

The following is an enhancement of my notes for a talk I gave on this subject. Jerry Samons

Two Views of Baptist History

The 11th chapter of Hebrews known as the great hall of faith chapter provides a listing of men of faith that have gone before us. Hebrews 12:1 refers to them as “so great a cloud of witnesses.”

This I believe teaches us, among other things, that we should honor those who have gone before us in the faith. Today we’re going to talk about those who have gone before us and about Baptist history.

I want to try to present to you for your consideration two views of Baptist history.

I would assume that the majority of us here would consider ourselves Baptists – in that we embrace most, if not all, of what are commonly called Baptist tenets. Those tenets would include baptism by immersion, baptism of the believer only, priesthood of the believer (liberty of conscious), separation of church and state, autonomy of the individual church, pure church discipline, closed communion, and regenerate church membership.

In regards to Baptist history, there is a fundamental question that is in dispute. It is a question that I would guess most of us have probably not thought a lot about. Yet it is a question that our Baptist ancestors considered very important. This is the question: **Are Baptists Protestants?**

Before we go further let’s define what a Protestant is. A Protestant is a member of a Christian church arising out of the Reformation. The word means *protester*. Thus it is one who protested against the Catholic Church. How do we get the name Reformer? It was not the intention of the early reformers to create a new church, but to reform the existing Roman Catholic Church.

There are two distinct views on the origin of Baptists and thus whether or not they are Protestants. These opposing views are held by two groups of historians. We might term the views the new or modern historians' view and the old or traditional historians' view.

Very simply stated, the new or modern historians' view is that Baptists arose out of the Protestant Reformation and are therefore Protestants.

Very simply stated, the old or traditional historians' view is that Baptist pre-existed the Protestant Reformation and are therefore not Protestants.

The New or Modern Historians View

Since the new or modern historians' view, I believe, is the prevalent view today, let's look at it first. The new Baptist historians' view arose early and well into the 20th Century. As I said, they believe that the Baptist came out of the Reformation and had never existed prior to the Reformation. This view has gained wide acceptance; it is taught in many seminaries and churches.

In fact, in a Church History class taught at a church I attended, I raised a question concerning those Christians who had existed outside of the Catholic Church prior to the Reformation. I was told that there was very little history regarding those people, as they had existed in small numbers and were in effect of minor importance in church history. I was told that practically all church history prior to the Reformation was a Catholic history. I did not know much, but I knew enough that I was not entirely satisfied with that answer.

Now let me give an extremely brief summary of the modern historians' view of how the Baptist came into being:

Luther died in 1546 and Calvin in 1564. Around 1603 the Puritans, who were Calvinists in their doctrinal sympathies, were hoping that the persecutions against them in England were going to decrease. This did not happen and a small group of Separatist Puritans led by John Smyth, an ex-Anglican clergyman, left England for Holland around 1608 to escape further persecutions. The Separatists were those who believed that the established church of England was beyond reforming.

While in Holland, Smyth came to the conviction of believers-only baptism and that pedobaptism (baptism of infants) was wrong. He first baptized himself and then baptized his entire congregation. From this act and theological position, the modern historians conclude that this was the beginning of the very first Baptist church.

A few months later Smyth apparently became an Arminian. Smyth soon died and the church came under a man named Thomas Helwys. I'm leaving a lot out. In 1612 or 1613 Helwys and his followers returned to England. Keep in mind that this group's origins are Catholic, then Anglican, and then Baptist. Their origin is thus clearly thru the Reformation.

In 1633 there was a split in Helwys congregation in London. The new group, which was Calvinistic, elected John Spilsbury as their pastor. They became known as the Regular or Particular Baptist. This is, of course, because they believed in particular redemption. I'm leaving out a lot of details, twists, and turns, but basically by 1633 Particular Baptists were known as a separate denomination. London confessions of faith then followed in 1644 and 1646.

The 1689 London Baptist Confession, of course, followed. It is similar to the Westminster Presbyterian Confession, but there certainly are differences. Thus we have the origin of the Baptist from the perspective of the new or modern historians.

If this is the correct way of defining Baptist, then one would have to agree that Baptist did come out of the Reformation. There is the objection, however, from those who say that these people were

influenced by the Anabaptist to come to this position. The Anabaptist had existed prior to the Reformation and prior to Smyth, Helwys and Spillsbury.

Let's now briefly answer the question, who were the Anabaptist? The word means *re-baptizers*. They were those people who would not accept anyone into their church unless they were baptized by their church. This would apply to anyone whether baptized as an adult or as an infant. The claim of the old historians is that the Anabaptist descended from the Lollards, Waldenses, Albigenses, and others on back to the apostles. One writer says that the Anabaptist name has been found all the way back to the 3rd century. In other words, all of these groups were re-baptizers. When the term Anabaptist first came into common use is in dispute. Gradually, during the 17th century, the *Ana* prefix was dropped, and they were simply called Baptist.

The Old or Traditional Historians View

Now let's examine what the old historians taught and why. I believe that it was the prevailing view among Baptist until well into the 20th century.

As we have said, basically they believed that there has been a New Testament church in existence since Christ. They claim that these churches existed under various names, coming forward, such as Cathars, Novatians, Paulicans, Bogomils, Albigenses, Waldenses, Lollards, Anabaptists and many others. They admit that the theologies of these groups varied, and some even had gross heresies from time to time. However, the position of the old church historians was that they generally stuck by the tenets we listed earlier, which they say define Baptist from the time of the apostles. In other words, a rose by any other name is still a rose.

They say that all of this is true even of today's Baptists. They say that if we look around today we see Baptist theologies ranging from Arminian to Calvinist (low, medium, high, hyper) and Primitive Baptist. There are even gross heresies today if one cares to look hard enough.

It is very difficult to trace church history especially with regard to theology. It is like nailing Jell-o to the wall. Churches split and divide over all kinds of issues. Some are trivial and some are large. For instance, if one were to write a history of a certain church whose history I have followed closely, it would be difficult to characterize its particular theology. It would depend on when one examined and wrote about the theology. For instance, that particular church was Arminian when it was founded some sixty years ago. It later became moderately Calvinistic and later moved to a higher form of Calvinism as the staff changed. As the pastoral staff continued to change, the theology became what one might call neo-Calvinism or whatever one might choose to label the theology of John MacArthur. However, during all of this time, this particular church has always held rather closely to the Baptist tenets mentioned earlier. So the church has always been Baptist in that sense. Yet the name of the church has never had the word Baptist in it.

By saying this I do not intend to trivialize the importance of sound doctrine. I think that it is of critical importance. I am a staunch doctrines of grace man myself.

The first reason old Baptist historians did not see themselves as Protestants is that they believe there has been a true New Testament church in existence since Christ and the apostles, though at times it may only have been a remnant. They cite several scriptures to support this position:

Matt 16:18, "...upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it."

The fact that the Roman Catholic Church has been grossly corrupt from its beginning they cite as proof that it could not possibly have been God's church. They say that God therefore must have had in existence another church in perpetuity even if it was just a remnant.

Eph. 3:21, "to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever."

They say that here Paul declared the church would bring glory throughout all ages, and the Papist have certainly not done that. Again, some church did bring glory even if it was a remnant.

A second reason the old Baptist historians did not want to be called **mere** Protestants is that they believed the Protestants had come out of the "whore of Rome" and had brought some of her heresies with them. These heresies, they say, would include baptism by sprinkling or pouring, pedobaptism, church hierarchy, and belief in combining church and state.

A third reason the old Baptist historians did not want to be called Protestants is the idea of church succession. Some of them believed that there had been a laying on of hands of ministers from the time of the apostles until today. Protestants, they said, cannot claim this.

A fourth reason is the severe persecution of the Anabaptist by the Protestants – more about that later.

History is always written by the victors. That is no doubt the case with church history. The victors were the Catholics until the Reformation. Therefore until the Reformation, church history was basically written by the Catholics. After the Reformation, it was written by the Catholics and the Protestants. Any history written by those not in power was mostly destroyed.

Prior to the Reformation, the Catholics persecuted any non-Catholic as heretics. After the Reformation, the Catholics and Protestants persecuted each other and both persecuted the Anabaptist (the name by which many of the non-Protestants were called by this time).

These persecutions were brutal. The Baptists and Anabaptist and their predecessors were severely persecuted on the continent of Europe and in Britain. Some estimates go as high as 50,000,000 deaths. Methods used were burnings, drownings, beatings, imprisonment, taking of land, and starvation. This is documented though the extent is disputed. No one knows the true numbers.

As I said earlier, history is written by the victors and almost everything written by the predecessors of the Baptist was destroyed by their persecutors. Therefore those that support the old historians' view must rely on many historians who were no friends of the Anabaptist. Following are quotes from some of them:

In his book, *Religious Denominations of the World*, Vincent L. Milner says, “The members of this denomination are distinguished from all other professing Christians by their opinions respecting the ordinance of Christian Baptism. . . . Baptist claim their origin from the ministry of Christ and the Apostles. . . proof of which they appeal to the highest authorities in church history, such as Mosheim (1694-1755 known as father of church history) and Neander (1789-1850 a Lutheran church historian and theologian). . . they claim to be able to trace their history in a succession of pure churches, under various names, down to the Reformation of the sixteenth century. . . . At the first dawn of the Reformation, they emerged on all sides, and after fifty years of unparalleled suffering from Romanists and Protestants alike, . . .” (The parentheses in this paragraph are my addition.)

This is a quote from Cardinal Hosius, President of the Council of Trent, 1560, “If you behold their cheerfulness in suffering persecution, the Anabaptist run before all the heretics, (i.e. Protestants) you have regard to the number, it is likely that they would swarm above all the others, if they were not so grievously plagued and cut off by the knife of persecution.”

In the *History of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands*, by Drs. Ypeig and Dermout, published in 1819 we have this quote: “We have now seen that the Baptist, who were formerly called Anabaptists, and in later times Mennonites, were the original Waldenses, and have long in the history of the church received the honor of that origin. On this account the Baptist may be considered the only Christian community which has stood since the days of the apostles; and a Christian society which has preserved pure the doctrines of the Gospel through all ages.”

The above quotes are only a few from the respected academic men of the highest standing who were certainly not friends of the Baptist or Anabaptist.

For a good look at the persecutions of groups like the Montanists, Novatianists, Donatists, Paulicans, Albigenses, Waldenses, and Anabaptists, one might want to read the book, *The Trail of Blood*, by J.M. Carroll. This man’s history is not to be overlooked. He served as secretary of the Texas Baptist Education Commission, as statistician of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and as agent of the Foreign Mission Board. Founder and first president of San Marcos Baptist Academy, he was also president of Oklahoma Baptist University and Howard Payne College. This small book has circulated over one million copies, more than any Baptist history every published.

I will not go further into European history of the Baptist and their forerunners. There are books written. Most are not popular today and may take a little effort to find. The modern church historians don’t seem to take much interest.

If you are interested in reading more about this, I would also recommend *The Battle for Baptist History* by I. K. Cross, *The Lost History of Calvinism* by Elder Harold L. Hunt, and *Reformers and their Stepchildren* by Leonard Verduin.

We could go on with this history and talk about such as Sir John Oldcastle, Baron of Cobham burned 100 years before the Reformation. We could mention the Lollards and others. We could mention Hill Cliffe Baptist Church in England of which there is an old engraving. This church predates the Reformation by at least 200 years. It had a baptistry. The historian whose father was a former

pastor of the church commented that, "This church stood for what Baptists have historically stood for through the ages."

We could go in a lot of directions here. However, I would like to narrow our focus to talk about a small group known as the Welsh Baptist. The Welsh Tract Baptist Church is one of the oldest churches in America. It traces its heritage through the Welsh Baptist. In discussing the Welsh Baptist, I refer to *A Welsh Succession of Primitive Baptist Faith and Practice* by Elder Michael N. Ivey.

The Welsh Baptist heritage is very real. The apostle Paul himself makes a brief reference to these people in 2 Tim 4:21. "Make every effort to come before winter. Eubulus greets you, also Pudens and Linus and Claudia and all the brethren." There are various accounts of how Claudia, a Welsh woman, came to be in Rome. She probably came as a member of a family of what today would be called diplomats. Pudens, her husband, is believed to have been a Roman senator. They would have been converted under Paul and their theology should have been sound.

There is evidence that they returned to Wales taking their Christianity with them. Legend has it that Paul himself went as far as the British islands though there is apparently no proof of this. However, there is evidence that non-Catholic Christianity existed in Wales from a very early time. Thus we will have to place the idea of Paul in Britain as speculation or tradition.

In 180 A.D. two Welshmen named Faganus and Damicanus were converted in Rome and returned to Wales to assist the brethren there. That same year Lucius, the Welsh King, accepted the Christian religion. Thus the first European Christian King was a Welshman.

By 285 A.D. there was a massacre of more than 1200 Welsh Baptists by the papist monk Austin in the Olcon valley over their refusal of Catholic baptism. Keep in mind the Olcon valley.

Not much is written about the Welsh Baptist during the dark ages roughly 600 to 1300 A. D. These were times of severe persecutions of the non-Catholics and what we do have was written by the Catholics.

One author says, "It is conceded that during the dark ages the Welsh churches remained pure and never bowed the knee in submission to the Roman church."

Wycliffe, who translated the Bible into English, lived in Wales near Olcon in 1371. William Tyndale lived in the area. Walter Lollard (the Lollards) was believed to have been given refuge there before returning to Europe and being burned alive in 1322 in Cologne. He was of renown among the Waldenses in Europe.

Some real insight into the Welsh Baptist can be gained from the writings of Jonathan Davis who wrote *A History of the Welsh Baptists*, published in 1835:

Concerning the brethren around Olchon, Davis said, "We know that at the reformation, in the reign of Charles the first, they had a minister named Howell Vaughan, quite a different sort of a Baptist from Erbury, Wroth, Vavasor Powell and others, who were the great reformers, **but had not reformed so far as they ought to have done**, (emphasis mine) in the opinion of the Olchon

Baptists. And was not to be wondered at; for they had dissented from the Church of England, and probably brought some of her corruptions with them, **but the mountain Baptists were not dissenters from the establishment** (emphasis mine). We know the reformers were for mixed communion, but the Olchon Baptists received no such practices. In short, these were plain, strict Apostolic Baptist. They would have order and no confusion, the word of God their only rule."

Concerning Christianity in Wales prior to the Reformation, we have these beautiful words from Jonathan Davis: "It is well known to all who are acquainted with the history of Great Britain, that Carleon, in South Wales, was a renowned city in past ages.....The vale of Carleon is situated between England and the mountainous part of Wales, just at the foot of the mountains. It is our valley of Piedmont; the mountains of Merthyn Tydryl, our Alps; and the crevices of the rock, the hiding-places of the lambs of the sheep of Christ, where the ordinances of the gospel, to this day, have been administered in their primitive mode, without being adulterated by the corrupt church of Rome. It was no wonder that Penry Wroth and Erbury, commonly called the first reformers of the Baptist denomination in Wales, should have so many followers at once, when we consider that their field of labors was the vale of Carleon and its vicinity."

I don't know how typical or atypical the Welsh Baptist may have been compared to other pre-reformation groups. However, it certainly offers more than just a nod to the existence of non-Catholic believers since the apostles.

As to the old or traditional historians' view, I do believe that it was prevalent until well into the 20th century when many prominent seminaries and Baptist colleges began to have professors with the modern view. The new breed took the position that their academics and research were superior to the old historians'. This may be true, but they have discarded the old historians' view entirely.

I would venture to say that if most of us older folks could ask our Baptist grandfathers or great grandfathers if Baptist were Protestants, the overwhelming answer would be a definitive **no**.

Let me say that I certainly do not discount the histories written by such modern historians as Tom Nettles at Al Mohler's seminary in Louisville, KY. He is fine scholar and historian. He has written a good two volume history entitled *The Baptists*, which I have. I think that he is correct that the Baptist came out of the Reformation and are Protestants **if** one defines the Baptist as he does. However, it can be argued that this definition is far too narrow and fails to honor the many non-Catholics over the centuries who gave their lives because they held Baptist tenets.

Generally, the Baptists have always been a fluid group while basically holding to Baptist tenets. Look at Southern Seminary in Louisville, KY. Has it always held to its current Calvinistic theology? No, it was Arminian a few years ago. It is interesting to note that in 1896 they had a professor there named William H. Whitsett, who wrote a paper in which he took the position that Baptist are Protestants. He was practically drummed out of the seminary for that position.

My purpose today is not to downgrade anyone who wishes to hold the view that Baptists are Protestants. That is probably true **if** one wishes to limit the definition of Baptists as the modern historians do. However, I have tried to point out that there is another view.
