

# The Baptists

Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Christian Churches of America: Origins and Beliefs, Revised Edition*. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1976, pp. 110–119.

America's largest Protestant community, the Baptists, is characterized by a multitude of distinguishing features. There are more than 27 million adult baptized members of this denomination in the United States, in comparison to about 6 million elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Thirty-four percent of all American Protestants are affiliated with one of the twenty-three bodies comprising this family of churches, and over fifty percent of all church members enumerated by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S. are either Roman Catholics or Baptists. Moreover, the Baptist society was America's first convert faith, becoming the fastest growing religion in America at the end of the colonial period and remaining the largest Protestant denomination in the United States since the 1920s. Although this family of churches is known for its theological orthodoxy, it is also characterized by pluralism regarding historical roots and a number of basic doctrines.

Some Baptist historians contend that the historical roots of their faith stem directly back to the New Testament Church. They note that during the Middle Ages various Christian sects, such as Petrobrusians, the Paulicians, the Bogomils, and the Waldensians, taught principles that parallel modern Baptist beliefs, including the doctrine of believer's baptism.<sup>2</sup> Successionist historians have also advanced many theories regarding the manner in which Christ's church continued through the ages. Some have suggested that there was a chain of ordination preserving the authority which Christ conveyed to his apostles. Others have contended that the church was preserved by local groups who retained the essential principles or characteristics of New Testament Christianity, and that connecting links are not necessary.<sup>3</sup>

Most twentieth-century Baptist historians reject the successionist theories regarding a continuous history of the Baptist society from the first century to the present age. They assert that the successionists neglect or ignore basic differences in the beliefs of select medieval societies and of the modern Baptists; these significant differences, they aver, negate the possibility of a succession of the church. Moreover, many contemporary historians emphasize that

there is no apparent connecting link between the so-called medieval Baptist societies which existed during different eras nor is there a visible connection between these medieval groups and the Baptists of the modern world.<sup>4</sup>

Although most twentieth-century Baptist historians insist that there was a disruption of the early Christian church, they claim that Christ's church was renewed when men gathered and worshipped according to the New Testament pattern. Some historians speculate that the recovery occurred in the early sixteenth century with the emergence of the Anabaptists of Switzerland. After Conrad Grebel (a. 1490–1526) of Zurich failed to convince Huldreich Zwingli that the church and state should be separated and that the church should consist solely of regenerated Christians baptized after their conversion, a schism resulted and a new society was constituted, which spread into Germany, the Netherlands, and other parts of western Europe.

Other Baptist historians believe that the recovery emerged from the English Separatist movement. Modern Baptist history, some suggest, begins with John Smyth. Believing that the Church of England needed purification, Smyth became a Separatist and in the midst of increasing religious oppression joined others in a flight for freedom. This quest led many Separatists, including the Pilgrim fathers, to the Netherlands, where they secured temporary asylum in the first decade of the sixteenth century. While living in this new land, Smyth learned the tenets of the Mennonites or the Anabaptists (meaning "to rebaptize") and was converted to the principle of believer's baptism. Subsequently, Smyth prepared an articles of faith and promoted the transfer of English Separatists to an Anabaptist society. Because of his activities in the Netherlands, John Smyth has gained the reputation among some historians as the "founder of the modern Baptist churches."

Another English Separatist who was influenced by the Mennonites was Thomas Helwys. Refusing to embrace Smyth's program of reform and deciding not to remain in exile, Helwys returned to England and with the support of about ten ardent followers organized the first Baptist church in England just outside the walls of London in 1611 or 1612.

Although Smyth is credited with initiating the rise of the first English Baptist society in the Netherlands and Helwys is recognized as the founder of the first Baptist church in England, there is no historical evidence indicating that either of these leaders proclaimed that immersion was the only proper mode of baptism. Since they probably retained the

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<sup>1</sup> *The 1973 World Almanac and Book of Facts* (NY:Newspaper Enterprise Association, Inc., 1973), p. 342. Some Baptists do not classify themselves as Protestants.

<sup>2</sup> Edward H. Overby, *A Brief History of the Baptists* (Niles, IL: Independent Baptist Publications, 1962), pp. 45–61.

<sup>3</sup> Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1973), pp. 18–19; W. Morgan Patterson, "The Development of the Baptist Successionist Formula," *Foundations*, vol. 5 (October 1962), pp. 331, 335.

<sup>4</sup> Torbet, *History of the Baptists*, pp. 25–32.

Anabaptist principle of baptism by affusion or pouring, some modern historians claim that the recovery movement did not occur until about 1640 when Baptists of England adopted the principles of baptism by immersion. According to one group of Baptist historians, after the proper mode of baptism was coupled with other Baptist distinctions, the renewal of New Testament Christianity became a reality.

Another popular explanation of the origin of the Baptists is that their modern historical roots stem back to the Free Church movement, which includes the Anabaptist and Mennonite tradition on the Continent and the Separatist tradition of England. This Free Church movement was characterized by liberty of conscience in the sense that each congregation was to be independently governed by God's influence and was to be free from all outside political and cultural influences. Therefore, some historians suggest that the recovery occurred when the principle that a church should be disciplined solely from within was coupled with other distinguishing features of the Baptists. Since about 1640, these historians note, the distinctive Baptist beliefs have remained essentially the same.<sup>5</sup>

Baptist opinions concerning the American origin of the denomination also conflict. The most popular view is that America's first Baptist church was organized under the leadership of Roger Williams in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1639. Since these early Baptists refused to acknowledge the authority claimed by ministers of other faiths, they initiated baptism among themselves, authorizing certain of their number to administer this ordinance. According to one account, Ezekiel Holliman, a layman, first baptized Roger Williams, who in turn baptized Holliman and about ten others.<sup>6</sup>

Williams remained a Baptist for only a few months. Shortly after helping others organize a Baptist society, Williams left the movement. He doubted the validity of his own baptism because of an absence of a visible succession of authorized administrators. In a letter to John Winthrop in 1649, Williams argued that he believed the practice of believer's baptism by "dipping ... comes nearer the first practice of our great Founder Christ Jesus, than any other practices of religion ... and yet," he continued, "I have not satisfaction neither in the authority by which it is done, nor in the manner."<sup>7</sup> On another occasion Williams acknowledged that he was dissatisfied with the prevailing creeds and with the various Christian institutions of his age. He insisted that an apostasy had occurred and that there was a need for a restoration of the purity of the "Primitive Church."<sup>8</sup> Failing

to locate a church which, in his opinion, had received the necessary "special commission" to restore New Testament Christianity, Williams became a "seeker" (one searching for the truth but not afflicted [sic] with any church) and died before his vision of a restoration had been realized.<sup>9</sup>

A few historians contend that the first Baptist church was constituted in Newport in 1638 under the direction of Dr. John Clarke, but since the records which indicate its being a Baptist society only date back to about 1648, most members of this faith agree that the earliest Baptist society was constituted in Providence.<sup>10</sup>

Although the Baptist persuasion was one of the earliest Protestant traditions to be transplanted in the New World, for over one hundred years Baptist growth in this land was exceedingly slow. In 1660 there were only four Baptist congregations in the English colonies of North America; all were in Rhode Island, two in Providence and two in Newport. The number of societies increased gradually to about twenty-two in 1700 and 132 in 1750. Membership in this denomination, however, rose sharply after 1760 and by 1776 there were about 430 Baptist meetinghouses in the new nation with an estimated membership of about 22,000. By 1795 membership had soared to more than 76,600 with 1,089 churches and 915 ministers. By 1800 the Baptist faith had become the largest religious community in the United States and retained that position until the early 1820s. At that time, the Methodists replaced the Baptists as the number one religion, numerically speaking, in the early republic. The Baptists regained numerical leadership among the Protestant churches in the mid-1920s and since that decade have remained America's largest body of Protestants, ranking second, next to the Roman Catholics, among all the American denominations.<sup>11</sup>

The remarkable growth of the Baptist Church in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was primarily the result of the inauguration of America's first effective missionary program. Recognizing the problems created on the frontier environment, the Baptists determined to carry religion to the rural farmers of the continent. The deficiency

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<sup>9</sup> John Callender, *An Historical Discourse, on the Civil and Religious Affairs of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations* (Boston, 1739), reprinted in *Collections of the Rhode Island Historical Society* (Providence, 1838), vol. 4, pp. 109–11; John Winthrop, *History of New England*, James Kendall Hosmer, ed. (2 vols., NY: Barnes and Noble, 1946), vol. 1, p. 309.

<sup>10</sup> Torbet, *History of the Baptists*, p. 203.

<sup>11</sup> Edwin Scott Gaustad, *Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (NY: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 10–12, 52–53; Milton V. Backman, Jr., *American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1970), p. 277; John Asplund, *The Universal Annual Register of the Baptist Denomination ... for ... 1794 and 1795* (Hanover, 1796), p. 82.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 25–32.

<sup>6</sup> Reuben Aldridge Guild, "A Biographical Introduction to the Writings of Roger Williams," *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams* (NY: Russell and Russell, 1963), vol. 1, pp. 35–37.

<sup>7</sup> Roger Williams to John Winthrop, December 10, 1649, quoted in *Writings of Roger Williams*, vol. 6, pp. 187–89.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., vol. 5, p. 103.

in the number of ministers was partly resolved by the ordination of many lay members who claimed an internal call from God but who had not secured a college education. For most of these early Baptist elders, preaching was an avocation rather than a profession. These dedicated preachers did not rely on parish contributions for their support but earned their livelihood from farming. The log cabins and frame homes of these farm preachers served as temporary meetinghouses and also as bases of operation. Frequently these dedicated pioneers left their homes and preached enthusiastically in surrounding communities. One leader who received a meager compensation for his ecclesiastical labors served hundreds of rural farmers. As a result primarily of conversions, the Baptists grew rapidly in numbers, becoming America's first convert religion.

Although Baptists emphasize the autonomy of each congregation, most local societies have united for the purpose of fellowship, for the promotion of educational and missionary work, and for the advancement of other church-sponsored programs. These loosely related groups of independent churches are usually called associations or conventions and are organized on local, state, and national levels. Membership consists of clergy and lay representatives of the affiliated congregations. On the national level, professional secretaries and administrators are hired to transform policies accepted by the representatives into effective programs. Although these bodies prepare recommendations, they claim no authority to enforce their decisions. The only serious recourse toward a recalcitrant congregation is to dismiss them from the alliance.

Even though these associations have historically remained advisory bodies, some congregations refuse to join one of the Baptist alliances. A few members of this faith insist that such unions are unscriptural and infringe on the independence of the local congregation. Since these strictly independent churches are not affiliated with a national group, they generally do not issue reports of membership and are therefore not enumerated on most statistics of church membership in modern America.

In addition to directing a variety of humanitarian programs, many Baptist alliances in the United States promote doctrinal uniformity among their adherents. Some alliances have prepared articles of faith which serve as guides for framing beliefs of a local congregation. Since associations generally strive to preserve the historic faith, some bodies will not admit into their organization congregations that endorse patterns of belief that conflict with the association's declaration of faith. Moreover, in order to become a member of most Baptist societies, individuals must subscribe to a local covenant. Consequently, in contrast to most Protestant faiths with memberships of more than a few million, there is a striking harmony of belief concerning essential Christian doctrines among members of most Baptist conventions. There are, however, differences of belief among many members of different associations, and a few alliances

consist of many members known for their reinterpretation of the classical religion. Many members of the more liberal associations who do not adhere strictly to the traditional pattern of belief are not required to subscribe strictly to a local creed and share convictions popularized by various contemporary theologians.

The world's largest alliance of Baptists is the Southern Baptist Convention. Approximately 40 percent of all Baptists in the United States are affiliated with this national body; among whites they are the overwhelming body. Some members of this alliance, which is known for its theological orthodoxy, believe that theirs is the only true church and will not accept baptisms unless administered by ministers of this convention. Others do not take such a strict stand, but members of all congregations comprising this union of churches endorse a local "church covenant" that harmonizes with the national declaration of faith. Although most Baptists living in early nineteenth-century America endorsed the five points of Calvinism, currently most members, in and out of this alliance, endorse Arminianism, including man's free will to accept or reject faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Southern Baptist Convention was organized in 1845 after a series of controversies concerning slavery had precipitated a schism among American Baptists. After this alliance had been formed, the Southerners established a centralized organization for controlling various phases of their cooperative programs, such as foreign and home missionary societies. Previously, these programs were separate and independent organizations supported by different congregations. Prior to 1814, for example, at least sixty-five societies north of Philadelphia were raising money for domestic and foreign missions. The southerners decided that a national organization could more effectively direct missionary and other similar programs. Currently this convention is supporting home and foreign missions, hospitals, Sunday Schools, and many educational institutions.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a large percentage of the blacks in the United States have been affiliated with the Methodist and Baptist societies. Currently almost half of all blacks are members of a Christian church and four out of every five who are church members are Baptists. More than 8.5 million belong to one of three Baptist alliances: the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. (the largest Baptist black denomination), the National Baptist Convention of America, and the National Primitive Baptist Convention, Inc.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> W. W. Barnes, *The Southern Baptist Convention 1845–1953* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1854), pp. 18–33.

<sup>13</sup> Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970, p. 38; Edwin Scott

One other Baptist alliance, the American Baptist Churches in the USA, has a membership of more than 1 million. This denomination, predominantly located in the north, is known for its more liberal theological position, its endorsement of open communion, its more tolerant position concerning integration, and its emphasis on Christian unity. Its ecumenical activities include membership in the National Council of Churches. It has also framed various recommendations suggesting that Baptist groups and other denominations, such as the Disciples of Christ and the Church of the Brethren, unite under a common bond of fellowship.

Although theological differences serve as a major factor in separating this religious community into many factions and even though some Baptists have become liberal, one of the distinguishing characteristics of the modern Baptist movement is that a high percentage of its members is earnestly striving to preserve the historic faith. In fact, of the American religious bodies (or groupings under general headings, such as Baptists, Methodists, and Lutherans) with memberships of more than 4 million, the Baptists would definitely be ranked as the most conservative body of American Christians.

One of the most significant contributions of the Baptists to the American heritage has been their emphasis on religious liberty and the separation of church and state; in the early nineteenth century members of this society witnessed a remarkable change in the religious climate of the new nation. By proclaiming the God-given, natural, and inalienable right of freedom of conscience, Baptists have played a significant role in advancing in this land the principle of religious liberty.

### **Distinguishing Beliefs**

The following six beliefs are often cited by Baptists as their most distinguishing doctrines or practices:

First, *believer's baptism by immersion* is the correct Christian baptism — the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is considered an act of obedience, symbolizing a believer's faith in Christ. Most orthodox Baptists will accept baptisms performed by other Baptist ministers. Some pastors of the Southern Baptist Convention, however, will only accept baptisms performed by ministers who belong to this alliance of churches. While most Baptists do not believe that baptism is necessary for salvation, they teach that faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is essential.

Second, *a regenerated church* is the doctrine that only converted souls who have been baptized by immersion are proper members of the church.

Third, *the Lord's Supper is a memorial* for Baptists, a symbolic act in which communicants testify that they remember the death of Jesus Christ. A Southern Baptist would add to this statement, "until he comes again."

Fourth, the Baptists hold for the *independence of each congregation*. The local congregation is an autonomous body and should operate through democratic processes under the direction of the Holy Spirit and the teachings of Jesus Christ. The church, they say, should not subordinate to the rule of any other religious body and is subject only to Christ, who stands at the head of each congregation.

Fifth, *separation of church and state* is insisted upon by Baptists.

Sixth, *religious liberty* is important to Baptists who assert that man is free under God in all matters of conscience and has the right to embrace or reject religion, to choose or change his faith, and to preach, teach, and worship publicly and privately, with due respect to the rights of others.

### **Miscellaneous Beliefs**

In harmony with the beliefs of most Protestants, Baptists also teach that the New Testament is the supreme authority for determining religious truth and is the inspired word of God. Moreover, they generally believe in the Trinity; the incarnation; that men are saved by the grace of God, manifest through faith; and in a priesthood of all believers. Orthodox and liberal members of this faith are divided, however, concerning doctrines relating to the virgin birth, the fall, the atonement, and life beyond the grave, but since most Baptists are conservative, members of this denomination generally endorse the classical Protestant view.

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Gaustad, *Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (NY: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 159.