



LUTHERAN

looks at...

BAPTISTS

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INTRODUCTION

When Jesus commissioned Christians in Matthew 28:20 to do his work and to spread his name, he told us to teach people to obey “everything I have commanded you.”

This passage is the reason for this book. We want our teachings to agree with what Jesus taught. His Word is our only guide. So when we encounter teaching that runs counter to our teaching, we must go to the Word of God and find out what indeed is Jesus’ teaching and what is not.

God also tells us, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15). When we are called on to discuss Bible teachings with members of other churches, the Lord wants us to do this with gentleness and respect.

Gentleness and respect come when we are fair and precise in our understanding of what other churches believe. When Lutherans look at the Baptist church, they want to see it as it truly is and not as they imagine it to be. That is why most of the references to Baptist church teachings have come directly from statements of belief issued by the Baptist church.

Charles Ryrie, a professor at Dallas Seminary, has said: Whenever you state the case of someone disagreeing with you, imagine that your opponent is sitting in the front row of the class. State his position in such a way that he would say, “Yes, that is what I believe.” And then you can take issue with the position.¹

The person who quoted Ryrie went on to say, “It is dishonest to characterize someone else’s position in a way that person

would disavow. Being precise and fair, even with differing viewpoints, also adds to our credibility.”²

It would be impossible in the scope of a book like this to look at every belief held by the Baptists. Much of what Baptists believe are teachings Lutherans believe as well. When a Baptist leader says, for instance, “The Lord measures the gift by the love and sacrifice it involves,”³ Lutherans agree wholeheartedly. But there are differences of belief between Baptists and Lutherans, and this book will deal with these important differences of belief.

We do not intend to be negative. We believe that Scripture must speak whenever differing beliefs are evaluated. We believe that when Scripture does speak, we must believe it and accept it, interpreting its words in the most natural sense. We believe that Scripture must interpret Scripture. As confessional Lutherans, we have expressed our agreement with those who formulated our doctrines and wrote them down in what we call *The Book of Concord*. What they did helps us to know what the Scripture truly says. We are convinced, however, that all our evaluations of Baptist and Lutheran teachings must begin and end with Scripture.

George Truett, at the Baptist World Congress in 1939, said: We profoundly rejoice in our spiritual union with all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity and truth. We cherish them as brothers in the saving grace of Christ, and heirs with us of life and immortality. We love their fellowship, and maintain that the spiritual union of all true believers in Christ is now, and will ever be, a blessed reality.⁴

We Lutherans believe the same thing! When other believers tell us that they believe that Jesus is their Savior, we rejoice. We know we will spend eternity with those people. We rejoice when we hear Baptists say:

Baptists are a people who profess a living faith. This faith is rooted and grounded in Jesus Christ who is “The same yesterday, and today, and for ever.” Therefore, the sole

authority for faith and practice among Baptists is Jesus Christ whose will is revealed in the Holy Scriptures.⁵

May this truly be so!

Lutherans can also very much appreciate that Baptists really know their Bibles. We could hope and wish that all Lutherans would have the same zeal to know and memorize Scripture as many Baptists have. Baptists sometimes carry dog-eared Bibles with them and know where to find the Bible passages they need. Surely the Lord who says, “You diligently study the Scriptures . . . that testify about me” (John 5:39) is glad when he sees this. In this regard Baptist believers can in many instances be an inspiration to Lutheran believers.

But there are differences among Christian churches, and there are differences between the Lutheran church and the Baptist church. Hence this book. We don’t point to these differences happily. We wish it were different. But it isn’t, and our churches are divided on a number of important teachings of the Bible. We as Lutherans don’t find our identity in differing with other Christians. We find our identity in doing what Jesus tells us to do: “. . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20).

In this spirit the following 11 chapters present the major differences between the Lutheran church and the Baptist church. In studying these chapters, the reader will want to become even more convinced that what we teach as Lutherans is what Jesus has commanded his church to teach and profess.



1 BAPTIST BEGINNINGS

Some Baptists today are uncomfortable with being called Baptist. They say, “It isn’t really important—or even good—to be identified as Baptist and to become a part of Baptist history.” They would prefer to simply be called Christians who happen to be attending a church called Baptist. To some degree Lutherans would agree with this sentiment. Luther wasn’t in favor of his followers being called Lutherans. Most confessional Lutherans today want to be identified as Christian first and Lutheran second. Surely the Christian part is the most important.

Yet the title “Lutheran” is also important. Lutherans want to know what their church teaches. Understanding its history helps them do this. To some degree where we’ve come from as a church affects who we are and how we express ourselves in matters of faith. This is also true for Christians in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). The very name contains a reference to history. WELS Lutherans also identify who they are because so many other Lutheran bodies have not been true to historical Lutheranism and the name itself. So those who examine a church must also look at its history in order to understand how that church became what it is today.

Most churches will acknowledge that they started at some point in time. Most Baptists will acknowledge this to be true in their case also. But there are a few Baptists who claim the Baptist church goes all the way back to Adam! That claim seems pretty far-fetched even to most Baptists.

There is a larger group, however (which is still relatively small), that claims that the Baptist church goes back in one long, uninterrupted line to the time of Jesus and John the

Baptist. There is the so-called *III Theory*, according to which the Baptist church goes back to Jesus, Jordan, and John the Baptist. It is, perhaps, natural that the church that calls itself Baptist would like to see the greatest of baptizers as its founder. Recall that the Roman Catholic Church claims that Matthew 16:18 supports the papacy and an unbroken line of succession to the present pope. Those who hold to the III Theory claim that this passage also supports the Baptist church's continuing unbroken line of ordination up to the present day.⁶ Those who believe this are called Baptist Successionists.

Some say that the Baptist church has existed *in perpetuity*. A group who call themselves Landmark Baptists think of their church in this way. Their belief is called Landmarkism. The "landmark" idea comes from two passages in Proverbs that talk about landmarks: "Do not move an ancient boundary stone set up by your forefathers" (Proverbs 22:28) and "Do not move an ancient boundary stone" (Proverbs 23:10). They believe that the Lord must keep his earthly church intact if he is to be trusted to keep our salvation intact. In their belief, of course, the true Christian church is the Baptist church, specifically, the church of the Landmark Baptists. J. R. Graves, an early proponent of Landmarkism, even said, "I deny that a man is a believer in the Bible who denies this."⁷ The Landmark Baptists split from the Southern Baptist Convention in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They claimed that the teachings of the Southern Baptist Convention had been degraded to the point that they no longer reflected the teaching of Christ's true church. They accused the Southern Baptist Convention of "moving the landmarks" of the true Baptist church.

There are also many who do not want the Baptist church to be called Protestant because they do not want to give people the impression that their church was ever connected to the Roman Catholic Church. (Protestantism refers to the movement within the Catholic Church to reform the teaching of the Catholic Church and cleanse it from error.)

However, history doesn't support the idea that the Baptist church was formed already in Jesus' day. In some respects, the Baptist church had its beginning in the Reformation. Those who first espoused ideas that were later to be taught by the Baptist church were called the Anabaptists. *Anabaptist* means "rebaptizer." It refers to the distinct teaching that Baptism in the Catholic Church was not valid because one needs to make a conscious and informed decision to believe in Jesus before one can be saved and baptized. The Anabaptists developed into the Mennonites, Hutterites, Amish, and Quakers.

The Anabaptists of Reformation times were what we would call Arminian in belief. (This will be discussed further in the section of the book that talks about the teachings and beliefs of the Baptist church.) Arminianism contained a faulty belief about the powers of sinful man. Arminianism believed that people could accept God by their own decision and choice. The Baptist religion did not teach Arminianism at first but held to a more Calvinistic doctrine. Yet their insistence on believer's baptism put them in the Arminian Anabaptist camp from the start. Later on, as we will see, most Baptists gave up Calvinism in favor of Arminianism.

In 1530, Lutherans were already making statements against Anabaptist beliefs. Much of what they said against this group can also be said against the Baptists. The Augsburg Confession makes many references to Anabaptist beliefs. Fifty years after the Augsburg Confession, the Formula of Concord also spoke against the Anabaptist beliefs. Both confessions speak against what would become Baptist belief in the matters of conversion, the human nature and will, the life of love a Christian leads, and its proper place in the order of salvation. They also speak against Anabaptist beliefs about the Lord's Supper and Baptism, especially in regard to infant Baptism.

Consider the following statements from Article 12 of the Epitome to the Formula of Concord ("Errors Which Cannot be Tolerated in the Church"). These statements speak about the

matter of infant Baptism, which the Anabaptists rejected. The Lutheran Confessions reject these ideas:

That in the sight of God unbaptized children are not sinners but are righteous and innocent, and that as long as they have not achieved the use of reason they will be saved in this innocence without Baptism (which according to this view they do not need). They [the Anabaptists] thus reject the entire doctrine of original sin and everything that pertains to it.

That children are not to be baptized until they have achieved the use of reason and can confess their faith personally.

That without and prior to Baptism the children of Christian parents are holy and the children of God by virtue of their birth from Christian and pious parents. For this reason, too, the Anabaptists neither think highly of infant Baptism nor encourage it, in spite of the expressed word of God's promise which extends only to those who keep his covenant and do not despise it.⁸

These statements on Baptism define some of the major differences that exist between the Lutheran and Baptist churches.

So where and when did the Baptist church come into being?

There are two ideas as to where the present-day Baptist church actually came from, not counting the successionist idea discussed previously. Some believe it came directly from the Anabaptists as they spread from Switzerland to other countries because of persecution. Others believe that the Baptist church came from the English Separatist Movement of the 16th century, which wanted to rid the English church of all vestiges of Roman Catholicism. They were dissatisfied with the mere outward break that took place, because many of the Catholic practices and beliefs were retained by the new Church of England. You may be familiar with the Puritans. They wanted to stay with the Church of England but wanted to “purify” it of its errors. The Baptists, however, said that the answer lay in

complete separation. The best answer is that both were true. The Anabaptist influence on the Puritans and Separatists in England cannot be disputed.

The earliest Baptist church can be traced back to 1609 in Amsterdam, with John Smyth as pastor. Smyth had become a Puritan about 15 years earlier, but he and his group separated from the Church of England. Persecution followed, and Smyth and his followers fled from England to Holland. His followers rebaptized themselves and declared Christ as their Savior. This adult Baptism became the seminal event in the early Baptist church and led to its being given the name Baptist. They maintained that infant Baptism was meaningless because babies couldn't fulfill the requirement of Baptism, namely, coming to faith in Christ and performing an outward act of obedience as a sign of one's commitment to Christ.

It is unknown when the first Baptist church in America was founded. The honor seems to be split between two churches. Both Roger Williams and his colleague in working for religious freedom, Dr. John Clarke, have received credit. Williams established a Baptist church in Providence, Rhode Island, and Clarke began a Baptist church in Newport, Rhode Island.