

Baptists

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Part 1

In George Vandeman's book, "What I Like About ...", he describes the contributions the major denominations have made to the Protestant Reformation. Here is part of what he says about the Baptists.

Baptists were called by God to rescue two neglected truths—the truth about New Testament baptism, and the principle of religious liberty.

Do you realize that without our Baptists, America would probably not exist as a free nation? George Vancroft, the noted historian, observed: "Freedom of conscience, unlimited freedom of mind, was from the first the trophy of the Baptists." Our democracy, you see, was founded in the Baptist tradition of religious liberty.

Even before the days of Roger Williams, Baptists suffered much for freedom. There was born out of a complex and fascinating struggle among Protestants—a struggle for liberty of conscience.

It all started with the Anabaptist movement in sixteenth-century Europe. While Luther was pushing forward in Germany, Ulrich Zwingli launched the Swiss Reformation. Zwingli first heard the gospel while preparing for the priesthood. When called to the cathedral at Zurich in 1519, he determined to preach the good news. Spurning the prescribed sermon schedule, he opened the New Testament to his people.

Soon Zwingli met with stiff opposition. The city council, influenced by the church leaders, opposed his message of salvation by faith. Yet he kept right on preaching the truth which had set him free.

But by 1523 Zwingli started backing down. During a public debate, he showed his willingness to compromise. Zwingli imagined that if he toned down his reforms, he might be able to work within the system. He didn't want to alienate civic leaders. So he modified his message by seeking only a gradual reformation of church traditions.

Some of Zwingli's young students were disturbed by this. One of them, Konrad Grebel, protested that the Bible truth always demands immediate action—with or without the blessing of government. Grebel became disillusioned at his teacher's willingness to accommodate the politicians. He accused Zwingli of allowing the city council to exercise authority belonging only to the Bible.

Zwingli rejected Grebel's criticisms. Grebel then decided that truth must march onward even without the Reformer. With some friends, he organized home Bible study circles. Soon they rediscovered the New Testament truth about baptism.

Do you remember how the Lord Jesus was baptized? We read about it in Matthew 3:16: "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water."

Notice that Jesus went up out of the water after He was baptized. He had not been sprinkled or poured upon. He was submerged, immersed into the Jordan River. Believers in Christ are "buried with Him in baptism," says the apostle Paul. [Colossians 2:12]

Unfortunately, the church had lost sight of this important truth. For centuries the tradition of sprinkling infants had brought everyone into the church. Now Konrad Grebel in Switzerland proclaimed that Rome and the Reformers had all been mistaken.

As you can imagine, the Zurich council did not appreciate Grebel and his group. On January 21, 1525, they passed a law prohibiting home Bible fellowships. Despite the decree, Grebel and his friends continued studying together. They determined to reject not only Rome's traditions but also Zwingli's compromises.

To seal their commitment to Christ, Grebel and his friends baptized each other again. They formed a new Christian community known as the Anabaptists—meaning those baptized twice.

How did Martin Luther react to the Anabaptists? At first the German reformer defended the full freedom of conscience. He drew a sharp distinction between church and state. Listen to what he wrote:

“Over the soul God can and will allow no one to rule but Himself alone. Therefore, where the worldly government dares to give laws to the soul, it invades the reign of God, and only seduces and corrupts the soul. This we shall make so clear that our noblemen, princes, and bishops may see what fools they are if they will force people with their laws and commandments to believe this or that.”

Luther was right. Unfortunately, he came to reverse his views. What changed his mind?

It was a gradual process. During the Peasants' War, many Protestants were put to death by Catholic princes. Thousands perished on the field of battle. Luther saw the value of having government on his side instead of against him. After his teachings came to control northern Germany, Luther depended upon Protestant princes to protect the Reformation from Rome. Thus a Lutheran church-state relationship was formed.

Like Zwingli, Luther welcomed a favorable union of church and state. To them it was a matter of survival for the Reformation. But they failed to foresee the problems that always come from mixing religion and politics.

We have a similar situation in America today. Crusading to save our nation, earnest Christians are pressing hard to legislate morality. Their own interpretation of morality, of course. But those who have learned from the past reject religious handouts from government. They know that spiritual problems can't be solved by political action.

Notice what happened back in the sixteenth century. The Reformers had been outlawed by Rome; now they, in turn, outlawed the Anabaptists. Believe it or not, they even persecuted their fellow Christians. This is one of the most perplexing, regrettable chapters in church history.

First Zwingli urged his politician friends to crush the nonconformists. Anabaptists in Zurich were declared under the death penalty. Later, over in Germany, Luther's associate Melancthon argued that the Anabaptists should be put to death. Even their peaceful expression of faith disrupted the religious and civil order, Melancthon charged. He preached that their opposition to infant baptism would produce a heathen society. Therefore they ought to be exterminated to save the nation.

Such barbarity is hard for us to accept today. Evidently Protestant leaders themselves erred, sometimes seriously. Given the weakness of human nature, we should not find this surprising. Every spiritual awakening has been marred by misguided zealots. We see in the Scriptures that even the most faithful men of God often made serious mistakes. This was also true during the Reformation.

Anabaptists were taken from their homes and thrown into prison or cruelly slain. But their blood was as seed. And those Anabaptists who escaped the sword spread their faith throughout Europe. Some went to Norway, others to Italy, Poland, Holland, and England.

Holland became a special haven for Anabaptists as well as other religious refugees. A group of British Christians fled there from their fellow Protestants in the Church of England. The two groups, Anabaptists and English Separatists, enjoyed fellowship with each other. One British pastor, John Smyth, became completely convinced by Anabaptist teachings and was rebaptized. Modern Baptists consider Smyth a pioneer of their faith.

In 1609, Smyth's group returned to England and organized the first Baptist church there. In a few years, Baptists from England came to America with their heritage of democracy and freedom. Roger Williams was only one of many Baptists who led the colonies toward liberty.

James Madison, one of America's founding fathers, was won to religious liberty by the Baptists. As a boy in Virginia he heard a fearless Baptist minister, imprisoned for his faith, preaching from the window of his cell. That day young Madison dedicated his life to the fight for freedom of conscience. Tirelessly he toiled with Thomas Jefferson and others to secure the First Amendment in our Bill of Rights. It reads simply and majestically: "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Government, you see, must protect religion, but not promote it. Otherwise intolerance will surely raise its ugly head. History shows that whenever the religion of the majority is enforced upon society, persecution is always results. ...

Prophecies in the book of Revelation predict some unusual and distressing events in store for America. Could Puritan-style persecution arise here again?...

Thank God, we still enjoy religious liberty here today. How I appreciate our Baptists ancestors for bringing to America their heritage of freedom!

Now come with me back to seventeenth-century Holland. A group of Pilgrims has decided to start a colony in America. They are about to board the ship Speedwell, bound for the Mayflower. It's a time of excitement, but not without a sense of foreboding. They are leaving loved ones behind to cross the cold and unfamiliar Atlantic.

In this farewell hour, their beloved pastor John Robinson rises to speak. Listen to his words:

"Brethren, we are soon to part asunder, and the Lord only knows whether I will live to see your faces again. ... I charge you before God to follow me no farther than I have followed Christ. If God should reveal anything to you by any other instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as you have been to receive any truth from my ministry—for I am very confident that the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth from His holy Word. ...

"For my part, I cannot tell you how sad I am about the reformed churches. They will go no farther than the instruments of their reformation. The Lutherans cannot be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw ... And the Calvinists, you see, stick fast with where they were left by that great man of God ...

“Even though these Reformers were burning and shining lights in their time, yet they did not understand all the counsel of God. But, if they were living today, they would be as willing to accept further light as the light which they first received.”

What a message! In these noble words we hear the true spirit of the Reformation. Willingness to learn and grow. Eagerness to walk in neglected truth that we rediscover in God’s Word. Like Martin Luther at Wittenberg, Konrad Grebel in Zurich, Roger Williams at Providence. And, of course, the Methodist John Wesley in England. ...

Today there are no oceans we haven’t crossed, no more New Worlds left to discover. But new vistas of spiritual opportunity may be waiting around the corner.

Suppose God offers you new truth from His Word. Are you willing to take His hand and walk in the light? A wonderful experience awaits you! ¹

Of course, in addition to religious freedom, the other great Biblical truth Baptists discovered was baptism. We will talk about that right after this short musical break.

[Music – Honeytree: Clean Before My Lord]

Part 2

In the first segment of today’s broadcast we read an excerpt from the late George Vandeman’s book titled, “What I Like About ...” Specifically, we read a portion of the chapter about Baptists. The two things George liked about Baptists were their rediscovery of the Biblical truth about baptism, and their stand on religious liberty. Most of the chapter dealt with religious liberty. Baptism was only briefly mentioned. So, let’s devote the rest of this broadcast to a discussion of baptism.

As George said, it was Konrad Grebel who rediscovered Biblical baptism when he formed some home Bible study groups in Switzerland in the sixteenth century. Let’s do our own Bible study about baptism and see if we come to the same conclusions the Anabaptists did.

The Anabaptists no doubt read about the baptism of Jesus in Matthew chapter 3, Mark chapter 1, Luke chapter 3 and John chapter 1. All four writers thought it was important to tell the story near the beginning of their Gospel. Since they all say basically the same thing, it doesn’t really matter which one we read. Here’s Luke’s version.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, ... — during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

**“A voice of one calling in the desert,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.
Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.
And all mankind will see God’s salvation.”**

¹ George E. Vandeman, 1986, What I Like About--, Pacific Press Publishing Association, pages 25-31.

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

“What should we do then?” the crowd asked.

John answered, “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.”

Tax collectors also came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”

“Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.

Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”

He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them. (Luke 3:1-18)

It does not specifically say that John refused to baptize vipers; but the clear implication is that he would not baptize anyone until he “produced fruit in keeping with repentance.”

It does specifically say that it is insufficient to say, “We have Abraham as our father.” The Jews of that day were depending upon their relationship to save them. They were children of Abraham, which, in their minds, made them children of God, guaranteeing them salvation.

But God doesn’t save by groups—He saves on an individual basis. John’s message was, “every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” He did not say, “every tree that is descended from Abraham will be saved.” He did not say, “everyone I baptize will be saved.” Luke tells us that John “went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

The four Gospel writers make it perfectly clear that you have to have your sins forgiven to be saved, and you have to repent to have your sins forgiven, and repentance will shown by behavior.

Peter preached a sermon about baptism, recorded in Acts, chapter 2, verses 36 through 41.

“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

Peter saw the unrighteousness of his generation and “pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation,” telling them, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”

So, like John the Baptist, Peter connected baptism with repentance and forgiveness. Paul makes the same point, but adds one other element. See if you catch it in Romans 6, verses 1 through 4.

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

Paul associates baptism with Christ's death and resurrection. We die to sin, are buried in the water of baptism, and rise again so that “we too may live a new life.”

Paul makes a similar argument in 1 Corinthians 10, verses 1 through 13. This time he associates baptism with the passage through the Red Sea during the Exodus.

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.

Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: “The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry.” We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

Paul gave an abstract concept and then defined it using concrete examples. He began by telling the Corinthians, “our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink.” They weren't actually baptized in a cloud; nor were they baptized into Moses—they were baptized into Christ. That's why he explained what he meant with specific, literal examples. Let me try to tie his metaphor to his meaning.

During the Exodus, the Jews were “under the cloud.” That is, they were guided by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. That cloud and fire was Jesus in a pre-incarnate form. Jesus led them out of Egypt, through the water, into the Promised Land. Paul makes the figurative connection of Jesus leading us from our secular life in Egypt through the water of baptism into a new spiritual life.

When the Jews left secular Egypt, they became a new holy nation. They were all part of one group. That group rejected immorality and received the power to resist temptation. Paul's conclusion was, “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment

of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

In 1 Corinthians 12, verses 12 and 13, Paul makes the same point, somewhat more succinctly.

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Baptism is associated with membership in the body; but it doesn't stop there. Along with membership comes transformation. It isn't like joining the Auto Club. You don't just get roadside assistance and free maps. You become a different person. The old self is buried and a new self is raised in its place.

Finally, the Anabaptists must have read what Jesus said in Matthew 28, verses 18-10. This is the passage commonly referred to as, "The Great Commission."

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Again we see the concept of membership associated with a change in behavior. The disciples were to teach the new converts to obey everything Jesus commanded. So, that's what Paul did.

Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized. (Acts 18:7-8)

The Anabaptists studied all these verses, and must have made the connection between baptism, repentance, symbolic death and resurrection, resulting in a change in behavior and active membership in the group. They found this to be inconsistent with the practice of infant baptism by sprinkling.

What was their objection to infant baptism? Clearly a baby can't repent. It has no concept of sin, guilt, or a need of a savior. Furthermore, baptism by immersion symbolizes death to the old way of life and resurrection to a new life. That important visual symbol is lost when just a few drops of water are sprinkled on the infant.

Baptism is an opportunity for the sinner to go on public record, saying that he renounces his former life and intends to become a dedicated follower of God.

Infant baptism by sprinkling doesn't give the baby an opportunity to repent and express his faith in Jesus to raise him in newness of life. Sprinkling an individual will no concept of what is happening to him turns baptism into a magic ceremony. It makes it seem like the priest is saving the baby by saying a magic incantation and sprinkling holy water on the child. It goes back to the fundamental disagreement that the Protestant Reformation is based upon. Specifically, it is Jesus, not the Church, which saves. The Church is merely the instrument that brings an individual to Jesus; the Church is the instrument through which the redeemed sinners work; but the Church doesn't save anyone.

The founders of the Baptist church realized that baptism of infants is of no value because the infant isn't consciously involved. They returned to the Biblical procedure of baptizing adults by immersion the way

John the Baptist did, giving the sinner an opportunity to repent and have his old life buried in the water, and be raised to a new life in Christ.

Some Protestant denominations still retain the Catholic practice of infant baptism by sprinkling; but recognize the need for profession of faith, too. That's why they have a ceremony called "confirmation," in which young adults profess their desire to serve Christ.

If you weren't baptized by immersion, it certainly doesn't mean you aren't saved. One of the thieves on the cross next to Jesus wasn't baptized, but Jesus assured him that his profession of faith was accepted and his resurrection was assured. Had that thief had the opportunity, he no doubt would have been baptized by immersion.

If you realize that you have not been leading a life that Jesus would approve of, and sincerely want to live a new life controlled by the Holy Spirit, then you need to be baptized. Let Jesus wash your sins away.

[Music: Trace Adkins, "Muddy Water"]