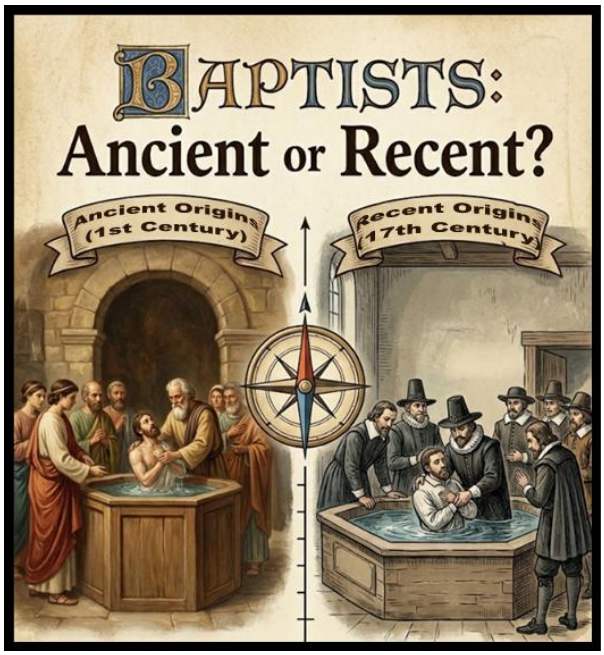
Baptists: Ancient or Recent?



By
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Prior to the late 1800's nearly all Baptist historians attested to the antiquity of the Baptists. However, with the publication of an article on Baptists for *Johnson's Encyclopedia* in 1896 by Dr. William Whitsitt, a great controversy broke out within Baptist circles regarding the actual origins of the Baptists. Dr. Whitsitt took issue with the ancient origin of Baptists and wrote: "The earliest organized Baptist Church belongs to the year 1610 or 1611…"

Since Dr. Whitsitt was, at the time, the President of *The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*, his article stirred up much controversy among Southern Baptists. The debate became more contentious when Whitsitt admitted to writing a series of articles under a pseudonym in several non-Baptist journals arguing that Baptists did not practice immersion until 1841. For example, in an editorial in *The Independent*, a Congregationalist weekly, on September 2, 1880, Whitsitt wrote:

> *The baptism of Roger Williams is affirmed by Governor Winthrop to have taken place in March, 1639. This, however, was at least two years prior to the introduction of the practice of immersion among the Baptists. Up to the year 1641 all Baptists employed sprinkling and pouring as the mode of baptism. …We are inclined to believe that no case of immersion took place among the American Baptists before the year 1644.*

Then, on September 9, 1880, in the same Congregationalist publication, and again under a pseudonym, Whitsitt wrote:

> *The proofs which are demanded by Zion's Advocate of our recent assertion that immersion was not practiced in England before a period as late as 1641 are so abundant that one is embarrassed to know where to begin. …It was not until the year 1644, three years after the invention of immersion, that any Baptist confession prescribes "dipping or plunging the body in water as the way and manner of dispensing the ordinance" (London Confession of 1644, Article 40)….Happily for us, however, the above assertion is confirmed by the authority of Edward Barber, the founder of the rite of immersion among the Baptists.*

At the time, Whitsitt's position was very much in the minority among Baptists. However, over the next several decades, his claim that Baptists originated around 1610-1611 and did not introduce immersion until 1641 began to gain traction among Baptists and non-Baptists. Gradually it overtook the age-old position that Baptists have existed since the first century and have practiced immersion from that time as well. Now, it has gained such a hold that most church historians, including Baptist, take for granted that Baptists and immersion originated in the 17th Century.

Consider for examples the following from the Wikipedia article on Baptists, viewed on September 21, 2021:

> *Baptists form a major branch of Protestant Christianity distinguished by baptizing professing Christian believers only (believer's baptism, as opposed to infant baptism), and doing so by complete immersion (as opposed to affusion or aspersion).*
>
> *Modern Baptist churches trace their history to the English Separatist movement in the 1600s, the century after the rise of the original Protestant denominations. This view of Baptist origins has the most historical support and is the most widely accepted.*
>
> *Historians trace the earliest Baptist church back to 1609 in Amsterdam, with John Smyth as its pastor. Three years earlier, while a Fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge, he had broken his ties with the Church of England. Reared in the Church of England, he became "Puritan, English Separatist, and then a Baptist Separatist," and ended his days working with the Mennonites.*
>
> *Another milestone in the early development of Baptist doctrine was in 1638 with John Spilsbury, a Calvinistic minister who helped to promote the strict practice of believer's baptism by immersion.*

Despite the inroads and popular acceptance of the 1600's view on the origin of Baptists and immersion, many still hold to the traditional view of ancient origins. This view holds that Baptists have existed since the first century, though not always under the name Baptist. They have been called Anabaptists, Waldenses, Valdesians, Albigensis, Paulicians, Donatists, Montanists, Novations, and others down through the centuries. The common denominator of these Baptist groups, however, has not been their names but rather their common beliefs and practices. Chief among those beliefs and practices historically have been:

- **B**iblical Authority
- **A**utonomy of the Local Church
- **P**riesthood of the Believers
- **T**wo Ordinances of the Church:
  1. Baptism (by immersion)
  2. Lord's Supper
- **I**ndividual Soul Liberty
- **S**aved and Baptized Church Membership
- **T**wo Offices of the Church:
  1. Pastors
  2. Deacons
- **S**eparation of Church and State

These beliefs and practices are rooted in the New Testament. However, nonbiblical beliefs and practices, such as extra-biblical authorities, denominational hierarchies, sacraments, infant baptism, baptismal regeneration, and the union of church and state gradually found their way into churches, eventually displacing biblical beliefs and practices. In fact, Paul warned of this in Acts 20:28-30:

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.

Nevertheless, Baptist historians have been able to trace a history of biblical, New Testament based churches down through the centuries. Consider the following statements:

"The Baptist movement in history has always been back to the New Testament ... then it was about 150 A.D. that the first Baptist protest was raised by the Montanists". —W. A. Jarrel, "Baptist Church Perpetuity or History" (1894)

"Baptists have a history of which they need not be ashamed--a history of noble names and noble deeds, extending back through many ages, in which the present generation well may glory. From the days of John the Baptist until now, a great army of these witnesses for the truth, and martyrs for its sake, has illumined and honored the march of Christian history. The ages since Christ have known no purer, nobler lives, no braver, more faithful witnesses for the Gospel of Christ, no more glorious martyrs for its sake, than many of those who honor us by being called "our fathers in the faith". —Edward T. Hiscox, "New Directory for Baptist Churches" (1894)

"Baptists have, with one voice denied any connection with the Romish apostasy, and claimed their origin, as a church, from Jesus Christ and the apostles". —D. B. Ray, "Baptist Succession, a Handbook of Baptist History" (1912)

"The intention of this little work is to show that from the time of Christ, beginning while He was on earth, the church of Christ has not failed to exist down to this present year of 1926. We have chosen this line of history as being the most simple and direct; Jerusalem, Rome, Britain (now Wales), to the North American colonies...Baptist church perpetuity is a proven fact." —M. M. Munger, "Baptist Churches from Jerusalem to North America" (1926)

Also consider the names of some prominent Baptist histories:

"History of the Welsh Baptists, From the Year Sixty-Three to the Year One Thousand Seven Hundred and Seventy" by Jonathan Davis (1835)

"Baptist History: From the Foundation of the Christian Church to the Close of the Eighteenth Century" by John Mockett Cramp (1852)

"A Concise History of Baptists from the time of Christ their Founder to the 18th Century" by G. H. Orchard (circa 1855)

"The Trail of Blood: Following the Christians Down Through the Centuries Or The History of Baptist Churches from the Time of Christ, Their Founder, to the Present Day" by J. M Carroll (1931)

Just to prove that the idea of the Baptists ancient origins is not a figment of hopeful Baptist imaginations, read what some non-Baptists have said:

"Were it not that the Baptists have been grievously tormented and cut off with the knife during the past twelve hundred years, they would swarm in greater number than all the Reformers." —Roman Catholic Cardinal Stanislaus Hosius, President of the Council of Trent (1524)

"The modern Baptists formerly called Anabaptists are the only people that never symbolized with the Papacy." —Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1727)

"Before the rise of Luther and Calvin, there lay secreted in almost all of the countries of Europe persons who adhered tenaciously to the principles of modern Dutch Baptists." —Lutheran historian Johann Lorenz von Mosheim (1693-1755)

"We have now seen that the Baptists, who were formerly called Anabaptists ... were the original Waldenses ... On this account, the Baptists may be considered as the only religious community which has stood since the days of the apostles, and as a Christian society which has preserved pure the doctrines of the gospel through all ages. The perfectly correct external and internal economy of the Baptist denomination tends to confirm the truth, disputed by the Roman Church, that the Reformation brought about in the sixteenth century was in the highest degree necessary, and at the same time goes to refute the erroneous notion of the Catholics, that their denomination is the most ancient." —Dutch Reformed Doctors A. Ypeij and J. J. Dermout (1819)

"The Baptists were by far the most numerous of the sectaries. Their enemies...were fond of tracing them to the anarchical German Anabaptists of the Reformation; but they themselves claimed a higher origin. They maintained, as Baptists still do, that in the primitive or apostolic church the only baptism practised or heard of was an immersion in water; and they maintained further that the baptism of infants was one of the corruptions of Christianity against which there had been a continued protest by pure and forward spirits in different countries, in ages prior to Luther's Reformation, including some of the English Wyclifites, although the protest may have been repeated in a louder manner, and with wild admixtures, by the German Anabaptists who gave Luther so much trouble." —David Masson, "Life of John Milton" (1876)

"I should not readily admit that there was a Baptist Church as far back as A.D. 100, although without doubt there were Baptists then, as all Christians were then Baptists." —Methodist historian, John Clarke Ridpath (circa 1894)

"Of the Baptists it may be said that they are not reformers. These people, comprising bodies of Christian believers known under various names in different countries, are entirely distinct and independent of the Roman and Greek churches, have had an unbroken continuity of existence from Apostolic days down through the centuries. Throughout this long period they were bitterly persecuted for heresy, driven from country to country, disfranchised, deprived of their property, imprisoned, tortured and slain by the thousands, yet they swerved not from their New Testament Faith, Doctrine and Adherence." —William C. King (ed.), "Crossing the Centuries" (1912)

Personally, I believe that the preceding comments should be enough to overturn the modern view that Baptists are of recent origin. However, I want to share another bit of Baptist history from Wales and is corroborated by both the Bible and secular history. It is the unusual story of a Welsh King named Caradoc (Caractacus), his son Llyn, his daughter Gladys, and a Roman soldier named Pudens.

The key to this story is found in an oft overlooked verse near the end of the Apostle Paul's last epistle, 2 Timothy 4:21, where he recognizes a number of individuals. Paul says, "Do thy diligence to come before winter. Eubulus greeteth thee, and Pudens, and Linus, and Claudia, and all the brethren."

According to both Welsh and Roman history, King Caractacus was betrayed and taken captive by the Romans and brought to Rome along with his family. In *The Origin and Early History of Christianity In Britain*, Dr. Andrew Gray writes on pages 14-16:

> *"CARACTACUS: From those valuable historical documents, the Welsh Triads — written originally in the British dialect — it appears that Caràdoc (Caractacus) was betrayed and delivered up to the Roman Commander by Arègwedd, about A.D. 51, and taken to Rome. Brân (Brennus) his father, Llyn (Linus) his son, Eurgan (Eurgain) a daughter, and Gladys (Claudia) a second daughter, were all taken to Rome likewise, and there detained seven years as hostages [along with their father] Caractacus.*

Notice that Llyn was also called Linus and that Gladys was also called Claudia. This gives us the identity of the Linus and Claudia mentioned by Paul in 2 Timothy 4:21. They were Welsh nobility; the children of King Caractacus.

According to Cornelius Tacitus, in *The Annals, Chapter XII*, written 109 AD, Caractacus was brought before Emperor Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus. Emperor Claudius ruled Rome from AD 41-54. Tacitus records that Caractacus defended himself saying:

> *Had my moderation in prosperity been equal to my noble birth and fortune, I should have entered this city as your friend rather than as your captive; and you would not have disdained to receive, under a treaty of peace, a king descended from illustrious ancestors and ruling many nations. My present lot is as glorious to you as it is degrading to myself. I had men and horses, arms and wealth. What wonder if I parted with them reluctantly? If you Romans choose to lord it over the world, does it follow that the world is to accept slavery? Were I to have been at once delivered up as a prisoner, neither my fall nor your triumph would have become famous. My punishment would be followed by oblivion, whereas, if you save my life, I shall be an everlasting memorial of your clemency.*

Later, while living in Rome, Caractacus' daughter married a Roman senator named Pudens, who had served as a soldier in Britain. In fact, the Roman poet, Martial, in an ode to the new couple alluded to this when he wrote, 'Claudia, the fair one from a foreign shore, Is with my Pudens joined in wedlock's band."

Now, there is some controversy as to when Linus, Claudia and Pudens became Christians. Some historians say that they were led to Christ by the Apostle Paul when he was a prisoner in Rome. However, others believe that they first heard the gospel message from Joseph of Arimathaea in Britain. They write that Joseph was involved in the tin trade and visited some of his mines in Britain a few years after the resurrection of Jesus Christ where he met Caractacus and his family.

Jonathan Davis touched on this subject in his 1835 book, *History of the Welsh Baptists, From the Year Sixty-Three To the Year One Thousand Seven Hundred and Seventy*. He writes:

> *By what means the Christian religion was first introduced into Britain, is a matter which has often engaged the pens of historians, but whose records do not always agree. The tradition that Joseph of Arimathea was the first who preached the gospel in Britain, at a place called Glastenbury, the*

wicker chapel built for him by the Ancient Britons, and his walking-stick growing to a plumtree, might be worthy of the attention of those who can believe any thing. However, we are willing for those who believe that the good man who buried our blessed Redeemer also proclaimed salvation in his name to our forefathers, to enjoy their own opinion. That the apostle Paul also preached the gospel to the ancient Britons, is very probable from the testimony of Theodoret and Jerome ; but that he was the first that introduced the gospel to this island cannot be admitted; for he was a prisoner in Rome at the time the good news of salvation through the blood of Christ reached this region. That the Apostle Paul had great encouragement to visit this country afterwards, will not be denied. When we consider the particular inducement he might have from Pomponia, Grecina, and Claudia Ruffina, the saints in Caesar's household; the former the wife of Aulus Plautius, the first Roman governor in Britain, and the latter a Briton born, the daughter of Caractacus the Welsh king, whose husband was Pudens, a believer in Christ…

Whether any of the apostles ever preached in Britain cannot be proved, and though it is generally believed that Joseph of Arimathea was the first that preached the gospel in that part of the world, we must confess that we are not positive on that subject. The fact, we believe, is this: the Welsh lady, Claudia, and others, who were converted under Paul's ministry in Rome, carried the precious seed with them, and scattered it on the hills and valleys of Wales; and since that time, many thousands have reaped a most glorious harvest. They told their countrymen around, what a dear Savior they had found; they pointed to his redeeming blood, as the only way whereby they might come to God…

How rapidly did the mighty gospel of Christ fly abroad! The very year 63, when Paul, a prisoner, was preaching to a few individuals, in his own hired house in Rome, the seed sowed there is growing in the Isle of Britain. We have nothing of importance to communicate respecting the Welsh Baptists, from this period to the year 180, when two ministers by the names of Faganus and Damicanus, who were born in Wales, but were born again in Rome, and there becoming eminent ministers of the gospel, were sent from Rome to assist their brethren in Wales. In the same year, Lucius, the Welsh king, and the first king in the world who embraced the Christian religion, was baptized.

Davis goes on to relate an incident which occurred around 600 AD which proves these early Welsh Christians were Baptists:

Infant Baptism was in vogue long before this time in many parts of the world, but not in Britain. The ordinances of the gospel were then administered exclusively there, according to the primitive mode. Baptism by immersion, administered to those who professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Welsh people considered the only baptism of the New Testament. That was their unanimous sentiment as a nation, from the time the Christian religion was embraced by them in 63, until a considerable time after the year 600. As soon as any of them renounced paganism during that period, they embraced Christianity, not as corrupted by the Romans, but as founded by Christ and his apostles This we assert to be a fact that cannot be controverted; for the proof of which, we refer our readers to the dispute between Austin and the ministers in Wales, sometime after the year 600. When Austin came from Rome to convert the Saxons from paganism to popery. Having succeeded in a great measure in England, he tried his experiments upon the Welsh; but was disappointed. At this period the Welsh were not ignorant pagans like the Saxons, but they were intelligent, well-informed Christians. It*

is true, they had no national religion; they had not connected church and state together; for they believed that the kingdom of Christ is not of this world.

However, they agreed to meet with Austin, in an association held on the borders of Herefordshire. Austin said he would propose three things to the Welsh ministers and messengers of the different churches of the Principality. First, he proposed infant baptism. He was immediately answered by the Welsh, that they would keep this ordinance, as well as other things, as they had received them from the apostolic age. On hearing this, Austin was exceedingly wroth, and persuaded the Saxons to murder one thousand and two hundred of the Welsh ministers and delegates, there present; and many more afterwards were put to death, because they would not submit to infant baptism. The leading men being dead, king Cadwalader and the majority of the Welsh people submitted to popery; at that time more out of fear than love. Those good people that did not submit, were almost buried in its smoke; so that we know but little of them from that time to the Reformation.

Much more could be written on this subject. Hopefully, though, enough information and history have been provided to make it clear that Baptists are not of recent origin. Though their names may have changed from time to time, they clearly go back in their beliefs and practices to that of the early Apostles of the first century. Attempting to make the Baptists a recent offshoot of the Protestant Reformation detracts from the purity of their doctrine and suggests that their unique beliefs and practices are corruptions of what Paul and the other Apostles taught and practiced. It also bolsters the false claim of the Roman Catholic Church to be the Mother Church and that all other churches are wayward descendants of the one true church.

In other words, there are essentially two streams of church history. One stream is the Roman Catholic stream. Protestant and Orthodox churches share this stream. The other stream is the Baptist stream. The Baptist stream represents the history of true New Testament churches from the first century down to the present. Rejecting the ancient origins of the Baptists, then, is an attempt to dry up this stream leaving only the polluted, adulterated Catholic stream.

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