

A Summarized History of the Baptists

by Bishop Auriel Jones-Webb

Hosea 4:6a according the *World English Bible* and its derivatives reads regarding knowledge, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.” As questions come to the rise of many asking the origins and purpose of the Baptist Christian tradition, let’s dive deep into the historic record so as to provide the necessary answers.

The Baptist Christian tradition as a whole stems to 1609 in Amsterdam, Netherlands, with the English Separatist John Smyth—a man who is regarded and widely accepted as the first Baptist pastor among Christian and other scholars, and not John the Baptist of the first century.

John Smyth—thought to have been the son of a father with the same full name and had the position of yeomen in Sturton-le-Steeple, Nottinghamshire, England—was born around 1570, and died around August 28, 1612. He was educated locally at the grammar school in Gainsborough and in Christ's College, Cambridge, where he became a fellow in 1594.

John Smyth was ordained a priest in the national Church of England, where the movement or tradition of Anglicanism—a group of Christians claiming to be *Reformed* and *Catholic*—stems from. He preached in the city of Lincoln from 1600 to 1602, and soon after his ordination broke away from what he perceived the nonbiblical teachings of the Anglican Church—that is, the Church of England—in 1606.

After leaving the Church of England he and his congregation left for the region of Holland in the Netherlands where this congregation began to study the Scriptures passionately, as the nonconforming English were persecuted by the national church and desired a land to freely practice their faith which vehemently opposed ritualism and other historic tenets due to their strong perceptions of dogmatism experienced within and throughout the Anglican tradition. During his time away from the Church of England he also returned to England for a brief time.

In 1609, John Smyth along with several others came to believe in believers’ baptism as they personally believed God sought to bring His people out of some mode of confusion, whereby one, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, comes forth in worship and pronounces their belief in Jesus the Christ as Lord and Savior, desiring to be fully immersed in water for the remission of sin as taught in the Bible in the name of the Holy Trinity. This belief resulted in the rejection of infant baptism as historically practiced in the Roman and other ancient churches which Baptists and other Protestants saw as contrary to biblical teaching alone.

John Smyth and this group of people then came together and officially formed arguably the first Baptist church in existence, though others may have believed the same biblical teaching and were not as prominent as Smyth's congregation—perhaps being preferably remaining as Evangelical Anglicans, or, simply, Congregationalists.

During this—the birth and growth of the Baptist Christian tradition in Protestant Christianity—another group of Christians protesting against the Catholic Church in Rome known as the Anabaptists held similar beliefs to the Baptists, even entering fellowship with one another for a time. As most Baptists of the time were General Baptists, they did not believe in the Reformed Calvinistic teaching of predestination, instead holding many similarities with the Dutch Waterlander Mennonites—an Anabaptist group—such as believers' baptism only, religious liberty, and the separation of church and state.

In the future, the teachings of John Calvin, which are perceived among various Baptists as truly reformed when comparing and contrasting with Martin Luther's—as it is believed God used Martin and then John to bring His people out of what they perceived as Babylon—were adopted by Baptists though Smyth himself claimed to be Reformed from the beginning—even though he was partially reformed as an Anglican, with Anglicanism being the middle way of Catholic Christianity and Protestant Christianity.

Coming from an Anglican upbringing and claiming to be Reformed, John Smyth also claimed to uphold Puritanism, which sought to purify the Anglican Church from its Roman Catholic practices as he taught that the Anglican Church, like others, was only partially reformed. The true reformation desired of the Church of England never occurred as he and others anticipated.

In 1609, Smyth wrote a tract titled *The Character of the Beast, or The False Constitution of the Church*. In it he expressed two propositions: first, infants are not to be baptized; and second, "Antichristians converted are to be admitted into the true Church by baptism."

Antichristians are those who were described as Christian but only in name, and followed the allegedly vain traditions of men rather than of God—such as, in Smyth and other's eyes, the Roman Catholics with some of their traditional teachings going against the non-vain manly traditions instituted by the early Apostles in 2 Thessalonians 2:25.

Smyth's conviction in founding the Baptists was that a scriptural church should consist only of regenerate believers who have been baptized on a personal confession of faith, a statement debated to this very day with churches upholding the unchurched as consisting them

too. He strongly rejected the Separatist (Puritan/Dissenter) movement's doctrine of infant baptism/paedobaptism.

Shortly thereafter, Smyth left the Baptist movement he is proclaimed to be the father of, and layman Thomas Helwys—his personal supporter—took over the leadership and led the church back to England in 1611: the year the *King James Version* of the Bible was published as the only authorized English bible for the Church of England, hence why it is called the *Authorized Version*, and not according to the King James Onlyist presuppositions.

Ultimately, Smyth became committed to believers' baptism as the only biblical baptism. He was convinced on the basis of the interpretation of Scripture that infants would not be damned should they die in infancy, as they haven't yet reached accountability—although this has been a debatable matter, since some young children have been seen as being accountable to themselves and their actions in youth.

During his tenure among the Baptists, Smyth insisted that true worship was from the heart and that any form of reading from a book in worship was an invention of sinful mankind; this contrasted with the liturgical worship of First and Second Temple Judaism, Rabbinic Judaism, and the early Church who read from liturgical books.

This rejection of formalized liturgy remains strong among many Baptists still today. Prayer, singing and preaching must be completely spontaneous, he taught; this is similar to some of the teachings in Pentecostalism which was birthed from the Methodists and Wesleyan-Holiness movements.

Teaching this, Smyth did however diverge off into his own pride, stating that he would not allow the reading of the Bible during worship on the grounds that a translation was "...the worke of a mans witt...& therefore not to be brought into the worship of God to be read." This flawed idea stemmed from the belief that worship should be ordered by the Holy Spirit, yet the Old Testament and New Testament have been read aloud for centuries according to biblical requirements to preach repentance, and the Bible comes from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Another reformational teaching brought into the Baptist Christian tradition by John Smyth was the introduction of a twofold church leadership, that of bishop or elder, and deacon.

This was in contrast to the Anglican, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox traditional hierarchy of bishop, priest, and deacon, and the Reformed Calvinistic trifold leadership of pastor-elder, lay-elders, and deacons as upheld in Presbyterianism for example (or even, as of the 20th century the advent of five-fold leadership with apostles, bishops, overseers,

pastors, and teachers—although historically, this never existed as pastor and teacher were a compound word and every bishop is technically an apostle to their jurisdiction, etcetera).

Regarding the term “pastor,” the early Baptists laid the foundation that the lead pastor, presbyter, or elder of any Baptist church is the bishop as they all mean the same thing, and are not subject to some diocesan authority allegedly *lording* over them.

This can be found in the earliest Baptist confessions of faith, including the National Baptist Convention USA’s statement of faith—though some who allegedly have doctorate degrees in the Baptist institutions of education have assumed otherwise and denounced Baptists using the term “bishop.”

Near the end of his life, convinced that his self-baptism was invalid—as he indeed, baptized himself—Smyth applied with the Mennonites for membership. He died while waiting for membership, and some of his followers became Mennonites. Thomas Helwys and others kept their baptism and their Baptist commitments, so as to further what they saw as the true Protestant Reformation apart from an apparent partial reformation in England.

The current movement in Christianity known as the Baptists—part of the Protestant Reformation—stems from John Smyth before he apparently fell into some form of vanity and added additions contrary to Scripture because of their personal or private interpretation which has become a tenet of this tradition, such as disallowing the reading of the Bible as written earlier. Baptists, after Smyth’s death, rejected the name Anabaptist when they were called that by opponents in derision. It is to be noted that that as late as the 18th century, many Baptists referred to themselves as “the Christians commonly—though falsely—called Anabaptists.”

Prior to Smyth’s death, and as he was looking to the Mennonites, Helwys and a dozen or so others began to formulate the earliest Baptist confessions of faith as mentioned prior. This “confession” (or, technically, creed) became the twenty-seven articles in *A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland* (1611). And, in the next twelve months or so, Helwys wrote three more important works: an argument for *Arminianism* (*A short and plain proof, by the word and works of God, that God’s decree is not the cause of any man’s sin or condemnation: and that all men are redeemed by Christ; as also that no infants are condemned*), a polemic explaining his differences with the Mennonites, and, most importantly; *A Short Declaration on the Mystery of Iniquity*, a critique and apocalyptic interpretation of the Roman papacy as well as criticisms of Brownism and Puritanism, and possibly the first ever English book defending the principle of religious liberty.

For Helwys, religious liberty was a right for everyone, even for those he disagreed with; this is a tenet which some have unfortunately casted aside, being that Baptists have struggled for separation of church and state in all sectors of their existence—from education, to the courts, and so forth, and not enforcing the Ten Commandments upon children of multiple or no faiths as the Anglicans and Roman Catholics did to others throughout the centuries prior to their own inner-reformations.

Despite the obvious risks involved, Helwys and twelve Baptist émigrés returned to England to speak out against religious persecution. They founded the first Baptist congregation on English soil in Spitalfields, east end of London. Early in 1612, Helwys was able to publish *A Short Declaration of the Mistery of Iniquity*. He wrote an appeal to King James I arguing for liberty of conscience and sent him a copy of his book.

“The King,” Helwys said, “is a mortal man, and not God, therefore he hath no power over the mortal soul of his subjects to make laws and ordinances for them and to set spiritual Lords over them.” The king—indeed, the namesake for the *King James Version*—had Helwys thrown into Newgate Prison, where he had died by 1616 at about the age of forty. Helwys’ presentation copy of *A Short Declaration of the Mistery of Iniquity* is still preserved in the Bodleian Library as of 2022.

Thomas Helwys is honored with the Helwys Hall at Regent’s Park College, Oxford. Thomas Helwys Baptist Church, in Lenton, Nottingham is named after him. Broxtowe Hall, the Helwys’ family home, is now only a remnant but in nearby Bilborough Baptist Church there is a simple plaque to his memory.

By 1638, John Spilsbury—a Reformed clergyman—helped to continue formulating the Baptist Christian tradition according to a better understanding of Scripture per Calvinistic thinkers. One important way he helped was by promoting the strict practice of believers’ baptism by immersion. According to Tom Nettles, professor of historical theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, “Spilsbury’s cogent arguments for a gathered, disciplined congregation of believers baptized by immersion as constituting the New Testament Church gave expression to and built on insights that had emerged within separatism, advanced in the life of John Smyth and the suffering congregation of Thomas Helwys, and matured in Particular Baptists.”

In 1643, Spilsbury published *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme*, which he reissued in a second edition in 1652, “Corrected and enlarged by the Author.”

In 1644, under the from John Spilsbury, the *1644 Baptist Confession of Faith* was published to help solidify the then-Reformed Calvinistic faith of some Baptists and establish standards for accountability in spite of individual and congregational autonomy.

Later in 1677, 1688, and 1689 another Baptist confession would be published based off the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646) and the *Savoy Declaration* (1658) which are adopted by Presbyterians and some Congregationalists. The 1689 confession reflected Baptist perspectives on church organization and baptism.

In 1646, Spilsbury issued *God's Ordinance, The Saints Privilege*, with a discussion of what he perceived as the two Scripturally-based ordinances of the Christian Church: believers' baptism and the Lord's Supper. Benjamin Coxe transcribed and enlarged the second part of this work. They were termed ordinances, because Baptists disagreed with the historic belief of baptism and the Lord's Supper or Eucharist having spiritual effects on the soul, but were regarded as mere symbols. It should be noted that as Baptists are diverse, some have restored sacramentalism according to the movement's early Anglican background.

In the American colonies, Baptists soon appeared among settlers from England. Theologically, all Baptists insisted that baptism was the key observance and should not be administered to children too young to understand the true meaning of baptism; this contrasts with the majority of mainstream Christendom that baptized infants and children, and catechized them up to their adulthood leaving little to no room for their churches' declining memberships.

Some of these Baptists in the American colonies were Arminian in line with early Baptist beliefs—holding that God's saving grace is available to everyone; and others followed Reformist orthodoxy, which said grace was available only to the so-called predestined elect.

Roger Williams and John Clarke—his compatriot in working for religious freedom—have been credited with founding the Baptist faith in North America during the colonial era. Roger Williams was a Puritan minister, theologian, and Particular (Reformed) Baptist who founded the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations. He was a staunch advocate for religious freedom, separation of church and state, and fair dealings with Native Americans, and he was one of the first abolitionists.

Williams was expelled by the Puritan leaders from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for spreading “new and dangerous ideas,” criticizing the British Monarchy, and he established the Providence Plantations in 1636 as a refuge offering what he called “liberty of conscience.”

In 1638, he founded the First Baptist Church in America, also known as the First Baptist Church of Providence. He was a student of Native American languages, and he organized the first attempt to prohibit slavery in any of the British American colonies. His associate, John Clarke, was a physician, Baptist minister, co-founder of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, and author of its influential charter. He pastored the congregation God assigned to him until his death in 1676. He left an extensive will, setting up the first educational trust in America.

In 1764, leading Baptist ministers—the Reverend James Manning, the Reverend Isaac Backus, the Reverend Samuel Stillman, the Reverend Morgan Edwards and the Reverend John Gano established—The College in the English Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, the seventh institution of higher education in the original thirteen colonies, with the specific goal of serving as a sanctuary for Baptists who were not widely welcomed at the other institutions which were closely associated with the congregationalist churches (Harvard College, Yale College, and the College of New Jersey) and the Church of England (the Academy of Philadelphia, King's College and the College of William and Mary).

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the First and Second Great Awakenings increased Baptist church membership in the United States, and throughout American history numerous Baptist churches, conventions, and denominations were created and abolished. Historic conventions include the American Baptist Churches USA (Northern Baptist Convention, originally the Triennial Convention), the Southern Baptist Convention, the National Baptist Convention USA, the National Baptist Convention of America International, Progressive National Baptist Convention, National Missionary Baptist Convention of America, the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Alliance of Baptists, and countless others gauging what it meant to be Baptist. In addition to the formation of many Baptist bodies, the Baptist movement has spread through missionary efforts across the globe.

As it has spread throughout the globe, the Baptist movement has however sustained statistical stagnation and serious, multi-generational decline across multiple continental sectors through persistent disputes on some Baptists becoming as legalistic and popish as the churches their founders separated themselves from; some Baptists intertwining politics and religion in attempts to support Christian nationalism and theocracy; some Baptists pushing away those desiring proper, secular education with a proper basis of understanding Biblical Hebrew and Koine Greek by stating they don't need educated clergy and laity, thereby promoting hardline anti-intellectualism which they also accuse Pentecostals of; some Baptists blaspheming the Holy Spirit by denoting His activity as unnecessary and not present in the current Age of the Church some Baptists prioritizing toxic individualism by the enshrined personal and church

autonomy of one another; and other issues including sexuality and marriage—particularly amongst Arminian or General Baptists, as marriage nor sexuality was mentioned in the very first Baptist confession of faith.

Nonetheless, the Baptist Christian tradition—in spite of its greatly highlighted issues alongside others including Anglicans, Catholics, the Orthodox, and so forth—has indelibly marked humanity with a Christian basis for the separation of church and state; individualism; and civil rights.

In part, this why Baptists and Methodists have soared as children coming out of their mother Anglican Church in Europe and North America—though, the Methodists prioritizing outward holiness; preaching against the use of wine which has been drunken by the prophets and apostles of old, including Jesus Himself at the Last Supper, and thereby themselves through Thomas Welch creating grape juice thousands of years later; and supporting women's ordination as elders and bishops from their very foundation in contrast with the historic mandate of female deacons and apostles existing solely, as there has been a lack of concrete information regarding female bishops or actual, functioning presbyters.

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