced, his answer is, "In vain do ye worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." The same sentiment is admirably put by Dr. Curry in the tract already referred to.

:Baptists differ fundamentally from Pedobaptists in practically adhering to the New Testament as the rule of faith and practice. The soul of Baptist churches is submission and conformity to the New Testament. Individual liberty is to be regulated by divine law. The end of revelation is the limit of moral and religious duty. Loyalty to Christ must in all things take precedence to personal inclination. The New Testament is not to be supplemented by tradition, nor the syllabi of popes, nor the decrees of councils or synods, nor by the acts of civil government, nor by motives of personal convenience, nor by parental constraint. No Christian can take as obligatory upon his conscience the belief or practice of any person, family or church, or nation, except as sustained by the Word of God." We know that other denominations claim that they, too, take the Bible as their only guide in all matters of religion. We do not question their sincerity, but at the same time we are obliged to regard them as having forsaken this great principle in respect to points cited as representing our distinctive tenets.

In maintaining these principles we feel that we are under the most sacred obligations to protest against the errors of Protestantism itself, and that God calls us to responsibility and imposes upon us a dignity such as he put upon Luther, Calvin, and Knox, and other reformers of the sixteenth century.

Second—Closely allied to this high doctrine of regard for God's Holy Word as exalted to supreme authority, and indeed growing out of it, is another, very dear to Baptists, which is "the personality of all religious duties" - the individual responsibility of every man for the performance of his own duty. The Old Testament dealt with man in families and nations; the language of the New Testament is, "every man must give account of himself unto God." Daniel Webster once remarked that "death brought every man to his individuality." So does the Christian religion. In the performance of a religious duty there can be no sponsor or proxy. No one, however close his relationship, can answer for another.

Each human soul is responsible to God for the discharge of its own duty. Every one must repent for himself, believe for himself, and obey for himself. The faith and obedience of my parents or friends will not avail for me, and "compulsory or involuntary baptism is no more allowable than compulsory or involuntary taking of the Lord's Supper." If faith, prayer, obedience of any kind, is any individual duty, then baptism, which, in the Scripture is always joined with faith, is also an individual duty, and, therefore, the baptism of an unconscious, unbelieving infant is a violation of this principle, since it not only lacks the elements of personal faith and personal obedience, but robs the child, when it can believe, of the unspeakable privilege of personally obeying a command of Christ, as baptism is an ordinance to be administered but once. There are duties, very important religious duties, which parents owe to their children; they should not only feed, clothe, and educate them, but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and by constant prayer and earnest effort to secure their salvation; but, as the Scripture do not require them to repent, believe and be regenerated for their children, and as, in the nature of the case, it

is important for them to perform these personal acts for their offspring, so baptism, which is equally a personal act, cannot be performed by a parent for a child.

Three—A legitimate deduction from this principle of the personality of religious duty gives us the sublime doctrine of *soul-liberty*—freedom to worship God according to the dictates of each man’s conscience. If each human soul alone is responsible to God for the discharge of its duty, then no human authority has a right to come between that soul and its God, and therefore, all interference with the faith and practice of man in matters of religion, whether that interference be from human government, parental authority, or religious teachers, under the name of priests, pastors, or what-not, is a violation of the sacred rights of conscience, and not to be tolerated. Many think this doctrine of religious liberty the outgrowth of modern Christianity—a development not so much of the Gospel as of experience and enlarged Christian liberality. So far as civil government are concerned it is certainly a new doctrine, for Judge Story says, “In the code of laws established by the Baptists in Rhode Island we read, for the first time since Christianity ascended the throne of the Caesars, the declaration that conscience should be free, and men should not be punished for worshipping God in the way they are persuaded he requires.” But in religion it is not a new doctrine. The New Testament plainly lays down the principle that while taxes and tributes belong to human governments, conscience and souls belong to God alone; and this doctrine Baptists have always steadily maintained. As Chevalier Bunsen, for twelve years the esteemed ambassador of Prussia at the Court of England, and a Lutheran, declares, “the principles and polity of the Baptist church will not allow it to persecute;” while the great American historian, George Bancroft, has said, “Freedom of conscience, unlimited freedom of mind, was from the first the trophy of the Baptists.” For seventeen hundred years the Baptists stood alone in the world as the advocates of religious liberty. Papists and Protestants, Lutherans and Calvinists, Episcopalians and Presbyterians, all repudiated this doctrine as the dreadful dogma of the despised and persecuted Ana-Baptists. But while all hierarchs and State religions have sought to destroy this principle, it has never been extinct. Handed down from generation to generation; entertained, sometimes for ages of succession, only by those who were cursed as heretics,; driven from country to country by cruel hand of persecution—its history all gory with the blood of the saints, it is vital in every part, and has been preserved by a gracious Providence, and will live on to bless the world “till the last syllable of recorded time.”

Fourth—The twin brother of religious liberty—offspring of the same cradle—is another principle ever held sacred by the Baptists: the right of private judgment in interpreting God’s Word. If the Bible is our supreme and exclusive rule of duty, and if each individual is personally accountable for the discharge of that duty, then it follows, as a logical necessity, that every man has a right to read and interpret the Bible for himself. “The Baptists have always held that the Bible was given by God, not a priesthood, to be by them diluted, compounded and unadulterated, and then retailed by the pennyworth the people, but on the contrary, that the whole revelation in all its abundance of blessings, with all its solemn warnings and its exceeding great and precious promises, is a communication from God to every individual of the human race. It is given to the minister in no higher, better or different sense that it is given to every one who reads it. Every one to whom it comes is bound to study it for himself and govern his life by it.

“The wisdom of Omniscience has tasked itself to render this communication plain, so that he that runs may read, and that the way-faring man, though a fool, need not err therein. The Holy Spirit, moreover, has been sent to assist every one who will, with an humble and devout heart, seek to understand it. With such a revelation and such spiritual aid, every man is required to determine for himself what is the will of God. He has, therefore, no excuse for disobedience. He cannot plead before God that he could not know His will. He cannot excuse himself on the ground that his minister deceived him. The revelation was made to the man himself, and the means were provided for his understanding it. Every one of us must give an account for himself unto God.

This extract I have quoted at length for Wayland’s “Principles and Practices of the Baptists,” page 132, for two reasons—first, because the idea is admirably presented, and also because, as the opinion of one great representative man, it carries with it more weight than any utterance of my own.

Having thus stated our doctrines, and the principles on which they are founded, I propose to present, in closing, several conclusions which seem to me to be legitimately derived from the principle discussed.

*First*—The Christian religion is the religion of a book. That book is its supreme law, and contains all we know or need to know of the religion. Whatever precepts, doctrine or ordinance is found in that book has authority to bind men’s consciences in matters of religion. Whatever is not in that book is only of human origin and is not binding upon man’s hearts and consciences; therefore, we stand upon a foundation of solid rock when we take that book as our only rule of faith and practice. We are often asked what is the creed, confession of faith, or standard authority of the Baptist churches? To this question we have but one reply: “The New Testament is our rule of faith and practice; we have no creed, confession of faith, book of discipline, book of common prayer or book of church law but this.” If other denominations reply to this answer—“We, too, take the Bible for our guide, but we also have authorized confessions, creeds and formularies, which have been prepared by our wisest men and adopted by our highest ecclesiastical tribunals, and to a greater or less degree all our members subscribe to and are governed by them. Indeed we see not how we could preserve our unity and protect ourselves from serious errors and divisions, if we had not some authorized standards;” - to all this we reply, that we cannot recognize the authority of any earthly tribunal, and the nature of our policy forbids the adoption of any such standards. Every church, therefore, when it expresses its own beliefs, expresses simply the faith of its own members. We believe in the perfect independence of every church of Christ. If several churches understand the Scriptures in the same way, and adopt the same confessions of faith, then they simply say thereby that they understand God’s Word as teaching the same truths, and they adopt them because they believe they accord with the Holy Scriptures, and not because any tribunal other than themselves has given such interpretation to the Scriptures.

The authority is still in the Scriptures; and we repeat with emphasis, that we believe the Scriptures are a revelation, not to popes, or bishops, or presbyters, or pastors, or to councils, synods, assemblies, or conferences, but to each individual man, to be read and interpreted by himself and for his own guidance. And, strange as it may seem to others, - several Pedobaptist churches have expressed their surprise to me at the fact—we have never felt the need of

authorized standards and confessions of faith to preserve our unity and secure us from division and heresy. The truth is, there does not now, nor ever did exist, a denomination of Christians, which has for so long a period, and with such entire unanimity, held the same doctrines as the Baptists. It is a most extraordinary fact that the confessions of faith put forth by the Baptists in the days of Henry VIII., who began to reign in 1509, and later, in the times of Cromwell and Charles II., are almost identical with those now generally entertained by Baptist churches. Authorized standards, enforced with pains and penalties of the most fearful kind, have not secured uniformity of faith to the Church of Rome, nor protected this great hierarchy from heresy and schism. Nor have the Episcopalians, the Lutherans, the Presbyterians, or the Methodist churches been more fortunate in this particular; while the Baptists have at same time preserved their liberty and enjoyed the blessing of harmony. And why should it not be so? If the Bible is given to every man to be read and understood for himself, why should we be surprised that the greatest amount of unity attainable among men has been produced by a resort, not to human standards, which are fallible, but to the infallible Word of God, which we know is true, and which affords the most solid basis of unity to be found among men?

The second remark I wish you to note is that the reliance upon the pure Word of God has not only been the means of preserving us from divisions, but it has preserved us from error as well, and reserved to us a purer faith than that of any other people under heaven. Do any object to the assertion of such high claims on our part, because we have numbered among our members not many of the great and learned of this world? We reply by saying that, doubtless, we owe our singularly pure faith to the fact that we have not had such guides to follow. As another has well said, "Our fathers for the most part, were plain and unlearned men. They had no learned authorities to lead them astray. They mingled in no aristocratic circles whose overwhelming public sentiment might crush the first buddings of earnest and honest inquiry. As little children they took up the Bible, supposing it to mean just what it said, and willing to practice just what it taught. Having nowhere else to look, they looked up in humility to the Holy Spirit to teach them the meaning of the Word of God, and they were not disappointed. It was thus that they arrived at truth which escape the learned and the intellectually mighty."

Finally, brethren, consider the exhortation of the Apostle that you should earnestly contend for the faith, once for all, delivered to the saints. The principles we have discussed constitute our peculiar inheritance as a people. In my judgment, they bring with them a dignity, and involve a responsibility such as God bestows upon no other denomination of Christians. These principles are the hope of the world. They constitute the impregnable foundation whereon all forms of religious error, whether Papal or Protestant, Pagan or Scientific, can be encountered and overcome. Let us hold with them a tenacity, esteem them with a reverence, and circulate them with an energy and enterprise such as never distinguished the Propagandists of Rome, in the days of their great prosperity. To do this, we must understand these principles and appreciate their unspeakable importance. The great German, Krummacher, said some years ago to Dr. Sears, "*You Baptists have a future.*"

May the God of all truth keep us to these great and glorious doctrines, and give us grace that we may ever be faithful to the honorable trusts committed to our charge. Let us be careful, however, always and everywhere, that we contend for those principles in the proper spirit. The truth we must speak, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, but it *should be spoken in love*. We have

no right to discharge one duty by violating another in the spirit in which we do it. As for myself, I have never been able to see why a man should cease to be a Christian gentleman because he was a Baptist, or cease to love Christians of other denominations because we differ from them. Of these three, *faith*, *hope*, and *charity*, the greatest, God says, is charity.

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