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A BAPTIST BECAUSE OF THE BIBLE

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I am a Baptist because of the Bible. Let me explain.

CHILDHOOD IN WISCONSIN

There was no Baptist church in Jim Falls, the northern Wisconsin town of 286 people that was my home for the first thirteen years of my life. Most of the other boys with whom I played baseball and rode bikes and built snow forts went to the Catholic church. They couldn't eat meat on Fridays, they attended mass every Sunday, and, when they were old enough, they all memorized sections of the Latin Mass, which they carried around on pieces of card stock while they were learning to be altar boys. I sometimes felt left out, but it was good practice in learning to stand alone for what I believed.

Our family didn't go to the large Catholic church in town, or the only other church, a smaller Methodist church. Every Sunday we drove twenty-six miles to attend the First Baptist Church of Eau Claire, Wisconsin. But why a Baptist church? I think ultimately it was because of the Bible.

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Neither of my parents had grown up Baptist. My father's family went to Minneapolis Gospel Tabernacle, an Assemblies of God church at 13th and Lake Street in Minneapolis. My mother's family went to First Covenant Church, an Evangelical Covenant church in downtown Minneapolis. But when they had moved to Jim Falls, Wisconsin (where my father became part owner of a creamery), what they brought from their previous church backgrounds that went deeper than particular denominational traditions was a strong confidence in the Bible as the absolutely reliable Word of God. Therefore, they chose to drive an unheard-of distance to go to church every Sunday.

And so one could say I am a Baptist because I grew up in a Baptist church. But considering that I was born to two non-Baptist parents in a town with no Baptist church, it is remarkable that it turned out that way. The Bible is the fundamental reason for it all, because my parents searched until they found a church where the Bible was faithfully preached, and that Bible-believing church was a Baptist church.

I was baptized at age twelve in that church, after making a public profession of faith before the congregation. Our pastor had explained to me the meaning of baptism, and why we baptized by immersion, pointing to passages that clearly spoke of people going "down into the water" and coming "up out of the water" (Mark 1:10; Acts 8:38-39). He also explained how baptism was a symbol of death to our old manner of life and rising to walk "in newness of life" as it says in Romans 6:4: "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the father, we too might walk in newness of life."

It all seemed quite clear and straightforward to me at age twelve—this was what the Bible said about baptism, and this was what we should do in obedience to Christ. It still seems quite clear and straightforward to me at age fifty-two.

We moved to Eau Claire when I was thirteen, and that allowed more involvement with church youth group and other activities. My favorite was the class in Christian doctrine taught by my pastor to junior high students on Thursday afternoons. We worked through a little book by E. Y. Mullins called *Baptist Beliefs*.¹ I was absolutely fascinated to find that we could learn summaries of the teachings of the Bible on various doctrines. I devoured every lesson, learning words such as *omniscience*, *omnipotence*, and *omnipresence* with great eagerness. Looking back at that book now, I am surprised to find that I differ with a number of points that I had underlined in pencil at age fourteen, but one fundamental truth was reinforced in that class—our pastor wanted

to be sure that our doctrine derived from Scripture, and he had a deep confidence that the Bible could always be trusted.

It became more clear that our family's commitment was to the Bible and its teaching, and not to any single church or denomination, when First Baptist Church of Eau Claire called another pastor a couple of years later. The new pastor had been tainted by the liberalism that was sweeping through the American Baptist Convention, and I remember one Sunday sermon when he said you didn't have to believe in the virgin birth of Christ. That Sunday afternoon I remember my father, quite upset, talking at length with the new pastor by phone. That was only one sample of a "Baptist" church that was becoming less truly Baptist, because it was becoming less truly biblical.

Our family eventually left and went instead to Salem Baptist Church in Eau Claire, a Baptist General Conference church with a Bible-believing pastor (where I would be ordained to the Christian ministry many years later).

COLLEGE YEARS: A CRUCIAL DECISION

I think that the most decisive event in my theological thinking occurred one afternoon in the summer of 1966. I had gone off to Quebec City to study French for the summer at the University of Laval, and I suddenly found myself, at age eighteen, in the middle of a population that was more than 99 percent Roman Catholic. I was suddenly aware that at the end of the summer, after returning home briefly, I would leave to start my freshman year at Harvard (where I had been accepted). I had a real sense that I was "leaving home" that summer and needed to decide what I was going to believe.

How could I know that what my parents had taught me was true? How could I know that what I had learned in those two Baptist churches was true? How could I know that anything was true?

Sitting alone in my dormitory room in that predominantly Roman Catholic university on a hot summer afternoon, I decided that I really wasn't sure whether anything that my parents or my church had taught me was true. Maybe they had made some mistakes, and how was I to know?

As I thought about this, in the space of a few minutes I decided that I knew one thing for sure: *the Bible was true*. It was God's Word, and I could trust it. I decided at that moment that I would begin with that one conviction and go forward from there. I would test everything by measuring it against what the Bible said. If the Bible supported what my parents and my church had taught me, then I would agree with parents and church. If the

Bible did not support what I had been taught, then I would change my beliefs to bring them into line with the Bible.

Looking back on that afternoon, I am confident that God guided that decision. But what factors did he use to persuade me to believe the Bible above everything else? From a human standpoint, I had been strongly influenced by the confidence that my parents had in the Bible (they have read aloud a chapter from the Bible every night of their fifty-three years of marriage and continue to do so still today). I had also been influenced by the confidence of my two previous Baptist pastors (A. Kenneth Ham and Neal Floberg), whose trust was clearly in the Bible more than in any system of doctrine or denominational tradition. And I know I was also influenced by my grandmother, Hildur Sheady, who encouraged me to start memorizing passages from Scripture as soon as I was able to read.

But I think that an even deeper reason for that decision was the self-attesting power of Scripture itself: I had been reading from the Bible every day since age five or six, and the Holy Spirit had implanted in my heart, through the words of Scripture, a deeply settled conviction that these were indeed the words of God speaking to me.

I looked for a Baptist church in Quebec City that summer. Through the yellow pages I found a tiny Baptist church that had no building but met in the YMCA, a mission effort sponsored by something called Baptist Mid-Missions, whose pastor, John Garrisi, wonderfully encouraged me that summer.

I went off to Harvard that fall, and the first Sunday I attended a Baptist church just across the street from the university campus. It troubled me that during the Scripture reading the pastor read from Matthew's Gospel, but when he came to verses about God's judgment against sin he skipped over them and went to a later part of the passage that talked about God's love. So the next day I showed up in his office and asked why he had skipped those verses. When it was apparent that his answer wasn't convincing me, he asked, "Are you a freshman?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, you've got a lot to learn." I never went back to that church.

There probably were some Baptist churches in the Boston area that believed the Bible at that time. But as I looked for a church that had strong Bible teaching, I eventually ended up at Park Street Church in Boston where Harold John Ockenga preached forty-five-minute expository sermons without notes every Sunday morning and evening. I, along with many other university students from the Boston area, drank it all in week after week and grew in my Christian faith. Park Street Church was a conservative Congregational

church, not a Baptist church, but my baptistic convictions remained unchanged during those years.

WESTMINSTER SEMINARY AND JOHN MURRAY

The real challenge (from a Baptist standpoint) came during my years at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. There were no Baptists on the faculty, nor could there be, for all regular faculty members had to subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith. I had gone to Westminster because I had read several writings of its previous faculty members (such as J. Gresham Machen, John Murray, and E. J. Young), and I knew that the seminary believed wholeheartedly in the full authority and inerrancy of Scripture. I agreed with many of the doctrinal positions taught there at the seminary. But I just found the Presbyterian arguments for infant baptism to be unpersuasive.

I remember at one point during my seminary career that I decided to think through this question in more detail. In particular, I decided that I would try to read the best argument for infant baptism that I could find, to see if it might persuade me. I purchased *Christian Baptism* by John Murray,² in part because I had long admired so many of Murray's other writings. But the book was disappointing.

I still have the copy of Murray's book that I read in 1971 or 1972, and I find my marginal comments to be interesting even today. As a seminary student, I read Murray's explanation for "they both went down into the water" and "they came up out of the water" (referring to Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch). When I found that Murray was happy with the thought that they "stood on the brink" or "stepped into the edge," and that Philip baptized the eunuch by "scooping up the water and pouring it or sprinkling it on him" (p. 27), I wrote in the margin, "Come on! They at least went *into* it. And why? Certainly not to scoop up a little water with the hands!"

Later in the book, Murray wrote that baptism and circumcision "are signs and seals of the covenant of grace, not of certain external blessings accruing from or following upon the covenant of grace. And this is so even though many who bear the sign and seal do not possess and may never possess the blessings of the covenant itself" (p. 55). I wrote in the margin, "!!?" I failed to understand how something could be a sign and seal of something that was not signed and sealed.

When Murray wrote, "Baptism is not administered by revelation of God's secret will" (p. 56), I wrote in the margin, "But *profession of faith* is the *external* indication that God has given so that 'fallible men' may have indication

not of God's secret will, but of the *fact* of conversion—in order to determine who should be allowed in the church.”

Murray said, “With respect to infants, the sign is properly dispensed in many cases where the recipients do not possess and may never possess the inward grace signified. It may be said that such are only in external covenant relationship. But it may not be said that baptism is simply the sign and seal of such external relationship” (p. 56). I wrote in the margin, “Double-talk!”

Murray quoted with approval the *Directory for the Public Worship of God* prepared by the Westminster Assembly, saying that “children, by baptism, are solemnly received into the bosom of the visible church . . . and united with believers. . . . They are Christians, and federally holy before baptism, and therefore they are baptized” (p. 59). I wrote, “Justified? Then saved!” I knew that that could not be true. But then why call them “Christians” and “federally holy”?

Regarding Acts 2:38–39, Murray quotes verse 39 as saying, “For the promise is to you and to your children” (p. 70). I wrote, “Why don't you finish the verse?” I knew that the verse continued, “and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him,” and that two verses later the text explains who exactly was baptized: “so *those who received his Word* were baptized” (Acts 2:41). This could not be infants.

Murray said, “Summarily stated, baptism represents the inclusion of the person baptized in the body of Christ and in the fellowship of the saints” (p. 79). I wrote, “But not for infants, or else it is a false sign for many.” When Murray wrote, “Only those united to Christ, and who are members of his body have a right to present their children for baptism” (p. 80), I wrote, “But under the old covenant, *all* (male) Israelites were circumcised, not just those who professed faith.” A further marginal note indicates that I realized even then that the requirement for entrance into the old covenant community of God's people was a physical, external requirement (you either had to be born as an Israelite, or just come and live among them), but in the new covenant the requirement for entrance into the spiritual community of God's people, the body of Christ, is an internal, spiritual requirement, namely, saving faith.

Where Murray wrote about baptism, “as seal it authenticates, confirms, guarantees the reality and security of this covenant grace” (p. 87), I underlined the word *guarantees* and drew an arrow to the margin where I wrote, “to the unregenerate? A pretty poor guarantee.”

I had already heard several arguments for infant baptism in classes and from other students, and I had thought that Murray's book might provide some better arguments than those. (I guess some students were persuaded by

them, but I just could not see it there in the text of the Bible.) After reading Murray's book, I concluded that there *were* no other major arguments. This was it. But the reasoning did not seem at all persuasive to me. So after reading this book I decided that my baptistic convictions were secure. John Murray was one of the ablest theologians and exegetes of the twentieth century. But at the end of this book I had a distinct sense that he was trying to defend something that simply could not be defended adequately from Scripture.

I loved Westminster Seminary and treasure the memory of my years there as some of the very best years of my life. In countless ways my understanding of Scripture and my theological convictions were deepened and strengthened during my years there. Lifelong friendships with other students and faculty members were begun and continue to this very day. In addition to that, I have a lifelong appreciation for the unity in Christ that I share with Presbyterians and every other non-Baptist evangelical who believes the Bible. I am thankful for many opportunities for fellowship with them and joint participation in many kinds of interdenominational ministry activities. Yet with regard to the doctrine of baptism, I went into Westminster Seminary a Baptist and came out a Baptist (as did many other students), and I remain one to this day.

OTHER REASONS

There are other reasons for my baptistic convictions than I have mentioned in this article. I have detailed these in the chapter on "Baptism" in my *Systematic Theology*,³ so I need not discuss them in detail here. It seems to me clear that the New Testament authors consider baptism to be *an outward symbol of beginning the Christian life* (Gal. 3:27; Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12; as well as several narrative passages such as Acts 2:41; 8:12; 11:44-48; 16:14-15; 16:32-33). Therefore, it seems right to conclude that the *symbol of beginning the Christian life* should only be given to *those who show evidence of having begun the Christian life*. Nowhere in the New Testament is baptism understood as a symbol of *probable future regeneration*, yet it seems to me that at root that is what the pedobaptist argument boils down to. And that seems to me to be far different from the New Testament picture of baptism. Paul did not say, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ *will probably someday put on Christ*," but, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ *have put on Christ*" (Gal. 3:27 NKJV).

I have not spoken of other Baptist distinctives in this essay—distinctives such as the idea that church membership is voluntary, and that membership in the church is for believers only, and that a high value should be placed on the priesthood of all believers and their ability to understand Scripture for themselves, and that the primary authority for church government should rest within the local congregation itself. Other denominations and groups of churches also share some or all of these distinctives, and I am thankful for them wherever they are found. But on this decisive point, the doctrine of believer's baptism, this story explains why I am a Baptist. I am a Baptist because I believe the Bible, and because I am convinced that believer's baptism is what the Bible teaches.