

Are Baptists Part of the Protestant Reformation?

By Allen Mickle, Jr.



On this day in 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, which sparked perhaps one of the greatest events in the history of the church of Jesus Christ, the Protestant Reformation. Protestants (who protested against the established church) sought a Reformation (a change in the church to return to the essence of the Scriptures) which has changed the face of the entire Christian church since then. A focus on the sources (ad fontes) of Scripture brought the church back to what became 5 pillars of a return to New Testament Christianity. These are:

- 1) Sola Scriptura – By Scripture Alone
- 2) Sola Gratia – By Grace Alone
- 3) Solo Christo – By Christ Alone
- 4) Sola Fide – By Faith Alone
- 5) Soli Deo Gloria – Glory to God Alone

Even while modern day Protestants trace their roots to the Reformation, there are many within Baptist circles that would argue that Baptists are not part of the Protestant Reformation. They would see a distinct difference in origin for Baptists than the Reformation. So, the question must be asked, are Baptists part of the Protestant Reformation?

Views on the Origin of Baptists

There are, to make it simplified, four different views on Baptist origins (please note I am indebted to my former Church History professor, Gerald Priest at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary for first presenting these truths to me). These are:

1) Strict organic successionist view.

There has always been a succession of Baptist churches throughout history beginning with the first Baptist church of Jerusalem. Dissenters from the earliest times were Baptists with different names.

2) Anabaptist kinship view.

Early seventeenth century Baptists were influenced by continental anabaptists.

3) Spiritual kinship view.

This is the continuation of biblical teachings view or spiritual successionism. There is a continuity of Baptist concepts. In other words, there is no “trail of blood” but there is an discernable “trail of truth.”

4) British separatist view.

The Baptist denominations originated out of the Puritan Separatist Movement in seventeenth century England.

There is of course a mixing of these different views but these are essentially the normal views taken.

Historical Arguments for the British Separatist View

Now, this is a huge topic and one that could be devoted whole books to, but I will refer you to the recent presentation of this material by my former Church History professor [here](#) for more details. See him for a presentation of arguments against Baptists being derived from the Protestant Reformation. Briefly though, let me outline a few historical reasons FOR viewing Baptists as deriving from the Protestant Reformation (see Priest for biblical arguments regarding the universal church).

1. The church of Jesus Christ has existed since Pentecost. Just because it is difficult to find historically groups throughout history who maintain a pure commitment to the NT church does not mean they did not exist. Regardless, the purity of the church has been maintained in the universal body of believers, not necessarily always in local churches. This helps us then to not attempt to force heretical groups into a Baptist mold just because they performed baptism by immersion.

2. The Second London Baptist Confession (1688) affirms both the universal and local aspects of the church in article 26, sections 1 and 2. Since Baptists affirm the universal church, this means that it is not necessary for there to be visible manifestations of the universal body in local bodies at every single moment throughout church history.

3. Just because Anabaptists (who did not truly come from the Protestant Reformation) and Baptists practice a similar form of baptism does not make them the same. There are some very major differences like pacifism, nonparticipation in government, and unwillingness to take oaths among other things makes a real difference between the two groups.

4. Just because Baptists did not directly come out of the Roman Catholic church does not mean they are not part of the Protestant Reformation. They come out of British Puritan Separatism (which can be demonstrated historically) and therefore, since they derive their origin from the Reformation, so we can as well.

5. The First and Second London Confession of Faith mention that they are not Anabaptists. The Confession or Declaration of Faith by the General Baptists says the same thing.

6. John Smyth inaugurated the practice of believer's baptism among his Separatist followers in 1609. After repudiating his baptism and attempting to merge his church with a Mennonite community, Thomas Helwys, John Murton, and their followers rejected Smyth and returned to England to found the first General Baptist church there in 1611.

7. In the 17th century, when some argued for a successionist view of the Baptist origin they were looked upon with suspicion as it sounded very Roman Catholic.

8. There were many different varieties of Anabaptism in the 17th century, not all of it biblical. Today most Anabaptists have no fellowship with Baptists.

This has been rather brief, but it is good to get an overall historical view of something and use it as a jumping off point so that others can investigate the issues for themselves. In conclusion though let it be said that whatever the origins, Baptists have attempted to derive their theology and practice from the New Testament and only the New Testament. Yet, when looking at the historical evidence, it does seem primarily true, that Baptists come not from a long line of succeeding groups, nor from the Anabaptists directly (there may be some influence there) but from the British Puritan Separatists. And they take their origin eventually out of the Protestant Reformation. So therefore, Baptists are part of the Protestant Reformation.

If you are a Baptist this day (Reformation Day) take heart and rejoice in what God has done in history to rescue the truths of the Scriptures and bring them back into the church and thank God for the privilege of being part of that Reformation!