

How the Reformation Has Shaped Our Baptist Identity

Introduction

All Protestant denominations claim that their key doctrines come from the NT and not from historical tradition. Baptists are not alone in making this claim. This is a key distinction of Protestants from Roman Catholics, who explicitly say that apostolic tradition, embedded in the councils and papal decrees, is of coordinate authority with the Bible (which, as you know, inevitably trumps the plain meaning of Scriptures).

Nevertheless, nearly all other denominations depend on some type of historical connectivity to validate the trustworthiness of their theology.

Lutherans, Anglicans, and Episcopalians teach an apostolic succession for their bishops so that they can trace their ordinations back to the early church. Not surprisingly, these denominations tend to view the early church as having very strong authority in how to interpret Scripture.

Reformed churches believe their historic creeds—Westminster, Heidelberg, the Belgic Confession, etc.—accurately express the historic consensus of sound theology. While these documents must be normed by Scripture, the final authority, they grant to these documents considerable authority over individual interpretations

Baptists approach church history very differently – island illustration.

Incidentally, this is one of the reasons I reject a “Trail-of-blood” view of Baptist history. Some believe Baptists can trace their history past the Reformation, through medieval groups, all the way back to the early church along a trail of persecution, so that Baptists are the “true Christians” in every age. Ironically, this is a very Catholic way of viewing church history. It appears to give Baptists legitimacy by arguing for our continuous history. Not only is this historically untrue (or, at least, it has massive gaps in evidence), but it is theologically unnecessary. Rather than bypassing the Reformation, as a squabble between Catholics and former Catholics, I believe a proper view of the Baptist denomination will recognize the massive role the Reformation had in shaping us as we are.

This is true both historically and theologically.

I. Historically, the Reformation shaped our Baptist identity

A. We have a history

1. To deny that Baptists *require* historic connectivity to be valid is not to deny that Baptists *have* a history that connects us to the major traditions of the church. Baptists did not invent anything that

we believe. Not only do we find all our key beliefs in the NT, but various believers throughout church history have shared these beliefs with us.

2. We are not like Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses who not only contradict the Bible at numerous points but also have teachings totally at odds with the entire Christian tradition.

B. We are separatists

1. In particular, Baptists have always believed that churches are made up of regenerate individuals who choose to affiliate with them (people are not born into church; they are born again so that they can be a part of a church).
2. Baptists have always believed that these voluntary associations, churches, should be free to follow Christ as they see fit, apart from governmental or denominational control.
3. So Baptists have always found their identity outside the establishment. They are not alone in this.
4. From Theodosius in the 4th century on, there have always been state-churches that expected universal attendance and conformity. Not surprisingly, various groups have repudiated this established church concept: e.g., Montanists and Donatists in the early church; Paulicians and Bogomils in the Dark Ages; Waldensians, Petrobrussians, and Albensians in the Middle Ages; Anabaptists and Quakers in modern times.
5. Baptists share separatism, to one degree or another, with all of these groups. In particular, the Anabaptists of the 16th century, who came out of the Reformation (every Anabaptist leader was a Roman Catholic who got saved before moving to Anabaptist views), are very close cousins to the Baptists.

C. We are distinct

1. Nevertheless, careful analysis of all of these earlier groups will show that Baptists have as many differences from most of them as they do similarities. In most cases we know very little about the particular beliefs of these groups, but what we know is scant evidence that they would self-identify with the package of beliefs that make us Baptists today. Some of them—e.g., Montanists, Bogomils, Albigensians, Quakers—have teachings that strongly distinguish them from Baptists.
2. The group most like us was the Anabaptists who arose on the Continent of Europe (as opposed to the British Isles) beginning in

the 1520s. Today, the Mennonites, Hutterites, Amish, and German Brethren are descendants of the Anabaptists.

3. But a very strong case can be made that the earliest people called “Baptists” (the name was first used in the 17th century in England) did not come out of the Anabaptist movement. I can only summarize the argument:
 - a. The early Baptists repeatedly denied that they were Anabaptists. Of course, they may have simply be denying that they were re-baptizers (the meaning of Anabaptist), but the historical context of these denials suggests they were distancing themselves from the Anabaptists on the Continent.
 - b. Virtually every Baptist leader of the 17th century had been an English Separatist (think Mayflower Pilgrims) before he became a Baptist. Not a single one had been an Anabaptist.
 - c. These early Baptists rejected key aspects of Anabaptist teachings.
 - (1) All Anabaptists were thoroughly Arminian, i.e., they emphasized free will in salvation, including the possibility of falling from grace. Few Baptists were Arminian; the great majority were Calvinistic to one degree or another.
 - (2) Most Anabaptists were pacifists, rejecting all use of force. Few if any Baptists embraced pacifism.
 - (3) This was part of a larger repudiation of culture in Anabaptism. Anabaptists viewed the church as totally separate from the cultures in which it found itself. They said they were Christians and denied that they remained Swiss or German or Dutch. The early Baptists clamored to be recognized as fully Englishmen. They served in the army, held responsible posts in government (occasionally), and, in general, had a very different view of culture than the Continental Anabaptists.

Aside: When the Anabaptists repudiated culture, they inevitably formed their own communities. To regulate the life of these communities, governing power had to be posited in someone, and this power typically devolved on the elders. Thus, in their desire to avoid a state-church, they in effect erected mini state-churches throughout their communities. The result, as is commonly recognized by those who observe strict Mennonite, Amish, or Hutterite communities, is that the evils of the state-church—nominal faith

and the confusion of religious and secular power—are replicated in these communities, only on a smaller scale.

The Baptist version of separation of church and state went in a much sounder direction. By urging participation in culture and constantly begging their cultures to accept them into full membership, they were able to keep their churches as purely spiritual bodies. One could be expelled from the church without being banned from the community; one could serve in the army or in local politics on the one hand while being a faithful and committed church member on the other. One could be a good Baptist and also a good Englishman, and that certainly seems to reflect the posture of the New Testament saints better than the new monasticism of the Anabaptist movement.

- d. Fourth, the beliefs of the early Baptists, rather than coming from Anabaptism, can be shown to be the logical outgrowth of English Separatism. I'll say more about that in the next section.
- e. Finally, when we come to look at the churches and pastors that first self-identified as Baptists, a clear pattern is evident. Almost every single 17th century Baptist pastor will follow this progression: he will be an Anglican (usually a minister); he will embrace Puritanism, hoping to purify the Anglican Church; he will despair of Puritanism and become a Separatist; he will recognize the inconsistency of the Separatist position and become a Baptist.

More could be said (much more), but a strong case can be made that the earliest people known as Baptists have philosophical and some theological relation to earlier separatist groups, like the Waldensians and Anabaptists, but historically they came out of English Puritanism.

II. Theologically, the Reformation shaped our Baptist identity

A. The Baptist Logic

1. The early Baptists were initially the General Baptists, whose founding church was in Amsterdam in 1609 under Pastor John Smyth, and the Particular Baptists, whose founding church was in London in 1638 under Pastor John Spilsbury. Both Smyth and Spilsbury followed this line of reasoning:
2. We pulled out of the Anglican Church because we finally realized that staying in the church and trying to purify it was wrong. Our allegiance is first to Christ, and, therefore, we cannot continue

compromising and hoping the government will make the changes we desire.

3. Our Separatist churches are based on the principle that churches should be voluntary societies of believers, not parishes based on political jurisdictions.
4. Why, then, are we still baptizing babies? We do not find infant baptism anywhere in the NT, and it doesn't make sense to baptize babies when they can neither believe nor unite with a NT church.
5. The final step is to have a true, biblical baptism of all of the members of the church; their sprinkling as babies was not a biblical baptism.
6. It is true that Anabaptists had arrived at similar conclusions in the previous centuries, but the process of getting there was quite different for the Anabaptist theologians from that of these Baptists. Smyth, Spilsbury, and many others were following the logic of separatism from the Anglican Church.

B. The Baptist Confessions

1. The two groups of Baptists were regarded by the Anglican authorities as revolutionaries, and many false charges were leveled against them. To respond, both groups produced confessions of faith that described what they believed.
2. The Particular Baptists produced the London Confession in 1644 and the Second London Confession of 1677/1689. The General Baptists published the Standard Confession in 1660 and the Orthodox Creed in 1678.
3. Seven Particular Baptist churches, all founded between 1638 and 1644 in London, produced the first London Confession, when they entitled, "The Confession of Faith, of those Churches which are commonly (though falsly) called ANABAPTISTS." In their preface they carefully distance themselves from the Anabaptists:

[Our detractors have charged us] with holding Free-will, Falling away from grace, denying Originall sinne, disclaiming of Magistracy, denying to assist them either in persons or purse in any of their lawfull Commands, ...: All which Charges wee disclaime as notoriously untrue.

The articles divide into three groups: 18 articles express basic Christian orthodoxy; 13 emphasize themes characteristic of

Reformed theology; and 22 delineate distinctive Baptist themes (especially relating to the doctrine of the church). The middle section, especially, shows thorough acquaintance with Calvin's *Institutes*. The whole confession is framed in categories developed by the Protestant reformers and would not look like it does without its Reformation context.

4. The Second London Confession, written in 1677 and published in 1689 after William and Mary came to the throne, is even more emphatically a Reformation document.
 - a. In 1646 the Puritans produced the Westminster Confession. Twelve years later the Congregationalists (who were like the Separatists but retained infant baptism) published the Savoy Declaration, which copies much of Westminster verbatim.
 - b. In the preface to Second London, the Baptists mention Westminster and Savoy and say they are going to follow the same procedure. Use Westminster as their starting point and simply modify it, "hereby declaring before God, angels, and men, our hearty agreement with them, in that wholesome protestant doctrine, which, with so clear evidence of scriptures they have asserted."
 - c. That's what they did. By my count ninety-one of the one hundred sixty-eight chapters in the confession are identical or very nearly identical to chapters found in Westminster, usually in precisely the same order. This is about 54% of the confession. Another 20% take a Westminster article and keep its basic import, but make modifications of one sort or another. The remaining 26% of the confession departs substantially from the Presbyterian document. As might be expected, the majority of these chapters relate to ecclesiology. The Baptist distinctives, as important as they are, constitute only one-fourth of their confession of faith, and, otherwise, they are comfortable taking the Presbyterian definitions and using them verbatim or occasionally modified somewhat. As I tell my students, the Second London Confession was simply the Westminster Confession baptized.
5. Surprisingly, the Standard Confession of the General Baptists also seeks to distance itself from the Anabaptists. They entitled their confession, "A Brief Confession or Declaration of Faith Set forth by many of us, who are (falsely) called Ana-Baptists, to inform all Men (in these days of scandal and reproach) of our innocent Belief

and Practise.” The confession, of course, affirms Arminian theology, but, interestingly, it does not utilize the categories of the Anabaptists or medieval groups. It uses the language developed in the Arminian-Calvinist controversies of earlier in the century.

6. This is even clearer in the Orthodox Creed, published by the General Baptists in 1678, a year after the Particulars wrote the Second London. They entitled it, “An Orthodox Creed, or a Protestant Confession of Faith, Being an Essay to Unite and Confirm All True Protestants in the Fundamental Articles of the Christian Religion, against the Errors and Heresies of Rome.” Unique among the Baptist confessions, The Orthodox Creed incorporates the Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds, signaling the framers’ desire to establish their continuity with the other great Reformation denominations. Another way this confession shows Reformation influence is its extensive use of “covenant” language to describe God’s interactions with man in eternity, in the Garden, and at the cross.
7. The bottom line is that 17th century Baptists, both of the Calvinistic and Arminian traditions, framed their theology in Reformation terms and showed undeniable dependence on Reformation developments. They did not view themselves as bypassing the Reformation and continuing medieval separatist traditions.

C. The Baptist Distinctives

1. What about the doctrines that distinguish Baptists from other Protestant denominations? Key Baptist distinctives include a regenerated church membership, congregational polity, soul liberty, separation of church and state, and, of course, believer’s baptism by immersion. Did the early Baptist theologians advance these doctrines because of the influence of medieval separatist groups, thus bypassing the Reformation?
2. The doctrines that best exemplify the Reformation are the absolute authority and sole sufficiency of Scripture, justification by faith alone, and the priesthood of every believer. The Baptist distinctives flow out of these great truths and are the logical and scriptural outworking of them.
3. Scripture
 - a. When one studies the Baptist theologians of the 17th century, he discovers constant appeal to the authority of Scripture and its sufficiency to establish all we believe. This was the claim, of course, of the mainline reformers. But Baptists believed that

Lutherans, the Reformed, and Anglicans allowed unbiblical practices into their churches.

- b. For instance, the General Baptists in their Standard Confession affirm believer's baptism by immersion and accuse the Pedobaptists of misusing Scripture:

And as for all such who preach not this Doctrine, but instead thereof, that Scriptureless thing of Sprinkling of Infants (*falsly called Baptisme*) whereby the pure *word of God is made of no effect*, and the new Testament-way of bringing in Members, into the Church by regeneration, cast out.

- c. Baptists saw their most distinctive contributions—believer's baptism by immersion, soul liberty, congregational polity—as firmly rooted in the authority of Scripture and its sole sufficiency. They took the Reformation emphasis on Scripture and extended it into every part of church life.
- 4. Justification by faith alone
 - a. Unlike the Anabaptists, who tended to emphasize the moral transformation involved in salvation (they loved James 2), the Baptists followed Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin in emphasizing forensic justification by faith alone.
 - b. Again, though, they took this doctrine further than the reformers. They believed this doctrine left no room for infant baptism. Because infants cannot exercise faith, they are neither justified nor regenerated and are thus not fit subjects for baptism. They thus expressly reject the baptismal regeneration of the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican churches, as well as the presumptive regeneration involved in baptizing babies in much of the 16th and 17th-century Reformed tradition.
 - 5. Priesthood of the believer
 - a. Of the Reformation emphases, the one that Baptists took its biblical conclusion the most was the priesthood of the believer.
 - b. The sacramentalism that continued from Rome into the mainline Protestant denominations necessitated a continuing clergy-laity distinction.
 - c. Granted, both Luther and Calvin wrote boldly of the sacred calling of every Christian and did much to counteract the Roman Catholic depreciation of the laity.

- d. Nevertheless, they entrusted the sacraments—the means of grace—and authority to rule local churches to the clergy.
- e. Baptists saw the implications of priesthood as far more sweeping. First London, for instance, rejects the notion that only ordained clergy can perform the ordinances:

The persons designed by Christ, to dispense this Ordinance [baptism], the Scriptures hold forth to be a preaching Disciple, it being no where tyed to a particular Church, Officer, or person extraordinarily sent, the Commission injoyning the administration, being given to them under no other consideration, but as considered Disciples.

- f. Similarly, the very next article in First London grants the entire church authority to excommunicate and expressly denies it to specific officers.
 - g. In short, Baptists saw congregational polity as a biblical inference from the priesthood of all believers.
6. The point of this last section, on the doctrines that distinguish Baptists, is to say that even here, where Baptists are least like their fellow Protestants, they viewed themselves as carrying Reformation principles to their biblical and logical ends. Far from denying they were Protestants, they viewed themselves as the most biblically consistent Protestants, or, if you will, as the most Protestant of the Protestants. Practically speaking, we are more Reformed than the Reformed.

Conclusion

Of course, Baptists don't ultimately need the Reformation. The most important thing is that we be biblical.

The point of today's lesson is that Baptists should be profoundly thankful for the revival God sent in the sixteenth century through mainline reformers like Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin and through Anabaptists like Grebel, Hubmaier, and Menno Simons. Apart from Scripture itself, nothing has been more influential in the development of Baptist faith and practice.