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Who were the Baptists?

A comment by Dr. Ernest A. Payne on Dr. Winthrop S. Hudson's article in our July issue.

Dr. Payne writes: I am sorry to find myself in disagreement with Dr. Winthrop Hudson, for I have much profited from his writings on the Free Church tradition, particularly in its American setting. His article on the early English Baptists in the last issue of the *Baptist Quarterly*, however, seems to me to be a singular attempt to survey a varied landscape with a telescope fixed firmly towards one part only of the terrain or else to an eye that is closed.

No responsible historian "confuses" or "identifies" the seventeenth-century Baptists with the continental Anabaptists of the sixteenth century. By implication Dr. Hudson appears to be denying all similarity or connection. This is, I am convinced, a misreading of history and would deprive the Baptists of one of the main clues to an understanding of their origin and development. Dr. Hudson bases his argument on four propositions: (1) the early Baptists repudiated the name Anabaptists; (2) they condemned "the (*sic*) distinctive Anabaptist doctrines and errors"; (3) the Westminster Confession became the most widely accepted theological statement of their position; (4) "practically all the early Baptists had been Congregationalists before they had become Baptists" and co-operated closely with Congregationalists during the Commonwealth period. He desires to draw a sharp distinction between the Anabaptists and the Baptists. He regards the former as stemming from "a few university trained humanists" of an Erasmian type, and the latter as an offshoot of English Calvinistic Puritanism in its Congregational form. Only by a very selective process, so I believe, can these positions be maintained.

1. The Anabaptist movement on the continent was a much wider and more complex one than Dr. Hudson's brief characterisation suggests. It included the Swiss Brethren, the Hutterites, the followers of Melchior Hoffmann, the Mennonites and a number of other groups. Even if, with some historians, we call them stepchildren of the Reformation, their debt to Luther and Zwingli is clear. Their origin is not to be sought in Erasmus and the Northern Renaissance, as Dr. Hudson suggests, but in the main impulses of the Reformers' teaching carried further and without tarrying for any. Though they took the Bible as the norm of faith and life, they

were certainly not all "Biblical literalists." They differed, indeed, on a number of matters—on the use of the sword, on Christology and on eschatology. A basic document like Peter Rideman's Confession gives a very different picture from that suggested by Dr. Hudson in regard to original sin, saving faith and the grace of God. What was *common* to almost all the left-wing groups was a belief in a gathered church of believers, a repudiation of infant baptism and a claim for toleration and freedom of conscience. These were the distinctive ideas. The main historical problem is whether the English Separatist and Baptist movement was related in any way to the earlier developments on the continent. Basic similarity is obvious. Further particular similarities are so many that it is difficult to regard them as mere coincidences.

2. The origins of early English Separatism remain in considerable obscurity. Can it really have been accidental that the first gathered churches appeared in Kent and East Anglia where in the middle of the sixteenth century there were colonies of Dutch refugees, some of whom are known to have been Anabaptists? There is now no doubt that a number of English men and women accepted and suffered for Anabaptism in the time of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary. That many seventeenth-century Baptist churches grew out of the soil of Stuart Separatism or, as Dr. Hudson calls it, Congregationalism, is of course true. But that does not dispose of the likelihood that they and their predecessors had been influenced by the continental radicals. Ideas had legs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as they have today. Separatism itself, even if narrowed to an outgrowth of Puritanism, was treading a path similar to that trodden earlier by many in Germany and Switzerland.

3. Dr. Hudson plays down the influence on Smyth and Helwys of the Dutch Mennonites and pays little attention to the General Baptists. Indeed, he appears to suggest that almost all seventeenth-century Baptists were Calvinists and alike in their church polity. It was the General Baptists who were the earliest champions of the three distinctive ideas already noted: the church as a gathered fellowship, believers' baptism and freedom of conscience. Further, not only were many of them emphatically Arminian, but they included not a few who believed in the sleep of the soul after death; whose Christology was of a Hoffmanite kind; and who held other views which had been put forward on the continent two or three generations earlier. Commonwealth Baptists were a very varied and radical group. In their very diversity there are parallels to the earlier movement. That after the Restoration the main stream of Baptist life become more homogeneous and "respectable" is true. But the Baptist history of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as that of the earlier period, cannot be understood by ignoring its diverse heritage.

4. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the name "Anabaptist" had become one of abuse, wildly used and suggesting violence and antinomianism. The excesses to which some of the successors of the Swiss Brethren were driven by persecution in Holland, and the tragic episode of the Münster siege, resulted in widespread disgust and fear. That the early English Baptists were anxious to repudiate the name "Anabaptist" was natural. It was repudiated on the continent on theological as well as prudential grounds. Helwys and his fellows certainly adopted a more positive attitude to the civil authorities than did many of the continental radicals, though Hübmaier should be remembered. The English Baptists protested their loyalty to James I and Charles I. Later most of them approved what Cromwell did, though many become his critics when he was appointed Lord Protector. They endured the Stuart restoration, but hoped and sometimes intrigued for a change of government. When they declared—as they did repeatedly—that they were falsely called Anabaptists, various motives were at work. But this does not really touch the question whether the Baptist movement as a whole had any links with or dependence upon the earlier developments on the continent. The English Baptists stood, as did the continental radicals, for gathered churches, for the baptism of believers and for freedom of conscience.

5. I do not know the grounds on which Dr. Hudson makes the assertion that "practically all of the early Baptists had been Congregationalists before they became Baptists." Smith and Helwys, of course, had been leaders in the Gainsborough and Scrooby churches before they went to Holland. The earliest Particular Baptist churches originated as offshoots of the London church ministered to successively by Jacob, Lathrop and Jessey. As the Baptist movement spread, however, a surprising number of Baptist leaders, and no doubt the members of their congregations with them—appear to have moved over directly from the Church of England. But even if Dr. Hudson is right on this point—which I doubt—it does not prove that Baptists are merely an offshoot from the Congregationalists or that their history can be rightly understood without any reference to the left wing of the continental Reformation.

6. Dr. Hudson makes much of the adaptations of the Westminster Confession published by the Particular Baptists in 1677 and by the General Baptists in 1678. The common sufferings of Dissenters at this time have to be borne in mind, and the desire of Baptists to present a united front with Congregationalists and Presbyterians. There are significant differences in the three Confessions. The leaders of the General Baptists were anxious to repudiate Socinian tendencies and the views of Matthew Caffyn. But the latter was in Christology a Hoffmanite. Whence did he get his notions? The preface of the 1678 Confession goes so far as to state: "We are

sure that the denying of baptism is a less evil than to deny the Divinity or Humanity of Christ." But these Confessions are not evidence of the almost complete identity of Baptists and Congregationalists. To understand the full pattern of Baptist life and thought earlier Confessions have to be examined as well. The so-called "Orthodox Creed" of 1660, an important General Baptist document, does *not* state, as did the Westminster Confession, that "it is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of magistrate." It does contain a brave assertion that where the civil powers infringe conscience, God and not man must be obeyed. Even more important is the fact that the General Baptists, eighteen years later, in their adaptation of the Westminster Confession, placed a re-drafted and strengthened section on "Liberty of Conscience," immediately after that on the "Civil Magistrate." This more radical note is an essential element in the full Baptist tradition and it runs back directly, I believe, to far earlier pleas. Where did Helwys learn the things he set out in his *Mystery of Iniquity*? His references to Turks and Jews suggest a continental background.

The religious life of the seventeenth century was like a tumultuous sea, blown upon by winds from several directions. That one strong current of air came from the Anabaptist movement of the previous century I am convinced. Nor need Baptists be ashamed to admit it. I am no more interested than is Dr. Hudson in establishing a "succession" in any outward or exclusive sense. But to speak of "harm" and "unhappy consequences" if there is any recognition of a connection between Anabaptists and Baptists seems to me to be historically unsound. It also implies an unjust reflection on a very notable movement to which all the churches of the modern world owe a debt.