CRITICAL ISSUES RELATING TO THE ORIGIN OF THE BAPTISTS

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Consideration of Baptist history, especially in the area of Baptist origins, is more than an academic exercise. Such consideration has theological implications as well.

2. In the present study attention will focus on three theories of Baptist origins, consider briefly the methodology and sources of some Baptist historians, and examine the two basic denials which are maintained by the adherents of the theory which teaches that Baptist churches originated in England, when certain people left English Separatist (i.e. Protestant) churches to establish what became the direct forefathers of modern Baptist churches. Time will be devoted to a critique and evaluation of the methodology of these historians, as well as their basic denials. A concluding assessment and admonition will be given. (Note: most of the information contained in the present document was extracted from a thesis which the author produced as a requirement for the M.A. degree from Baylor University in 1966. Complete documentation and much more information is contained in that document.)

3. Hopefully each of us will be more appreciative of the complexity and importance of this subject as a result of the study. You are welcome to study this in as much detail as possible! "The sky is the limit!"

II. THEORIES OF BAPTIST ORIGINS

1. The question of Baptist origins often has precipitated controversy among Baptists. Proposed solutions have occasionally radically modified and influenced Baptist ecclesiology.

2. According to Robert G. Torbet, three classifications of Baptist theories of origin have emerged in Baptist historiography (Torbet, HB, 18-21). a. the successionist theory, b. the Anabaptist spiritual kinship theory, and c. the English Separatist descent theory.

3. Successionist theories--the oldest and most generally accepted theory of Baptist origins--that Baptists have had a continuity of existence since the days of Jesus' ministry.
   a. Based primarily on Scripture: Daniel 2:44 ("a kingdom which shall never be destroyed") and Matthew 16:18 ("I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it").
   b. Four variations: (1) church succession, (2) apostolic succession, (3) baptismal succession, (4) spiritual succession (Barnes, 100-103).
   c. The first three maintain that "a valid church must validly authorize a minister in order that a baptism may be valid" (Barnes, 102).
   d. William Morgan Patterson has concluded that (most) successionist writers wrote from an apologetical and polemical approach and that their conclusions were based upon a priori reasoning and not scientific methodology (M. Patterson, 8-10, 91-107).

4. Anabaptist spiritual kinship theory--"held by those who trace a spiritual relationship of Baptists through the long line of Anabaptist sects, such as German, Dutch, and Swiss..."
Anabaptists, the Waldensians and Petrobrusians, the Henricians, the Novatians, and the Donatists" (Torbet, HB, 19).

a. Such a view precludes the necessity of organic continuity in either baptisms or ordinations for baptism to be valid.


5. **English separatist descent theory** (cited hereafter as ESD)--the chief affirmation is that only those to whom the name Baptist was actually applied should be so considered and that "the Baptists originated with certain English Separatists who were congregational in polity and who had come to consider believers' baptism alone as valid according to the Scriptures" (Torbet, HB, 20).

a. This interpretation is compatible with the view that only the proper candidate (professed believer) and proper purpose (public testimony) are necessary for valid baptism.

b. Logically, therefore, ESD is a denial of each of the other two theories--i. a denial of any **organic identification** or connection between Baptists and Anabaptists, and ii. a denial of **theological identification** of Baptists with Anabaptists.

c. Representatives include: William Heth Whitsitt, George Augustus Lofton, Henry Clay Vedder, John Howard Shakespeare, Robert George Torbet, and Winthop Still Hudson.

6. Attention to ESD will relate directly to the other two theories and should provide answers to many of the questions which need to be considered.

**III. METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES OF ESD HISTORIANS**

1. All of the representative ESD historians have maintained, either in word or principle, that the Baptist historian, as any historian, must approach his subject, if possible, without a priori theological presuppositions.

2. Consequently, they endeavored to use "primary" sources dating back to the time in question, not just a series of quotations of (later) secondary sources.

3. The question facing the historian is one of history, based upon historical records; historical facts cannot be changed by theology. Most of these men maintained that their interpretation of history did not affect or change their theological convictions.

4. They affirmed also that their studies had been objective, having a scientific, critical methodology. What is termed ESD theory of Baptist origins, they maintained, meets the requirements and tests of such methodology.

**IV. DENIAL OF ORGANIC IDENTIFICATION OF BAPTISTS WITH ANABAPTISTS**

1. ESD historians have consistently denied any organic connection between Baptists and Anabaptists--either Continental or English.

2. They have contended that Baptists originated from certain seventeenth century English Separatists who were congregational in polity. They were the natural product of the Bible study and teaching of the Reformation.

3. General Baptists (Arminians) originated with John Smyth (who baptized himself by affusion!?) and Particular Baptists (Calvinists) descended from John Spilsbury who "revived" believer's baptism by single immersion.

4. Of course, such would logically preclude any possibility of organic connection between Baptists and Anabaptists.

5. John Smyth and the General Baptists
a. In 1609 or 1610 an English Anabaptist church was organized in Holland and later evolved into an Arminian Baptist movement in England, subsequently denominated General Baptist Churches.

b. Led by John Smyth, these people became closely attached to Waterlander Mennonites. "The Mennonites, who opposed infant baptism, persuaded Smyth [sic] that he had never been baptized" (Whitsitt, UC, I, 489). Probably in October, 1608, "Smyth took the lead, and, after performing the ceremony of his own case, proceeded to baptize the others. The mode of this baptism, it is believed, was by sprinkling, since that had now become the general mode in England. Certainly there was no other mode among the Mennonites, and sprinkling had by this time become almost universal in every section of Holland and Germany" (Whitsitt, UC, I, 489).

c. The Mennonites did not like this action and said that he had not authority to baptize himself or anyone else, because he had no valid succession of baptism or ordination.

d. Smyth was "won over" by the Mennonites and accordingly sought membership in their church in January or February 1609. Finally in 1615, three years after his death, his followers were admitted into church membership by the Mennonites.

e. About ten of his members, led by Thomas Helwys and John Murton, organized their own church, which shortly thereafter returned to London and established itself at Newgate (Torbet, HB, 35-36).

f. "This was the first Baptist church on English soil for whose origin there is historical proof" (Torbet, HB, 37). By 1626 four additional churches had been organized, having approximately 150 members. These churches became known as General Baptists because of their belief in the General Atonement.

g. ESD historians assert that these churches all practiced sprinkling or affusion, not immersion, for baptism until much later, no earlier than the early 1640s!

h. The following conclusions, therefore, are set forth by ESD advocates:

i. Since they originated their own baptism, English General Baptists which sprang from Helwys' church could not have had organic succession with Anabaptists. They were connected neither by baptism nor ordination with either Continental or English Anabaptists.

ii. Smyth's later desire to join the Mennonites did not affect in any way the lack of organic continuity between Helwys and the Anabaptists.

iii. Any historical continuity between Baptists and Anabaptists must be found with Baptists other than the General Baptists who originated from John Smyth.

iv. Even if organic continuity could be proved, the successionist interpretation would not suffice since the Mennonite baptism was by affusion.

6. John Spilsbury and the Particular Baptists

a. "The origin of the Particular Baptist Denomination must be dated . . . some time after 1633, and not later than 1638" (Shakespeare, 183).

b. Particular Baptists "represented a further step in the movement of English Independency (Congregationalism) towards its logical conclusion in believer's baptism. The origin of Particular Baptist churches in England may be dated from about 1638. Their antecedents are to be found in a non-Separatist or Independent congregation which had been organized in 1616 at Southwark, London, by Henry Jacob, who had emerged from Puritanism after six years as a refugee in Leyden under the influence of John Robinson" (Torbet, HB, 40-41).

c. Information concerning the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey church at Southwark is contained in two chief sources, the Stinton Papers or Repository, containing the Jessey Records and
so-called Kiffin Manuscript, and the "king's Pamphlets" (see the Appendix for copies of excerpts from these documents).

d. This Southwark church has often been called "the Mother Church of the Independents," although it eventually became a Baptist church in 1645. Five or six churches which evolved from it became Baptist.

e. The separations arose chiefly from differences on the question of baptism: "The baptismal controversy passed through three distinct and successive stages, which must be noted with the utmost care. The first question was as to the administrator, or, who should baptize; the second, as to the subject, or, who should be baptized; the third, as to the mode, or how should baptism be administered" (Shakespeare, 178-79).

f. In 1633, during Lathrop's pastorate, certain members became convinced that baptism by Anglican clergymen was invalid and accordingly were dismissed to form a separate church. Samuel Eaton joined them and was rebaptized along with others.

g. In 1638, "the second stage of the baptismal controversy was reached. A further dismissal took place from the Jacob Church of some who, rejecting infant baptism, joined with Mr. Spilsbury, and were 'of the same judgment with Samuel Eaton'" (Shakespeare, 182-83).

h. The third stage in the controversy was reached in January, 1642, when the people with Spilsbury and Eaton became immersionists. Some were thus baptized for the third time.

i. In order to clarify their theological stand, fifteen ministers, representing seven London Calvinistic Baptist churches, signed a confession of faith in 1644, the first London Confession. Incorporated in the document were articles which prescribed believer's baptism by single immersion. Thus, for the first time in modern English church history, a group of churches made this stipulation. Spilsbury was among the signers (Torbet, HB, 43).

j. ESD proponents conclude, on the basis of these developments, Calvinistic Baptists must look to English Separatism for their origin, rather than to either Continental or English Anabaptism.

i. Particular Baptists were English Separatists before they advocated believer's baptism.

ii. They baptized by affusion before they adopted the practice of immersion.

iii. A three step process led to their formation: denial of Anglican baptism, denial of infant baptism, denial of affusion or pouring.

iv. Such developments, thus, preclude any Particular Baptist succession from Apostolic days.

k. Several "monuments" have been set forth pointing to the change from sprinkling to immersion in the 1640s. A few were as follows:

i. The Fortieth Article of the London Confession (1644) marked the first time that an English Confession of Faith prescribed "dipping or plunging the body under the water" to believers (Whitsitt, Question, 34-48).

ii. Instructions were given about the meaning of the word "immersion" and about modest clothing, because of the novelty of the act (Whitsitt, Question, 91).

iii. The name "Baptist" first came into use shortly after 1641 (Whitsitt, Question, 92-93).

iv. The baptismal controversy which began shortly after 1641 agrees with the Stinton Repository (Whitsitt, Question, 93-95).

v. Before the 1640s no instances can be found where churches were divided on the
issue of immersion. Even after 1640, some churches remained "open" Baptist churches, having both immersed and unimmersed members (Whitsitt, Question, 95-97).

vi. The alarm that some felt in England shortly after 1641 regarding the effect of immersion upon the health of the people submitting to it indicates similarly the novelty of the act (Whitsitt, Question, 97-98).

vii. The coining of the word "rhantize" during this period and its early usage in English exclusively was apparently necessary when sprinkling was first begun to be denied as scriptural baptism (Whitsitt, Question, 98-100).

viii. Prior to 1641 not one case of adult immersion has been indicated among anti-pedobaptists--especially between 1611 and 1641 (Lofton, EBR, 239-49).

ix. Every Baptist church in England in 1640-1641, as well as every Baptist preacher and Baptist members, originated from the Puritans or other pedobaptists as the records now stand (Lofton, EBR, 239-49).

x. In 1644 apparently the first jail sentence for the practice of immersion in England took place in the county of Suffolk; Laurence Clarkson was judged guilty of the specific offense of teaching and practicing immersion as baptism (Lofton, EBR, 239-49).

7. ESD advocates argue that Baptist origins are not to be sought elsewhere.
   a. Although at least ten Baptist churches in England have traditions which place their origins earlier than either Smyth's or Spilsbury's churches, such tradition, however, has not since been corroborated by seventeenth century Baptist writers.
   b. No documentary evidence has been produced.

8. The exact connection between early American Baptists (Roger Williams? and John Clarke) with the English Baptists cannot be established definitely, in subsequent years such connection existed.

V. DENIAL OF THEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION OF BAPTISTS WITH ANABAPTISTS

1. The main argument pertains to the Baptists' persistent denial that they were Anabaptists. They repudiated the term.

2. ESD advocates maintain that the theology of Continental Anabaptism was vastly different from that of English Baptists. The argument of ESD advocates--whether the complete denial of Shakespeare and Hudson or the milder approach of Torbet--is, therefore, that even the respective theologies of Baptists and Anabaptists demonstrate that they were two distinct movements.

VI. SUMMARY AND CRITIQUE

1. Methodology and Sources--These historians have attempted to be objective and utilize the modern, critical method of historiography. In many instances they were successful, for they relied heavily on "primary" sources, instead of relying on tradition.

2. While one must admire their advocating and generally using a scientific methodology, he must also note that they have been subject to the same type of errors that have been characteristic of earlier successionist historians. Their errors fall into three general areas:
   a. Errors pertaining to sources--ESD advocates have occasionally used doubtful sources, especially some of Whitsitt's use of "secondary" sources. i. Albert H. Newman said that "de Hoop Scheffer has had a certain polemical interest in showing that early English
Baptists practiced affusion" (Newman, in Lofton, Review, 178). Similarly, Dr. Martin Dexter was "known to have been intensely partisan, . . . and the comparison of some of his quotations with original works . . . has not redounded to the credit of the great Congregational historian" (Newman, in Lofton, Review, 213). ii. Shakespeare, Torbet, and Hudson based their interpretation of the beliefs of Continental Anabaptism upon older works, either disregarding or being ignorant of modern studies, especially by Mennonites. Their understanding of Anabaptism was quite deficient. Torbet was also ignorant of the contents of some of the Anabaptist materials that he referred to. For example, he referred to "an Anabaptist book entitled The Sume of Scripture" (Torbet, 92-94), a book which advocated immersion as early as 1530! iii. Torbet relied heavily on Champlin Burrage, who interpreted the data differently from Torbet. Burrage could be characterized as advocating the Anabaptist spiritual kinship theory.

b. Errors pertaining to documentation--Vedder and Shakespeare generally failed to document their statements. Neither Lofton, Whitsitt, Vedder, nor Shakespeare included a bibliography in their works. They often failed to give credit to one another. One also finds errors in occasional misquoting and misinterpreting of documents.

c. Errors in terminology--several of the ESD historians were inconsistent in their usage of the word "Anabaptist," especially when referring to the early General Baptists--Smyth and Helwys. Were they Anabaptists or Baptists? Whitsitt used both terms! If they were, then these early Baptists were connected organically with the Anabaptists! Torbet apparently changed from an earlier position similar to the Anabaptist spiritual kinship to ESD between the two editions of his book (1950 and 1963). Vestiges of his earlier position continue in the 1963 book.

3. Evaluation of the denial of organic identification of Baptists with Anabaptists

a. Based on the affirmations and denials which form the hypothesis of the ESD theory, one should expect to find positively the following documented information:
   i. an account of some members leaving an English Separatist church of congregational polity to form a Baptist church--a church different only in advocating believer's baptism--both in 1609 or 1610 and in 1638;
   ii. "indubitable documentary evidence" (Vedder's and Torbet's terminology) from 1610 to a reasonable subsequent time of a succession of Baptist churches in England and later in America;
   iii. evidence that only since 1641 have Baptist doctrine and practice had the same essential features they have today--that is, chiefly evidence of the restoration of believer's immersion.

b. Negatively, one should not expect to uncover data indicating:
   i. any organic connection between Baptists and earlier groups practicing believer's baptism, especially Anabaptists; or
   ii. any church or groups practicing believer's immersion among English anti-pedobaptists before the seventeenth century, or 1641 specifically.

c. The data reveal:
   i. "3.a.i." has been documented.
   ii. Vedder and Torbet apparently assumed an organic continuity between modern Baptists (especially in America) and the immediate followers of these early English Baptists. No "indubitable documentary evidence," however, showing a succession of modern American Baptist churches from these early English churches has been produced by either Torbet or Vedder. The question of the mode of Roger Williams' baptism is debatable. With the exception of scant documentary evidence connecting
American Baptists with Smyth's church (1609) or Blunt's church (1640), the expected substantiating evidence has been presented, showing that some Baptist churches, at least, had an English Separatist origin.

d. Other data, however, which should be unexpected if ESD is valid, have been uncovered. Although no organic connection between Baptists and Anabaptists is specifically demonstrated by this unexpected evidence, existence of such evidence and the following considerations bring doubts about the validity of ESD hypothesis:

i. The denial of organic connection is chiefly an argument from silence as is the denial of traditions among Baptist churches claiming earlier origins.

ii. Even the statements of the Stinton Repository are too sweeping.

iii. ESD is not the only theory consistent with present known facts, for other hypotheses also can explain the unexpected evidence.

iv. The widespread popularity of the Sum of Scripture indicates that baptism by immersion was not non-existent among anti-pedobaptists in sixteenth century England. Versions existed in English, German, and French. Believer's immersion, therefore, may have been secretly practiced in England in the late sixteenth century although conclusive proof is lacking.

v. Consideration of Leonard Busher (1614) shows that at least one General Baptist was aware of the NT doctrine of believer's immersion prior to the 1640s. Arguments asserting his advocacy while denying actual practice are at the most weak.

vi. The General Baptist William Britten in 1654 referred to someone who practiced immersion before 1641. He also believed in organic succession:

"And for the further information of the manner, note the word . . . [baptizo], immergo, to plunge, dip, in, or overwhelm. . . . Some object, that now there ought to be no water-baptism, neither of infants nor Beleevers, alledging that the Ordinance is ceased, for want of a succession of Administrators from the Primitive times. . . . It is hard to prove a succession of Administrators in a Gospel-way; for the enemy having power a long time, then the poore Saints durst write little to keep it upon records, when themselves were persecuted from City to City, . . . Yet I question not but there was a Church continued under the same ordinances, although obscure and hid from the eyes of the world. . . .

Although the right Gospel frame did not visibly appeare to the world in the time of Popery, Prelacy and Presbytery, so that great Congregations could not be gathered; yet if two or three, Christ hath promised to be amongst them, (as a Church in his name)" (Burrage, I, 378-79).

Britten also gave an account of immersion prior to 1641:

"In the yeare 1635, [sic] when Prelacy had so great power that it overtopt the tender plants, yet then I found one Baptist, who declared so much unto me, that I perceived in those tyrannical times there was a Church of Christ under his Ordinances accorinding [sic] to Gospel manner; and why not formerly under other persecutors also? for we never read of a total cutting off the Church of Christ, but a wildernesse estate, . . . yet all this while as the word was preserved, so I question not but the Saints were hidden in that measure whereby God had alwayes a Church upon the Earth, from Christ unto this present" (Burrage, I, 379).

vii. The first Baptist tract advocating immersion was written by a General Baptist (Edward Barber, 1642) (Whitsitt, UC, I, 490). Why did a General Baptist publish
the first such tract if they did not begin the practice until after the Particular Baptists had restored it?

viii The lifting of certain restrictions on printing in the early 1640s can account for the sudden surge of tracts on baptism then.

ix If Particular Baptists immediately adopted a confession in 1644 in order to show their new belief in immersion, why did the General Baptists wait until 1654? The answer might be that General Baptists had already been practicing immersion (Lumpkin, p. 191, 173, 182).

x If John Smyth and others practiced se-Baptism, and if Roger Williams either was influenced by some Baptists or came unassisted to the conclusion of believer's baptism (either by sprinkling or immersion), then other churches whose records are not extant could have had connection with earlier anti-pedobaptist groups, either Continental Anabaptists or indigenous English churches (see Torbet, HB, 28-29; Vedder, 291. John Clarke could have been a member of one of these other churches if he was a Baptist when he came from England in 1638).

e. While there is much evidence supporting the denial of organic continuity by the ESD theory, a large portion of the evidence consists in the argument from silence. A safer approach would be less dogmatic and absolute, for the lack of expected data and presence of certain unexpected data indicate certain weaknesses in the theory.

4. Evaluation of the denial of theological identification
   a. Shakespeare's denial is irrelevant to the question, for it is based upon false premises. He considered all of Anabaptism as represented by the Munster uprising.
   b. Hudson revealed prejudice again and lack of understanding of Anabaptists when he said that they "stemmed from the activity of a few university-trained humanists . . . and represented . . . [the] faith . . . characteristic of the Northern Renaissance" (Hudson, Chronicle, XVI, 171). Many scholars have rejected his absolute denials.
   c. Torbet's uncertainty and shifting of position have placed him in a most inconsistent and compromising position which cannot be logically maintained.

VII. A CONCLUDING ASSESSMENT

1. The question of historical substantiation
   a. Historical facts, hitherto discovered, substantiate some of the affirmations and denials of the theory.
   b. The historical data, however, could substantiate other interpretations, for facts not consistent with the hypothesis have been uncovered. Data needed to corroborate conclusively the theory have not been presented by ESD historians.

2. The question of methodology
   a. The historians studied have honestly searched for the truth and have sought objectivity by using acceptable, scientific methodology.
   b. They have been occasionally guilty of the same errors which characterized earlier Baptist historians.
   c. The fact that they supposedly used the same historical data and same methodology as historians of the Anabaptist spiritual kinship orientation (e.g., A. H. Newman and Champlin Burrage), and yet arrived at a different theory of Baptist origins indicates that another element has influenced their conclusions.

3. The question of theological presuppositions
   a. The denial of the successionist and Anabaptist spiritual kinship theories is in itself an
attempt to eliminate theological presuppositions which characterized earlier Baptist historians.
b. By denying a theological position, however, they have by necessity taken a theological position of their own.
c. The charge of theological bias and presuppositions is not based just on the logical necessity outlined above. Specific theological biases can be discovered in the presentations of each.
i. A. H. Newman said that Whitsitt's interpretation of Jesus' statement about building his church was the basis of Whitsitt's published statements about baptism (Newman, in Lofton, Review, 147, 161).
ii. Lofton's pro-Whitsitt, polemical writings automatically involve him with the same indictment.
iii. Vedder revealed his theological presuppositions when he devoted nearly all of the "Introduction" of his history to refuting the successionists' interpretation of Jesus' statement (Vedder, 3-10).
iv. Shakespeare's role as "one of the leading advocates of the union of all the Churches" shows an ecumenical conviction which no doubt influenced him in attempting to show the common origin of Baptists and Congregationalists (Underwood, 252).
v. Hudson's contention that Baptists must be seen as Left-wing Puritans rather than as Anabaptists "if unnecessary obstacles are not to be placed in the way of ecumenical discussions" reveals most clearly his theological bias (Hudson, RE, LV, 182-95).
vi. Torbet revealed his ecumenical bias in his speech at the 1966 American Baptist Convention (Haselden, 706).
d. The ecclesiological presuppositions delineated above probably serve as the extra elements which influenced these men in reaching conclusions different from those reached by other theories of Baptist origins. Enough theological biases are present to modify the results of even a scientific methodology.

4. The question of unique validity--does the validity of this theory necessarily preclude former theories? The conclusion is negative for several reasons:
a. The classifications consistently overlap.
b. Theological presuppositions have influenced advocates of all the theories discussed in this study.
c. The author's hypothesis is that because of basic ecclesiological presuppositions, the question will remain, not merely historical, but also theological. Discussion and controversy based upon theories of church perpetuity will not doubt continue:
i. successionists will continue to believe that various Free Church movements historically substantiate organic perpetuity;
ii. Anabaptist spiritual kinship advocates, with emphasis upon the visible church, will continue to believe that these movements demonstrate historically that God has not left himself without witness; and
iii. English Separatist descent historians, with emphasis upon the invisible or catholic church, will continue to maintain that, since God's family has continued throughout history in all Christian movements, questions of organic perpetuity and spiritual kinship are unnecessary and irrelevant.
iv. A wise course, therefore, would be for advocates of these theories to admit that, granted the validity of their theological convictions, their individual theory of
Baptist origins only approximates historical fact.

v. Theological convictions will (with our present historical data) be the determining factor in the matter.

VIII. BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS CITED


