

# ARE BAPTISTS PROTESTANTS?

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## Introduction

Ever since the emergence of Landmarkism in the mid-nineteenth century, a conflict over Baptist origin and identity has been fought. Just exactly who are the Baptists? Can they in any legitimate sense be classified as Protestants? The answer to these questions centers on the nature of the church. Nearly all Baptists are agreed that their ecclesiology is derived from the New Testament. The Scriptures have been the foremost formative influence on Baptist belief and behavior. So why the conflict? I believe it can be attributed to a misunderstanding of the church. Any discussion of Baptist ecclesiology must begin with the question, “What is the church?” Once the confusion regarding its nature is eliminated we can better answer the question of Baptist identity and logically determine whether or not Baptists are Protestants. Additional information regarding this question will be drawn from early Baptist records.

The discussion of identity often begins with origins—“Where did the Baptists come from?”

## I. Four Views of Baptist Origins.

### A. Strict organic successionist view.

1. Position: there has been a succession of Baptist churches throughout history beginning with the first Baptist church of Jerusalem. Dissenters from the earliest times were merely Baptists with different names.

2. Proponents: J. R. Graves (1820–1893), the founder of the Landmark movement. “All Christian communities during the first three centuries were of the Baptist denomination” (in “Introductory Essay” to G. H. Orchard, *A Concise History of Baptist in England in 1838* [1855]). J. M. Carroll (1852–1931) and his *Trail of Blood* booklet (1931). “According to History... Baptists have an unbroken line of churches since Christ.”

### B. Anabaptist kinship view.

1. Position: early seventeenth century Baptists were influenced by continental Anabaptists.

2. Proponents: A. C. Underwood (1885–1948). Anabaptism forms “the spiritual soil from which all nonconformist sects have sprung” (*A History of the English Baptists* [1947], pp. 51–52). William R. Estep (1920–2000). “From the available evidence, it seems more than mere chance that the Separatist movement in England bore such a close resemblance to sixteenth-

century Anabaptism” (*The Anabaptist Story* [3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1996], p. 283).

### **C. Spiritual kinship view.**

1. Position: continuation of biblical teachings view; spiritual successionism. There is a continuity of Baptist concepts. In other words, there is no “trail of blood” but there is a discernable “trail of truth.”

2. Proponents: Thomas Armitage (1819–1896). It is possible “to follow certain truths through the ages,...down to their present conservators of this time, the Baptists” (*A History of the Baptists* [1886], pp. 8, 11). Henry C. Vedder (1853–1935). “A succession of the true faith may indeed be traced, in faint lines at times, but never entirely disappearing; but a succession of churches, substantially like those of our own faith and order in doctrine and polity—that is a will-o’-the-wisp, likely to lead the student into a morass of errors, a quagmire of unscholarly perversions of fact” (*A Short History of the Baptists* [1907], pp. 9–10).

### **D. British separatist view.**

1. Position: the Baptist denominations originated out of the Puritan Separatist Movement in seventeenth century England.

2. Proponents: Norman Maring (1914–1998). “The Particular Baptists, for all practical purposes, constituted the Baptist denomination in England and America, and their origin and development were clearly within the Congregationalist movement” (“Notes from Religious Journals,” *Foundations* 1 [July 1958]: 94). W. T. Whitley (1861–1947). “Baptists are to be sharply distinguished from the Anabaptists of the Continent,... Baptists moved in quite a different circle of thought” (*A History of the British Baptists* [1923], pp. 17–18). Winthrop S. Hudson (1911–2001). “Actually the Baptists and the Anabaptists represent two diverse and quite dissimilar Christian traditions” (“Baptists Were Not Anabaptists,” *Chronicle* 16 [October 1953]: 171–179). Hudson’s famous five points of Baptist/Anabaptist discontinuity have provided the principal frame of reference for debate:

- a. Early Baptists themselves repeatedly denied they were Anabaptists.
- b. Baptists firmly rejected the distinctive features of Anabaptist life.
- c. Practically all of the early Baptist leaders had been Separatists before they adopted Baptist views.
- d. Baptist views represent the logical conclusions of Separatism.
- e. After John Smyth’s defection to the Anabaptists, he was repudiated by a Baptist remnant who separated from him.

NOTE: It is important to realize that advocates of all these views recognize the authority of the NT to support their positions. Therefore, any discussion of their differences must center on hermeneutics and history. The first two views are similar in that they insist on a linear descent of Baptist churches and doctrine from historical antecedents. There must be some type of organic connection for Baptists to have legitimacy. For advocates of the first view, the church is exclusively a local assembly. When referring to a company of Christian believers, it never refers

to a universal, so-called invisible, church. A variation of the successionist view is quite popular today among many fundamental Baptists. It combines features of views one and two to affirm that Baptists are direct descendants of the Anabaptists who have always existed throughout Christian history. The third view has some validity in that apostolic doctrine has been preserved in the sacred Scriptures and is observable in various contexts throughout the centuries. Advocates of the fourth view take a different position on the church than those holding the other positions: the church is both universal and local. And based on this premise, together with facts drawn from historical evidence, it can be shown that Baptists indeed are Protestants.

## **II. Arguments Used to Buttress the Case for Baptist Churches Being Non-Protestant.**

### **A. Scriptural arguments.**

1. *Ekklesia*, whenever used in the Septuagint, in Greek society, or in the NT, always refers to a called out or gathered assembly for a specific meeting, and therefore must be local and visible. It cannot be invisible and universal, since there has never been a time in the history of the church (with the exception of the first church at Jerusalem) where all professing Christians have met together in one place. Southern Baptist theologian B. H. Carroll (1843–1914), after an inductive study of every use of *ekklesia* in the NT, concluded that of the 114 citations, “every instance...of the word means a gathering together—an assembly” (cited in Jimmy A. Millikin, “The Nature of the Church: Local or Universal?” in *Theology for Ministry: Issues in Church Polity* 1 [November 2006]: 66). *Ekklesia* must therefore refer to a locally gathered assembly whenever it is used in the New Testament.

2. In passages such as Matthew 16:18—“Upon this rock I will build my church,” and Ephesians 5:25—“Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her,” the usage is *generic*. For example, when speaking of the strength of the nation as the home, the school, and the church, these institutions are used generically as representing specific homes, schools, or churches. It would be like saying, “A dog is man’s best friend.” Dog would be used generically to refer to individual dogs.

3. To explain such passages as Ephesians 1:23 and Colossians 1:18, 24 the local church exclusivists state that the apostle is using metaphorical language. Based on the reference “you” in 1 Corinthians 12:27, the use of “body” is predicated on the local congregation.

4. When Christ states in Matthew 16:18 that the “gates of Hades will not overpower [the church],” he is referring to the local church. Since this church is local, gathered, and visible, it must always be in existence in this form. Furthermore, only a local assembly can fulfill the requirements of what constitutes a church—practicing the ordinances, having two offices, etc. Finally, according to the Landmarkists, it must be descended from the very first local church at Jerusalem for it to have validity. This requires an unbroken organic succession of Baptist churches throughout history.

### **B. Historical Arguments.**

1. Constantine was responsible for creating the state church in the fourth century. The concept of the visible institutional church was born. In the fifth century Augustine amended this view by advocating a two-fold church—one that is visible, formal, universal, sacramental and institutional; the other, invisible, elect, the truly redeemed of all ages. According to Augustine, this two-fold church is intrinsically holy, because created by Jesus Christ. Its viability is predicated on its ordination not its membership. This is a false view of the church.

2. If the Constantinian/Augustinian church is an unscriptural false church, then we must look elsewhere in history for the true church. We find it in the succession of “true” New Testament Baptist churches at enmity with the institutional state church. As a continuum of historical churches, they comprise a “trail of blood,” since most were persecuted by the institutional church. The tendency is to identify as Baptist any sectarian or nonconformist group holding to any of the so-called Baptist distinctives.

3. Evidence for the continuation of local Baptist churches is drawn from reports of “ana”baptist groups existing in various time periods. These groups have been identified by various names—Donatists, Novations, Bogomils, Paulicians, Albigenses, Waldenses, etc. These believers, in opposition to the institutional Roman Catholic Church, continued the organic succession of NT Baptist churches in fulfillment of Christ’s promise in Matthew 16:18. They may not have owned the name “Baptist,” but they were Baptists in principle and practice.

4. The Protestant Reformation has little to do with the existence of Baptist churches. The sixteenth century Anabaptists were simply continuing an existence which was known prior to the Reformation. Still part of the trail of blood, they were persecuted by both Catholics and Protestants. The successionists argue that these forebears of the Baptists could not be Protestants simply for the reason that they did not come out of the Roman Catholic Church, nor were they trying to reform it. They had an existence prior to it and therefore to Protestantism, and wished to remain separate from both.

5. Baptists are the successors to the Anabaptists and thus to the historical succession of Baptist churches traceable to the first church at Jerusalem.

### **III. Arguments Used to Support the Case for Baptists Being Protestants.**

#### **A. Scriptural Arguments.**

1. Those viewing the term *ekklesia* as reference solely to the local church misinterpret its usage in passages where it clearly refers to the universal body of believers. There are several NT passages where *church* (or its equivalent) is used in a universal or collective (rather than a local) sense: Matt 16:18; 1 Cor 12:13, 28; 15:9; Gal 1:13 (cf. Acts 26:10, 11); Eph 1:22, 23; 2:19; 3:10, 21; Phil 3:6; Heb 2:12; 3:6; 12:22–24. In reference to these texts, A. H. Strong writes, “The church of Christ, in its largest signification, is the whole company of regenerate persons in all times and ages, in heaven and on earth” (*Systematic Theology* [1907], p. 887). Strong defines the local church “as that smaller company of regenerate persons, who, in any given community,

unite themselves voluntarily together, in accordance with Christ's laws" (p. 890).

2. A word study approach to *ekklesia* relies on the premise that a term having a basic etymology must always have the same linguistic meaning in any passage. However, while language communication is univocal by nature (it can only mean one thing at any given time), a word meaning must be determined by the context in which it is used. This approach is based on authorial intent. Specifically, how did Christ intend to use the word *ekklesia* in Matthew 16:18? Inclusivists suggest that he meant to use it comprehensively of all believers everywhere subsequent to the founding of the church at Pentecost. Everyone who has ever been or will ever be a believer in Jesus Christ is included in "my church."

3. *Ekklesia* is not used generically in Matthew 16:18, but collectively. Southern Baptist theologian John L. Dagg (1794–1884), in his *Manual of Theology: Second Part. Treatise on Church Order* [1858], ch 3, carefully refutes the generic view of this and several other passages. Dagg states that if "church" is generic in Matthew 16:18, then so must "gates of hell" be generic. But this cannot be true since many local churches in history have been prevailed against (pp. 105–106). Dagg also treats those passages dealing with Paul's persecution of the church to show that the church he persecuted were the various saints. Paul "did not persecute the institution, either as the individual institution in Jerusalem, or as a genus, of which this individual institution served as a specimen and representative. But he persecuted the saints; and the term church denotes the saints in no other way than as a collective noun" (p. 107).

4. If such passages as 1 Corinthians 12 refer only to the local body of Christ (cf. v. 27) then how do we explain the fact that Paul includes himself in the body of Christ when writing to various local churches? See Romans 12:5—"So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another;" and Ephesians 5:30—"For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones." If we predicate a local church on the basis of "you" in 1 Corinthians 12:27, how do we do that with Paul's use of "we" in these other passages? He was not a member of the church at Corinth, or Ephesus, certainly not of Rome—he had never been there when he wrote that church! He was evidently a member of the Antioch church. The first person plural pronoun could only refer to an inclusive church greater than a local assembly.

5. When the church is designated as Christ's body in such passages as Ephesians 1:22–23, 2:16, it refers to the universal church. The metaphor of the body implies oneness not multiplicity of local bodies. Church = body and body in 2:16 refers to the reconciliation of both Jewish and Gentile believers into one household of God (2:19) a building fitly framed together, a holy temple indwelt by the Holy Spirit (2:21–22). All these metaphors suggest an inclusive universal church, not a local assembly per se.

6. Further evidence that *church* can be universal and refers to all redeemed individuals is that fact that not every local church, while visible, is necessarily regenerate. It can only be ideally so. However, Christ's body—the equivalent of the universal church—is composed of all true saints, throughout time, whether visible now on earth or invisible in heaven. The idea of an invisible church is something of a misnomer since all believers throughout history have existence.

7. A common criticism by the exclusivists is that the church cannot be universal since it is never assembled collectively on earth. True, but in the eschatological sense, all the redeemed will be gathered in heaven as the bride of Christ (Rev 19:7–9). The same requirements for membership in the body of Christ are not the same as the local assembly. To make them the same would imply that only one who practices believer’s baptism could be a Christian, while a Presbyterian or a Methodist could not be a Christian. This is tantamount to the false “Baptist Bride of Christ” view. But this does not mean that we accord the same measure of respect to a body of disorderly Christians as we would those whose beliefs and practices accord with the NT. Strong writes, “Bodies of Christians which refuse to accept these principles we may, in a somewhat loose and modified sense, call churches; but we cannot regard them as churches organized in all respects according to Christ’s laws, or as completely answering to the New Testament model of church organization” (*Systematic Theology*, p. 891).

8. All believers everywhere are members of the body of Christ (the universal church), but when they voluntarily organize into a local assembly, it does not necessarily follow that they are orderly. We have a common identity with all believers, but we do not have liberty to join a local assembly that is blatantly disorderly, i.e, it refuses to observe the law of Christ as revealed in the NT. In obeying the law of Christ, Baptists should be protesting any deviation from it, including a condemnation of those professing Christian groups whose apostasy from NT truth, such as the Roman Catholic Church, deserve censure. Baptists historically have called such deviant churches disorderly at best and have protested against them. Baptists have been protestants of the Protestants.

## **B. Historical Arguments.**

1. The church of Jesus Christ has always existed since its formation at Pentecost, but individual groups of believers cannot always be located easily in history especially during times of great religious apostasy, e.g., the Dark Ages (c. 500–1000 A.D.). The continuation of the church must be explained in terms of the perpetual existence of believers. This avoids the problem of trying to force some heretical groups of history into a Baptist mold.

2. The Second London Baptist Confession (1688) affirms both the universal and local aspects of the church in article 26, sections 1 and 2.

1. The catholic or universal church, which (with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace) may be called invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ, the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all. (Hebrews 12:23; Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:10, 22, 23; Ephesians 5:23, 27, 32)

2. All persons throughout the world, professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ according unto it, not destroying their own profession by any errors everting the foundation, or unholiness of conversation, are and may be called visible saints; and of such ought all particular congregations to be constituted. (1 Corinthians 1:2; Acts 11:26; Romans 1:7; Ephesians 1:20–22)

3. Anabaptists are simply those who have at one time or another before the actual 16th

century Anabaptist movement rejected an institutional baptism that failed to preserve the purity of a belief system they espoused. They would be “anabaptists” with a small “a,” if you please, such as the Novations and the Donatists. But in many respects they do not resemble true Baptists. In fact, any similarity between them and the Swiss Brethren is only coincidental. Attempting to draw a straight line between Baptists and these groups, including the 16th century Anabaptists, is more a matter of sentiment than reality. While some early Baptists may have been influenced by regional and continental Anabaptism, there is no evidence for historical continuity. Robert Torbet agrees: “With respect to the relationship between Anabaptists and Baptists, it is safe to say that the latter are the spiritual descendants of *some* of the former. *No historical continuity between the two groups can be proved.*” The Mennonite marks of a true Christian were generally adhered to by true Baptists, having their beginnings in mid-seventeenth England, but “the Mennonite principles of pacifism, nonparticipation in government, and unwillingness to take oaths provides a marked distinction between the two groups” (*A History of the Baptists* [1963], p. 29).

4. To say that Baptists were not Protestants because they did not come out of the Roman Catholic Church (since they were never a part of it) really begs the question of 17<sup>th</sup> century Baptist origins. Clearly, both General and Particular Baptists derive from British Puritanism, which was unquestionably a part of the Protestant Reformation.

5. To say that Baptists are not Protestants flies in the face of documented evidence to the contrary.

The *First London Baptist Confession* (1644) title page states that this was a confession of “churches which are commonly (though falsly) called Anabaptists.”

In the preface to the *First London Confession*, the Particular Baptists complained that they had been charged “with holding Free-will, Falling away from grace, [and] denying Originall sinne.... All which Charges wee disclaime as notoriously untrue.”

The General Baptist *Confession or Declaration of Faith* (1660) was “set forth by many of us, who are (falsely) called Ana-Baptists.”

In the preface to the *Second London Baptist Confession* (1677, 1688), we find comments regarding the reason for adopting the Presbyterian Westminster Confession:

...and finding no defect in this regard in that fixed on by the [Westminster] Assembly, and after them by those of the Congregational way [viz. The Savoy Declaration], we did readily conclude it best to retain the same order in our present Confession.... We did in like manner conclude it best to follow their example, in making use of the very same words with them both, in those articles (which are very many) wherein our faith and doctrine is the same with theirs. And this we did, the more abundantly to manifest our consent with both, in all the fundamental articles of the Christian religion, as also with many others whose orthodox confessions have been published to the World, on the behalf of the *protestants* in diverse nations and cities; and also to convince all that we have no itch to clog religion with new words, but to readily acquiesce in that form of sound words which hath been, in consent with the holy scriptures, used by others before us; hereby declaring before God, angels, and men, our hearty agreement with them, in the whole- some *protestant*

doctrine, which, with so clear evidence of scriptures they have asserted (*italics added for emphasis*).

6. John Smyth inaugurated the practice of believer's baptism among his Separatist followers in 1609. After repudiating his baptism and attempting to merge his church with the Waterlander Mennonite community, Thomas Helwys, John Murton, and their followers rejected Smyth and returned to England to found the first General Baptist church there in 1611.

7. In 1640 one group of Particular Baptists attempted to retrieve successionist baptism by sending one of its members from London to Holland. Thomas Crosby, son-in-law of Benjamin Keach and first historian among English Baptists, writes that not all of the early Particular Baptists were pleased; successionist baptism reminded them of Roman Catholics practicing uninterrupted successionism of the sacraments. "They affirmed therefore, and practiced accordingly, that after a general corruption of baptism, an unbaptized person might warrantably baptize, and so begin a reformation." According to Crosby, those opposing successionist baptism included John Spilsbury, one of the early founders of the Particular Baptist movement. Spilsbury taught that "where there is a beginning, some one must be first," not on the basis of successionism, but on the authority of the New Testament. He wrote, "There is no succession under the New Testament, but what is spiritually by faith and the Word of God" (see Leon McBeth, *Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*, pp. 46–47, 61, and William Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, pp. 143–44).

8. Add to these arguments the fact that there was almost an innumerable variety of Anabaptists in the sixteenth century alone—there were chiliasts, mystics, pantheists, anti-trinitarians, pacifists, communalists, and radical militants. Many believed in soul-sleep; all refused to hold civil office, to take oaths, or to bear arms. Even the more biblicist Swiss and German Brethren generally held to a semi-Pelagian view of sin and human nature and rejected the doctrine of forensic justification. Many based their practices on kingdom passages in the gospels instead of the epistles of Paul. In which of these ways do they resemble Baptists? Even today most Mennonites, Amish, and Hutterites hold no communion with Baptists living in the same countries.

## **Conclusion**

There are matters of doctrine and praxis that Baptists share with many groups. But such coincidence does not demand correspondence. Baptists have at least as much in common with Protestants as they do with Anabaptists. But that does not mean that they owe a debt to one over the other for the embrace of their distinctives. Their indebtedness is to the NT. It is a verifiable fact that Baptists have wished to locate their belief system in the NT, the whole NT, and nothing but the NT, to use the words of Francis Wayland (*Notes on the Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* [1857], pp. 85–86). It is unnecessary to presume a local church successionism to authenticate their existence. McBeth writes,

Even the briefest glance at early Baptist writings confirms that they sought to draw their teachings directly from Scripture. Other movements may have provided a framework for their understanding, but Baptists never consciously sought to pattern their teaching from these sources.



Instead, they consciously and conscientiously sought to draw every teaching and practice from Scripture. Perhaps [John] Shakespeare is too partisan, but he made his point when he wrote that one could wipe out all the religious groups of the seventeenth century, leave an open Bible, and “there would be Baptists tomorrow” (*Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*, p. 63).

It is an interesting observation that often accompanying an espousal of Baptist successionism is the argument that Calvinism is a great detriment to Baptists. This hostility toward Calvinism has undoubtedly predisposed exclusivists to disavow any connection with Protestantism. It is interesting to me that most historians who wish to identify Baptists with Anabaptists are usually Arminian of one type or another, such as the late William Estep. Their idea is that Calvinism has deprived Baptists of their evangelistic fervor. Yet just the opposite is true. Yes, hyper-Calvinism has undermined evangelism, but soteriologically-sound evangelical Calvinism has provided an enormous impetus to revival, missions, and church planting among Baptists. What has really hurt Baptists is the acceptance of Finneyite Pelagianism with its emphasis on new measures revivalism and man-centered evangelism. And what is truly ironic is that those fundamental Baptists who decry any form of Calvinism nevertheless reserve the highest praise for John Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Gilbert Tennent, Andrew Fuller, William Carey, Charles Spurgeon, Isaac Backus, Hezekiah Smith, John Gano, and scores of others like them. But what did they all have in common? They were five point Calvinists in addition to being fervent soul-winners!

### **Suggested Reading**

Dagg, J. L. *Manual of Theology. Second Part. A Treatise on Church Order*. Reprint of 1858 ed. Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1990. An early Southern Baptist theologian masterfully refutes the Landmarkist generic church view and discusses the universal church's connection to the local church.

Lumpkin, William L. *Baptist Confessions of Faith*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969. This is the standard reference work on the subject. The confessions it contains verify the early Baptist intention to be identified with Protestantism.

McGoldrick, James Edward. *Baptist Successionism: A Crucial Question in Baptist History*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000. This book refutes the organic successionist view and has an excellent bibliography of primary source materials and articles.

Whitsitt, William Heth. *A Question in Baptist History*. Reprint of 1896 ed. New York: Arno Press, 1980. In this work Whitsitt (1841–1911) challenges the popular Landmarkist view of strict successionism of Baptist origins by teaching the English Puritan Separatist view. This book was so controversial it resulted in the resignation of Whitsitt as president Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1899.