

The
Historical Significance
of the Baptists.

*An Address delivered before the Virginia Baptist
Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia,
November 14, 1906,*

BY

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THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BAPTISTS.

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FIRST of all, I wish to congratulate the Virginia Baptist Historical Society and the Baptists of Virginia upon the approaching celebration of the Ter-Centenary of the settlement of Jamestown, and particularly upon the noble part which the Baptists of Virginia have played in the development of American civilization.

Some eras are ushered in so gradually that the exact date of their origin is difficult to determine; others by definite events which stand as monuments marking their beginning. The perfecting of the alphabet was doubtless a new era in the intellectual development of mankind. The issuing of the first Bible from the press in 1456 demonstrated the utility of movable types and inaugurated a new literary era. The first telegraphic message and the first steam locomotive marked the beginning of new eras in the intercommunication of the various parts of the world. In like manner a new era of soul-liberty was distinctly marked in the world's history by one or two great historic events. Two of these in particular may be named. The first was the establishment of Rhode Island under a special charter by Roger Williams, and the other was the first amendment to the Federal Constitution, secured, in large part, through the influence of Virginia Baptists. Then humanity repeated the experience of

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Galileo when first the structure of the solar system broke upon his view; of Newton, when the law of gravitation, binding the universe together, dawned upon him. It was the discovery of a new principle of civilization. We to-day are singing the great oratorio of religious freedom whose opening staves were first sounded in modern times by the persecuted Anabaptists of Europe.

My subject is "The Historical Significance of the Baptists." I do not propose a detailed historical account of the Baptists, but rather an interpretation based especially upon the struggle for religious liberty in Virginia. I reserve my announcement of the historical significance of the Baptists until later in the address. Suffice is to say now that whatever it is, it is deeply imbedded in the historical struggle for religious liberty.

THE VIRGINIA STRUGGLE.

Let us look first at the Virginia struggle. I make three general remarks regarding this struggle in Virginia. The first is that it was typical. All the stages necessary to a complete view are present in the story. There was first the full-orbed conception in the earliest Virginia Baptist history, accompanied by stalwart conviction. Then followed a long struggle against heavy odds with varying fortunes, and at last victory. In Rhode Island in the previous century the story was somewhat different. There was first the black tragedy of Roger Williams' exile, an interval of fearful suffering, then the new charter, and the white banner of peace. But in Virginia the conflict was interesting, because the contestants were on a raised platform for all the world to behold the various stages of the battle. It thrills us to-day with joy as we contemplate the heroic struggle of the Virginia Baptist fathers as we follow them.

Again, it was a Baptist conflict. The Baptists trod the wine-press alone, and of the people there was none with them. I would not pluck a laurel from the brow of Madison or Jefferson or Washington, who rendered splendid service in the later stages of the conflict. But they drew their inspiration in large part from the Baptists. The Methodists were not yet free from alliance with the Established Church. The Church of England had the reins of government and all the prerogatives of an establishment. The Presbyterians did good service at certain stages of the

conflict, but their record is not consistent. They had as yet not grasped fully the great idea which swayed the Baptists of soul-freedom and absolute separation of Church and State. It is difficult, in one sense, to define accurately the relation of the Baptists to the struggle. The immediate connection of their influence with the results brought about is not always obvious. They were not legislators. Their influence was not felt directly in the halls of legislation. And yet, by their persistency, by means of petition, remonstrance, appeal, agitation, and holy resolution, they gave the Virginia Legislature no rest until the Established Church was overthrown. It is really a remarkable record, considering how few men there were among them of affairs, in the ordinary sense of the word, in the political world. I know of no better illustration of it than a psychologist's account of how a balky horse is moved out of his tracks after vigorous effort. One cracks the whip above his back and lays the lash upon him, but the horse moves not. Another jerks the bridle, and by and by a multitude surround and shout, and then by the cracking of the whip and the jerking of the bridle and the shouting, or, as the psychologist puts it, by the multiplication of stimuli, the psychic paralysis of the motor nerves of the horse is overcome, and he moves forward with his burden. Doubtless the ordinary driver is unaware that he is engaged in so elaborate a performance as this description of the psychologist would indicate, but the statement illustrates the relation of the Virginia Baptists to the balky Legislature and the slow-moving wheels of government. There was, so to speak, a paralysis of the motor nerves, and the Baptists, by their ceaseless agitation and persistency, finally overcame it.

Again, observe the completeness and consistency with which the Baptists of Virginia grasped the conception of religious liberty from the beginning. They do not grope their way in the dark. There is no sense of uncertainty. Clear as a bugle is their testimony. Round and full and beautiful as a new star of the first magnitude does this truth stand forth in their thought and dominate their imagination. The State has no religious function. It is safe to trust man with his God in all religious affairs. Favoritism in dealing with religious organizations is tyranny, just as taxation without representation is tyranny.

Our Baptist fathers purchased this freedom with a great price. Much did they suffer for it. Lowell sings:

“ By the light of burning heretics Christ’s bleeding feet I track ;
Toiling up new Calvarys ever with the cross that turns not back ;
And those mounts of anguish number how each generation learned
Some new word of that grand credo which in prophet hearts hath burned
Since the first man stood God-conquered with his face to heaven upturned.”

Virginia Baptists were not burned at the stake, but they were whipped and ducked and imprisoned and subjected to other indignities and insults which were as galling to men of high and noble spirits, as even worse punishment might have been.

THE HISTORIC BACKGROUND.

Now the grandeur of this triumph of the Baptists can be fully appreciated only as we study it against its historic background. Let us therefore sketch that background.

For one thing, the Baptist conception of religious liberty and separation of Church and State was an interpretation of the New Testament rather than obedience to a distinct command. The New Testament nowhere in so many words enjoins separation of Church and State, though the principle is implicit everywhere and in many forms. None, however, among the moderns grasped this truth until the Baptists had taught it to them. It was a prophetic insight, a spiritual discernment.

Again, nearly two thousand years of history had left men’s minds fettered with an opposite view. For nearly one thousand years there had been a union of Church and State, and a struggle went on for supremacy. In the Eleventh Century the Church triumphed, and her spirit became incarnated in the great Pope Gregory the Seventh. Of him Bryce says: “His was the rarest and grandest of gifts, an intellectual courage and power of imaginative belief, which, when it has convinced itself of anything, accepts it fully with all its consequences and shrinks not from acting at once upon it.” That is to say, the Roman Catholic theory became incarnated in Gregory. Two memorable acts of his signalize the consummation. He made the disobedient Emperor Henry do penance in his bare feet in the snow at Canossa, and he served notice on William the Conqueror, in a memorable letter, that the power of the Church was the sun, while that of the State was the moon. The exalted personality of the great Pope Gregory thus towered above his generation and succeeding ages like a malign spirit. His spell was not broken by Luther or Calvin or Knox or Wesley in the fullest sense of the word.

Notice again that the Reformation did not in any of its earlier forms break the fetters. Luther and Calvin both resorted to the civil power, as is well known, to enforce religious belief. In England and Scotland one sect after another seized the reins of power in turn except the Baptists. In our own colonies there were dim and tentative movements toward religious liberty, but they all came short save two—that in Rhode Island and that in Virginia. Our colonial fathers heard the rustle of the wings, and perhaps caught a glimpse of the white apparel of the angel of religious liberty, but into her benign face they never looked, and they never felt the thrill of her emancipating touch upon their heads. A glance at our colonial history will show this. In Massachusetts they drove Roger Williams into exile. In Providence to-day they show you the long root of an apple tree which was dug up out of the grave of the great apostle of religious liberty, and it is claimed that this root grew right down through his spinal column. Whether the story is humor, or myth, or authentic history, the parallel is true—life must spring and fruit must flourish above the grave of such a man. I need not sketch the story as to New York and New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and the various other colonies. In all of them there were compromises, and forms of toleration, but not religious liberty prevailed. No wonder that the Roman Catholics seek to-day to exploit the toleration which prevailed in Maryland under the Calverts. For Roman Catholicism it is to be admitted that this was a long stride forward, but everything depends upon the point of view. Maryland toleration is intolerable to a Baptist. For Baptists were infinitely removed in their conception from the Maryland view, which put disabilities upon the Jew, the Unitarian, and the atheist. All the denominations, along with the Roman Catholics, were back in the realm of the middle ages in their view of the relations of Church and State. The Baptists already had grasped the idea and consistently applied it. A snail complained of the tortoise, "You travel too fast for me." A clod lying near said to the snail, "You go so fast you make me dizzy." While they were complaining at each other an eagle swept past overhead, and in a moment disappeared from view, but neither clod, nor snail, nor tortoise dreamed of the eagle and his flight.

Even the Declaration of Independence makes no mention of religious inequality as an abuse. Other forms of tyranny are named, but not this. The minds of men in general had not grown to it. James Madison said that to most people it was inconceivable. It was thought that it would be to deliver Christianity over to the infidels outright to give all men liberty of conscience. And yet, after a long struggle for victory in Virginia itself, after the struggle over the general assessment and the Glebes, and finally for disestablishment itself, Virginia Baptists, alert and on guard, discovered in the Federal Constitution, when it was promulgated, a defect in its provisions, and sent their petition to Washington, and there brought about the first amendment to the Constitution, which forever established religious freedom in America. Thus we see that the sky in the East had grown purple, in Rhode Island the crimson had succeeded when the Establishment was overthrown and religious liberty proclaimed in Virginia, but the full flood of golden light from the rising sun of freedom did not cover the earth until the Virginia Baptists brought about the first amendment to the Constitution. Even to-day in England and Europe men are strangers to the great conception, and so able a statesman as the late Mr. Gladstone has formally attempted to prove that the propagation of religion is a function of government.

WHY WERE BAPTISTS CHOSEN FOR THIS WORK?

From our foregoing discussion a question arises, viz., Why was it given to Baptists to achieve this result? There are several possible answers.

First, persecution drove them to it, it is urged. But the Puritans and the Pilgrims were persecuted, and persecution failed to enlighten them. Again, others have said that religious freedom was inevitable under our national government, because there was such variety of religions in the various colonies. Not necessarily, for the doctrine of States' Rights might have perpetuated as many Establishments as there were States, and, as is well known, it was long years after the Constitution was adopted that all inequalities were taken from the State Constitutions, and even to-day there are remnants left in some instances.

A third reason which has been assigned is that the world was ready for it anyway. The tide had come in, and none could resist it. This may be true, but English Baptists had advocated the principle one hundred years

before, and German Anabaptists two hundred years before. Moreover, the opposition which was encountered shows that the world was not ready for it.

No, my friends, the reasons lie deeper. The Baptists held a view of Christianity which no others held, and they are in some respects still alone in their position. This will lead us to our answer to the question as to the historical significance of the Baptists. What, then, is the Baptist conception of Christianity? Is it best expressed by Luther's great discovery of the doctrine of justification by faith? It is this but more. Is it in the doctrine of the right of private interpretation of Scripture? Yes, but more. All depends on what you find when you interpret. Is it soul-freedom? Yes, but more. For the free soul may grope in darkness in its quest for truth, and the question of freedom is what a man will do with his freedom. Freedom does not imply capacity for self-government. Is it individualism? Yes, and more. A man is more than an individual. He is a social being, and must live and work in a social order. Is it the separation of Church and State? Yes, and more. For the separation of Church and State may involve tyranny in the Church and tyranny in the State.

A LARGER AND BETTER STATEMENT OF THE BAPTIST POSITION.

There is a larger and better statement of the Baptist position. It is inclusive of all the above, and more. It is this: The competency of the soul in religion. This, of course, means under God. It is the assertion of the sublime truth that man is capable of himself to work out his destiny under the tutelage of God alone. As an individual and as a social being, man is competent. Now all the above are provinces in man's spiritual heritage. Justification by faith is a province. Anglo-Saxon individualism was a mighty political force, and is to-day. It is a mighty province of human rights. The privilege of private interpretation of Scripture is another province. The principle of Renaissance or of intellectual freedom is another province. Soul-liberty, as we say, is another province. But these are provinces under the larger truth, as reflection will show to any one.

Now, this doctrine of the competency of the soul under God in religion assumes that man is made in God's image; that he has capacity for God, can respond to God's appeal. It does not assume that man can save himself alone. But only that God can communicate with the human soul and the

soul with God. Priesthoods and hierarchies, therefore, are an impertinence, and they do violence to the rights of the spirit, and are an affront to God.

Now, this truth is so obvious when once understood, so inspiring, so self-evident, that the hungering spirit of man seized upon it as upon the pearl of great price. It shone in its own light. Men could no more deny it than they could deny the beauty of an orchid, or gainsay the transparency of a crystal, or criticise the note of a nightingale, or deny the splendor of the milky way. Even so, has this great truth of the Baptists, the competency of the soul, under God, like a note out of a seraph's song, caught and enraptured the hearts of mankind, and to-day it is marching forward toward a complete victory over the human race.

INSTRUCTIVE COMPARISONS.

That we may understand this Baptist principle of the competency of the soul in religion, let us now study it briefly by the comparative method.

1. Let us compare it with Romanism. Roman Catholicism is the exact antithesis to the Baptist view at all points. This is often asserted, but it is not always clearly grasped. I think our principle of the competency of the soul will set it forth in a clear light. The whole significance of Roman Catholicism is the incompetency of the soul in dealing with God. The seven sacraments all lodge the power of the keys of the Kingdom in the hands of a human mediator. All the institutions of the Roman Church assume that man cannot approach God by himself; that he is incompetent in religion. Auricular confession denies the competency of the soul to approach God directly in prayer, and asserts that God must be approached through another human mediator. Baptism as a sacrament lodges regenerating grace in the same priestly hands. The Lord's Supper cannot be partaken of until it has been consecrated by a priest. Extreme unction, the last rite of the Church bestowed upon the dying, implies that the soul is incapable of dying alone, and prayer for the dead means that human intercessors are necessary to deliver the soul from purgatory. An infallible pope denies the right of any human soul to think his own thoughts about God and religion, and the tiara of him who sits in the Vatican obscures from the people's view the crown of Him who is King of kings and Lord of lords. The shadow of a vast hierarchy thus eclipses the Sun of Righteousness, and

the Catholic conception of man, viz., that he is incompetent in religion, is at all points a distinct antithesis to the Baptist view.

In the next place, compare this Baptist conception with Protestantism at large. Protestantism is a partial emancipation from Romanism, but only partial. The Baptist position stands to it as the mature stands to the immature, the perfect to the partial. General Protestantism makes of Christianity a mongrel religion. It does not set forth a single, but a double principle of salvation. Christianity becomes dualistic—two gospels rather than one. In retaining justification by faith, it adheres to original Christianity, for this requires the soul's direct dealing with God. In retaining episcopacy or presbytery or infant baptism, it denies man's competency in religion. Infant baptism denies the child's capacity for God and anticipates his personal action in the sponsor, and thus denies justification by faith. It converts Christianity into magic, in so far as it gives saving efficacy to the ordinance of baptism. Each generation takes the privilege of the next out of its hands and puts a religious mortgage on every child's religious life.

OUTGROWN EXCRESCENCES.

These elements of a false Christianity cannot permanently survive. Just as dead leaves which cling to the branches of the tree after the rigors of winter are pushed off by returning sap in the spring-time; just as drift-wood in a river inevitably finds its way to the central current and is carried out to sea; just as a boulder on a mountain side gravitates unflinchingly to the valley below; in short, just as any unerring law of nature works towards a fixed and definite result in the physical world, so certainly will spiritual life, spiritual current, spiritual gravitation detach infant baptism, sacerdotalism from Christianity. These are outgrown excrescences which cannot survive in the light of that spiritual freedom which man is as certainly achieving for himself, as that he now faces the future and aspires after God.

In the third place, observe the relation of this Baptist principle of the competency of the soul to our modern life and progress. Properly understood, it is the summary of our progressive civilization. The religious principle is always the dominant force which gives its leading characteristics to any civilization. The competency of man in religion is the competency of

man everywhere. Every significant movement of our day is one form or another of that high purpose of man to make his way back to God. Art is simply the assertion of man's inherent capacity for beauty, the claim that he is competent to trace out in time all the settled lines of grace, all the varied hues and forms of a manifold and wonder-crowded universe. Art is simply the march of the beauty-lover along the highways of variegated creation, forward and upward, until he stands face to face with Him who is the infinitely Beautiful.

Science is the corresponding quest for truth, the assertion of the soul's competency to find the truth, its capacity for truth, its deathless struggle for truth, until it stands face to face with Him who is the Truth.

Philosophy simply asserts man's competency in the realm of speculative thought. Christian theism is the only philosophy possible to the believer in our principles, for it asserts God's ability to communicate a revelation to man and man's ability to communicate with God. Agnosticism, which denies the competency of the soul, is the Roman Catholicism of philosophy, and is a belated view of human ability. Its position in this respect is little dreamed of by many who lean toward it in theology and doctrinal matters to-day, but it is nevertheless true.

Politics and government and the social institutions assume man's moral competency, his capacity for moral progress under God in a well ordered society. Society is the bold assertion that under God's leading eternal right will be attained in the human sphere. If you let the gold and the pearls stand for the highest moral values; if you let the walls of jasper and their twelve foundations stand for the reign of moral law; if you let the sunless, yet resplendent heavens above stand for the light and glory of truth in its triumph in the human soul; and if you let the hallelujahs of the tearless and shadowless and triumphant multitude in white stand for a purified social order, then you have in the unmatched glory and beauty of the New Jerusalem, which the prophet saw descending from heaven to earth, the fitting symbol of what is going on in the world all about us—man under God achieving for himself an ideal social order. The absence of the temple from the perfected city means that all life will become a temple. The absence of the sun means that all light and all truth are now ours through the indwelling of God. The absence of labor from the city means that now achievement is spontaneous. Culture, religion, all are blended into a per-

fect harmony of achieving and progressing humanity. Thus it will be that the city of science and art and civilization from below will rise and join the city of God, one city, one redeemed society, made up of redeemed individuals.

THE FOUNTAIN OF ETERNAL DISCONTENT.

It is man's deathless conviction of his competency to achieve this goal that opens in his bosom the fountain of eternal discontent. The best symbol of his progressive march to this goal is a sculptor carving out of the marble his vision, rejoicing in it for a time, and then destroying it or setting it aside and beginning his work on another block, and making a better statue; forever achieving, yet forever repudiating his achievement until he achieves the image of God in himself through God's grace. All this and more are implied in our Baptist view. God opened an arena here in America for this Baptist ideal of religion to take root and flourish, and here it is destined to spread until it conquers the race.

In conclusion, we must note two or three of the practical bearings of our discussion. These are implied in what has been said.

The first is education and enlightenment. The doctrine of the soul's competency not only sets it free; it burdens it with the sublimest task and responsibility, viz., the obligation of self-development and self-direction, of autonomy and growth. Its first command is, aspire; its second is, dare; its third is, achieve. The command to aspire directs the gaze upward to the snowy heights of education, culture and character, to the very top of the mount of blessing where "clouds form, meteors shoot, stars come and go." The command to dare must follow, because nothing save courage and endurance can ever scale those heights. The command to achieve means that all profession without results is vain. Fruits must test the life, but only fruits. We must educate, we must endow our schools. Let us call our colleges colleges, and our universities universities. Let us not call an academy a college, nor a college a university, but we must maintain a symmetrical education. Our glory and power will wane without enlightenment.

"The music and splendor
Survive not the lamp and the lute.
The heart's echoes render
No song when the spirit is mute."

Even so, the music of our testimony to the Gospel cannot long survive the lute of a harmonious educational system, and the splendor of our spiritual life will wane if the lamp of knowledge grows dim among us.

I appeal to you, Virginia Baptists, to endow Richmond College and all your related schools. The College has been the glory of your history. Give it a million dollars endowment; set it free to do its great work, and put into the hands of your other schools the means for the education of the pupils who come to them, and you will do the greatest work for the furtherance of the truth, apart from the preaching of the Gospel itself.

The second practical application from my discussion is, evangelize. We must not mistake our culture for our Christianity. We must not lose our historic sense. We must not forget the rock from whence we were hewn, nor the hole of the pit whence we were digged. Remember that our mother principle is religious. The soul and God first, then the soul and science, the soul and art, the soul and philosophy. We are primarily propagandists of life, and after life, culture. Our peril is that we will either neglect the life for the culture, or the culture for the life, or that we will confound the two and lose the distinction entirely. I would say, then, let us Christianize our culture, and cultivate our Christianity, but let us never confound our Christianity with our culture. Let us bring the forces of life to bear first, and then let us bring the forces of culture. The regenerated man becomes thus competent through the competency of the indwelling of Christ, and the regenerated man cultivated becomes the greatest power in this world.

The third practical point is, let us cherish a denominational self-respect. Let us believe in our own mission and destiny. We need no questionable or fictitious history to support our cause, for our true history is resplendent with moral and spiritual glory. We have no occasion to cherish a narrow sectarian spirit in the bad sense, for our principles are as deep as the sea and as broad as the firmament. We need not fear for their ultimate reception by mankind, for they match the human spirit as air matches the lungs, as water matches our thirst, as bread matches our hunger. They are as clear as crystal, pure as the snow, strong as adamant, energetic as lightning, bearing on their front the insignia of their divine origin, peerless among the systems which have engaged the thoughts of men, and destined to endure when the stars are quenched and the heavens are rolled up like a scroll.

THE SOCIETY.

The Virginia Baptist Historical Society was incorporated by Act of the Legislature of Virginia, March 29th, 1876, and has authority to hold money or property to a value not exceeding \$30,000. The legal title is "THE VIRGINIA BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY."

OBJECT:

To discover, procure and preserve whatever may relate to the history of Christianity and to the Baptist Denomination in Virginia in particular.

Richmond College has recently fitted up an excellent fire-proof and (in case of fire) water-proof room, as a memorial to our Virginia Baptist fathers, and placed it at the disposal of the Society. This has removed one of the difficulties in the prosecution of our work, and will prove a great incentive to gifts as well as secure permanency and efficiency. The history of Virginia Baptists is very rich, but the materials have been widely scattered. The Society has been at work for the past thirty years gathering this most valuable historical data. Such things as we have been able to secure are invaluable; but much remains to be done, and it is hoped that fresh interest will be added to the movement, by reason of the generous action of the College in providing a safe home for the Society.

We cordially invite attention to this important work. Every Baptist in Virginia should resolve to aid in rescuing and preserving the rich historical legacy left by our wise and often persecuted forefathers.

Contributions in printed matter, (books, pamphlets, minutes) manuscripts and money, will be gladly received and wisely used.

Will you not become a life member?

Life membership, \$10.00.

Address,

C. H. RYLAND, D. D., *Secretary*,

RICHMOND COLLEGE,

RICHMOND, VA.

When you come to Richmond, call and see the beautiful memorial.