

THE PEOPLE CALLED BAPTISTS

Psalm 16:6

"The lines are fallen unto us in pleasant places; yea, we have a goodly heritage" (Psalm 16:6).

As Baptists, we frequently need to look back to the rock from whence we were hewn, and to learn more about our origin, history, and doctrines. This exercise will increase our knowledge, help us to appreciate more fully our heritage, and give us courage to stand more firmly for the truth in these days of uncertainty and much false teaching.

Peter told us "to be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh us a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear."

I. Who Are The Baptists?

The Baptists are a succession of believers in Christ. They believe in God as the Creator of all things, and as the heavenly Father Who calls all men to Himself; they believe in Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God, and as the Saviour of all who exercise faith in Him; they believe in the Holy Spirit as the ever-present guide Who gives the Christian knowledge of the will of God and the power to follow Christ in daily living; they believe that a church is a congregation of regenerated, scripturally-baptized believers, associated together for fellowship, the ministry of the Word, worship, and the carrying of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

The Baptists are a denomination which is composed of self-governing churches which call their own pastors, elect their own officers, and make their own programs of work by democratic process.

They are voluntarily banded together to proclaim the gospel of Christ, to teach the saved how to live in accordance with His Word, and to bless the world through cooperative ministries of mercy.

The Baptists are a group of Christians who believe that the Bible is the only sufficient rule of faith and practice; that every individual is sovereign in his own soul and stands face to face with a sovereign God; that all matters between him and God are personal; that each individual is competent to deal with God by and for himself; that he must repent for himself, believe for himself, act for himself, and worship God for himself without any hindrance from any outside authority; and that each individual can make a personal and direct approach to Christ through faith.

II. From Whence Did The Baptists Come?

When you try to find where the Baptists came from, you go back and back and back and finally arrive on the banks of the Jordan River where one of their number whom God called John the Baptist was making ready a people out of whom the Lord Jesus organized His church. The Lord called him John the Baptist before he ever preached a sermon or baptized anybody. He was called John the Baptist because of the work God sent him to do. His mission was to make and baptize disciples.

Jesus Christ walked approximately sixty miles to get John the Baptist to baptize Him. The only time that the three persons of the Godhead ever manifested their presence on earth at the same time was when the Son of God was baptized in the Jordan River.

When John the Baptist lifted the Lord Jesus from the watery grave, there came a

voice from heaven, saying, "Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). John the Baptist baptized all of the twelve apostles. Christ organized or built His church with these men. John the Baptist prepared the material and the Lord Jesus Christ organized the first church during His personal ministry here upon earth.

There were one hundred twenty names on the roll of membership of this church before Pentecost (Acts 1:15). To this church there were about three thousand additions on the day of Pentecost. "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:42).

The church which Christ built was instituted during His personal ministry and was located in Palestine. All the other churches we know anything about were established in Europe or America. Christ was the Head, Founder, Builder, Master, Lord, and Proprietor of His church. The glory of building His own church He did not and will not share with any other. The doctrines and teachings of the church were given to it by the Master. The mission of the church which Christ founded from its very incipency was to make disciples.

For nearly two hundred years after the Lord Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18), there was but little diversity of opinion and division among the churches. Here and there were small disputes among the members, such as at Corinth over the question of eating meats that had been offered to idols and about the observance of the Lord's Supper, but as to diversity between the various churches such was absent.

In 251 A.D. non-fellowship was declared against some irregular churches, which had adopted the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. About this time, the churches in and about Rome began an attempt to exercise dominion and authority over other local churches. This tended toward separation. One group upheld the doctrines in their purity, while the other was daily sloughing off the principles which Christ had commanded, and in their place was substituting a man-made decorum. Strange to say, the latter group attracted the largest number of followers. The smaller group refused to accept members from the larger group without rebaptizing them, since the larger group was preaching baptismal regeneration. This smaller group of disciples, who were holding the doctrines in their purity, were compelled to flee to the mountains and to hide in caves to escape persecution and death.

When Constantine the Great came to the throne of the Roman Empire shortly before 300 A.D., he made that which was called Christianity by the larger group the religion of his worldwide empire. At his death in 337 A.D., his territory was divided among his three sons and this destroyed the solidarity. Hordes of wandering vandals and barbarians of North Europe swept over the broken empire of Constantine. These Goths, Visigoths, Huns, and Tuetons cared nothing for the religion which Constantine had proclaimed throughout his empire. Thus, Christianity fell into disrepute.

The unscrupulous leaders of the larger group, in their desperation to hold Christianity together, began to play upon the imagination, superstition, and ignorance of these uncivilized invaders. This group developed a hierarchy and, under Gregory the Great, established the Roman Catholic Church in 590 A.D. The pontificate of Gregory the Great extended from 590 to 604 A.D. Under the triple

title of Bishop of Rome, Primate of Italy, and Apostle of the West, Gregory the Great by gentle incentive or bold assertion, as best suited the circumstances, elevated the episcopacy of Rome into a genuine papacy of the church. As Ridpath said, "He succeeded in bringing the Arians of Italy and Spain into the Catholic fold and thus assured the solidarity of the Western Ecclesia."

From 590 until the beginning of the sixteenth century, "darkness covered the earth and gross darkness the people." Historians speak of this era of Catholic dominion as the "Dark Ages." To the heresy of baptismal regeneration was added infant baptism, union of church and state, maryolatry, image worship, exaltation of the bishops, and celibacy of the priests. By the year 1500 only traces of the original church which Christ had established could be found in this almost universal Catholic Church.

Gradually the power of this church increased. Kings and princes became puppets at the will of the pope. Through the sale of indulgences, the church grew vastly rich. She dominated the political maps of Europe. Untold wealth and power gradually came into her hands. Martyrs for the cause of Christ died by the thousands. In many cities the streets ran with blood of the martyrs that was spilled because they refused to bow the knee in subjection. The small band of followers that had existed from the beginning suffered all manner of cruel hardships at the hands of the "deceiver of nations." They were drawn and quartered; they were sawn asunder; they were impaled upon sharp stakes; hot molten lead was poured into their ears; their tongues were pulled out with hot pincers; they were imprisoned; they were stoned; they were slain with the sword; they were burned at the stake. Every conceivable instrument of torture was invented.

III. What Others Have Said About The Baptists.

I give you some quotations from scholarly and world-renowned historians, none of whom were Baptists, yet all of them agree that Baptists have existed since the days of the apostles, and that the path traveled by Baptists through the ages has been one of suffering and martyrdom.

Ypeij and Dermout, eminent historians of the Dutch Reformed Church, in their "Account of the Origin of the Dutch Baptists" said: "...the Baptists may be considered as the only Christian community that has stood since the days of the apostles, and as a Christian society has preserved pure the doctrines of the gospel through all ages."

Robert Bruce Smith said: "With all my heart I believe that the Baptists have a history parallel with the history of Christianity."

The noted historian, John Clark Ridpath, a Methodist, said: "I should not readily admit that there was a Baptist Church as far back as A.D. 100, though without doubt there were Baptists then, as all Christians were then Baptists."

Cardinal Hosius, a Catholic, and the president of the Council of Trent, December 13, 1545 to December 4, 1563, said: "Were it not for the fact that the Baptists have been grievously tormented and cut off with the knife during the past twelve hundred years, they would swarm greater than all the reformers...If the truth of religion were to be judged by the readiness and boldness of which a man or any sect shows in suffering, then the opinions and persuasions of no sect can be truer and surer than those of the Anabaptists, since there have been none for the twelve hundred years past that have been more generally punished or that have been more cheerfully and

steadfastly undergone, and have offered themselves to the most cruel sort of punishment than these people."

Mosheim, the outstanding Lutheran historian, said: "Before the rise of Luther and Calvin, there lay secreted in almost all the countries of Europe, persons who adhered tenaciously to the principles of the modern Dutch Baptists...the origin of Baptists is lost in the remote depths of antiquity...the first century was a history of the Baptists."

Alexander Campbell, who hated Baptists perhaps more than any man within the last century and a half, wrote: "The sentiments of Baptists and their practice of baptism from the apostolic age to the present have had a continued chain of advocates, and public monuments of their existence in every century can be produced."

"Crossing the Centuries," edited by William C. King, who had as his associate counselors, editors, collaborators, and contributors: Cardinal Gibbons, Roman Catholic; Bishop John H. Vincent, Methodist; President Theodore Roosevelt; President Woodrow Wilson; W. H. P. Faunce (President of Brown University); Albert Bushnell Hart, head of the History Department of Harvard University; George B. Adams of Yale, and many more such famous men, said: "Of the Baptists it may be said that they are not reformers. These people, comprising bodies of Christian believers known under various names in different countries, are entirely distinct and independent of the Roman and Greek churches, and have an unbroken continuity of existence from apostolic days down through the centuries. Throughout this long period, they were bitterly persecuted for heresy, driven from country to country, disfranchised, deprived of their property, imprisoned, tortured and slain by the thousands; yet they swerved not from their New Testament faith, doctrine, and adherence."

Baptists can say with John Newton:

"Through many dangers, toils and snares
We have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought us safe thus far,
And grace will lead us home."