

A SUMMARY OF BAPTIST HISTORY FOR
SOUTHERN BAPTISTS WORKING ON
GOD AND CHURCH
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Where Did We Come From?

It is always good to know where you came from. It gives you a sense of direction in knowing where you are going. So, where did the Baptists come from? Among church historians today there are two answers that are considered likely. One answer often given is that modern Baptists developed out of a movement in Europe called the “Swiss Brethren”,¹ or the “Anabaptists”.² This group began in 1525, in the city of Zurich, Switzerland, with a small group who rejected the infant baptism they had received in the Roman Catholic Church. They came to believe, based on a study of the Greek New Testament, that baptism was only for people who had repented of their sins and personally trusted in Christ for salvation. The early leaders of this movement included Conrad Grebel, George Blaurock, Michael Sattler, Balthasar Hubmaier, and Felix Manz. Several of these men died a martyr’s death for being “heretics”.³ Most Anabaptists were “pacifists”, who believed that Christians should not be involved in politics or the military. This version of Anabaptism still survives in the Amish and Mennonite communities.

Another answer to the question focuses on England during the late 1500s and early 1600s. This view has the strongest support in terms of documents from the beginning of Baptist life. In

¹The “Swiss Brethren” was a group of believers in Switzerland who owned each other as “brothers” in Christ and united as a local church by believer’s baptism. “Brethren” is an old word for “brothers”.

²“Anabaptists” means “rebaptized ones”. In a world where infant baptism was the norm, to have one self baptized as a believer was viewed as being “rebaptized” and violation of the law with a possible death penalty as punishment.

³“Heretic” denotes persons who have strayed from accepted practices, doctrines or beliefs, especially to the point of risking eternal judgment from God.

the 1500s, King Henry VIII, who was a loyal Roman Catholic, sought to divorce his wife, Catherine, but the pope could not grant the divorce without risking a break with the King of Spain, whose help he needed against the early Protestant Reformers in Germany. The King's answer was to break from the Church of Rome and make the ⁴Archbishop of Canterbury the episcopal head of the English Church. After Henry's death, his son, Edward VI, reigned briefly and moved the Anglican⁵ Church in the direction of Protestant theology. He died after only a four year reign, and his half-sister, Mary, became queen. She was a devout Catholic, the daughter of the scorned Queen Catherine. She restored Catholicism and launched an intense persecution of Protestants in England. Many fled to the Swiss city of Geneva, where they came under the influence of John Calvin.

When Mary's reign came to an end, Elizabeth I became queen and restored the Anglican Church's independence from Rome. She tried to make everyone happy by blending Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed elements together in the Church of England. In the end this made few people happy. A group influenced by John Calvin's teachings formed the "Puritans", whose goal was to "purify" the Church of England of its Catholic elements. Some of these Puritans became impatient and separated from the Church of England and became known as "Separatists". They formed independent congregations on the basis of a "covenant".

Rise of the General Baptists

Among the Separatists two events happened that appear to have resulted in the formation of the first English speaking Baptist congregations. After the death of Elizabeth I, King James VI

⁴The highest ranking bishop in the English Church.

⁵The Anglican Church is another term for the Church of England.

of Scotland became King of England as James I. Having dealt with Calvin's followers in the Church of Scotland, he had no patience for the kind of reform the Puritans wanted. His approach was to demand obedience to the Crown or face persecution. Many Separatists left England. Some came to the New World (the Pilgrims were one such group). Others fled to Holland. In Holland a group led by John Smyth and Thomas Helwys organized the very first known English speaking Baptist church when they adopted believer's baptism. There are questions as to how much influence local Mennonites might have had in this event. John Smyth's most memorable work was a book called *The Character of the Beast*, written in 1609, which was his defense of believer's baptism.

In 1610 this group split into two groups. John Smyth sought to join the local Mennonites,⁶ along with a portion of the original group. He died in 1612 awaiting admission to the Mennonite church, but his followers were later admitted. Thomas Helwys refused to go along with this, took a portion of the group, and around 1612, returned to England to bear witness to Christ and suffer persecution for the Gospel. He wrote a work on religious liberty entitled *The Mystery of Iniquity* for which King James thanked him by putting him in jail. He died sometime between 1612–1616 in prison.

Those who came from Smyth's and Helwys' movement were called "General" Baptists because they believed in "general" atonement, or the idea that Christ died for all men equally and made possible the salvation of all men.

⁶A group of Anabaptists who followed the teachings of Menno Simons.

Rise of the Particular Baptists

Another movement within the Separatists occurred in the 1630s. In London there was a Separatist church known as the “Jacob-Lathrop-Jessy” Church. It was so named for its first three pastors. Out of this church came the first “Particular” Baptist church. A group in this church became convinced through studying the Bible that believer’s baptism rather than infant baptism was the only true baptism. Unlike the majority of Anabaptists and the General Baptists, though, they also became convinced that baptism should be done by fully immersing the body in water. Most Anabaptists and all General Baptists up until this point baptized by pouring water over the head from a pitcher or bucket. Not knowing how to proceed, they sent one of their own, Richard Blunt, to Holland, to meet with a group of Mennonites called “the Collegiates”,⁷ who practiced immersion, to get information about how they practiced the rite. Upon his return the group was immersed and formed the first “Particular” Baptist church under the leadership of John Spilsbury. By the 1640s there were five of these churches in and around London. They were called “Particular” Baptists because they believed that Christ died to save a particular group of people, the “elect”, whom God had chosen by grace in Christ before the creation of the world. For many years this group was the dominant Baptist group in England and America.

Baptist Beginnings in Colonial America

During the period of the 1630s a man named Roger Williams left England and came to New England. Williams was a Separatist and was invited to become a pastor in Salem. Soon his preaching created problems as he pushed for full and complete separation from the Church of

⁷A small group within the Mennonite fellowship who differed from other Mennonites by practicing baptism by immersion rather than pouring.

England. He also advocated for full and complete religious liberty, asserting that God alone was Lord over the human conscience. In 1635 he was forced to flee Massachusetts and settled among the Native Americans in what is today Rhode Island. Here he established a colony known as Providence Plantation and the first Baptist church on American soil. The church was organized on the basis of believer's baptism in 1639. The First Baptist Church of Providence, Rhode Island, is the oldest Baptist church in the United States. Williams himself remained a Baptist only a few months. He worked for religious liberty, writing a detailed book on religious persecution in New England called *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution*. In nearby Newport, John Clarke's Separatist Church adopted believer's baptism in 1640. In this way the Baptist witness came to America.

By the late 1600s Baptists from England had immigrated to other colonies, and in 1707 the first Baptist association was organized in Philadelphia. This association was patterned after the London Particular Baptist Association, even using the same doctrinal statement, slightly amended, as early as 1724. In the aftermath of the "First Great Awakening", the Philadelphia Association sent out traveling preachers throughout the colonies to preach the Gospel.

In New England a group of dissatisfied "Separate" or "New Light" Congregationalists adopted believer's baptism and became known as "Separate" Baptists. Two men from this group, Shubel Stearns and his brother-in-law, Daniel Marshall, headed south, eventually settling on Sandy Creek, in North Carolina. They organized a church there in 1755 that is still in existence today. The influence of these Separate Baptists was felt in New England and in the Carolinas, Tennessee, Virginia, and Kentucky.

Organizing for Missions

From humble beginnings in 1609 down to the late 1700s, Baptists in England and America were viewed as small, odd, and despised sect of radical believers. Much of their energy was spent simply defending the Baptist view of baptism, church membership, and religious liberty. They dealt with internal conflict as well. The General Baptists in England suffered a major decline due to their decision to make religious liberty for the individual more important than unity of belief in and among the churches. Particular Baptists became obsessed with debates about God's foreknowledge that stifled their prior evangelistic zeal. But revival came for both groups in different ways.

For the General Baptists revival came in the person of Daniel Taylor, who was converted under the preaching of John Wesley. Taylor, dissatisfied with the lack of doctrinal commitment among the General Baptists, formed the "New Connection of General Baptists", which became the dominant General Baptist group in England.

For the Particular Baptists revival came from the preaching and writings of Robert Hall Sr., Andrew Fuller, and William Carey. Fuller and Carey led in the formation of the first Baptist missionary society in 1792, and Carey was among the first Baptist missionaries sent from England to India, in 1793.

News of Carey's work in India prompted Christians in the United States to organize for missions. In Massachusetts, the Congregational Church formed a mission society and sent Adoniram Judson, his wife, Anne, and Luther Rice, to India as Congregational missionaries. Traveling on separate ships, the Judsons and Rice independently came to be convinced of believer's baptism before reaching India. They were baptized in India, Rice was sent back to the U. S. to try to organize Baptists in the support of missions and Judson eventually settled in

Burma (modern day Myanmar). Rice succeeded in rallying Baptists to the cause of missions, and both Separate and Regular (Particular) Baptists came together as “United” Baptists to form the “Triennial” Convention in 1814, in Philadelphia. Baptists also began forming state wide conventions during this time as well. Early support was raised through “societies”. Membership in the mission societies was open to individuals and churches on the basis of monetary donations. These societies functioned independently of the churches and were controlled by the paying members of the associations. This eventually became a source of conflict that led to the “anti-mission society movement”. From that movement came today’s Primitive Baptists.

Further strife came in the 1840s with the rise of the Abolitionist⁸ movement. Increasing pressure was put on Baptists in the South to disavow⁹ slavery. In 1845 Baptists in the South organized the Southern Baptist Convention after the mission societies of the Triennial Convention refused to send missionaries who owned slaves or accept money earned through the use of slaves. Unlike other denominations, Baptists were not able to reconcile their differences after the Civil War, and Baptists in the North and South went their separate ways.

The Southern Baptist Convention

In 1845 the Southern Baptist Convention was organized on a different plan than the Triennial Convention. This body organized on the basis of a “convention” or “association” model. Membership was open to all churches that desired to partner for the purposes of advancing missions and education. Representation was based on either (1) church membership numbers or (2) the amount of financial support given, with the provision that no church would

⁸Abolitionists sought to abolish, or do away with slavery.

⁹To disavow means to disown or to separate oneself from something.

have fewer than one or more than ten messengers to the Convention meetings. In the beginning the SBC had only two boards—the Foreign Mission Board (now the International Mission Board) and the Domestic Mission Board (now the North American Mission Board). The SBC is controlled by the local churches through the messengers sent to its meetings. These “messengers” constitute the Convention in session. The messengers elect the trustees and committees that carry on the business of the Convention between meetings. In the beginning the Convention met every two years but now meets annually. The first president of the SBC was W. B. Johnson, who also had served as president of the Triennial Convention.

In 1859 the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary opened in Greenville, South Carolina, to provide education for Baptist ministers in the South. After the Civil War it relocated to Louisville, Kentucky, where it is located now. In 1888 the Women’s Missionary Union was formed as an auxiliary to the Southern Baptist Convention to raise mission awareness and help in funding mission work. In 1891 Southern Baptists established the Sunday School Board (now LifeWay Christian Resources) to provide Sunday School literature for churches. In 1917 the SBC formed the “Executive Committee”, which effectively functions as the legal representative of the SBC between annual meetings.

In 1925 two major changes took place in the Southern Baptist Convention. First, the SBC approved a new funding method called the “Unified Budget Plan”. This has become known as the Cooperative Program. Prior to this the SBC raised money for its various causes through a wide variety of special offerings in the churches. People would pledge to give but often would be unable to fulfill those pledges due to changes in the economy or crop failures. With the Cooperative Program churches were asked to set aside a share of their general, or “undesignated” gifts to be sent to the SBC to fund missions and other work.

In addition to the Cooperative Program, the SBC takes up two offerings each year for mission work. These are the Annie Armstrong Offering for North American Missions, taken up prior to Easter each year, and the Lottie Moon Offering for International Missions, taken up prior to Christmas each year. Annie Armstrong lived from 1850–1938 and was a leader in forming the Women’s Missionary Union for Southern Baptists. Lottie (Charlotte) Moon lived from 1840–1912, dying on Christmas Eve, in Kobe Harbor, Japan. She spent most of her adult life as a Southern Baptist missionary in China, principally working among women and children. These offerings make up one half of the budget for their respective mission boards each year, and every penny given goes directly to support mission work.

In 1925 the Southern Baptist Convention took a second bold step in adopting the “Baptist Faith and Message” as its official doctrinal statement for the SBC. This was done in response to the spread of liberalism, modernism, and evolutionary teaching Christian colleges, universities, and seminaries in the nation. It was intended to safeguard the SBC from such teachings. The Baptist Faith and Message is based in large measure on the New Hampshire Confession of Faith, which was written by Regular Baptists in New Hampshire in the 1830s.

Throughout the twentieth century Southern Baptist work continued to grow, spreading to all fifty states and many foreign countries. By 1960 there were five Southern Baptist seminaries: Southern, in Louisville, Kentucky, Southwestern, in Fort Worth, Texas, New Orleans, in New Orleans, Louisiana, Southeastern, in Wake Forest, South Carolina, Golden Gate, in Mill Valley, California, and Midwestern, in Kansas City, Missouri.

In the early 1960s the threat of liberalism again cause the SBC to revisit the Baptist Faith and Message, and in 1963 a revision of the historic document was adopted. In 1998 it was

amended to address the issue of family in light of social trends in the U. S., and in 2000 it was thoroughly revised again.

In the late 1970s a movement was launched to secure a conservative theological base for SBC organizations, and in 1979 Adrian Rogers was elected President of the SBC. His election marked a major turning point in the SBC, with the election of conservative presidents committed to conservative appoints ever since. This has served to restore the SBC to its early commitment to the belief that the Bible is God's written word and is without error.

In the 1990s the SBC was completely reorganized. Many agencies were eliminated or combined into other agencies and boards. The Foreign and Home Mission boards were reorganized under the names International Mission Board and North American Mission Board, respectively. The Sunday School Board of the SBC was renamed LifeWay Christian Resources. In 2010 the SBC overwhelmingly approved the Great Commission Resurgence Report. The recommendations in this report are intended to refocus SBC energies and efforts on evangelism and missions.

Study Questions

1. Why is it good to know where we, as Baptists, came from?
2. Name two Anabaptist groups.
3. Why did Henry VIII break away from the Roman Church?
4. Which Reformer most influenced Puritans and Separatists in England?
5. Who were the first two leaders of the “General Baptists”?
6. What did the General Baptists believe about Christ’s death?
7. Name one early leader of the “Particular Baptists”.
8. What did the Particular Baptists believe about Christ’s death?
9. What did Roger Williams work to achieve?
10. Where was the first Baptist church in North America started?
11. Where was the first Baptist association formed in North America?
12. Name two leaders of the Separate Baptists.
13. Who was Daniel Taylor?
14. Name two people who helped form the first Baptist missionary society.
15. Name two missionaries from America who became Baptists after leaving for the mission field.
16. When Regular and Separate Baptists came together to support mission work, what were they called?
17. How did slavery impact Baptist life?
18. Who was the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention?
19. Who was Lottie Moon?

20. What is the “Cooperative Program”?
21. What is the “Baptist Faith and Message”?
22. How many seminaries does the Southern Baptist Convention own?
23. When do Southern Baptists take up the Annie Armstrong Offering for North American Missions?
24. When do Southern Baptists take up the Lottie Moon Offering for International Missions?
25. What document did Southern Baptists adopt a revision of in 2000?