

# BAPTIST PRINCIPLES BEFORE THE RISE OF BAPTIST CHURCHES.

BY

Professor H. WHEELER ROBINSON, M.A.



“The great object,” said one of the most distinguished students of history in the last generation, “in trying to understand history, political, religious, literary, or scientific, is to get behind men, and to grasp ideas.”\* That is the aim of these earlier pages. Other chapters of this book will show the work of the men of the past, and its issue in the Baptist Churches of to-day. But we do not know these men until we realise their convictions, and penetrate to the permanent principles of thought and conduct underlying those convictions. There is the more need to do this, because a Baptist Church, by its presentation of Believers’ Baptism, claims more emphatically than any other to be built up of convinced men. This ideal it stands for, and offers as its characteristic contribution to the religious life of the world. As members of a Baptist Church, therefore, even more than of any other, we ought to grasp the ideas that justify its existence, chief amongst which is the necessity of personal conviction in religious life.

Baptists are sometimes regarded as Congregationalists plus a harmless eccentricity. There is a certain plausibility in this attitude towards Believers’ Baptism, because the earliest Baptist Churches of England had their origin in the “Congregationalism” of the day, and because the mode of Church government remains the same for these two divisions

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\* Lord Acton, *Letters*, p. 6.

of the Church Universal. Yet there is a real difference in their tone and temper, not to be ignored by those who have any inner familiarity with both, and often impressing the impartial observer. Here are two examples of the impression made:—"The strong effort made to maintain unity of doctrine is an essential characteristic of the Baptist, as compared with the Congregationalist position, and throughout the whole body the teaching is very definite . . . . the Baptist community is virile beyond any other Christian body . . . . the Baptist Churches are a great spiritual force in London; and the religious influence they exert is very deep . . . . compared with that of the Congregationalists it is far more intense."\* By the side of this opinion of a social observer of to-day, we may place that of a well-known historian, with his eye turned on the origin of the two denominations:—"The weakness of Congregationalism lay in the fact that it was too purely a protest. The more logical and consistent system of the Anabaptists [*i.e.*, English Baptists] contained all that the Congregationalists strove for, and went further . . . . The aim of the Baptists is higher than that of the Congregationalists, who discarded the idea of a visible Church that they might affirm the rights of separate congregations. The Baptists, on the other hand, affirmed the right of freedom from outward control not as an object in itself, but as a condition necessary for the discharge of their duty to create a visible Church of perfect purity."† These words are quoted, not to minister to Baptist self-complacency, but to rebuke that cheap and tasteless witticism which sometimes describes the difference between the sister denominations as one of little or much water. The difference is a real one, whatever we may think of its value. But, granting its existence, the cause can lie only in that assertion of Believers' Baptism, which characterises Baptists.

\* Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*. Third Series. Vol. vii., pp. 121-128.

† Creighton, *Historical Lectures and Addresses*, pp. 54, 64. I am indebted to Dr. Whitley for this reference, and for suggestions as to some other points in this chapter.

It is sometimes urged, even by those who are in general sympathy with the ideas for which Baptists stand, that this emphasis is both unspiritual and unnecessary.\* It is said to be unspiritual because it lays stress on an external act, whereas the essence of Nonconformity is "the spirit which exalts life above organisation."† We might fairly answer that the name we bear, which does throw an external rite into prominence, was first given us by others (*i.e.*, in the form "Anabaptist"), and not chosen by ourselves, any more than the name "Quaker" or "Methodist." Moreover, this criticism should properly come from those only who have discarded the external rite of baptism in *any* form (*e.g.*, the Society of Friends), and not from those who retain it in a mode and meaning for which no New Testament basis can be found. But we can answer from a higher level when we have once grasped the idea which underlies this rite and justifies its continuance, the idea of a spiritual change wrought in human nature by the Spirit of God in Christ. The New Testament describes this change as a "new birth," *i.e.*, a new beginning of life.‡ But it is not like natural birth, an event of which the new life is itself unconscious; it is not wrought against a man's will, but with it, and that surrender of the will is called "faith."§ Both aspects of this experience find expression in Believers' Baptism, which implies both a profession of faith and a change of heart. This is the meaning of baptism to a Baptist; he values the external rite just as far as it means this, and no further. To emphasise Believers' Baptism is to emphasise *this*; how, then, can it be called an unspiritual emphasis, if the spiritual is to be allowed to find expression in material signs at all? The same answer really meets the second part of the criticism, *i.e.*, that the testimony of separate Baptist Churches to such spiritual truths is unnecessary. If these truths are important—and surely they are of paramount importance in the Gospel of

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\* *E.g.*, by Clark, *History of English Nonconformity*, pp. 302f.

† *Op. cit.*, p. 3.

‡ John iii. 3f.; cf. Gal. vi. 15.

§ John i. 12, vii. 17; cf. I. Ep. John v. 1: "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is begotten of God."

the New Testament—the clearest testimony to them is also necessary. Members of other Christian Churches may, and often do, hold Baptist convictions as earnestly as do members of Baptist Churches. But individual conviction on the part of some does not make unnecessary collective witness towards all. Both criticisms, in fact, spring from the idea that baptism is, after all, a little thing. But it is not a little thing in its spiritual meaning to the Baptist, any more than it is a little thing in its sacramental meaning to the Anglican. It is a little thing only to those who have first made it little.

The Baptist Churches, therefore, claim to exist as the representatives of a still living idea, of fundamental importance in Christian life. If they lose it themselves, they become its melancholy monument; if they keep it, it will keep them. Here we shall review: (1) the principles implied in the Believers' Baptism of the New Testament; (2) the process by which it came to be abandoned by the Church; (3) the witness of history to these principles apart from Believers' Baptism; (4) the return to Believers' Baptism, culminating in the Baptist Churches of to-day.

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## I.—THE PRINCIPLES IMPLIED IN BELIEVERS' BAPTISM.

The curious spectator of the distinctive rite of a Baptist Church, who knows nothing of the history of Believers' Baptism, usually regards it as a peculiar and unattractive innovation on Christian use and wont. He wonders why the highly inconvenient practice of immersion has replaced the aspersion or sprinkling with which he is probably familiar; he may also notice that more or less grown-up people are being immersed, and may ask why children are excluded from the supposed benefits of the rite. Tell him that what he has seen is no innovation, but a simple return to primitive Christian custom, and let him convince himself by enquiry