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A Brief History of the Baptists

by the late Norman H. Wells

The history of the ancient churches is very obscure. Much of the early recorded history was either lost or destroyed. A great part of the history that remains was changed to suit the interests of the Roman Catholic Church. All of church history has been involved in much controversy and was subject to the whims and fancies of each particular age.

In a very broad outline we want to look at the history of the church.

The First 300 Years of Church History

Jesus Christ, during His earthly ministry, founded the first church in Jerusalem in approximately the year 30 A.D.

This first church was commissioned to go forth preaching the gospel, winning the lost to Christ, baptizing and teaching the converts and establishing new churches.

On the pages of the New Testament we find the record of the growth of Christianity and the founding of many New Testament churches.

Nero, the Roman Emperor, blamed the Christians for the burning of Rome in 64 A.D. and began the first of ten persecutions the Christians were to receive at the hands of the Romans.

Despite all the persecution, Christianity grew. At the end of the first 300 years the religion of Jesus Christ was established all over the then known world. *There were churches in every town and community.*

The Progress of Error During The First 300 Years

In the first two centuries the individual churches rapidly multiplied and some of them became very large. The church at Jerusalem had possibly as many as 50,000 or more members!

These large churches each had several preachers or elders. Some of these bishops or pastors began to assume authority over smaller churches. This corrupted the original democratic policy and government of the churches and led to the kind of hierarchy we see in the Roman Catholic Church today.

In the first two centuries the false teaching of "baptismal regeneration" began to spread. This error led to infant baptism and many other errors.

It has to be remembered that these changes did not come about all in a day, nor within a year. They came about slowly and never within all the churches. Some of the churches vigorously repudiated these errors.

About the middle of the third century the lines were clearly drawn. Those churches that remained loyal to the Scriptures were now clearly separate from those that had gone into error and apostasy.

Constantine ruled as Emperor of the Roman Empire from 306 to 337 A.D. and his reign was to mark one of the great turning points in church history.

During a battle in 312 A.D. Emperor Constantine believed he had a vision of a flaming cross and above it the words, "By this sign thou shalt conquer."

He decided to fight under the banner of Christ and Christianity came into favor in the Roman Government.

In 313 A.D. Constantine gave a call for all the churches to come together and pronounced himself as the head of the churches.

Many, but not all, of the churches came. The true churches would have no part in this error.

This hierarchy or body of church rulers, that Constantine formed was the *definite* beginning of the Roman Catholic Church. Many of the errors of Catholicism had already had their beginning but now they were organized into a definite system.

Constantine made "Christianity" the "State Religion." Up until this point the persecution of the Christians had been done either by Judaism or Paganism. Now came a change. Christians (in name) began using the law to compel all Christians to join the organization. The true churches that refused were persecuted.

The division was now complete. The true churches refused to line up with the errors of the "state church." The church of Constantine became what we know as Roman Catholicism. *Baptists were never part of Roman Catholicism.* They remained true to the Scriptures and rejected the error.

After the organization of the churches into a hierarchy and their acceptance as a "State Religion" the true, loyal churches that rejected this error were identified by various names.

It is not to be understood that each of these groups was entirely free from error or entirely embraced the truth. Through these groups can be traced the people called Baptists. *In these groups is to be found the true church -- not in Catholicism.*

Montanist ... Paulician ... Novationist ... Paterines ... Donatist ... Albigenses ... Anabaptists ... these were some of the names used to identify those who refused to identify with Rome.

The Dark Ages

The period from 426 A.D. to 1628 A.D. is called the "Dark Ages."

With the establishment of the new Catholic temporal power a bloody persecution began. Loyal, New Testament churches, by whatever name they were called, were

hunted and hounded to the utmost limit by this new Catholic power.

The now established Catholic Church began a war of extermination upon all who opposed her.

It is reliably reported that 50,000,000 died of persecution during the Dark Ages.

During the bloody times of persecution, as Catholicism tried to exterminate the true churches, many of the false doctrines of the Catholic church of today began to take place.

The Inquisition 1198-1700

The Inquisition was instituted by Pope Innocent III and perfected under Pope Gregory IX. It was a "Church Court" established by the popes for the trying and punishing of "heretics" ... a heretic being anyone who did not agree with Roman Catholicism. The Inquisition lasted for 500 years and was a time of indescribable horror.

During all this persecution Baptist churches continued to exist.

The Reformation

The conditions within the Catholic Church had become so corrupt that many voices were raised within the church in protest. Among these voices was that of John Wycliffe (1320- 1384), John Huss (1373-1415), Savonarola (1452-1498), Zwingli (1484-1531), John Knox (1505-1572), John Calvin (1509-1564), and Martin Luther.

The combined effort of these men, along with many others, brought about the Reformation.

All these Reformers started new churches. This was the beginning of Protestantism. *All Protestant churches had their beginning in the period of the Reformation or since that time.*

Baptists continued to exist through the Reformation as they had since the time of Christ. Since the Reformation the Baptists have had a glorious history. There are over 23,000,000 Baptists in the United States and they are also found in over 100 different countries.

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