

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

writings of Owen, Goodwin, and Hooker to clarify the grounds of their practice.

The religious life of the Commonwealth period was "a tumultuous sea" in which one can find almost anything and everything—Familiists, Behemists, Quakers, Muggletonians, Ranters, Seekers, Socinians, Universalists—and in the chaos of the time the Baptists—like other bodies—were a formless grouping played upon by many winds. The problem is which of these winds really shaped the denomination that eventually emerged. William Dell is sometimes referred to as a Baptist, but if one wishes to find his continuing influence embodied in an existing religious communion one must look to the Society of Friends and not to the Baptists. In the same way, the significant fact about Matthew Caffyn was not the fact that he was a Baptist and a Hoffmanite in Christology but the fact that his Christological views were repudiated. The remarkable thing about the Baptists is the way in which they were able to emerge from this confusion with what might be termed a "Reformed churchmanship" still intact. As late as the end of the eighteenth century, John Witherspoon was able to say of the Baptists of New Jersey that, except at the point of Baptism, "Baptists are Presbyterians." Witherspoon was a knowledgeable person. He had been a leader of the Popular party in Scotland and was the most prominent leader among the colonial Presbyterians. His statement indicates that there had been a softening of Presbyterianism in the American environment, but it also indicates the major stance of the Baptists. Is it not possible that the early Baptists knew what they were saying and meant what they said, when they asserted that they were "falsely" and "unjustly" called Anabaptists?

WINTHROP S. HUDSON

Who were the Baptists?

(II)

IN the *Baptist Quarterly*, July, 1956, there is an article dealing with the old question of the relations between the continental Baptizers' movement (Anabaptists) and the origin of the English Baptist churches. It is well known that there have been different opinions on this historical question. The author of the article just mentioned is Dr. Winthrop S. Hudson, and he takes a definite stand for an indigenous origin of the English Baptist movement, quite independent of the Baptizers' movement on the Continent. It is an interesting article and will certainly stimulate further research in its

area. Some scholars, however, will not be convinced by the arguments put forth in Dr. Hudson's article, and as to myself I have put several question marks in the margins. Here, I am going only to make these known; not build up an argument by references and notes.

First of all it seems to me that the question is not one of *identity*, still less a question of "succession." The latter idea could be left aside altogether, as the historian should have no other interests than the historical facts according to source material and conclusions in analogy with happenings in human fellowship. When Dr. Hudson speaks of "the identification of the Baptists with the Anabaptists," I am not sure that he gets to the real point of modern research. I don't know of any historian who ever would try to make such an *identification*, and to give arguments *against* an identification is an easy task. But the question is not solved by that. In the same way one would not be able to show an identification of the General Baptists with the Particular Baptists in England, but in spite of that one must admit, that both were of the Baptist movement, with the basic characteristics in common.

Exactly the same problem must be faced in the question of Baptist-Anabaptist relations. One should not lay stress on special, sometimes peculiar differences between the two movements. If one used the same method on the Baptist unions within the Baptist World Alliance today, one would be able to show that there is such a diversity, that an identity could not be spoken of, but still we know that the basic Baptist teaching is common also in dissimilar unions. But now to the arguments put forth in the article by Dr. Hudson, "Who were the Baptists?"

It is true that the English Baptists in the seventeenth century complained against the term Anabaptist as a name of reproach unjustly cast upon them. But such a protest had been heard ever since the Baptizers' movement started in early Reformation times. Balthasar Hubmaier in a writing about paedobaptism in 1527 emphatically denied that he and his followers were Anabaptists. After the fanatical Münster revolution of 1534-35 the representatives of the sound and peaceful Baptizers' movement refused to use the name Anabaptists. In the eastern branch they had the name Hutterites and in the western movement Mennonites or, early in the sixteenth century, only Doopsgezinden (Holland). The peaceful Mennonites tried to prove that there was no connection between them and the revolutionary Anabaptists. In spite of thus rejecting the name of Anabaptists all these branches had "the distinctive features" common to the original Anabaptists. If now the early English Baptists did the same, that is to say, rejected the name of Anabaptists, this surely cannot be taken as an evidence of their independence of the continental movement. In fact, they only

followed the example of the many Dutch Mennonite refugees in England during the sixteenth century.

When one nowadays, for historical reasons, uses the name Anabaptists, one may apply it to the whole movement represented by the Baptizers from 1525 through the sixteenth century. But then one must not lay stress on details and variations as community of goods, a strict negative attitude towards state and community, or practising of feet-washing and the like. In several Baptist unions today there are conscientious objectors to military service, and many also refuse to take oaths or go to court to get their rights, but they do not cease to be Baptists because of that. No, "the distinctive features" were the ones that we in the whole family of Baptizers have held since Balthasar Hubmaier in his Nicolsburg days in 1527 wrote the following clear statement about the order of the "gathered church": "This is the sequence: first, Christ; second, the Word; third, faith; fourth, confession; fifth, baptism; sixth, church." He also said: "He who teaches aright Baptism and the Lord's Supper, teaches faith and love aright."

This teaching also had many representatives in England in the sixteenth century, and the refugees from the continent at that time certainly drew attention to their teaching, as many legal actions in courts and several edicts clearly show. This Anabaptist teaching was not derived largely from the humanists of the Northern Renaissance but from an eager study of the Scriptures, as the original writings of the pioneers in the sixteenth century clearly show. The Anabaptists of the 1520's came out of the Reformation in Switzerland and Southern Germany, and no one perusing their letters, pamphlets and books can avoid the impression that they had their doctrinal basis in a faithful Bible reading, and therefore demanded a more thoroughgoing evangelical reformation than they found in the movements led by Zwingli and Luther.

Another thing is that among the English Baptizers in the beginning of the seventeenth century there developed two branches, one more like the continental type as to the doctrine of grace, another with a strong trait of Puritan Calvinism in it. The latter naturally made good progress, because it had a congenial field for recruiting within the strong Puritan movement. But it is not their variations that are distinctive traits in Baptist churches, nor other theological questions as to Christology, open or closed Communion and the like, because we well know that among Baptists to this day there are various opinions on such matters. One ought to go back to Hubmaier and find the characteristics from the very beginning: Christ, the Word of God, a "living faith," a personal confession (when all the brethren and sisters should kneel down and pray for the candidate), then the Baptism and as a result the building up of the church, gathered around the Lord's table.

If the Baptizers came from the Zwinglian reformation, from Lutheranism or from Puritan congregations in England or in Holland, this fact can in itself offer no explanation for their status as Baptizers. There is also still the open question of the influence of Dutch refugees in Norwich on the first clearly Congregational church under the leadership of Robert Harrison and Robert Browne in the beginning of the 1580's. Some historians lay stress on that, and I see nothing strange in such an influence by a closed group of foreigners with a distinctive religious teaching and practice. At that time, people were certainly not less interested in the customs and ideas of refugees than we are in our days. The Calvinist Congregationalists certainly lost several members to the Calvinistic Particular Baptists, and sometimes there were no clear borderlines between the two movements, as Dr. Hudson also points out. But were the Particular Baptists more Baptist, so to speak, than the General Baptists, who as to the doctrine of grace evidently followed the continental Baptizers (Anabaptists)? Naturally there was a leftward "spiritual pilgrimage" in the Puritan movement, but the question is why this should have started in Norwich, where the many Dutch refugee Baptizers had their dwelling. Earlier "gathered churches" in England had been organised because of occasional reasons, i.e. more out of expediency than of principle. As the recently published writings of Harrison and Browne show, something new had come into the arguments.

Let me also emphasise the historical fact, that the "spiritual pilgrimage" of Puritans into the Baptist camp did not take place until Puritan Congregationalists had settled in a country (Holland), where the Baptizer's movement (Anabaptists) had been active for more than seventy years. A historian must lay some stress on such a fact, as he always must remember the old saying, that "life precedes literature." If John Smyth did not agree with the Dutch Mennonites in all details and Helwys and Murton openly disagreed with them, still they had in common the distinctive features, that Hubmaier already had laid stress on: a living faith, individual confession, Baptism, the gathered church, and the Lord's Supper.

I have thus added some question marks to Dr. Hudson's article. There is, however, still one point that I must deal with a little more, and this is his presentation of the Anabaptist theology and activity "in the early years of the movement." Here one has the subject for a treatise, but I venture to point out that the early Anabaptist leaders did not represent "the understanding of the Christian faith which was characteristic of the Northern Renaissance and which found its most eloquent spokesman in Erasmus," and that they did not repudiate the doctrine of justification of faith. There may have been examples of such repudiation later, but among the early Baptizers one finds quite another teaching. As early as Hubmaier's

writing, *A Summary of the entire Christian life*, in 1525, one will find this confirmed: "We find that there is no health in us, but rather poison, wounds and all impurities," and in himself man finds no help and is a miserable thing. But Christ is come in this world "to make the sinner righteous and godly," and Jesus, according to his own words, is "the only gracious, reconciling interceding peacemaker with God our Father." In faith God makes these Gospel teachings "to live, wax green and bear fruit." From Christ, the sinner derives his life, and he can with Paul say, "that it is not he that lives, but Christ that lives in him." Having in this way, inwardly and by faith, surrendered himself to a new life, a man has outwardly to testify to it to the brethren and sisters in the church, "who live in the faith of Christ." Thereafter he testifies to it publicly by being baptized in water.

A whole pamphlet could be filled by such quotations from the writings of the first theologians among the Anabaptists. In his important book about the Christian doctrines, "which every man before he is baptized should know," Hubmaier speaks about Christ having "paid for our sins and already overcome the devil and hell." Christ died for our sins, and rose to be our righteousness, that "our sins might be atoned," and we reconciled to God. I could quote similar words from other sources. When the Baptizers' movement started among the Zürich left wing group in 1525, it had the character of a revival with tears, wailing, and confession of sins. And in the writings of that time one will find the stress led on the forgiveness of sin and the new life through faith in the work of Jesus Christ. As to Conrad Grebel and his relations to the humanists, I think that Harold S. Bender has cleared that problem well in his large book on Grebel.

In the so-called Schleithem articles (1527), it is stated that Baptism should be administered to those "who believe truly, that their sins are taken away by Christ and who walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ." About twenty years later another theologian among the Anabaptists, Peter Riedemann, taught that the propitiation and redemption of Christ was fully accomplished for our justification, but Christ is not only the justification *for* us, but he also works righteousness and godliness *in* us. By means of repentance and faith we must come into possession of salvation and sanctification acquired through Jesus Christ. We are grafted into the true vine, and therefore we have the power to bear the fruits of a Christian life. Similar doctrines were characteristic also of the Dutch Baptizers who had the Schleithem articles translated into Dutch in the 1550's. Calvin's refutation of them was translated into English a decade earlier. Here a historian must ask, why?

The teachings of Menno Simons and other Dutch writers cannot be dealt with here, but the distinctive features of their doctrines

pertain to the "living faith," individual confession, Baptism in water, the gathered church and the Lord's Supper. Common to all Baptizers was strict church discipline and excommunication according to *Matthew* xviii. In other points there were variations.

With these remarks I feel obliged to point out the necessity first of all of studying the original texts of the Anabaptist fathers to find out their real teachings about the main doctrines and, second, to pay keen attention to the historical significance of the lively communications between the Continent and England during the sixteenth century. For my part I cannot cut off the Baptizers' movement through the centuries after the Reformation from the very source of it in the 1520's.

GUNNAR WESTIN

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

ARNOLD H. J. BAINES, M.A.,

Member, Baptist Historical Society.

WINTHROP S. HUDSON, D.D.,

President, American Baptist Historical Society; Professor, Colgate Divinity School, Rochester, N.Y.

ERNEST A. PAYNE, M.A., D.D.,

General Secretary, Baptist Union of Gt. Britain and Ireland.

D. S. RUSSELL, M.A., B.D., B.Litt.

Principal, Rawdon Baptist College.

GEOFFREY SHAKESPEARE, Bart., P.C.,

M.P. for Norwich, 1929-1945.

GUNNAR WESTIN, D.Theol.,

Professor of Church History, University of Upsala, Sweden.

REVIEWERS : G. Henton-Davies, M.A., B.D., B.Litt., W. S. Davies, B.A., B.D., S.T.M., F. Dodson, F.R.C.O., G. W. Hughes, B.A., B.D., D. Lant, Ll.B., L. J. Moon, M.A., B.D., G. H. Price, M.A., B.D.