

Who are the Strict Baptists?



July 2008

A brief and simplified history for readers with little previous knowledge of church history.

Strict Baptists churches are a group of churches who share in the Baptist stream of church history.

The history of all Baptist churches is wrapped up with the history of the whole of the western European church. They arose out of the Protestant Reformation that took place in western Europe in the sixteenth century. The supremacy of the Pope in Rome over the church in western Europe for over a thousand years meant that all churches had the same beliefs and practices and any dissent was suppressed ruthlessly. The 'protest' in Protestant was against the corruption of the church of Roman Catholicism at the time and over the whole question of how people were made right with God.



All the reformers insisted on the absolute authority of the Bible to inform everything about what a Christian believed, how a

Christian behaved and how a church should be run. This insistence on the Bible's authority led Martin Luther, John Calvin, Thomas Cranmer and others to reject the authority of

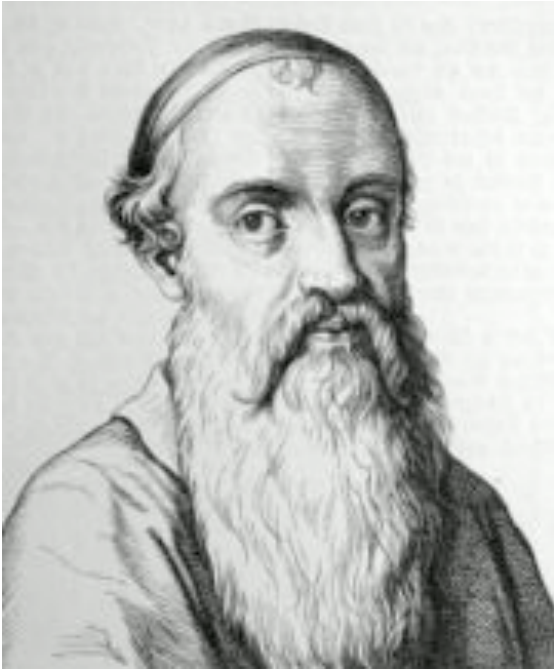
the Pope and set up churches separate from the Roman Catholic church.

As many people were reading the Bible for themselves in their own language for the first time since the early centuries of the church, (the Bible translation used was only in Latin) some came to see that the Reformers like Luther and Calvin did not go far enough. They saw the importance in the Bible of churches being formed of those who confessed Christian faith individually and were seeking to follow Jesus in the way that they lived. In the Bible believers were admitted to the church on being baptised by immersion on profession of faith.

Some in the sixteenth century wanted to organise churches in this way, they called it 'the gathered church' and started to practise adult or



believers' baptism. A person had to be old enough to understand what they are doing in confessing their belief in Jesus. In all the other European churches of the sixteenth century, whether Catholic or Protestant, everyone in



Menno Simmons the founder of the Anabaptist group called the Mennonites

the state was regarded as belonging to the church into which they had been baptized as infants otherwise known as christening.

All of these churches regarded 'Anabaptists' (meaning rebaptizers) as religious and political anarchists. The Anabaptists challenged church tradition of around thirteen hundred years. They were persecuted everywhere they went and in some places were annihilated. Today the descendants of the Anabaptists are the Mennonite groupings found chiefly in America. It has to be said that some of the Anabaptists groupings did have extreme political views and gave all of the different groupings a bad press.

What is not very well understood in English church history is whether the Anabaptists of continental Europe had any influence in England in the sixteenth century. It is not clear that they did, but the general ferment caused by the breakaway from the Roman Catholic church to become the Church of England, under the king Henry VIII, probably did include

at least the knowledge of what the Anabaptists were doing and saying in the rest of Europe. In the time of Queen Elizabeth there were many Anglicans who wanted to reform the church further. They became known as the Puritans because they wanted a pure church. Some of this group wanted the freedom to form 'gathered churches' and many wanted the separation of church and state. They did not believe that the political authorities, the Queen and her government should have any right to tell the church leaders what to do.

These Puritan groupings became known in later centuries as Nonconformists, which means that they would not conform to how the government regulated the church.

Out of these groupings of Puritan Nonconformists or Separatists in England in the seventeenth century came the groups we know today as the Presbyterians, the Congregationalists, the Quakers and the Baptists.



In late sixteenth century and seventeenth century England anyone who did not conform to the state regulated Church of England was severely persecuted and many fled to Europe. The first English speaking Baptist church was founded in Holland in 1609. The Baptists differed from the Presbyterians over how the church was governed, they shared the 'gathered church' principle with the Independents or Congregationalists, but they differed with all the other groupings over baptism. The first Baptist church appeared in England in 1612 and by 1660 there were over 200 Baptist churches in England.

From the beginning there were differences among those who called themselves Baptists. There were two main differences, one was doctrinal and the other was a question of church order. The doctrinal difference arose around the doctrines of predestination and redemption and the church order issue arose

over who was to be admitted to the Lord's table or communion service.

Most of the Protestant churches in Europe agreed in the Biblical teaching, that God made

The label Strict and Particular had nothing to do with the strictness of their lifestyle

choices in eternity about who should be saved. This teaching has become associated

with John Calvin and some now call this emphasis 'Calvinist'. This led to a question about who was included in Christ's death for sinners on the cross. Was it for all people that he died or only for a particular people ie. those who were chosen to come to faith? The belief that Christ only died for the ones God had chosen came to be known as 'particular redemption'. Other Christians in the seventeenth century began to follow the teachings of Arminius, a Dutch Reformed pastor, who taught that God did not make choices in eternity and people had free will to choose if they became Christians or not and that Christ had died for everyone.

There were Baptists in both camps of this divide and those who followed the 'particular redemption' teaching became known as Particular Baptists. Those who did not become known as General Baptists.



Old Baptist Chapel - Bradford upon Avon

Both Baptist groupings had differing ideas about how to order the church. Most churches wanted to restrict the communion to those who had been baptised as believers and a minority wanted to open the communion to all believers whether they had been baptised as adults or as infants. The ones who practised a restricted communion became known in later times as Strict Baptists.

In the early days there were Baptists who were Particular, but not Strict and there were those who were Strict and not Particular and there were those who were Strict and Particular! There was some interchange between all of these groups.



In the seventeenth century all Baptists in England were persecuted by the state for refusing to submit to the state church (the Church of England or the Anglican church). They enjoyed some respite in the time of the Civil War and under the government of Cromwell, but when Charles II was invited back at the restoration of the monarchy, the persecution resumed. It was not until the end of the Stuart dynasty in 1688 that Baptists had the right to practise their faith freely. Even then they did not usually participate in local or national government or the legal system, nor were they allowed education in church schools or universities.

The Particular Baptists published a statement of their beliefs in 1644 and another in 1677 which was reprinted in 1688 and adopted by the churches in 1689 at their Assembly. The rest of the seventeenth century



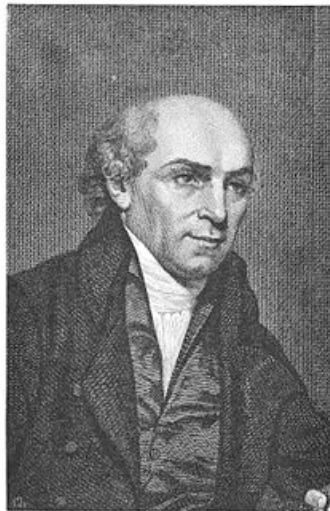
saw the building of many of the first English Baptist chapels some of which survive to this day.

In the eighteenth century two influences affected the Baptist churches. One was the prevailing mood of rationalism which led many Christians in all groupings to question both how God could be One God in three persons and how Christ could be both human and divine.

Many General Baptists denied both the Trinity and the deity of Christ and became known as Unitarian. General Baptists who maintained traditional views about the nature of God formed a new grouping called the New Connexion which started in 1770.

The other influence affecting the churches was a 'rationalist' view of predestination which had the effect on the Particular Baptists of making them increasingly unwilling to preach the Christian faith to persuade anyone, as it was pointless if Christ died only for the chosen or elect. The belief did not stop them telling everyone about the possibility of believing in Jesus. Such views are often called Hyper or High Calvinism. Many churches lost their energy at this time possibly as part of a general spiritual malaise and there was not much growth.

The impetus to change came from the preaching of the early Methodists like George Whitefield and John and Charles Wesley and also Particular Baptist preachers like John Fawcett, John Ryland and Abraham Booth. The Baptist churches were affected by their call to preach to the world whether in church or outside it and there was another period of growth. The belief that all could be called upon to become Christians was taken up among the Particular Baptists by Andrew Fuller.



William Carey - founder of the modern missionary movement

In 1790 John Rippon, a Baptist leader in London produced the first Baptist magazine where he listed 326 Particular Baptist churches in England. From the mid seventeenth century the churches started forming themselves into regional associations and it was from the Northamptonshire association that the first English missionary society was formed which led William Carey to go to

India in 1793. Although Associations have been an important part of Baptist church life, there were always

a number of Baptist churches who never joined their association believing that the local church is the only grouping that matters.

In 1813 the Particular Baptists formed the Baptist Union, an association for the whole country, but fairly quickly it lost its Calvinistic emphasis and some churches within it were influenced by liberal theology which questioned the reliability and authority of the Bible.

The New Connexion churches joined the Baptist Union in 1891. The Baptist Union remains as the largest grouping of Baptist churches in this country, but the churches within it hold a wide variety of beliefs about the Bible. They are all united by their belief in the congregational government of the church and in believers' baptism.

The debates about the authority of the Bible, about how to preach the Christian faith and about who could attend the communion continued throughout the nineteenth century.



Charles Haddon Spurgeon - Particular Baptist pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London who preached to thousands

Gradually there emerged a grouping of churches that became known as Strict Baptists. The leaders in this movement were pastors like William Gadsby, John Stevens, J.C. Philpott,



William Gadsby - pastor, preacher, social reformer and hymn writer

John Foreman and James Wells. They opposed the teaching of Andrew Fuller and the drift towards admitting all to the communion whether baptised by immersion or not.

They tended to group around the magazines that they published, The

Gospel Herald in 1833, the Gospel Standard started in 1835, the Earthen Vessel in 1845 which merged with the Gospel Herald in 1886. There were many differences among them about how to preach to unbelievers, about what place the Old Testament law had in the believers' life and about styles of worship. However, they were united in their belief that the Bible is the absolute Word of God and that the communion could only be taken by those who were baptised by immersion on profession of faith. In 1861 the Strict Baptist Mission was set up because the Baptist Missionary Society started by Carey no longer emphasized the Particular Baptist view of God's work in salvation.

Some Strict Baptist churches influenced by J.C. Philpott and the Gospel Standard wanted to centre spirituality around experience, lamenting the formal Calvinism they saw in their churches. The emphasis on experience tended towards introspection and subjectivity. This emphasis led eventually to a grouping of churches known as Gospel Standard Strict Baptists. Almost

all Strict Baptists down to recent times believed that it is not the duty of all men to believe the gospel, but this did not dampen their zeal to proclaim the gospel. In the 1870s the Gospel Standard grouping of churches went further than this by making it part of their statement of faith. They teach that the biblical commands to preach, to repent and believe the gospel were only written for the apostolic times and that invitations to believe are limited to those who are awakened to their need to be saved. However they do believe that everybody should be told of their need of salvation. There are about 115 Gospel Standard churches today.

At the beginning of the twentieth century there were around 2000 Baptist churches of all persuasions in England. Around one third were Strict Baptist. The Baptists have been affected by the decline in Christian faith and church going in this country along with all the other Christian groupings. In the second half of the twentieth century the Strict Baptist churches have generally adopted the term Grace Baptist as Strict was increasingly misunderstood. There is a Grace Directory of churches holding to the 1689 Baptist confession, but not all have come to that position from a Strict Baptist background. The missionary society was renamed the Grace Baptist Mission in 1982.

To this day each church remains an individual entity. Belief and practice is regulated by the consensus of the individual congregation, so probably no two churches are exactly alike, though most would accept the 1689 Confession or 1966 Affirmation which is a rewriting of the 1689 Confession.

Pauline Johns



The Strict Baptist churches tended to group around the magazines that they published - the Gospel Standard, the Earthen Vessel and the Gospel Herald

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

The Baptist Historical Society publishes four books:

The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century by Dr. B.R. White

The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century by Dr. Raymond Brown

The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century by J.H.Y. Briggs

The English Baptists of the Twentieth Century by Dr. Ian M. Randall

and also

Strict and Particular (English Strict and Particular Baptists in the Nineteenth Century) by Dr. Kenneth Dix.

Another useful general introduction is:

Leon McBeth The Baptist Heritage published by Broadman USA

FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you would like more information please go to www.strictbaptisthistory.org.uk

or contact David J. Woodruff, Hon. Librarian and Publications Secretary, Strict Baptist Historical Society, 10 Priory Road, Dunstable, Beds. LU5 4HR. Tel: 01582 696962