

BAPTIST THEOLOGY IN THE NEW WORLD ORDER

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It is fitting that the various denominations should in this portentous era of change take stock of their resources and position and seek to relate themselves to the great world and its needs. No denomination of Christians has a monopoly of all the truth or of all the good things in the Kingdom of God. Most of them have put the emphasis upon certain elements of Christianity and have made their contribution to the world's life in this particular direction. It will be very profitable if all the denominations can survey the field at large as well as their own field.

Baptists have throughout their history occupied a unique position in the Christian world, and Baptists as a people feel themselves called of God to render a distinctive service to mankind. In Baptist theology there are, broadly speaking, two elements: First, that which is common to all the evangelical denominations; and second, that which is distinctive of the Baptists themselves.

It is not necessary for me to dwell here upon those elements of Baptist faith which are common to them and other bodies of evangelical Christians. The great central truths and doctrines of the Christian religion are now in mind, such as the following: God, the Trinity, the Incarnation, the deity of Christ, the Atonement, justification by faith, repentance, faith, heaven, and hell. All these are common to evangelical Christians generally, and it is not necessary for me to expound them in this connection. The purpose of the present article can be realized only if I discuss some of those things which distinguish Baptists from others. The particulars which will be named will vary in the degree of their distinctiveness. In some instances it will be a matter of emphasis and point of view; in others it will be a radical distinction of belief and of

the conception of Christianity itself. I name, therefore, a few of those distinctive elements which are involved in the Baptist view of the Christian religion:

1. I mention, first of all, the Baptist emphasis upon personality and personal responsibility. With Baptists this is vital and fundamental. Their assertion of the principle has been, through past generations, by way of expressing the meaning of the New Testament faith and against the practice of infant baptism and all forms of sacramental and sacerdotal Christianity. It has led Baptists to oppose the idea of vicarious faith in baptism on the part of the parent or sponsor for the child. It has led them to oppose the sacramental conception of grace, according to which a priest must administer the sacraments in order that grace may be conveyed. They have asserted the principle against episcopacies and sacerdotal Christianity because it lodges authority in the hands of a few and in large measure robs the individual of his personal rights.

2. A second distinctive teaching of Baptists pertains to the nature of saving faith. For the Baptist, faith is a personal relation to Christ, personal trust in Him; and such a faith, from their standpoint, is an absolutely essential condition of salvation. This conception of faith necessarily grows out of the Baptist conception of the direct relation of the soul to God. Baptists believe in the competency of the soul to act for itself in religion, so that all forms of proxy faith are excluded.

3. A third distinctive element in the Baptist view is that of a regenerate church membership. Baptists hold that no one has any right or place in a church of Jesus Christ save individuals regenerated by the grace of God upon condition of their personal faith in Christ.

Thus it will be seen that the Baptist conception of the church means that it must be a spiritual body, and that regeneration of the individual is a cardinal necessity in the constitution of a church of Christ. It will also be

seen that this principle of a spiritual church, coupled with the Baptist conception of personal responsibility, necessarily leads to a self-governing church in which every member exercises the franchise. Baptist churches have no authority over each other. No official of any description has any authority over a Baptist church or a group of Baptist churches. Each is an autonomous or self-governing body.

4. A fourth principle peculiar to the Baptists is that the ordinances are to be interpreted as symbols and not as sacraments. They believe it was a great error when baptism was converted into a sacrament and saving power attributed to it. They hold that the truth is symbolized in the ordinances, and that only as the participant discerns the truth thus symbolized is it of any spiritual value. It is truth, then, which the ordinances reflect in the regenerated and intelligent individual, and not saving grace, which is to be attributed to the ordinances.

The form of baptism, immersion, as held by Baptists, is insisted upon, not only because it is clearly taught in the New Testament, but because only an immersion of the body in water and an emergence of the body out of the water symbolizes the complete truth designed to be conveyed by this ordinance.

5. In the fifth place, the offices of a church, as held by Baptists, correspond to the character of the church itself as outlined above. There were two New Testament officers—pastors and deacons. These are not masters, but servants; they are not rulers, but guides; they are not officials clothed with authority, but teachers. They are simply first among equals, selected to perform certain duties because of their special fitness, and not because they exercise any authority. They are spiritual leaders.

6. A sixth element in the Baptist conception is that of religious freedom. In America this principle has become universal. Through the efforts of early Virginia and Rhode Island Baptists, our organic law now has this

principle incorporated in it. It has been exceedingly difficult for mankind in the older nations of Europe to grasp the meaning of this principle and ideal.

The Needs of the New World.

Having indicated thus some of the distinctive views of Baptists, I proceed to indicate the needs of the world into which we have come since the great war. These needs I can indicate by pointing out the defects of the culture and civilization which brought on the world war. It will be seen in each case that the Baptists are prepared in a very direct way to supply the need which confronts us.

1. First of all, the world has not appreciated the worth of human personality in the eyes of God. This has been the cardinal fault of the civilization of Europe. Personality has not come to its rights, either in the church or in the state or in economic life. At once the Baptist principle, emphasized throughout their history, of the freedom of the individual and personal responsibility, will meet this need. The Baptist conception of the individual will cure the old world defect.

2. A second defect of the old world has been the autocratic as opposed to the democratic view of the state. Here I need only point out the civilization of Germany and Russia. These autocratic states have been typical of the civilization which has collapsed. They are the direct result of the failure to appreciate the worth of the individual. Where the citizen is made a mere puppet of the civil power, personality can never come into its rights.

3. A third defect in the old civilization has been an unspiritual church membership. This has been due to the practice of infant baptism. Where proxy faith is exercised for the unconscious infant, and the form of religion is gone through with, the fruit in carnal and worldly church members is inevitable. It was also inevitable that the doctrine of regeneration would lose its appeal and that the church would become an unspiritual body.

From what has been said in the earlier part of this article, the remedy for this defect is self-evident. It is believers' baptism, a cardinal teaching of Baptists. Abolish infant baptism, emphasize the responsibility of the individual for personal faith, postpone baptism until the infant has grown to an age when it is capable of exercising personal faith, and at once the whole enterprise of the church is changed. Now the objective is to preach the gospel to the individual in such a way as to produce saving faith in Christ, with the resultant renewal of the heart by the new birth, and a change of character from the carnal to the spiritual. Certainly the Baptist view here is an absolute need of the modern world.

4. A fourth defect in the old civilization is a centralized church organization. Infant baptism logically goes with a state church, because an unregenerate church membership cannot have the spiritual motive which will lead to self-assertion against tyranny. Only an intense sense of loyalty to Christ will offset the domination of centralized churches. Authority takes the place of freedom, with the result that all the evils growing out of centralized or autocratic churches afflict society. It must be self-evident, therefore, that the Baptist conception of local church government is a direct antidote to the above evil.

5. A fifth evil of the old world is that its Christianity has been sacerdotal and sacramental. Priests have arisen wielding authority over the hearts and consciences of saints. The ordinances have been conceived of as magical agencies for conveying grace. They have ceased to be symbols, and have become sacraments. The inevitable result is that the priesthood has excessive power and influence and the laity become subservient. Here again the Baptist conception of the worth and the freedom of the individual meets the need.

6. A sixth defect of the old civilization has been the union of church and state. I need not dwell upon this.

It is familiar to all readers of history. The protestant church in Germany has been a state church. The Greek church in Russia has been a state church. The church has partaken of the autocracy of the state, and a thousand evils have arisen as a result.

There is but one means of counteracting this evil. That is a thoroughgoing adoption of the Baptist view of a free church in a free state.

7. In the seventh place, and finally, the cardinal defect of the older civilization has been the substitution of culture for salvation. The Germans converted the conception of culture into **kultur**, and Christianity became simply an element in the German **kultur**. The principle which guided and governed was evolution through resident forces. The chief agency employed was education. Thus the doctrines of regeneration, spiritual freedom, the worth of the individual, and all the other cardinal principles of the Christian religion sank into decay, and European civilization underwent an eclipse. The great war was the direct result of this conception of life.

It will be seen from the above brief outline that the Baptist conception of the Christian religion contains elements which in the highest degree are adapted to meet the needs of the modern world. A great responsibility and a great duty devolves upon Baptists to maintain these principles in their integrity, to maintain their loyalty and direct relation to Jesus Christ, and to propagate their faith to the ends of the earth.