



Influence of History of General and Particular Baptists in England on the Formation of Contemporary Baptist Doctrine

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Introduction

Many faithful Christians who try to live according to the words of the Holy Scripture and who study the Bible thoroughly do not know why the differences in the doctrine between their faith and the other Christians have appeared. The historical questions do not often bother people. Perhaps, it happens because according to the widespread understanding of the faith, everything that does not relate to the words of the Gospel cannot be important.

However, such belief is absolutely wrong, which will be proved on the example of the historical background of the Particular and the General Baptists in England. Their history proposes many vague questions for discussion, among which is the problem whether the distinction between the General and the Particular Baptists appeared due to the desire of the faithful to achieve comparative religious freedom or it was only the result of the theological dispute and division of power between the pastors. It is possible to assume that the present-day theological doctrine of the Baptist church was formed by the history of its development as both external persecutions from the side of the English government in the 17th century, and further disputes and opposition between the General and the Particular Baptists contributed to the image and views of the contemporary congregation.

The appearance of Baptists in England

When the church starts to pay more attention to the construction of the cult in the honor of itself and to the enrichment of the clergy than to their congregation, the reforms are inevitable. They might happen slowly, but even the most violent measures undertaken by the official church cannot stop this process. England and the Anglican Church are not the exceptions from this rule, which showed its veracity many times throughout history.

The beginning of the 17th century in England was marked by the increasing number of religious separatists who tried to find a new way of existence for the local church that would correspond to the most exact Biblical requirements. John Smyth was among the most prominent people who participated in the separatist movement. Because of his activity, he was persecuted by the English government and he immigrated to Amsterdam, where his congregation was among the first to create the Baptist church in 1609 when the leader decided to baptize himself.

It is logical to wonder why numerous separatist congregations that existed in England have not organized the new church according to their view of the Holy Scripture on the territory of their country. In fact, they were concordant with John Smyth in the main theological aspects, like the possibility of the faithful to baptize and the baptism in the adult age. However, they were afraid of religious persecutions from the side of the Anglican Church, and they understood that their peaceful initiative would be automatically associated with the radical movement of the Anabaptists that was at its peak. For these reasons, the first Baptist church appeared in the Netherlands.

However, the first Baptist church soon broke into two parts. Smyth joined the community of the Mennonites, and another spiritually influential person among the Baptists, Thomas Helwys, completely disagreed with the theological ideas expressed by them. As a result, a group of faithful under the guidance of Helwys



decided to return to England, where they aimed at changing the existing church rules that restricted religious freedom in their native country. The Baptists were surprised when their initiative regarding the reformation of the Anglican church was not welcomed with the deserved enthusiasm and James I, the current king, ordered to imprison all of them.

The persecution of the Baptists in England continued for many years, and the members of this community had much time to think why the official church did not like them that much. Perhaps, such struggle reassured them that the Church of England had serious problems and reasons to be afraid of them, which made their certitude in the chosen path even steadier. Their ideas seemed to be rational for some people who were not content with the current state of things in the religious life of England, and such persecution was among the most evident examples of religious slavery in the country. As a result, the number of the “separatists” increased and in 1926, there were approximately 150 General Baptists in the country. It would be impossible to state that the number was big, but the first step towards the independence from Calvinistic groupings like the much of England and the Puritan was made.

It is possible to summarize that the Baptists in England appeared because of the reactionary religious situation in the country and the absolute ignoring of the problem from the side of both religious and governmental authorities. The revolutionary ideas and the desire to spiritual freedom became the most important components of the Baptist doctrine, and the sufferings that the Baptist congregation had to overcome in that time strengthened their faith and gave them the feeling that they were on the right God blessed path.



The appearance of Particular Baptists in England

One of the strangest facts about the Particular Baptists in England is that their movement does not originate from the one of the General Baptists, as it is possible to assume on the basis of their names. Its history starts from the beginning of the English Separatist movement in 1603 when the Millenary Petition gained publicity, where Henry Jacob, a clergyman of the Anglican Church, wrote that it was the time to reform their Church. However, he was against the most radical measures that such leaders as Johnson, Barrow, and Browne had proposed, which supposed complete separation from the Church of England. In fact, the ideas expressed by Jacob were less separatist than those proclaimed by Helwys and Smyth. As a result, the Particular Baptists were more moderate in their views regarding the official state church than the General Baptists.

Among the most important distinctions between the General Baptists and the Particular Baptists was their view upon atonement. General Baptists believed in the universal atonement, while the Particular Baptists considered only the limited atonement possible. The debate over this question had been active among the separatist congregations for years. The group of the Particular Baptists underwent the great influence of the Puritans and Anabaptists during the course of these discussions. However, it would be not right to assume that the different points of view concerning the atonement divided the Baptist church into two parts. In fact, the Particular and the General Baptists emerged as independent separate groups despite their completely different doctrines. They were united by the main desire of that time – they wanted to reform the English Church that confidently alienated itself from the Bible.

It is possible to state that the greatest part of the practices and doctrines that the contemporary Baptists consider to be theirs take their roots from the Particular

Baptist movement, even though more attention in the historical researches is given to the General Baptists. With the time after numerous theological discussions regarding the two doctrines of the General and the Particular Baptists the contemporary doctrine was formed, that is, in fact, a compromise of the two branches of Baptism.

Historical Background. Beginning of the Development

The years from 1640 to 1660 can be called the period of the first active growth of the Baptist church. The newly gained religious liberty was explained by the chaos, into which the country was plunged by the Civil War and the beginning of the Commonwealth period of English history. Social disagreement increased in all spheres of life, and religion was not the exception. The Baptists gained freedom and, which was even more important, popularity among people because their doctrine corresponded to the aims of the New Model Army who fought against the old governmental order and the reign of the king. The Baptists were among the leaders in the new army, and their power helped to popularize the comparatively new confession among the soldiers.

Even though the Restoration that started in 1660 proclaimed the freedom of religious expression in England, the persecutions of the separatist congregations in general and the Baptists in particular began. The new monarch Charles II wanted every confession to swear that they were loyal to the king, otherwise, they were proclaimed to be traitors. Many Baptists were put into prison for their so-called unlawful meetings where people worshiped.

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The situation with the persecution changed for the better only in 1689, when the Toleration Act was signed during the Glorious Revolution. Even though the Baptists were not persecuted, their further development stopped for several centuries. The 18th century became the age of comparative permissiveness, of the decline of morality and social interest in religion. People preferred to focus more on science and commerce, which were considered to be the main reforming power of the Enlightenment Age. The decline of the Baptists was inevitable, especially in the big cities. It was still possible to find the communities of the Baptists in the rural areas, where the atmosphere of the air of the Renaissance era was not that concentrated.

The decline of the General and the Particular Baptists

The decline of General Baptists can be explained by several important factors. The first reason that determined their inevitable end was their change of the theological doctrine from the orthodox one into Socinianism. It leads to the significant decrease of the evangelic activity among the General Baptists, and as a result, to the loss of interest of the potential newcomers in their faith.

Another reason that did not make the General Baptists popular among the majority of people was their extreme religious practices that turned the faith into the cult and the Baptists into the sect. For example, they did not eat blood for all their lives, healed with the laying on of hands, anointed the ill members of their community with oil, they were against the singing of hymns and insisted on the pastorate that



ended only with the death of the faithful. The pastors did not receive much training, and as a result, they were not able to attract new people. The age of rationalism that was on its peak at that century in England was in the opposition to the ideas promoted by the General Baptists.

Many theologians tried to understand why the Particular Baptists had lost the main aspects of their initial doctrine, which led to the decrease of the reformation desire. The Particular Baptists did not make the same mistakes that the General Baptists had made. Their pastors were taught how to become spiritual leaders unlike their “colleagues” from the General Baptists. They did not practice heresy and they tried to fight with the popular trends of rationalism from the absolutely orthodox point of view. However, their doctrine also underwent significant changes that were completely different from the ones that the General Baptists had.

The Particular Baptists became more conservative, and many of them changed their views to hyper-Calvinism. It had a strange effect on the faithful. Their evangelistic zeal was seized by the idea of particular atonement, which was expressed by the assumption that if Jesus had died only for the sins of the group of elected faithful, there was no need to invite everyone to believe in God. It was evident that such a position concerning preaching led to a decrease in the number of new people in the Baptist community. In fact, such changes in the theological doctrine made the Baptist church close its doors for those whose hearts were willing to unite with Jesus Christ, and it was one of the main issues that had led to the inevitable decline of the Baptist faith at that period of its historical development.

The Baptist Revival

1750 was the year when the Baptist church was created for the second time, and continued to grow for the new 50 years. The New Connexion of General Baptists

was created, and the movement got the second chance to restore their influence on the minds of the ordinary people and gain power in the religious circles of England. The process of the revival started with the unification of the Leicestershire independent Baptists with the rest of the General Baptists that still existed. After that, the rest of the orthodox Baptist congregations joined them. The New Connexion became the strong religious institution that gave the faithful the feeling of being in the community of their brothers in Christ and provoked a serious evangelistic zeal.

There were 70 churches in the Baptist union by 1817, and unlike it was during the decline period, the churches started to appear not only in the rural areas but also in the towns. A year before such a union, another important step towards the popularization and spreading of the ideas of Baptism was made – the churches organized the General Baptist Missionary Society. The spiritual leaders of the new communions made everything possible to unite all separate groups of the Baptists, among which the General Baptists were one of the most persistent ones in their decline and independence. The reforms in the spheres of education of the pastors, in the preaching process, in the care for the members of the Baptist community changed the face of their church quite actively and made it more and more liberal. Such a situation was preserved until the beginning of the 20th century when the Foreign Unitarian Society and the Baptist Union divided the existing churches between them in 1916.

While the majority of the Baptist communions in England participated in the previously mentioned big organizations, the Particular Baptists remained comparatively silent and skeptical about such a revival. They condemned the unions in the betrayal of the initial doctrine and accused them of being too Arminianistic. However, despite the overall skepticism about the ideas of the Baptist Union, some of their leaders like Whitefield preached numerous times in the churches of the Particular Baptists and his words were greeted with interest and enthusiasm-



However, the most serious influence that changed the Particular Baptists in England and led them to the revival was the American one. The discussion that was started by the American theologian Jonathan Edwards about the consistency of the evangelistic endeavor with the Calvinistic doctrine led to the appearance of the more moderate form of Calvinism among the Particular Baptists. The new more moderate doctrine helped to create the image of a more liberal religious community than it used to be.

In 1785, the Society for the Support and Establishment of Sunday School where the children were taught to read the Holy Scripture was established by William Fox. Then, in 1792, the Itinerant Society appeared that aimed at organizing the Baptist church in every village and let people learn the words of God. The academies where the future pastors were trained appeared in London. Which was even more important, the spread of the words of the Gospel started not only in the most distinct areas of England. The Baptist pastors started to go overseas for missionary purposes. It resulted in the creation of the international society now called the Baptist Missionary Society and at the moment of its appearance in 1792, it was the Particular Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen. All these steps were crucial in the formation of the interest in the Baptist faith and revival of the evangelistic endeavor.



Theological Disputes

The changes in the Baptist church made it more liberal and, at the same time, led to numerous theological disputes. The growing popularity of Fullerism, which was the combination of Arminianism and Calvinism in simple words, was not welcomed by all members of the Particular Baptist community. A certain percent of them still considered themselves the strict Baptists and they were steady in their high Calvinist ideas.

Despite the fact that the majority of the Particular Baptists accepted the innovations and agreed that their responsibility in the evangelic work was not as serious as they had thought, the small group of the strict Baptists did not change their views. As the result, they formed the opposition that initially tried to change the situation with the liberation of the Baptist church, but when they finally understood that they could do nothing about it, they formed closed communions, where they lived separately from the others. Their churches were established in Yorkshire and in South Lancashire, and it gave the people who lived in those regions the examples of the most hard-working and earnest Baptists.

The Baptists from East Anglia also opposed the spread of Fullerism at the beginning of the 19th century. The main idea that led to the discussions was the so-called attempt of the Fullers to introduce the doctrine from the Armenian Church and change the particular redemption on the general redemption. The strict Particular Baptists considered such initiatives that tried to ruin the ancient rules from the Bible to be the heretical crimes against the Christian faith, God and the Holy Scripture. Such a position was expressed by the Gospel Standard church.

However, the strict Baptists were not always unified in the disputes about the Bible and their official doctrine. New associations and churches appeared, and every organization tried to find a particular detail that made them different from the rest of the Baptists. It would be problematic to assume that the discussions and the



creation of the new churches were explained solely by the extreme evangelistic zeal and the desire of the spiritual leaders to find the true words of the Gospel. The process of the creation of numerous new churches can be called the desire of the pastors to divide the power rather than the life goal to promote the Baptist faith for the glory of Christ.

The Results of the Development

It would be possible to assume that the results that the Baptists in England had achieved could be perceived differently depending upon the position of the faithful regarding the doctrine. Some of the Baptists approved of the decision when the Particular Baptists decided to form the union with the New Connexion Baptists. The others claimed that this step was one of the most horrible betrayals of the theological purity, which compromised the essence of the Baptist doctrine.

As it was mentioned earlier, the extremes to which the Baptists of different groups often went in their discussions, led to the separation of the communities and significant changes in the doctrine in general. The Baptist church constantly become more liberal, less strict, and it lost a serious part of its essential faith forming elements until now. The example of the disputes around Fullerism showed that the more the Baptists argued about the questions of faith, the weaker the church became and the chances for further decline increased correspondingly.

Constant fighting for religious freedom was one of the main ideas that the Baptists tried to pursue throughout their history. It started from the desire of John Smyth to let the Christians understand the words of the Holy Scripture in their own way, and this goal, which provoked years of persecutions, was finally achieved in the comparatively nearest past. The path of the Baptists, both the General and the Particular ones, showed that there was no objective need in the supervision of the local

church, and which was even more important, such governing from any authority over the religious practices of the congregation deprived them of the spiritual freedom and provoked revolutions. The history of the development of the Baptist church in England showed that God and the Gospel were the highest authorities for the faithful, and only their words were worth fighting for, and God would bless everyone who lived with the fire of the true love to Jesus.

Conclusion

The process of the development of the Baptist church was not easy since its beginning. It began in the 17th century in England, in the times of the Civil War and religious revolution, when people were tired of the old orders that were good only for those who had power. The revolutions in all spheres of life were inevitable and the religion was not the exception. The Church of England alienated itself from the Holy Scripture, and the desire of the faithful to serve God with all their lives led to the creation of the first Baptist communion. They tried to recover the doctrine given to the people of Israel by Jesus, but instead of gratitude, they were subjected to the persecution that lasted for decades. Even though the periods of decay were followed by the years of the revival, the history of the Baptist church was not easy, and it made it even more worthy of respect that they had managed to preserve the simple doctrine of the Gospel until the modern times.

