Why We Are Not Protestants

Edited by Leon King

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was a mixed blessing, part bitter and part sweet. Baptists rejoice in many truths often associated with the Reformation, such as the sovereignty of God in all things, justification by faith only, and exalted views of the worship of God. We have benefited from many outstanding writings which have come through Protestant authors. On the other hand, some aspects of the Reformation have always been a thorn in the side of Baptists. Some of these issues are so foundational that we cannot sacrifice them on the altar of unity in order to link up with Protestants today.

Of course these non-negotiable issues deserve a more lengthy treatment than we can give here. We shall simply attempt to consider briefly six areas of difference which distinguish Baptists from Protestants. We do not wish to misrepresent any Protestants by an unfair caricature painted with a broad brush. Nor do we dare to imply that all Protestants are lost - - any more than we would dare to say that all Baptists are saved!

1. Our view of Scripture. While most everyone claims to believe in the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice, nevertheless the Protestant emphasis on creeds tends to subtly undermine this position. B.B. Warfield called the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF hereafter) ...*the final crystallization of the elements of evangelical religion...* Baptists believe such language should only be used to describe the Bible alone. While Baptists do use confessions of faith as a summary of biblical truth, we never consider anything other than Scripture to be our standard. When in debate, we would rather say, *The Word of God says...*, than to say, *My confession says...*. We have no creed but the Scriptures.

The WCF itself contains wording in its first chapter which goes too far for us as well:

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.

This *deducing from Scripture* has left the door open to superimpose the system of covenantalism on the Scriptures. Then Scripture is interpreted by the covenant, rather than the covenants being interpreted by the Scripture.

2. Our view of the covenants. Protestantism sees one covenant, with various administrations. Baptists see distinct covenants. As Gal. 4:24-26 says, *...for these are the two covenants...* We see something new in the new covenant (or new testament). *Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life* (2Cor. 3:6). *And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance* (Heb. 9:15).

Though we do believe that the Old Testament saints were saved by the pure grace of God, without works, we do not equate the old economy (a national, ethnic, socio-politico-religious one) with the new (a spiritual one without national or social distinctions and without political ambitions). While we see a continuity between the old and new covenants, we do not see an identity. There are significant differences between the Old and New Testament, though God's purposes of grace operate in each.

Therefore, we see the New Testament as the final word on the Old Testament, and not vice versa. Unlike both covenantalists and

dispensationalists, we stand in the New Testament and interpret the Old in light of the New.

3. Our view of the church. Protestantism carried over from its roots in Roman Catholicism a sacralist mentality. If one were a member of society he must therefore be a member of the "church" also. As the line of distinction between church and state became blurred, infant baptism emerged. These "churches" came to be composed intentionally of both the regenerate and the unregenerate. Efforts were made to justify this error on the basis of the Old Testament rite of circumcision.

Baptists take the New Testament position of regenerate church membership. There are simply no instances at all in the New Testament of infant baptism, nor of the baptism of anyone known to be an unbeliever. We are grateful that some honest Protestants admit this. Those who claim otherwise must argue from silence.

We see the mission of the church as primarily spiritual, not social nor political. We are more interested in proclaiming saving grace than promoting common grace. We are but strangers passing through, citizens of a heavenly kingdom. Our message has never been *Save this generation*, but rather *Be saved from this generation* (see Acts 2:40).

Moreover, believing that each church is autonomous, we reject all forms of church hierarchy. In things spiritual, there is no higher court on this earth than the local assembly. Major issues in the churches of the New Testament were decided by the vote of the members, not by a board of elders, presbytery, synod, bishop or archbishop.

We reject the Protestant concept of a universal invisible church and the ecumenism which naturally springs from that concept. God certainly knows all those who are His and eternally views us as one in Christ, but in our

experience we will not be one assembly or church until all God's elect are gathered together in glory. Although every believer is in God's family and kingdom, the church of the New Testament is a local, visible assembly.

4. Our view of the ordinances. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are Christ's symbolic ordinances given to His churches, not to individuals, families, nor society at large. Baptism is for believers only; the Lord's Supper is for baptized believers only. Since we do not recognize infant sprinkling as Scriptural baptism, we obviously must "fence from the table" those who have not been immersed as believers. Since we are only responsible for the baptism of our membership, and since we cannot invite to the table those over whom we do not have the authority to discipline, we further restrict the table to members of our local assembly only.

These ordinances are symbolic and in themselves have no efficacy to save, nor impart grace. However, the WCF states, *There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other*. In his commentary on the WCF, A.A. Hodge states, ...*through the right use of the sign, the grace signified is really conveyed* (p. 329). Again Hodge states, *The sacraments were designed to "apply" - i.e., actually to convey to believers the benefits of the new covenant* (p. 331). Commenting on baptism, the WCF says, ...*by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost...* To Baptists, this language sounds alarmingly similar to baptismal regeneration.

5. **Our view of conversion**. In light of the above, we must state unequivocally that we believe that salvation is a direct operation of the Holy Spirit of God. No saving grace is conferred by means of family or national privileges. The children of believers are just as depraved and lost as are the children of unbelievers. The promise of Acts 2:39 which says, *For the*

promise is unto you, and to your children, does not end there! It continues, *and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.*

God saves sinners individually, not families collectively. Infant "baptism" and the covenant-child concept obscure the truth about regeneration and conversion.

6. Our view of church history. It may come as a surprise to contemporary Protestants and Roman Catholics to learn that Baptists did not originate at the Reformation. The more ancient historians, even those opposed to Baptist principles, admitted this; the more modern writers tend to ignore, dismiss or deny it. There is abundant evidence to affirm that evangelical churches, sound in the essentials of the faith, known by various names, existed in Europe from the days of the Apostles down through the middle ages. The Waldensian Confession of 1120 is an example of sound gospel belief during those times.

These Anabaptists, as they were deridingly called by their foes, were bitterly persecuted by the official pseudo-Christianity which apostatized under Constantine. These valiant people were our forefathers in the faith. (Of course, we do not identify with some truly heretical sects who were erroneously classified with them.) Many have forgotten that some of Calvin's theology was shaped by an Anabaptist cousin. *Calvin acknowledged...that he too "was at one time a Waldensian."* (Leonard Verduin, *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*, p. 199.)

When the Reformation came, these Anabaptists at first breathed a sigh of relief, but quickly discovered that the Protestants could persecute them just as severely, resorting to the same church-state model that Rome had brutally enforced for centuries. It is a forgotten fact of U.S. history that the first amendment to the Constitution, guaranteeing full religious freedom, came into being against the wishes of many colonial Protestants. Virginia Baptists, especially John Leland, were responsible for this amendment.

C.H. Spurgeon well summarized our position:

We believe that the Baptists are the original Christians. We did not commence our existence at the reformation, we were reformers before Luther or Calvin were born; we never came from the Church of Rome, for we were never in it, but we have an unbroken line up to the apostles themselves. We have always existed from the very days of Christ, and our principles, sometimes veiled and forgotten, like a river which may travel under ground for a little season, have always had honest and holy adherents... (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 1861, p. 225.)

...[W]*e, known among men, in all ages, by various names, such as Donatists, Novatians, Paulicians, Petrobrussians, Cathari, Arnoldists, Hussites, Waldenses, Lollards, and Anabaptists, have always contended for the purity of the Church, and her distinctness and separation from human government. Our fathers were men inured to hardships, and unused to ease. They present to us, their children, an unbroken line which comes legitimately from the apostles, not through the filth of Rome...* (*ibid*., p. 613.)

Twenty years later, Mr. Spurgeon reiterated,

Long before your Protestants were known of, these horrible Anabaptists, as they were unjustly called, were protesting for the "one Lord, one faith, and one baptism." No sooner did the visible church begin to depart from the gospel than these men arose to keep fast by the good old way. ...At times ill-written history would have us think that they died out, so well had the wolf done his work on the sheep. Yet here we are, blessed and multiplied... (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 1881, p. 249.)

In conclusion, let it be said we are grateful to God who has shown us these things. We rebuke any fellow-Baptist who may be swollen with pride because of his knowledge of these truths. If God has given us these truths, we must receive them with humility.

We admit that we may not speak for all who call themselves Baptist today. Some will no doubt disagree with us. We can only say that these are issues in which our consciences are bound and upon which we cannot compromise.