Berean Bible Institute
Fall Semester 2026
Church History I
Pastor Phil Erickson, Instructor

Lecture One – Introduction

Memory Verse – Matthew 16:18

"And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

Introduction

The word church or churches is used 114 times in the Bible, mostly referring to a local, visible assembly of believers. It is important for us as students of New Testament Church History to accurately identify the Scriptural churches and church leaders from history by what they believed and what they practiced. Not every great Christian from history was a Baptist, but since the time of Christ there have been people and churches that have closely resembled the pattern that was established in the New Testament. In this course, we will get a glimpse of some of the churches and prominent church leaders since the time of Christ that have followed this Scriptural blueprint. We will also study the other wonderful men and women of God who may not have been true to every Baptist distinctive but were certainly used by God in a great way to help fulfill the Great Commission and influence Baptist people.

"But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." (1Timothy 3:15)

Baptists Acrostic

B The Bible is our Final Authority. (2 Timothy 3:16, 17)

A The Autonomy of the Local Church (Colossians 1:18 – Christ is the Head of each church.)

P The Priesthood of Each Individual Believer. (1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 4:14 - 16)

T Two Ordinances [The Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23 – 26), and Baptism (Matthew 28:19 – 20; Matthew 3:13 – 17; Acts 8:36 – 39)]

I Individual Soul Liberty (Romans 14:12 – we have free will)

S Saved Membership only. (Acts 2:41, 47)

T Two Officers [the Pastor (or Bishop) and Deacons – 1 Timothy 3]

S Separation of Church and Government (The government has no authority over the ministry of the church.)

Definition of a New Testament Baptist Church

We believe that a Scriptural church is a visible assembly of baptized believers, covenanted together under New Testament law for the purpose of carrying out the Great Commission. This church is a self-governed, independent body having Christ as the head, the Holy Spirit for its guide, and the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice. The only scriptural offices of the local church are the bishop (or pastor) and deacons. The two ordinances of the local church are baptism and the Lord's Supper. On all matters of membership, policy, government, discipline, or benevolence, etc., the will of the local church is final.

Four Theories about Baptist Origins

1 English Separatism

This view suggests that Baptists came out of the Separatist movement in England which advocated separation from the Church of England. Advocates of this view believe that the first Baptist Church was started in Amsterdam in 1609 by John Smyth. This view would consider Baptists another branch of Protestantism.

> Note – John Smyth (1570 – 1612) was an Anglican priest who left the Church of England when he became convinced that it was filled with doctrinal error. Smyth believed in only two offices within the church and became convinced that baptism was for believers only. He baptized himself and 36 others, including Thomas Hewlys. He was eventually persecuted for his "Separatist" beliefs and was forced to flee to Amsterdam. He eventually united with Mennonites and was banished from the Baptist Church that he started. Though he died a Mennonite, he is (falsely) known by some as the first Baptist in Europe.
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> Thomas Helwys later returned to England and became an outspoken proponent of religious liberty and started what is believed by some to be the first Baptist church in England. We will learn more about these men later in the course.

2 Anabaptists of Europe

This view holds that the Baptists have their beginnings in the Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth century which ultimately lead to the present-day Amish and Mennonites.

3 Successionism

This view is sometimes called the perpetuity theory and teaches that Baptist churches exist today in an unbroken chain or continuity from the time of Christ and John the Baptist. This view explains that though these churches were called by different names (Donatists, Montanists, Waldenses, Paulicians, etc.) throughout history, they were, in fact, Baptist churches. This view is sometimes referred to as Landmarkism or The Trail of the Blood theory. Proponents of this theory were James Robinson Graves, Ben Bogart, and James Milton Carroll. Churches that espouse this view see the Baptist Churches as the only true churches and would not recognize any other church or church leader as legitimate.

4 Continuation of Biblical Teachings and Distinctives

This view is a more moderate version of Successionism and teaches that throughout history there have always been churches that have been distinctively Baptist in faith and practice, though it is impossible in most cases to trace the origin of these churches in succession back to Christ. This view encompasses all the above views, at least partially. Historically, it can be proven that since the time of Christ, baptistic churches that have either held to all or most of the Baptist distinctives were in existence. Yet, there are some Baptist churches that can trace their roots to the English Separatists or Anabaptists of Europe. We will see that, in America, there were Baptist Churches that broke away from Congregationalism, as well as from other Reformed churches. Spurgeon was said to have espoused the Successionism view, but his belief more closely resembles Continuation.

> "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 underground for a little season**, have always had honest and holy adherents. Persecuted alike by Romanists and Protestants of almost every sect, yet there has never existed a government holding Baptist principles which persecuted others; nor I believe anybody of Baptists ever held it to be right to put the

consciences of others under the control of man. We have ever been ready to suffer, as our martyrologies will prove, but we are not ready to accept any help from the State, to prostitute the purity of the Bride of Christ to any alliance with the government, and we will never make the Church, although the Queen, the despot over the consciences of men".[1]

The two main differences between Successionism and Continuationism are that an unbroken chain cannot be proven; and, Continuationism acknowledges the legitimacy of some non-Baptist churches, and even other Baptist churches that are not the same in belief and practice.

John Christian, in his, *A History of the Baptists* states

> The New Testament recognizes a democratic simplicity, and not a hierarchical monarchy. There is no irregularity, but a perpetual proclamation of principles. There is no intimation that there was not a continuity of churches, for doubtless there was, but our insistence is that this was not the dominant note in apostolic life. No emphasis is put on a succession of baptisms, or the historical order of churches. Some of the apostles were disciples of John the Baptist (Joh. 1:35), but there is no record of the baptism of others, though they were baptized. Paul, the great missionary, was baptized by Ananias (Act. 9:17-18), but it is not known who baptized Ananias. Nothing definite is known of the origin of the church at Damascus. The church at Antioch became the great foreign missionary center, but the history of its origin is not distinctly given. The church at Rome was already in existence when Paul wrote to them his letter. These silences occur all through the New Testament, but there is a constant recurrence of type, a persistence of fundamental doctrines, and a proclamation of principles. This marked the whole apostolic period, and for that matter, every period since that time.
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> This recurrence of type is recognized even where error was detected. The disciples desired Jesus to rebuke a man who walked not with them (Mar. 9:40), but this Jesus refused to do. The church at Corinth was imperfect in practice and life. The Judaizing teachers constantly perverted the gospel, and John the Evangelist, in his last days, combated insidious error, but the great doctrines of the atoning work of Christ, conversion and repentance, the baptism of believers, the purity of the church, the freedom of the soul, and the collateral truths, were everywhere avowed. At times these principles have been combated and those who held them persecuted, often they have been obscured; sometimes they have been advocated by ignorant men, and at other times by brilliant graduates of the universities, who frequently mixed the truth with philosophical speculations; yet; always, often under the most varied conditions, these principles have come to the surface.
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> Baptist churches have the slenderest ties of organization, and a strong government is not according to their polity. They are like the river Rhone, which sometimes flows as a river broad and deep, but at other times is hidden in the sands. It, however, never loses its continuity or existence. It is simply hidden for a period. Baptist churches may disappear and reappear in the most unaccountable manner. Persecuted everywhere by sword and by fire, their principles would appear to be almost extinct, when in a most wondrous way God would raise up some man, or some company of martyrs, to proclaim the truth.
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> The footsteps of the Baptists of the ages can more easily be traced by blood than by baptism. It is a 1ineage of suffering rather than a succession of bishops; a martyrdom of principle, rather than a dogmatic decree of councils; a golden chord of love, rather than an iron chain of succession, which, while attempting to rattle its links back to the apostles, has been of more service in chaining some protesting Baptist to the stake than in proclaiming the truth of the New Testament. It is, nevertheless, a right royal succession, that in every age the

[1] Charles H. Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit*, vol. 7 (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1861), 225.

> Baptists have been advocates of liberty for all and have held that the gospel of the Son of God makes every man a free man in Christ Jesus.[2]

Perhaps, we can learn much regarding the history of Baptist churches from the statements of non-Baptists.

Mosheim, the Lutheran historian stated:

> "The true origin of that sect which acquired the denomination of Anabaptists by their administering anew the rite of baptism to those who came over to their communion and derived that of Mennonites from the famous man to whom they owe the greatest part of their present felicity, is hidden in the depths of antiquity, and is, of consequence, extremely difficult to be ascertained."
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> "Before the rise of Luther and Calvin, there lay concealed, in almost all the countries of Europe, particularly in Bohemia, Maravia, Switzerland, and Germany, many persons, who adhered tenaciously to the following doctrine, which the Waldenses, Wickliffites, and Hussites, had maintained, some in a more disguised and others in a more open and public manner; viz. 'That the kingdom of Christ, or the visible church which He established upon earth, was an assembly of true and real saints, and ought therefore to be inaccessible to the wicked and unrighteous, and also exempt from all those institutions which human prudence suggests, to oppose the progress of iniquity, or to correct and reform transgressors.'"[3]

Zwingly, the Swiss reformer from sixteenth century said: *"The institution of the Anabaptists is no novelty, but for 1300 years has caused great trouble in the church."*

Cardinal Hosius, in the Council of Trent, stated: "If you will have regard to the number, it is like that in multitude they would swarm above all other, if they were not grievously plagued, and cut off with the knife of persecution. … there be none now, or have been before time for the space of these thousand and two hundred years, who have been more cruelly punished."[4]

John Clark Ridpath, doubtlessly the greatest historian the world has ever produced and a Methodist by denomination stated: "I should not readily admit that there was a Baptist church as far back as 100 A.D., although without doubt there were Baptist churches then, as all Christians were then Baptists."[5]

Sir Isaac Newton stated: "The Baptists are the only body of known Christians that have never symbolized with Rome."[6]

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[2] John T. Christian, *A History of the Baptists: Together with Some Account of Their Principles and Practices* (1922; Kindle edition, Delmarva Publications), loc. 419–445.

[3] Johann Lorenz Mosheim, *An Ecclesiastical History, Ancient and Modern*, trans. Archibald Maclaine, cent. 16, sec. 3, pt. 2, chap. 3.

[4] Stanislaus Hosius, *The Hatchet of Heresies*, trans. Richard Shacklock (Antwerp: Aegidius Diest, 1565), 44–49; original Latin in Stanislaus Hosius, *Opera Omnia* (Venice: Franciscus Francisci, 1632), 203 (De haeresibus nostri temporis).

[5] W. A. Jarrel, *Baptist Church Perpetuity* (Dallas: Published by the author, 1894), 58–59.

[6] Joshua Winslett, "Quotes from Non-Baptists on Baptist Succession," *March to Zion*, August 22, 2020, https://marchtozion.com/quotes-from-non-baptists-on-baptist-succession/.