

A Page from the History of Baptist Churches

by Bill Crews

During the early years of what history has called “**the Protestant Reformation Movement**” (the 16th and 17th centuries), one of the most prominent differences between “**Catholicism**” and “**Protestantism**” was the matter of understanding the Scriptures. While the Roman Catholic Church maintained that the individual could understand the Scriptures only with the help of the Catholic clergy (and therefore could not and should not even try to understand on his own), the various Protestant groups insisted that each individual had the right to go to the Scriptures for himself, believing that they could be understood without the help of some so-called “**official**” interpreter. They also regarded the Scriptures as authoritative and sufficient.

In the early part of the 17th century the people who became known as “**Baptists**,” driven by principle and conscience, made some remarkable changes. Like most religious groups of the times, they were practicing infant “baptism,” and they were “baptizing” by sprinkling. As they began to exercise their new-found freedom to study the Scriptures for themselves, they could find no instance of or authorization for infant baptism in the New Testament. They could see that only people who had been taught and, as a result of that teaching, had become penitent believers were baptized. (Please read Mark 16:15-16; Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:37-41; 8:35-38; 18:8.) Reading honestly, each one of them who had been baptized when an infant made the decision to be baptized again — by being sprinkled, of course. Later, when they undertook a study of the action involved in baptism, they could find no scriptural support for sprinkling or pouring. All of the New Testament evidence supported immersion of the entire body in water (Matthew 3:16; Acts 8:36-38; Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:12; Hebrews 10:22; Ephesians 5:26). Even though some of them sincerely thought they had been baptized twice, once when they were not proper “candidates” and once when they thought they were, they saw now that they had never truly been baptized (immersed, washed, dipped, buried in and raised from water). So all of them were then forthwith immersed.

What would have been so very wise and commendable on their part is to have continued on with an examination of all of their teaching and practice — to make certain that they were according to the Scriptures, and correcting them when they found that they were not. In that event, they would **not** have called themselves or allowed themselves to be called, “**Baptists**”; they would **not** have continued to teach that all inherit the guilt of Adam’s sin and are born lost, that salvation by faith means by faith “**alone**,” that baptism is not essential to one’s forgiveness but rather declares that the one baptized has already been forgiven, that baptism puts one into a local congregation, that those who are baptized must have the vote or approval of the members of a local congregation, that an organized congregation has a plurality of deacons and one pastor who can be hired or fired by the deacons, that the New Testament authorizes the use of mechanical instruments in worshiping God, and a host of other things. It would be refreshing indeed if they were still as open, as honest, and as willing to change as they were in their early history.

Are you familiar with “your” church’s history, with its doctrines, with its practices? Are you familiar with the contents of the Bible? Are you diligently searching the Bible to learn what it does and does not teach? Do you want to be certain that your own faith and practice are the result of following God’s revealed word?

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