

THE REFORMATION IN LIGHT OF BAPTIST HISTORY

BY JAMES A. ALTER

How should Baptists view the Reformation? The simple answer is—*Biblically*. Our heavenly Father has promised to give us biblical sight. “*I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye.*”¹ We follow this guidance as the Holy Spirit of God guides us into all truth.² This truth is found in only one place, the changeless Word of God. “*Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.*”³ Abraham Booth (1734-1806), long time pastor of the Prescott Street Baptist Church verbalized the heart of the Baptist:

This divine book, this heavenly volume, I accept with humility and gratitude from the hand of my adored Creator, as a gift of inestimable value; and, considering it as the grand charter of my eternal salvation, I cannot but esteem it as my indispensable duty implicitly to submit to its sacred dictates, in every affair of religious concernment.⁴

¹ Psalm 32:8

² “*Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.*” (John 16:13)

³ John 17:17

⁴ Abraham Booth, *Posthumous Essays*, “A Confession of Faith, Delivered by Mr. Abraham Booth at his ordination over the church of Christ in Little Prescott Street, Goodmans Fields, February 16, 1769,” (London: W. Button, 1808), 94.

For the Bible-believer, any subject, approached and viewed through biblical lenses, becomes clearer. Emotion is removed from the decision making process. Un-biblical thought processes⁵ are cast down, unscriptural allegiances⁶ are renounced, and heretical endorsements,⁷ (intentional or unintentional) are confessed as sin, repented of and forsaken. We must remember that the Reformers remained Catholic in many key areas such as, infant baptism, unregenerate church membership, denial of individual soul liberty, the marriage of church and state, denied the autonomy of the local church and remained Catholic in too many other areas to here mention. The key problem with the Reformation becomes clear when we simply apply Scripture to our examination. The Catholic “Church” did not need to be reformed, it needed to be rejected! *“A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject; Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself.”*⁸

Another important consideration is the fact that Baptists are not Protestants. If Baptists are Protestants, Christ had no ecclesiastical expression or genuine gospel witness for 1300 years. If Baptists are Protestants, then the church, God’s chosen vehicle of expression in this age, traces its heritage through an institution that systematically killed millions of people who disagreed with its heresies. If Baptists are

⁵ II Corinthians 10:5 “Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;”

⁶ Romans 16:17 “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.”

⁷ Isaiah 5:20 “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!”

⁸ Titus 3:10-11

Protestants, then the Donatists, Waldensians, Albigenses, Paulicians, Cathari and others were simply heretics. If this is the case, we may in good conscience, discard distinctives such as a born-again church membership, autonomy of the local church, individual soul liberty, believer's baptism, and our non-sacramental view of the ordinances. If Baptists are Protestants, then let us proudly tear down the walls of ecclesiastical separation and join again our siblings from our mother, the "Holy Catholic Church". *But Baptists are not Protestants. We trace our distinct doctrines all the way back to the early church and the Apostles.*

*"Remove not the old landmark; and enter not into the fields of the fatherless:"*⁹ The old landmarks were property markers identifying the boundaries of family lands. In biblical times a man's reputation, wealth and standing in the community were based on his family's God-given land. For us as Bible-believing Baptists, our landmarks are not man-made institutions or regulations. Our old landmarks are the doctrines of the Word of the living God. When we remove these or diminish the significance of any one of them we enter into the fields of the fatherless, with no heritage to claim, no doctrinal authority on which to stand, and no model of a New Testament Church on which to base our ministries—anything goes.

One significant difficulty is encountered immediately as one enters into this discussion. Most of us, who were educated in fundamentalist institutions, were taught courses in "Church History" or "The History of Christianity". In most cases these courses were taught by godly men who had been taught the same material by a

⁹ Proverbs 23:10

previous generation. Rarely were the textbooks written by Baptists. Rarely were the doctrines discussed in these histories distinctively Baptist. Even more rarely were the individuals discussed, Baptist men. Consequently, we have adopted, (at least philosophically), a spiritual family tree *from which we were not descended* and we are almost completely ignorant of our own true and Christ-honoring heritage.

It is interesting to note, from a biblical perspective, that the historians, who wrote the books on the history of Christianity, seemed unaware of the fact that a *Christian* is one who has placed their faith

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and trust in Christ alone for the forgiveness of sin and eternal life.

The historians, who wrote on *Church* history, were not to be bothered with a clear definition

of what a church actually is. We end up with the history of “Christians” who were not born-again and the history of a “church” that was never a church. It is no wonder there is such confusion!

Thankfully, in the last ten years or so, this has begun to change. Many of our independent Baptist Colleges are now teaching Baptist History and Distinctives courses. I fear however that we have in some cases, simply placed our Baptist History alongside the former “Church History”—as if they are somehow compatible.

At this point an inevitable question arises, “Do you believe that God only used Baptists?” No, we do not believe that God has only used Baptists. God can use anyone He chooses to use. God used King Cyrus. “*For Jacob my servant’s sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee*

by thy name: I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me. I am the LORD, and there is none else, there is no God beside me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known me."¹⁰ So the answer is first, God can use anyone He chooses to use. Second, while He has worked through many of the Reformers, in spite of their error, there exists a group of people which He used before, during, and after the Reformation. The Reformers, if they had their way, would have exterminated these Baptist people from the face of the earth.

An example of this is Ulrich Zwingli. Hailed as a great reformer and godly man, Zwingli was in actuality a serial killer, a mass murderer of the highest order. Does this sound too strong? Consider this: in 1525 Zwingli was tired of the Baptists in Zurich. Balthazar Hubmaier became convinced of Baptist principles and was tortured by Zwingli on the rack, though they had been friends! J. Newton Brown records:

Hubmeyer published a tract, in which he complains of Zwingli and his followers: —that they had proceeded so far as at one time to throw into a dark and miserable tower, twenty persons, both men and pregnant women, widows and young females, and to pronounce the sentence upon them—that thenceforward they should see neither sun nor moon for the remainder of their lives, and be fed till their days were ended with bread and water. And that they should remain in the dark tower together, both the living and the dead, surrounded with filth and putrefaction, until not a single survivor of the whole remained. He tells us, farther, that some of these persons would refuse to take even a mouthful of bread for three days in succession that the rest might have the more to eat. "O God!" he writes, "what a hard, severe, cruel sentence upon pious Christian people, of whom no one could speak evil, only that they had received water baptism in obedience to the command of Christ!"¹¹

¹⁰ Isaiah 45:4-5 [Emphasis added].

¹¹ J. Newton Brown, *Memorials of Baptist Martyrs*, (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1854), 119-120.

How then should Baptists view the Reformation? In many cases, the way the Jews would view the Holocaust. It matters not to the martyr whether the martyr is Catholic or Protestant. One truly sad result of our failure to study Baptist history is the promotion and endorsement of these Baptist-*hating*, Protestant leaders. We hear often of Latimer and Ridley, Anglican priests who were burned to death by Bloody Mary. But what did Hugh Latimer think of the Baptists and how did he view their burning? Here is the answer in Latimer's own words:

The Anabaptists that were burnt here in divers towns in England as I have heard of credible men, I saw them not myself, went to their death, even intrepid, as ye will say, without any fear in the world, cheerfully. *Well, let them go* (Latimer, Sermons, I. 143).¹²

When confronted with this information fundamentalists sometimes respond, "Well they did a lot of good things too" and "they were willing to die for their faith". Let us examine these opinions in the light of Scripture. "*And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.*"¹³ What then is the biblical estimation of their work? It was profitless.

Bishop Nicholas Ridley presided in the trials of people charged with heresy, condemning many as heretics,¹⁴ knowing the result of this condemnation would be that the condemned would have his body tied to a post and burned as chunks of flesh fell into the flame until the "heretic" finally died. *Regardless of what else these men did, they have*

¹² Jasper Ridley, *Bloody Mary's Martyrs*, (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2001), 35.

¹³ I Corinthians 13:3

¹⁴ Ridley, 53.

*earned our censure, not our admiration or praise.*¹⁵

Another question is often asked, “Why are we arguing about little doctrinal points, when people are dying and going to hell?” Our answer, we believe that God’s work must be done God’s way, and when practiced, God’s way will ultimately produce more fruit—fruit that remains. God’s way is outlined quite succinctly in the Great Commission:

“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you:... Amen.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

The plan of God as outlined in the Great Commission includes: going, teaching all nations, then (and these next two steps are not optional) baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, followed by, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever the Lord commanded. Through written revelation we find that the God-ordained institution for the accomplishment of these purposes is the local, New Testament church, which by a simple reading of the Scriptures, will be a Baptist church. As Dr. Roy Thompson has said, “Only a Baptist church can fulfill the Great Commission!”

Francis Wayland was an influential Baptist pastor and educator in the nineteenth century. He made a statement that will help to clarify the issue at hand.

It is evident that all disciples of Christ must hold essentially the same belief respecting the character of God, the obligations and character of man, and the way of salvation through the merits and atonement of the Redeemer. But it is also evident that, holding these truths, men may adopt sentiments at practical variance with them. These sentiments, in the process of time, may encroach

¹⁵ Romans 16:17

upon and undermine the truth, so that it becomes more and more inoperative, until, at last, a church once spiritual and heavenly-minded becomes formal, ritual, and worldly.

Wayland clearly understood the dangerous encroachment of error. Many Baptists have, I believe, adopted sentiments that are at practical variance with our foundational beliefs. How does the acceptance of error happen? Here we will describe the road to error as having three lanes. The first lane is the severing of our Baptist people from their magnificent, God honoring heritage. Francis Wayland wrote,

I have, on several occasions, alluded to the fact that we have suffered loss, as Baptists, by following the examples of other denominations. It would almost seem to an observer that we were ashamed of our own peculiar sentiments, and took pleasure in testifying that between us and their sects there were no real points of difference. I think the points of difference are important, and that our whole history is, in the highest degree, honorable to us as a Christian sect. If any sect 'has occasion to glory, we more.' If any man among us does not feel a manly pride in the sentiments which have distinguished us, and in the manner in which we have maintained them, there must exist something peculiar either in his head or his heart.¹⁶

The second lane corresponds with the first. This lane on the road to the acceptance of error is the endorsement and even reverencing of men who held unbiblical views. The third lane is the failure of good men to teach God's people Baptist principles, and the failure of Baptist people to study and learn those Baptist principles. These are the distinctive principles which clearly define what a New Testament Church is and what it is not. This neglect robs our people of the ability to discern the doctrinal error of those we endorsed in the second lane.

Did any of the Reformers hold views at practical variance with the

¹⁶ Francis Wayland, *Notes on the Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches*, (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman & Co, 1857), 121-122.

clear teaching of Scripture? Are these the men that we should commend to our young preachers and church members as models of faithful ministry? How many of the Reformers fulfilled the great commission of Matthew 28:19-20? None. How many of these men established New Testament churches? None. Does it matter to God whether or not these men fulfilled the Great Commission or established New Testament churches? Yes. To illustrate the work of God in history we may cite the following men and their life experiences as illustrative of biblical ministry.

- Felix Manz
- Balthazar Hubmaier
- George Blaurock
- Conrad Grebel
- William Kiffin
- Hansard Knollys
- Benjamin Keach
- Edward Wightman

This is a small list of men, Baptists all, heroes of the faith, whose lives and testimonies would inspire and instruct God's people. They stood firm for right biblical principles and in many cases paid the ultimate price, yet most Baptists do not even know their names.

Pastor R. B. Ouellette often says, "Nearness is likeness" and we would agree. In promoting men who were not Baptists we water down the significance of our differences, the significance of our principles, and by extension, diminish the necessity of the sacrifices made by our forefathers. The study of Baptist history and principles is more than nostalgia; it is the record of ministry done according to biblical

conviction as opposed to societal or political expediency. Our study of and familiarity with Baptist history and doctrine sheds the light of the Word of God on the deeds of the Reformers.

We do not ignore the significant contributions made by many of these men, but first, these contributions must be viewed and judged according to their obedience or disobedience to the clear teaching of Scripture. Second, Baptist men, who, during the same time period, were ministering according to the plan of God and were used more mightily than the Reformers, have been forgotten. Jabez Lamar Monroe Curry wrote:

Let us, in charity but with absolute loyalty to God's word, point out what differentiates a Baptist church from Pedobaptist churches. To the law and the testimony. That must be accepted as true ecclesiastically which approaches most nearly to what was decreed by Christ, the Lawgiver, as the basis of the fellowship of his disciples. Christ ordained the means of the progress and perpetuity of his kingdom. What was right then is right now. There has been no new revelation nor change of methods. Disciples were to teach, or disciple, baptize believers, and keep commandments. If we have the constitution, the organization, the spirit, of New Testament or apostolical churches, all fears may be dismissed. Baptists differ fundamentally from Pedobaptists in practically adhering to the NEW TESTAMENT AS THE SUFFICIENT, THE EXCLUSIVE, AND THE ABSOLUTE 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 of personal inclination. The New Testament is not to be supplemented by tradition, nor the syllabus of popes, nor the decrees of councils and synods, nor by acts of civil government, nor by notions of personal convenience, nor by parental constraint. No Christian can take as obligatory upon his conscience the belief or practice of any person or family or church or nation, except as sustained by the word of God.¹⁷

¹⁷ J.L.M. Curry, *A Baptist Church Radically Different From Pedobaptist Churches*, (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1889), 2-3.

God has revealed clear truth to us in the pages of His Word as to what a church is, and by extension, what a church is not. When we promote men from history who had a distorted view of the church and many other doctrines *without warning*, we promote false doctrine and confuse our readers and hearers. We especially confuse our young preachers. We drill into them the importance of right division and discernment. We teach them the importance of biblical doctrine and then contradict this teaching by our endorsements.

As an example, consider the doctrine of the church as stated in the Augsburg Confession of Faith. The confession is printed in Phillip Schaff's *The Creeds of Christendom* and is also available on the internet. The Evangelical Lutheran Synod gives this introduction to the Confession on their website:

Philip Melanchthon prepared a text to be presented at the Diet of Augsburg, based on an earlier set of doctrinal articles prepared by Martin Luther and his colleagues in the city of Torgau. Melanchthon's draft was sent to Luther for his consideration and possible revision. After Luther's approval was obtained, Melanchthon prepared the final text. The German version of what became known as the Augsburg Confession was read on Saturday afternoon, June 25, 1530. The Augsburg Confession is the most succinct presentation of Lutheranism.¹⁸

In this document Luther and Melanchthon teach what they believe a church is and conversely what a church is not. The following articles are quoted directly from the Augsburg Confession. The phrases, "They teach" or "Also they teach", in the articles are intended to state what Lutherans believe and teach.

¹⁸ From <http://www.bookofconcord.org/augsburgconfession.html>

Article VII: Of the Church.

1] Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught *and the Sacraments are rightly administered.*

2] And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and 3] *the administration of the Sacraments.* Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike.

4] As Paul says: One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, etc. Eph. 4:5-6. [emphasis added]

The Lutherans are happy and proud to declare what they believe a true church is and what a true church is not. They are quick to identify how they are different from Baptists in the administration of their sacraments. They readily condemn our doctrine in the following article:

Article VIII: What the Church Is.

1] Although the Church properly is the congregation of saints and true believers, nevertheless, since in this life many hypocrites and evil persons are mingled therewith, it is lawful to use Sacraments administered by evil men, according to the saying of Christ: The Scribes and 2] the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat, etc. Matt. 23:2. Both the Sacraments and Word are effectual by reason of the institution and commandment of Christ, notwithstanding they be administered by evil men. 3] *They [Lutherans] condemn the Donatists, and such like, who denied it to be lawful to use the ministry of evil men in the Church, and who thought the ministry of evil men to be unprofitable and of none effect.*

Donatists were Baptist people of the fourth century who desired to choose their own pastors. They expected those pastors to be born-again and give evidence of that new birth by living holy lives. Augustine hated the Donatists and with his Roman cohorts had some thirty-thousand of them killed. Luther and Melanchthon, as reformed Catholics, agreed with Augustine concerning the Donatists. *Put simply, Augustine, Luther, and Melanchthon knew the difference between themselves and the Baptists and believed those differences significant*

enough to separate from us!

Dolton Robertson in our book, *Why Baptist?* wrote, “The New Testament church is marked by what it believes and what it does. When these essential principles are diluted in even the slightest sense, it is a step toward apostasy and irrelevance.”¹⁹ Ironically, Luther and Melancthon would have agreed with this statement as evidenced by their belief that a true church is defined by the gospel they preach and their administration of the sacraments. Of course, we as Baptists only have two ordinances and they are not sacraments, so apparently even according to the Lutheran Confession, one of us is not a true church. Curry accurately stated the Baptist position of the ordinances:

Baptists hold that Christ enjoined two ordinances, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and they seek to preserve them unchanged in number, order, mode, and significance. Baptism is the immersion in water of a believer into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This voluntary baptism, after an intelligent confession of faith in Christ, is prerequisite to the Lord’s Supper, in which the members of a church, by the use of bread and wine, commemorate together the dying love of Christ. The allusions to baptism in the Scriptures are of no significance if the act were not voluntary on the part of a disciple and by immersion. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper summarize the gospel through which we are saved, the death of Christ for our sins, his burial and resurrection. In these two ordinances we declare that the Lord made atonement for sin by his death; that his death is reckoned to the believer; that salvation is on the principle of substitution; and that the believer has died to sin and has risen again to newness of life through faith in Jesus Christ. Those who are baptized into Christ—and this involves necessarily antecedent faith and excludes involuntary and compulsory baptism—put on Christ, assume his uniform, assert allegiance and loyalty, and come under the most imperious obligations to separate from evil and live for him who bought them with his precious blood.

¹⁹ James Alter, Dolton Robertson, *Why Baptist? The Significance of Baptist Principles in an Ecumenical Age*, (Sidney, OH: Ancient Baptist Press, 2008), 163.

These ordinances in strictness are not sacraments, and are wholly inoperative without personal antecedent faith. If sacramental, and the meritorious means of salvation, the great doctrine of justification by faith is cut up by the roots.²⁰

We are constantly reminded of Luther's great stand on justification by faith. Just how strong was his stand? The following is the article on baptism from the Augsburg Confession. See if you can identify a difference in the biblical teaching of baptism and Martin Luther's view.

Article IX: Of Baptism.

Of Baptism ... that it is necessary to salvation, and that through Baptism is offered the grace of God, and that children are to be baptized who, being offered to God through Baptism are received into God's grace. They [the Lutherans] condemn the Anabaptists, who reject the baptism of children, and say that children are saved without Baptism.

Article X: Of the Lord's Supper.

Of the Supper of the Lord they teach that *the Body and Blood of Christ are truly present, and are distributed to those who eat the Supper of the Lord*; and they reject those that teach otherwise.

Augustine, Luther, and Melanchthon knew the difference between themselves and the Baptists and thought those differences significant enough to separate from us!

*"Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them."*²¹ Is there anything in the book of Romans about salvation by grace through faith alone? Does the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul give us any instruction in the doctrine of baptism? Is this clear teaching different than that of Luther and Melanchthon as

²⁰ Curry, 10-11.

²¹ Romans 16:17

stated in the Augsburg Confession? If it is, then we are commanded to mark them and avoid them, not hail them as great religious leaders!

Please, read carefully here. I know that no Bible-believing Baptist preacher would agree with Luther and Melancthon in the confession cited above. But I am sure that many of us have been told that Luther “rediscovered” the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone. As seen in *his* confession, this is not the case. We promote men like Martin Luther because these are the illustrations we were taught as young preachers. We then read protestant writers who are in agreement with the reformers and take our illustrations from these sources, all the while exalting men who lived in direct disobedience to God’s Word and who viciously persecuted our forbears. The simple fact of the matter is this, *there have been Baptist people preaching the pure, unadulterated gospel of Jesus Christ since He established the church and sent the Holy Spirit.* The study of Baptist history and principles is not secondary to the work of the Lord! God’s work must be done God’s way, for His glory alone.

