

8 reasons Baptist history should matter to you

by

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Studying Baptist history enables us to become Baptists by theological conviction. It teaches us that there are many good biblical and theological reasons to hold a firm grip upon Baptist ecclesiology as a necessary biblical complement to a robust confessional, evangelical orthodoxy.

I always begin church history classes with a lecture called “Why Study Church History?” We live in an age in which what C.S. Lewis called “chronological snobbery” — the prioritizing of all things new and the despising of all things old — is almost palpable.

Students often need a little convincing that history is important. After all, many of their high school history courses were mere after-thoughts, sometimes even taught by football coaches who were well versed in the 4-3 defense and the spread formation, but perhaps (though not always, of course) not as informed regarding important things from the past. I was actually blessed to attend a public high school with a strong history department, which is probably part of the reason I love history today. And as my good friend Harry Reeder puts it, we must learn from the past to live effectively in the present and impact the future. Therefore, it is important that we know our history as Baptists. Here are eight reasons why:

1. We need to see church history as a discussion of the Bible.

Church history in general, and Baptist history in particular, is most fundamentally a discussion about the Bible. Debates such as Arius vs. Athanasius, Pelagius vs. Augustine, Erasmus vs. Luther, General Baptists vs. Particular Baptists, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship vs. the Southern Baptist Convention are at their root battles for the Bible. That’s why Baptist history is so vital.

2. We must become convictional Baptists.

“I was Baptist born and Baptist bred, and when I die, I’ll be Baptist dead.” I

heard this pithy dictum many times growing up in a small Southern Baptist church in answer to the question “Why are you a Baptist?” But being Baptist because it is part of our family lineage is not a valid reason to be a Baptist. Studying Baptist history enables us to become Baptists by theological conviction. It teaches us that there are many good biblical and theological reasons to hold a firm grip upon Baptist ecclesiology as a necessary biblical complement to a robust confessional, evangelical orthodoxy.

3. We need to see that Baptists have a rich theological and ecclesiological heritage.

Some think that the Presbyterians or Anglicans or Methodists or other denominations have all the good history. But Baptists own a tradition filled with great men and great moments — Charles Spurgeon, Andrew Fuller, William Carey, Benjamin Keach, John Bunyan (assuming we accept he was a Baptist), the founding of the modern mission movement, the reformation at Southern Seminary in the late 20th century, the founding of dozens of seminaries and colleges, the First and Second London Confessions, and the Baptist Faith & Message. Our Baptist heritage is deep and wide.

4. We must accurately assess claims as to where Baptists came from and what they have believed.

Are Baptists first cousins to the Anabaptists, the so-called “radical reformers” in Europe, during the Protestant Reformation? Or, did Baptists arise out of Puritan separatism in Europe? Were they mainly Arminian in their doctrinal commitments or were the majority of Baptists Calvinistic, and which theological stream was healthier? These are much-debated questions and only a close, careful study of Baptist history uncovers the correct answers.

5. Both theology and ecclesiology matter.

I hold a growing concern that ecclesiology is becoming less and less of a conviction among my fellow citizens of the young, restless, Reformed village. But even a 32,000-foot flyover of the Baptist heritage shows that the doctrine of the church and theology proper are inextricably linked. If God has an elect people, if Christ has shed his blood as the substitute for this people, if Christ has promised to build his church, then there must be a theology of the church. Historically, confessional Baptists, at their best (and I include both General and Particular Baptists here), have seen this connection and have sought to build local churches accordingly. Ecclesiology has deep

implications for our practice of the ordinances, for church membership, for church discipline, for pastoral ministry, and for many other matters pertaining to the day in, day out life of the church. A strong ecclesiology tied to a robust theology tends toward a healthy church. Baptist history bears this out through both positive and negative examples.

6. We need to be careful to keep the Ninth Commandment.

It is a sin to caricature and misrepresent those with whom we disagree. We must study their doctrines, hear their arguments, and be able to articulate their case, even as we develop our own convictions. We must avoid populating our theological gardens with straw men or polluting our polemical streams with red herring. We must treat our theological opponents the way we desire to be treated. Polemical theology has a long and established place in the history of ideas, but it should be executed in a way that honors the dignity of our opponents. By this, I do not intend to say we should seek to be politically correct in our debates, but we must be Christ-like and that means taking the beliefs of the other side seriously and treating them fairly. If we've learned nothing else from the current political season, at bare minimum, this lesson should not be lost on us.

7. We need to understand our forefathers paid a steep price to hold Baptist convictions.

Bunyan famously spent 12 years in a filthy Bedford jail. Spurgeon was strafed by liberalism to the point of death. And time would fail me to tell of Thomas Hardcastle, Abraham Cheare, Obadiah Holmes, and dozens of others who paid a high price for their Baptist beliefs, some dying in prison, some being locked in stocks and subjected to public mockery, others being tied to a post and whipped, and many being persecuted to the point of death. In 2016, we sit in our Baptist churches without a threat of even being scratched for our theology, but we must know that we arrived in this state upon the scars and bloodshed of our Baptist fathers. For these men, believer's baptism by immersion, a regenerate church, and liberty of conscience were not merely peripheral doctrines on which "good men disagree."

8. We need to see that Baptists have been, on the whole, a people committed to the formal principle of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura*.

Baptists are a people of the book. Baptists have sought to build their churches upon the Bible, connecting theology and ecclesiology together as a seamless

robe. The fundamental question Baptists, at their best, have asked is this: “Is it biblical?” Though there have been disagreements as to the specific answers, the Bible is our sole authority and a walk through the pages of Baptist history reveals, from solid General Baptists such as Thomas Grantham to Particular Baptist Giants like Spurgeon, demonstrates this as an axiomatic truth.

No doubt, there are many more reasons why we ought to engage our heritage, but let us never be guilty of failing to know precisely why we call ourselves Baptists and at least fundamentally what that meant in the past and continues to mean today.

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