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The Birth of Baptist Churches

Puritan Recovery of the Great Pattern



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Baptists were birthed in the matrix of Puritanism, that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century movement of reform and renewal. The genesis of Puritanism between the 1560s and the 1580s was deeply intertwined with questions of worship and polity. In fact, Puritanism, in its various ecclesial manifestations, was confident that there was a blueprint for polity and worship in the New Testament. As we will see, these concerns were bequeathed to their Baptist offspring.

‘Apostolic Primitive Purity’

Baptists began their existence in the first half of the seventeenth century — the General (Arminian) Baptists emerging in the 1610s and the Particular (Calvinistic) Baptists appearing some 25 years later — with a passion for going back to the apostolic model that they believed was taught in the Scriptures.

One of the major architects of the Particular Baptist cause, William Kiffen (1616–1701), explained in 1681 why he became a Baptist in the late 1630s/early 1640s:

[I] concluded that the safest way [for me spiritually] was to follow the footsteps of the flock (namely that order laid down by Christ and his Apostles, and practised by the primitive Christians in their times) which I found to be that after conversion they were baptised, added to the church, and continued in the apostles' doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer; according to which I thought myself bound to be conformable.¹

In other words, Kiffen became a Baptist because he was convinced that believer's baptism and congregational church governance were indisputably part of the blueprint of New Testament polity.

Ten years later, Hercules Collins (d. 1702), a key Baptist leader in London, made the exact same point in a polemical piece on baptism when he stated that his intent was “to display this sacrament in its Apostolic primitive purity, free from the adulterations of men.”² In fact, he asserted, it would violate his conscience were he to baptize an infant.³

The Believer's 'Great Pattern'

Given the uniqueness of believer's baptism on the ecclesial scene of Stuart England — of the various church groups, only the Baptists restricted baptism to believers — it is not surprising that they had to defend the biblical legitimacy of their position time and again in this era. One scholar reckons the number of tracts and treatises written on this subject during the seventeenth century to be more than a hundred.⁴

One of the most popular of these tracts was John Norcott's (d. 1676) *Baptism Discovered Plainly & Faithfully, According to the Word of God* (1672). In the relatively small compass of 56 pages, Norcott's tract sets forth the standard seventeenth-century Baptist positions on the proper subjects of baptism (believers), the correct mode (immersion), and the meaning of baptism (primarily identification with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection).⁵ Among his arguments in favor of believer's baptism is his emphasis that in being baptized as believers, Christians are following the example of Christ, their “great pattern.”⁶

Hercules Collins maintained the same. He argued that “Christ was baptized about thirty years of age, as our example.”⁷ And at the close of the Stuart era, the Seventh-Day Baptist leader Joseph Stennett I (1663–1713) made the same argument in the following extract from one of his baptismal hymns:

Lord, thy own precept we obey,
In thy own footsteps tread,
We die, are bury'd, rise with Thee
From regions of the dead.⁸

For Baptists, Christ's baptism was the pattern that the believer, in being baptized, was following in obedience.

'Forced Worship Stinks'

Believer's baptism also became tied to religious liberty. In infant baptism, the child had no choice over what was transpiring. Some saw this as a symbol of an oppressive state church. Thus, its counterpart, the baptism of believers,

became a symbol of religious freedom.

Consider the testimony of Roger Williams (1603/4–83), who became a Puritan during his studies for the Anglican ministry at Cambridge and who, in 1630, sailed to Massachusetts. During the long voyage, Williams had time to do an intensive study of New Testament church polity and its relationship to governing authorities. He came to the conviction that the magistrate may not punish any sort of breach of the first table of the Ten Commandments, such as idolatry, Sabbath-breaking, false worship, and blasphemy. Moreover, he was certain that every individual should be free to follow his own convictions in religious matters, for, in his words, “forced worship stinks in the nostrils of God.”⁹

During the 1630s, Williams came into conflict with the Massachusetts authorities regarding his perspective on religious liberty. Within a couple of years, Williams and some like-minded friends were driven out of Massachusetts and founded the colony of Rhode Island. And though there is no indication that their disagreement with the Massachusetts authorities concerned believer’s baptism, they had adopted Baptist views, and the church they founded in Rhode Island became First Baptist Church in America. Believer’s baptism thus became tied to affirming religious liberty.

Recovering a Lost Pattern

Becoming Baptist in the seventeenth century was thus a radical act politically. Not that those who did become Baptist would necessarily have thought of the act primarily in those terms. For them, it was a step of obedience to Christ and a way of recovering a lost pattern of discipleship. Over the next century, Baptist commitment to this ordinance in its original design continued to distinguish the Baptists from other evangelical bodies in the British Isles. In fact, it was not until the twentieth century that one finds other Christian communities embracing the baptism of believers by immersion.

Those who underwent this rite in the decades following the era addressed in this small essay displayed a willingness to be marginalized in British society. In fact, pick up most recent studies of eighteenth-century British society, and there is nary a mention of the Baptists. Such studies convey the impression that the existence of this Christian community was little more than a blip on the radar of eighteenth-century history.

As the biblical record of divine activity in antiquity bears witness, however, such has often been the case. The God of our Baptist forebears delights in using those considered small and insignificant by the intellectual elites and in employing means, like the immersion of believers, regarded with utter disdain by the surrounding culture.

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1. William Kiffen, “To the Christian Reader,” in *A Sober Discourse of Right to Church-Communion* (London: Enoch Prosser, 1681), i–ii. His commitment to the Particular Baptist cause appears to have been sealed by a public debate with the Anglican apologist Daniel Featley (1582–1645) that was held on October 17, 1642, in Southwark. ↩
 2. Hercules Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven, and of Divine Institution. Infants-Baptism from Earth, and Human Invention* (London: 1691), 7. ↩
 3. Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 113. ↩

4. William H. Brackney, *The Baptists* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 57. ↩
5. John Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly & Faithfully, According to the Word of God*, ed. William Kiffen and Richard Claridge, 3rd ed. (London: 1694), 11–21. ↩
6. Norcott, *Baptism Discovered*, 3–7. ↩
7. Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 111. ↩
8. Joseph Stennett I, *Hymns Compos'd for the Celebration of the Holy Ordinance of Baptism* (London: J. Darby, 1712), 8 (hymn 5, stanzas 5–6). ↩
9. Cited in J. Stanley Lemons, *First: The First Baptist Church in America* (Providence, RI: The First Baptist Church in America, 2001), 5. ↩