

A Baptist Church

*Radically Different From
Pedobaptist Churches.*

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A BAPTIST CHURCH

RADICALLY DIFFERENT FROM PEDOBAPTIST CHURCHES.

BY J. L. M. CURRY, D. D.

No religious denomination has a moral right to a separate existence unless it differs essentially from others. Ecclesiastical differences ought always to spring from profound doctrinal differences. To divide Christians, except for reasons of gravest import, is criminal schism. Sects are justifiable only for matters of conscience growing out of clear scriptural precept or inevitable logical inference. Human speculation, tradition, authority of pope or council or synod or conference or legislature, is no proper basis for an organization of Christians. Nothing short of the truth of revelation, the authoritative force of God's word, rising above mere prejudice or passion or caprice, can justify a distinct church organization.

While Baptists rejoice that there are so many points of agreement betwixt themselves and other evangelical Christians, and are prompt to acknowledge the works of faith and the labors of love of their brethren, yet they hold peculiar and differentiating principles, that are of vital importance and enter essentially into the idea of a church, its organism, membership, ordinances, and doctrines. These differences are radical, growing out of God's revealed will; and the barriers of separation are neither few nor trivial. To suppose that we are kept apart from beloved brethren solely by our views on baptism and the Lord's Supper is a grievous misapprehension. Our differences, as we conceive, are broader and involve imperishable scriptural ideas and principles. The "wall of partition" is not built of water, much or little, of rites or robes or ceremonial. No sectarian bitterness or preference for isolation keeps us apart from those with whom we delight to co-operate in many spheres of Christian labor. The suggestion would not be uncharitable that sectarianism is responsible for diverse denominations which have a common origin, recognize one another's ordinances, and hold to infant baptism, infant membership, and other common practices.

Let us, in charity but with absolute loyalty to God's word, point out what differentiates a Baptist church from Pedobaptist churches. To the law and the testimony. That must be accepted as true ecclesiastically which approaches most nearly to what was decreed by Christ, the Lawgiver, as the basis of the fellowship of his disciples. Christ ordained the means of the progress and perpetuity of his kingdom. What was right then is right now. There has been no new revelation nor change of methods. Disciples were to teach, or disciple, baptize believers, and keep commandments. If we have the constitution, the organization, the spirit, of New Testament or apostolical churches, all fears may be dismissed.

Baptists differ fundamentally from Pedobaptists in *practically* adhering to the NEW TESTAMENT AS THE SUFFICIENT, THE EXCLUSIVE, AND THE ABSOLUTE RULE OF FAITH AND PRACTICE. The soul of Baptist churches is submission and conformity to the New Testament. Individual liberty is to be regulated by divine law. The end of revelation is the limit of moral and religious duty. Loyalty to Christ must in all things take precedence of personal inclination. The New Testament is not to be supplemented by tradition, nor the syllabus of popes, nor the decrees of councils and synods, nor by acts of civil government, nor by notions of personal convenience, nor by parental constraint. No Christian can take as obligatory upon his conscience the belief or practice of any person or family or church or nation, except as sustained by the word of God.

Romanists appeal to the “church” and its alleged right to reform and alter, and High-churchmen appeal to “the church” and tradition. The claim of infallibility set up for pope or a church, Baptists cannot concede. The Vatican Council declared the official utterances of the pope in matters of Christian faith and duty to be a divine oracle, and to be departed from on peril of salvation. In an Episcopal tract, No. 90, it is stated that, ‘in the sense in which it is commonly understood at this day, Scripture is not, on Anglican principles, the rule of faith.’ A dean of the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church, in his inaugural address, said, “Learn what the church teaches and obey what she commands.” Protestants generally, it is gladly confessed, make theoretically, and largely in practice, the word of God the foundation of their faith, but we maintain that only the Baptists can sustain their religious creed without resort to tradition, the authority of so-called Fathers, or the interpretation of what is vaguely and sometimes unscripturally called “the church.” Obviously, infant baptism and membership prelacy, sacramental salvation, sacerdotal functions, “extension of the incarnation” into the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper, and some other beliefs of Pedobaptist churches, can only be sustained by the *insufficiency* of the Scriptures as a rule of faith and practice. The real appeal is often to other writings or authority than the Bible. A patent doubting the right of infant baptism is rarely, if ever, referred to the New Testament as the sole and conclusive guide.* The church, or the practice of the parents, or learned theologians, or usage, or strained inference becomes the standard. The word of God is conclusive and binding, on every heart and conscience and no human power can release from the obligation. What was taught by the apostles; what was commanded by Jesus; and especially what was done by him when he placed himself on the level of obligation with his disciples,—is of force now and for all time.

The New Testament is the constitution for Christian churches. It was not committed to any particular class of persons for interpretation. It is a revelation to every man, and was not given to a priesthood to be doled out and interpreted, nor to preacher in any higher or different sense than to every one who reads it. The pope or a church or a preacher has no information or enlightenment that is not accessible to every intelligent and faithful Christian.

This basal principle leads Baptists to maintain more emphatically than others—

* The following incident occurred almost literally as stated:

“Uncle, I have great confidence in your learning, judgment, and piety; and as we are alone, I want you to deal candidly with me. I am a mother and a Baptist; once you were a Baptist, but are now an Episcopal minister. You say that children ought to be baptized, and that by baptism they are made inheritors of the kingdom of heaven. If so, my children are less favored in the sight of God than those who have been baptized in infancy. As a Christian mother, I wish to do my duty to my Saviour and my children. Here is the Bible; please show me what convinced you of the error of your former opinions and on what you base the practice of infant baptism.”

“Oh, my daughter, read Hodge, read Hodge.”

I. The personality of all religious duties. In the performance of these there can be no sponsor nor proxy. Spiritual responsibilities cannot be met by power of attorney. Christianity is individualizing. God deals with each responsible being as if he were alone in the universe. No one, however close his relationship, can undertake or answer for another answer for another. The responsibility is personal. Repentance, faith, and obedience must be individual and voluntary. Compulsory or Involuntary baptism is no more allowable in God's economy than compulsory or involuntary partaking of the Lord's Supper. Every one must give an account of himself. Mental and moral freedom cannot be abdicated. God gives a rational mind to think and judge, and a free will to accept or reject. Parents, priests, church government, cannot rightly come betwixt an individual soul and Christ, nor decide individual obligations.

As a corollary from this personality flow the right and the duty of private judgment, which cannot be transferred without sin. Liberty of choice is not to be thwarted by infantile covenants or compulsory rites or penal inflictions. Private judgment in religious matters is largely ignored, or its unbiased exercise interfered with, by parents, churches, the law, public opinion, social customs, or traditions.

II. A credible confession of personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as a prerequisite to baptism and church membership.

The New Testament idea of a church is a local assemblage of baptized *believers*—a society of the spiritual and faithful, who give evidence of having been regenerated by the Spirit. This might have been expected from the nature and object of the mission of the Messiah, who came to set up a spiritual kingdom. The epistles to the churches are addressed to the saints and faithful in Christ Jesus, who are exhorted not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. Faith in Christ was the distinguishing principle of the new religion; and obviously there was no mixed membership except as the occasional result of mistake or fraud. A church was a manifestation of the Spirit, and membership in it must necessarily be preceded by regeneration, faith, adoption. Those added to the first churches are invariably spoken of as “the saved,” as “gladly receiving the word” and obeying it. When application was made for admission into the apostolic churches, there was *in every case* the avowal of faith in Christ

“Priests were obedient to the faith.” “Believers were the more added to the Lord, both men and women.” “The Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized.” A clear line of demarkation is drawn in the Scriptures between the churches and the world. National or hereditary membership is a gross departure from the original plan and practice. Hooker said, “Not any man a member of the Commonwealth of England but the same is also a member of the Church of England.” Burke said, “In a Christian commonwealth the church and the state are one and the same thing.” Into a New Testament church there can be no entrance by natural birth or ceremonial rite, by proxy or sponsorial faith, by accidental fact or compulsory form Christ enlists a people made willing in the day of his power. To them that believe on his name he gives power to become the sons of God. Apostolic churches were composed of those “born, not of” blood, nor of the will of the flesh,” but of the Spirit.

The churches were recruited, not, as Xavier recruited Romanism, by the manual labor of sprinkling the untutored Indians of the East until his arm was exhausted; nor, to quote Robertson, “by manipulations manufacturing a child of the devil through baptism into a child of God,” but by the reception of believing, loving, obedient, baptized Christians. Baptist churches consist exclusively of those who profess experimental faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; and this doctrine, of converted membership exclusively, is held in its fulness and unexceptionally only by them. Believe in order to become a member, not become a member in order to believe. Totally

different conceptions exist as to the relation of a church to human salvation. Romanists and others hold that the church is a divinely-constituted channel of grace to sinners. Men and children join, in order to be saved. Baptists hold that a person receives salvation directly from Christ, and that the relation of such a one to a church depends on his antecedent relation to Christ. Believers were baptized as a result of their faith in Christ. Baptism was the assumption by the new-born of the badge of discipleship, the public act by which they were designated as Christians and enrolled among the followers of the Redeemer: "Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ."

A denial of this principle of converted membership is one of the most serious of ecclesiastical errors. A departure from it has brought in infant baptism, infant membership, unregenerate elements, hereditary membership, hereditary holiness, sacramentalism, baptismal regeneration, alliance of church and state, religious persecution, and a thousand ills. To omit this characteristic, this "mark," is to miss the great distinction "of the churches that were in Christ Jesus."

III. The officers of a New Testament church were bishops, elders, pastors—all meaning the same office—and deacons: "To all the saints in Christ Jesus, which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons." The apostolic office and function having ceased, there is absolute parity of the ministry. Bishops are overseers and examples, office-bearers of the true Ruler of Israel, but have no power to "lord it over God's heritage." The ministry is a sacred order, not in a ceremonial sense, but in a moral sense, just as all Christians are called saints. No priestly or sacerdotal class is recognized in the New Testament, and hence not in Baptist churches. There are no gradations of rank in the ministry, and no episcopal authority beyond feeding and taking oversight, with their consent, of a local flock. Baptists recognize no pope nor cardinal nor archbishop; no national nor diocesan bishop, nor any head of the ministry excepting the ever-living Christ. In the New Testament can be found no threefold order of bishops, priests, and deacons as held by Romanists and prelatists. To faith in Christ the Scriptures do not add faith in the church, faith in the succession of the apostles, that is "another gospel," usurping the place of the true.

Deacons are not elders or rulers, but servants, of the churches, to look after temporal interests. No rule is given in reference to the number of deacons or duration in office.

Service or duty rather than power is the characteristic of the relation of church officers to a church. Offices are not titles of rank nor means of ecclesiastical exaltation, but posts of service. Church officers and members are but parts of a whole, and their actions are joint and mutual.

No privileged order is authorized, by imposition of hands or otherwise, to impart gifts, grace, or authority. A deacon or a bishop is the same, morally, intellectually, and physically, after appointment as before. The notion that there is a succession or transmission of virtue or validity through the hands of some one by virtue of his ordination has no warrant in the New Testament. Officers originate in, proceed from, the churches, and not the churches from, officers.

IV. Baptists hold that Christ enjoined two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and they seek to preserve them unchanged in number, order, mode, and significance. Baptism is the immersion in water of a believer into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This voluntary baptism, after an intelligent confession of faith in Christ, is prerequisite to the Lord's Supper, in which the members of a church, by the use of bread and wine, commemorate together the dying love of Christ. The allusions to baptism in the Scriptures are of no significance if the act were not voluntary on the part of a disciple and by immersion. Baptism and the Lord's Supper summarize the gospel through which we are saved, the death of Christ for

our sins, his burial and resurrection. In these two ordinances we declare that the Lord made atonement for sin by his death; that his death is reckoned to the believer; that salvation is on the principle of substitution; and that the believer has died to sin and has risen again to newness of life through faith in Jesus Christ. Those who are baptized *into* Christ—and this involves necessarily antecedent faith and excludes involuntary and compulsory baptism—put on Christ, assume his uniform, assert allegiance and loyalty, and come under the most imperious obligations to separate from evil and live for him who bought them with his precious blood.

These ordinances in strictness are not sacraments, and are wholly inoperative without personal antecedent faith. If sacramental and the meritorious means of salvation, the great doctrine of justification by faith is cut up by the roots. The Prayer-book speaks of “baptism, wherein I was made a member of Christ and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.” An Episcopal catechism has this question and answer: “What was done when you received your Christian name? I was taken into Christ’s holy church and made a member of it.” Dr. Nevins said, “The church makes us Christians by the holy sacrament of baptism.” An Episcopal tract speaks “of the regenerating water of baptism.” The Lutheran Confession, adopted by the Diet of Augsburg, condemned the Anabaptists because they “affirmed that children could be saved without baptism.” A Presbyterian catechism says, “Baptism is a sacrament therein the washing of water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost doth signify and seal our engrafting into Christ, and partaking of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord’s.” Baptists hold that baptism and the Lord’s Supper have no saving power, and depend for their value on the faith of him who receives these ordinances. Instead of possessing inherent power, they are the expressions of voluntary faith and obedience. Baptists reject these “magical conceptions of the means of grace,” and do not understand how those called “baptized children of the church” are any more entitled to “covenanted mercies” than the unbaptized children.

It is sometimes charged that Baptists make too much of baptism. Just what the New Testament makes; no more, no less. The symbol of regeneration is not put before experience of the new birth. Baptism, as an instrumental cause of salvation, as making a child “an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven,” or more salvable than its less-favored fellow, is, besides being a reversal of the divine order, a denial of the efficacy of the blood of Christ and of justification by personal faith. Salvation with us is not from the church or priest or sacrament or human works or by inheritance, but of grace through Jesus Christ, received by the soul in an act of loving trust.

V. *Ekklesia* (Church) means primarily an assembly, for whatever purpose convened. It is so used in two or three passages in the New Testament. But when referring to a Christian church, it is used in two senses only: *First*, and rarely, as including the whole body of believers, saints of all dispensations, “the sacramental host of God’s elect.” As such there is no visible organization, but outside there is no salvation. *Secondly*, and much more frequently, as a society of persons regenerated by the Holy Spirit, possessors of personal faith in Christ, having one Lord, one faith, one baptism, meeting in one place for the worship of God. We read of a plurality of churches in the provinces of Silicia, Syria, Judea, Samaria, Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, and of single churches at Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Philippi, Corinth, Cenchræa. These churches are always separate, voluntary, independent local associations of saints as equals. *Separate and distinct*, and so addressed, so instructed, so visited. *Independent* of all authority but Christ’s, bound to obey only his laws, free from all external control. No church claimed authority over any other. Each was complete in itself, competent to manage its own affairs without supervision or direction. Aggregation of churches could not increase church power, and really had no church power at all. *Local*, with no provincial, territorial ecclesiasticism, no external organic unity

among the various churches. The idea of a general or national church organization is of much later date than the time of the apostles. The New Testament makes no mention of the Church of Asia or Italy or England, nor of any church extending over a large area of country. Cases of discipline were attended to by individual churches, and there is no intimation of a higher judicatory

VI. Throughout their entire history Baptists present an unbroken record of the advocacy of the separation of churches from the civil power. There is not a denomination one hundred years old, Baptists and Quakers excepted, which has not, in some form, favored the union of church and state, or the use of governmental power for the support of religion or the punishment of nonconformity. The Reformers, while protesting against the heresies of Rome, framed creeds which gave to magistrates coercive power in religion. Having suffered persecution, they became persecutors. No Baptist church nor Baptist author can be cited as defending a national ecclesiastical establishment or any interference by the civil power with the rights of conscience. From the times of Peter and Stephen and Paul to the present hour their witness to religious freedom has been clear and unbroken. As Christ's King in Zion, no lawgiver can usurp his prerogatives. These principles have been denounced by statesmen as rebellion and by theologians as heresy; but amid direst persecution, and often unaided, Baptists have been faithful and inflexible in the assertion of soul-liberty. This conspicuous isolation has not been accidental nor due to superior intelligence, but is the logical, inevitable sequence from the principles inhering in their church polity and religious thinking.

Religious liberty is an inference irresistible from the whole structure and creed of Baptist churches. Their principles necessitate absolute separation of civil and ecclesiastical authority. A Baptist church failing to recognize this fundamental truth would cease to be a Baptist church. It is so basal that a Baptist church and a nation can never be identical or united. It is strange that a people, denounced as illiberal and bigoted, should so consistently have sustained a truth which, after centuries of opposition, all enlightened nations and denominations, Rome only excepted, are now incorporating into their political and religious creeds as of universal application. The improper notions concerning the relations of church and state, which have been so difficult to eradicate have grown out of the unscriptural notions which have prevailed as to the true idea and basis of a New Testament church. For a church or denomination to concede the right or claim of the civil power to make articles of faith, adopt a prayer-book, appoint ministers, or of a church to control the state, is to forfeit all just claim to the pretence of scripturalness. No apostolic church can be in alliance with a state. A church ceases to have the mark of apostolic or primitiveness when such a union occurs or is possible. Betwixt Baptist churches and any such possible connection there is an irreconcilable antagonism.

These radical features, differentiating a Baptist church from a Pedobaptist church, are adapted to all peoples and all ages. If the apostles, under the teaching of Christ and the Holy Spirit, in the infancy of Christianity, instituted voluntary union of baptized disciples as a Christian church; if Congregationalism and Independency were the best form then for individual edification, for purity of doctrine, for aggressive attacks upon the powers of darkness—surely we need now to do no more than to copy the primitive model. Spiritual principles never change. What was best when infant churches encountered heathenism, false philosophies, and cruel governments is best now.

These principles secure a vantage ground in opposing all form of error and heresy, and churches organized upon them ought to be pure and noble, ever alive to learn and quick to do the will of the Lord and Master.