

Who were the Baptists?

IF the early Baptists were clear about any one thing, they were clear in their insistence that they were not to be confused with the Anabaptists. In 1608, the year in which John Smyth adopted the principle of Believer's Baptism, a former minister of an English congregation in Amsterdam reported that Smyth and his little company of Baptists "complained against the term *Ana-baptist* as a name of *reproach* unjustly cast upon them."¹ For over a century, this was a repetitive refrain in Baptist confessions and writings. Thus the General Baptists in their Confession of 1611 listed various Anabaptist doctrines as errors, and in 1660 issued a summary of their beliefs under the heading: "A Brief Confession or Declaration of Faith, set forth by many of us who are (falsely) called Ana-Baptists."² In similar vein, the Particular Baptist Confessions of 1644 and 1646 were entitled: "The Confession of Faith of those churches which are commonly (though falsely) called Anabaptists" and "A Confession of Faith of Seven Congregations . . . which are commonly (but unjustly) called Anabaptists."³ As late as 1777, Isaac Backus, in his *History of Baptists in New England*, complained of an act passed at Norwich, Connecticut, which required Baptists "to certify a conscientious belief at a point which they did not believe; namely, that they were Anabaptists, a name of reproach cast upon them by their persecutors."⁴ Thirty-five years earlier, Count Louis Zinzendorf, exploring the possibility of forming a federal union among the various churches of Pennsylvania, had made inquiries concerning the Baptists in the colony. "The Baptist Church," he reported, "has not proved its origin, but they have sufficiently shown that they have nothing in common with the Anabaptists."⁵

By the nineteenth century, this situation was reversed. It was now the Baptists themselves and not their opponents who sought to claim continuity with the Anabaptists. In the interest of positing an unbroken succession of Baptists from the first century to their own time, such men as G. H. Orchard (*A Concise History of Foreign Baptists*, 1838), David Benedict (*A General History of the Baptist Denomination*, 1848), J. M. Cramp (*Baptist History from the Foundation of the Christian Church*, 1868), and Thomas

¹ Henoeh Clapham, *Errors on the Right Hand* (1608); quoted by Thomas Crosby, *History of English Baptists*, I, 89.

² W. J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 92 f.

³ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁴ *A History of New England with Particular Reference to the Baptists*, II, 96.

⁵ J. J. Sessler, *Communal Pietism Among Early American Moravians*, 56.

Armitage (*A History of the Baptists*, 1886) claimed the Anabaptists for the Baptist fold.⁶ In this they were but following the lead which had been provided by Thomas Crosby (*History of English Baptists*, 1738-40). Crosby appears to have been the first Baptist historian to fall victim to the temptation to demonstrate the existence of a Baptist witness from the time of the apostles to his own day. Thus he was led to suggest that the Baptists stood in a line of succession with at least some of the more moderate of the Anabaptist groups. Crosby was not particularly successful in eliminating material which contradicted his thesis, but he did succeed in blurring to a considerable extent the very great differences in spirit, outlook, and theology which characterised the two groups. A century later, when the former sturdy Calvinism (whether in its Arminian or its more orthodox form) of the Baptists had been replaced by a vague evangelicalism so that Baptists were no longer well equipped to make careful theological distinctions, Crosby's hesitant identification of Baptists and Anabaptists was accepted and elaborated with scarcely a reservation, and it became a standard feature of Baptist apologetics.

It was not until the twentieth century that Baptist historians began to point out the weaknesses involved in this reconstruction of the Baptist past and to emphasise that the evidence that the Baptists are not to be confused or identified with the Anabaptists is quite overwhelming.

BAPTISTS NOT ANABAPTISTS

First of all, the distinction between the Baptists and the Anabaptists is made evident not only by the protestations of the early Baptists but also by their firm rejection of the distinctive features of Anabaptist life and thought—the Anabaptist opposition to civil magistracy, the holding of public office, military service, oaths, and going to court, as well as the peculiar theological doctrines which were characteristic of many of the Anabaptists. Far from deriving their theology from the humanists of the Northern Renaissance as was largely true of the Anabaptists, the Baptists would seem to have been children of the Reformation and stood clearly within the Calvinist tradition. This fact is sufficiently apparent in all the early confessions, but it is made explicit by the action of the Particular Baptists in 1677—following the lead of the Congregationalists—in adopting with only slight modifications, as a statement of their own theological views, the Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith. It was this slightly altered

⁶ An alternative hypothesis had been set forth by Joseph Ivimey (*A History of the English Baptists*, 1811), who regarded the Baptist Movement as truly indigenous to England and who sought to trace its ancestry back through the various forms of English medieval dissent.

Westminster Confession which became, with the addition of two articles dealing with the singing of Psalms and the laying on of hands, the Philadelphia Confession of the American Baptists. While the General Baptists did not reproduce the Westminster Confession, the so-called "Orthodox Creed" which they adopted in 1679 was scarcely less Calvinistic. The articles dealing with the church should alone be sufficient to banish all questions as to the particular tradition in which these Arminian Baptists stood.⁷ Equally important evidence of the general theological orientation of the Baptists is Benjamin Keach's Catechism which was basically a modification of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, altered to correspond to a Congregational doctrine of the church and the Baptist doctrine of Believer's Baptism.

The fact that the Baptists are to be identified with the English Congregationalists rather than with the Anabaptists is made evident, in the second place, by the fact that practically all of the early Baptists had been Congregationalists before they became Baptists. They were participating in the general leftward "spiritual pilgrimage" which characterised the Puritan movement of the time as men sought to follow out consistently their theological presuppositions.⁸ Occasionally entire congregations followed the same leftward progression, shifting as a body from a Congregationalist to a Baptist position. Some of these congregations became stabilised at a half-way point, possessing a mixed membership of both those who had adopted Believer's Baptism and those who still held to Infant Baptism, thus illustrating in concrete, visible, institutional form the general identity of the two groups. During the Commonwealth Period, the sense of solidarity which existed between the Congregationalists and the Baptists found further expression in the enthusiasm with which they both participated in the so-called Independent party and in the affairs of the

⁷ "There is one holy catholic church, consisting of or made up of the whole number of the elect . . . which church is gathered by special grace and the powerful and internal work of the Spirit; and are effectually united unto Christ, their head, and can never fall away . . . We believe the visible church of Christ on earth is made up of several distinct congregations, which make up that one catholic church or mystical body of Christ. And the marks by which she is known are these, *viz.*: Where the word of God is rightly preached and the sacraments are truly administered according to Christ's institution and the practice of the primitive church; having discipline and government duly executed by ministers or pastors of God's appointing and the church's election, that is a truly constituted church; to which church and not elsewhere all persons that seek for eternal life should gladly join themselves." McGlothlin, *op. cit.*, 127, 133, 145 f.

⁸ James F. Maclear, "The Making of the Lay Tradition" (*Journal of Religion*, April, 1953, pp. 113-36) is "must" reading for anyone who would understand the "spiritual pilgrimage" and the lay movement in English Puritanism, out of which the Baptists emerged as a distinct group.

Army, and members of both groups joined hands in a sturdy defence of "the good old cause" of religious toleration.

It should be noted, in the third place, that Anabaptist influence is not necessary as a hypothesis to account for the adoption of Believer's Baptism by the Baptists. Quite the contrary! The problem is to explain why Protestantism as a whole rejected Believer's Baptism. Infant Baptism could be defended on Biblical grounds only by an appeal to the silence of the Scriptures on the subject, and the early Reformers experienced great difficulty in defending the practice on the basis of their theological presuppositions. Luther was driven to posit faith in the newborn child, and Calvin adopted the dubious expedient of regarding the faith of the church as an adequate substitute for the faith of the child. The compulsion under which the Reformers were labouring, of course, was the compulsion to preserve the notion of an inclusive Christian community which embraced the total population.⁹ When this ideal was surrendered by the early English Congregationalists, the problem presented by the continued practice of Infant Baptism became exceedingly acute.

The pressure upon Congregationalists to move on to a more consistent Baptist position, as a consequence of their abandoning the concept of a parish church, is illustrated by the comment of a Presbyterian, Adam Stewart, at the time of the first significant growth of the Baptist movement.

The Anabaptists here in London, for the most part, agree with the Independents in all things, save only delaying of baptism till the time that the parties to be baptized be of age sufficient to give an account of their faith. . . . Sundry of the Independents hold them for very good men, as they declare to the people in their sermons. . . . Many of them also hold the Anabaptist's errors very tolerable, which is the cause so many daily fall away from Independency to Anabaptism, and that not without just cause. For, if the Independents stand to their own principles and hold no men to be members of Christ's church or visible Christians till they be able to give an account of their faith and the motion of grace that they feel, what need they to christen those that are not visible Christians?¹⁰

⁹ The logical consequence of Reformation teaching can be seen in the conclusions which have been reached by Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. Freed from the seeming necessity of defending a state-established church, Reformed churchmen have been moving in the direction of an essentially Baptist position. Their shift has been the result of the new freedom they have found in the contemporary situation to pursue the logical implications of Reformation doctrine. It cannot be attributed either to Anabaptist influence or to the influence of a closely reasoned Baptist apologetic.

¹⁰ Quoted in *The Covenanter Vindicated from Perjury* (London 1644), 10.

The question, of course, had been the subject of earnest discussion among the English Congregationalists several decades earlier, prior to the time when one of their number, John Smyth, took what would seem to be the logical and inevitable step of repudiating Infant Baptism. Smyth's fellow Congregationalists "had shirked the issue," states A. C. Underwood, "because they hesitated to identify themselves in any way with the despised Anabaptists." Smyth, however, "was not the kind of a man to be held back by such considerations, and he carried his congregation with him in his change of views." Reminding his fellow Congregationalists that in the New Testament only those who confessed their sins and their faith were baptized and that there was neither precept nor example in the New Testament for the baptizing of infants, Smyth defended his progression "from the profession of Puritanism to Brownism, and from Brownism to true Christian baptism."¹¹

The fact that the Baptists are not to be identified with the Anabaptists is made clear, in the fourth place, by Smyth's own career. After taking the decisive step of embracing what he called "true Christian Apostolic baptism," Smyth was immediately criticised for baptizing himself. He defended himself by insisting that God's grace cannot be bound to any outward "succession." One of his critics then asked Smyth why he had not gone to the Dutch Mennonites for his baptism instead of starting *de novo* by baptizing himself. This question, which directed Smyth's attention to the local Anabaptist communities, coincided with the negotiations into which he had now entered with Jan Munter—a local Mennonite—in order to secure from Munter a house of meeting for Smyth's new Baptist congregation. Smyth was still willing to defend the resort to baptizing oneself in case of necessity, but he admitted that such an expedient could not be defended "when there is a true church and ministers established, whence baptism may orderly be had."¹² As a consequence, he professed

¹¹ A. C. Underwood, *History of English Baptists*, 37.

¹² J. De Hoop Scheffer, *History of the Free Churchmen*, 147. It is important to remember that the members of Smyth's English congregation in Amsterdam were rather effectively isolated from the general population of that city by the language barrier. Even after what became the Baptist group had been in Amsterdam for three or four years, and after Smyth had made his break with them, discussions with the Mennonites had to be carried on in Latin. The problem this created was emphasized by Helwys. "We have been much grieved since our last conference with you (i.e. with the Mennonites over the Smyth defection), because we dishonoured the truth of God, much for the want of speech, in that we were not able to utter that poor measure of knowledge which God of his grace hath given us." *Ibid.*, 153. The Helwys group, because of the language problem, had not been able to present their arguments with sufficient persuasiveness to convince the Mennonites of their errors and thus had failed to win from

his willingness to examine the proposition that the Mennonite congregation to which Jan Munter belonged might constitute such a true church from which baptism might be had and which would therefore make his act in baptizing himself indefensible. Smyth concluded that this particular Mennonite group was a true church, and as a result he repudiated his own baptism and entered into negotiations with them, seeking to unite with them, and to receive baptism at their hands. The negotiations were lengthy and were never consummated before Smyth's death, for Smyth discovered that union with the Mennonites demanded extensive and crucial changes in his theological position—changes which he himself was quite willing to make.

The significant feature of these negotiations, however, is that they were repudiated by those of Smyth's congregation who were to return to England and to establish the first Baptist church on English soil. The parting with Smyth over the doctrinal issues was not without pain, but it was explicit and emphatic. This is evident enough in the words of Thomas Helwys :

What we would not have borne or done, how willingly had we given up all we have, nay more, dug out our eyes, sacrificed our lives, if we might have continued with good conscience to profit by his (Smyth's) teaching. God knows it! Do not men know it too? Does he himself not know it? Have we not disregarded ourselves, our wives and children, and all what is ours, in order to honor him? We own to have all reasons for doing so, because of the excellent gifts God of his grace has so overflowingly given him. All our love was still too poor and unworthy of him. Let, therefore, everyone and himself not think otherwise than that the loss of such a man we most sadly have taken and still do take to heart. *But he has denied the Lord's truth, he is fallen from grace, and though the fowler laid the snares, the knot was broken, and we are liberated.* God be praised and thanked.

Smyth were thereupon excommunicated by these members of his congregation who were to return to England, and they proclaimed themselves to be "the true church" and explicitly condemned as errors the Anabaptist doctrines which Smyth had embraced.¹³ The

them an acknowledgment of that knowledge which God of His grace had given Helwys and the small Baptist congregation. Thus God had been dishonoured. Two or three further attempts to convert the Anabaptists to Baptist views were to be made within the following thirty or forty years, but without success. This was the consistent motivation of the later approaches to the Mennonite groups.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 149. Pigott, Seamer, and Murton declared that the Smyth faction was "justly for their sins cast from us, and should be looked upon as heathen and publicans." *Ibid.*, 153. For the specific Anabaptist errors which Smyth had embraced, see McGlothlin, *op. cit.*, 92 f.

members of Smyth's congregation who continued to follow his leadership did not return to England and were absorbed by the Mennonites, disappearing as a separate historical movement.¹⁴

Lastly, the distinction between the Baptists and Anabaptists is made evident by the fact that, while many of the early adversaries of the Baptists did seek to discredit them by identifying them with the Anabaptists, the more temperate and judicious of their opponents recognised that such a charge was without foundation in fact. Thus Henoeh [Enoch] Clapham, in *Errors on the Right Hand* (1608), acknowledged that "they came out from the Brownists," being led to separate themselves "both from the established church and other Dissenters," because they had come to the conclusion that "the baptism both of the Church of England and of the Puritans was invalid." Richard Baxter, in his *Autobiography* (published posthumously in 1696), described the Baptists as "sober, godly people" who "differed from others but in the point of Infant Baptism [the Particular Baptists], or at most in the points of predestination, and free will, and perseverance [the General or Arminian Baptists]." Thirty-six years later, Daniel Neal, in his *History of the Puritans*, reported that in 1644 the Baptists were "strictly Calvinistical in the doctrinal part, and according to the independent [Congregational] discipline."¹⁵

The evidence that the Baptists are not to be confused or identified with the Anabaptists may be briefly summarised. For at least the first century of their existence, Baptists were firm in repudiating the suggestion that they had anything in common with the Anabaptists; they condemned the distinctive Anabaptist doctrines as errors; the Westminster Confession of Faith became the most widely accepted statement of their theological position and the Westminster Shorter Catechism was utilised for purposes of instruction. Practically all the early Baptists had been Congregationalists before they had become Baptists; some of their churches

¹⁴ William Bradford, a member of the Gainsborough-Scrooby group, writes of the Smyth congregation: "They afterwards falling into some errors in the Low Countries, there (for the most part) buried themselves and their names." *History of Plymouth Colony* (1912), I, 22. Elsewhere he reports that Smyth had been "drawn away by some of the Dutch Anabaptists." H. M. Dexter, *The True Story of John Smyth*, 9. An account of the absorption of the Smyth faction into the Mennonite group and of their disappearance as a separate historical movement is given by Scheffer, *op. cit.*, 163-68.

¹⁵ Crosby, *op. cit.*, I, iv., liii, 88 f. This is the point, of course, that Adam Stewart had made (see note 10), and William Erbury also emphasized it when he commented: ". . . the Independent or baptized churches (both is one)." G. F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience*, 120. In both the Preface and Appendix to the London Confession of 1688, the Baptists themselves emphasized that they differed from the Congregationalists only at the point of baptism.

embraced both Congregational and Baptist members indiscriminately; and the extensive and harmonious co-operation of the Baptists and Congregationalists during the Commonwealth Period reflected common concerns which sprang from a common faith. The insistence upon Believer's Baptism was a logical corollary drawn from the Reformation emphasis upon the necessity for an explicit faith and from the Congregational concept of a gathered church, as well as from the common storehouse of Biblical precept and example, rather than being the result of any supposed Anabaptist influence. Indeed, the fear of being thought Anabaptists was the greatest single factor which mitigated against the adoption of Believer's Baptism, and when John Smyth moved in the direction of the Anabaptists he was condemned and his leadership was repudiated by those who had previously arrived at a Baptist position.

PURITAN LEFT-WING

In spite of such conclusive evidence to the contrary and in spite of the best efforts of some of the ablest of Baptist historians, the identification of Baptists with Anabaptists still persists. What difference does it make? Why bother to insist that the distinction be kept clearly in mind? To confuse Baptists and Anabaptists obviously does violence to historical fact, but does it do any real harm? What is the point of making an issue of it?

The answer to this question is simply this: the identification of the Baptists with the Continental Anabaptists has obscured the fact that the Baptists constituted the left-wing of the Puritan movement. This, in turn, makes it almost impossible to understand the Baptist heritage and to clarify the theological considerations which led them to adopt certain patterns of worship and church life and which determined their attitude on a wide range of political and social issues. It is largely because of this basic confusion that it has been so difficult to recover a reasoned apologetic for the Baptist position and to deal creatively and constructively with new problems as they emerge. This is true whether the questions be of church polity, the recovery of meaningful patterns of corporate worship, the providing of structural support for a democratic society, or the effort to come to terms with the major issues of contemporary economic life. And it is especially true if unnecessary obstacles are not to be placed in the way of ecumenical discussions.

It is an unfortunate fact that our Baptist forefathers did not write on many subjects that are of crucial concern to us. It is an astonishing circumstance, for example, that they gave practically no attention to the doctrine of the church. Nor did they

discuss questions of worship and discipline and the authority of connectional bodies. Why should they? The answers to these questions had been hammered out by the Congregational divines of the churches to which they belonged. The major controversial question to which they directed their attention was the question of baptism. But this did not mean that their convictions were any less deep-seated or firmly held in those areas in which they felt no call to engage in controversy.

The identification of the Baptists with the Anabaptists not only has the unhappy consequence of diverting attention from those sources from which an understanding and an appreciation of the Baptist position can be gained; it actually serves to introduce a confusing element into the whole picture. It is confusing because, as we have suggested, the Baptists and the Anabaptists actually represent two diverse and quite dissimilar Christian traditions. The Baptists, arising within English Congregationalism, represented an essentially Calvinistic or Puritan understanding of the Christian faith; whereas the Anabaptists in the early years of the movement stemmed from the activity of a few university-trained humanists of the sixteenth century and represented the understanding of the Christian faith which was characteristic of the Northern Renaissance and which found its most eloquent spokesman in Erasmus.

Some of the differences between Baptists and Anabaptists, to be sure, were incidental and perhaps of little importance. Whether Christ did or did not receive his human flesh from Mary is a speculative question which may be of no decisive significance. There were other differences, however, of greater import and more serious consequence.

One of these was the Anabaptist repudiation of the doctrine of justification by faith and the insistence that men are saved by "cognition" or "knowledge" derived from the Scriptures. The Baptists, on the other hand, whether General or Particular, affirmed that men are saved by grace. The Anabaptist position, one might suggest, would seem to undercut the major basis for whatever humility Protestants have displayed and leave the door open to those pretensions by which the churches again and again have been corrupted.

Another significant difference was the Anabaptist rejection of the doctrine of original sin which all the Baptist Confessions, both General and Particular, affirm. Yet, as James Bryce pointed out in his *American Commonwealth*, it is precisely the understanding of the human situation implied in the doctrine of original sin which has been so determinative in the ecclesiastical and political construction of English-speaking people and which has created an

unyielding insistence upon the limitation of both ecclesiastical and political power.

In the third place, the Anabaptists—with their rejection of civil magistracy—emphasised separation from and indifference to the world, a point of view which destroyed the basis for any social Christianity addressing itself to the problems of this world and which has as its logical culmination an excessive preoccupation with the necessity of using “hooks” and “eyes” instead of “buttons.” The Baptists, in contrast to the Anabaptists, had a positive attitude toward the state and society, and joined with the other Puritan groups in making “a determined and varied attempt” to create a godly society.

Furthermore, the Anabaptists were Biblical literalists who constantly were confronted by the temptation to make an idol of “the written word,” whereas the Helwys Confession of 1611 in good Reformed style speaks of the Bible as “containing” the Word of God.

Finally, the interest in proving “succession” through the Anabaptists runs counter to a central Baptist conviction. When John Smyth began to develop scruples with regard to the importance of an outward succession in the administration of baptism, Thomas Helwys replied: “That the Lord thus restrained his Spirit, his Word and Ordinances as to make particular men lords over them or keepers of them? God forbid. This is contrary to the liberty of the Gospel, which is free for all men, at all times, and in all places.” To affirm the necessity of an outward succession, Baptists have believed, is tantamount to a return to Rome in which the Gospel itself is made dependent upon outward circumstance and external form.¹⁶

WINTHROP S. HUDSON.

¹⁶ McGlothlin, *op. cit.*, 37, 46, 86 f., 91, 99 f., 133 f., 176. Underwood, *op. cit.*, 39.

Seren Gomer, Spring, 1956 (Welsh Baptist quarterly journal) has articles on Richard Edwards, Llangloffan, the theology of church architecture, Welsh Baptist theological colleges, the 1955 Dr. Williams Lecture. Contributors include Rev. D. M. Himbury, Sir Ben Bowen Thomas and Rev. Ceiriog Rogers.