

The Baptist History Series

Number 4



A History of New England Baptists

Volume 2 of 2

Isaac Backus

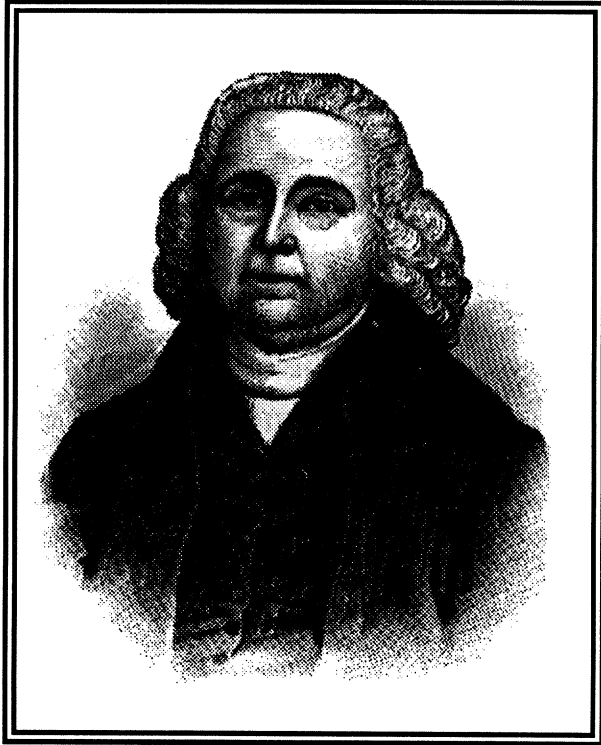
A
HISTORY OF NEW ENGLAND

WITH

Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians

CALLED

BAPTISTS



ISAAC BACKUS

1724-1806

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BY

ISAAC BACKUS.

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BY

DAVID WESTON.

VOLUME II.

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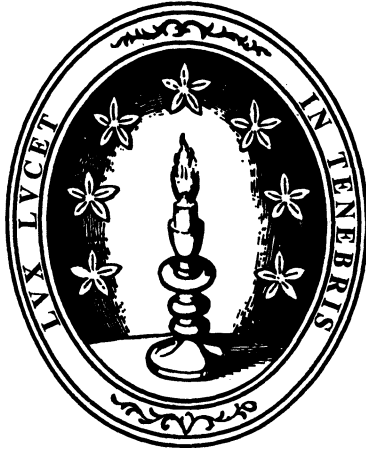
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Thou hast given a *standard* to them that fear thee;
that it may be displayed because of the truth.
— *Psalms 60:4*

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THE WALDENSIAN EMBLEM

lux lucet in tenebris

“The Light Shineth in the Darkness”

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO VOLUME II.

The powers of thinking and choice are so essential to all rational spirits, that without them no idea can be formed of their existence. A desire of the knowledge and enjoyment of the best good, also appears essential to their nature. Therefore, as finite knowledge is limited, finite spirits would ever be liable to err, if they had not some sufficient guard against it. And the best guard we can conceive of, is a clear, fixed persuasion in the heart, that God is the only fountain of all good ; and that every desirable good is to be obtained and enjoyed in the way of obedience to his revealed will, and nowhere else.

That he is the absolute Proprietor, and the sovereign Ruler of the worlds he has made, is a truth too evident for any but madmen to deny. All nations have been forced to appeal to him, to avenge injustice and perjury, in order to establish any government among themselves. Yet how far have they been from a willingness to be governed entirely by him ! He made man upright ; but they have sought out many inventions. Objects of worship and forms of worship, even without number, have been invented by mankind ; the folly whereof God has exposed in all his dispensations : Yet self-conceit, self-seeking, and self-dependence, are still the ruining errors of the world.

His design in all his dispensations, in every age, and every country, is undoubtedly the same in nature with that declared to Israel, in the passage which adorns our title page.¹ Three things deserve particular notice therein. 1. That it is the Lord who leads his people through all the changing scenes of life, in this wilderness world. At different times and places their circumstances vary exceedingly ; yet he orders or overrules in all, so that a sparrow cannot fall to the ground, nor a hair from their head, without him. 2. All his dealings are calculated in infinite wisdom, for their trial and humiliation ; to discover what is in their hearts, whether they will keep

¹Deut. viii. 2. Title page, Vol. II, old edition.—ED.

his commandments, or not. Therefore, 3. He requires them to remember all the way wherein he leads them, for this end.

Christianity, the only true religion, has its name from Christ, the Foundation, Lawgiver, and only Head of his church. And one of the greatest historians of our age gives us the following account of its primitive order and government. Says he, "The rites instituted by Christ [himself], were only two in number, and these designed to continue to the end of the church here below, without any variation. These were Baptism and the Holy Supper; which were not to be considered as mere ceremonies, nor yet as symbolical representations only, but also as ordinances, accompanied with sanctifying influence upon the heart and affections of true Christians." Of those who heard and believed the preaching of John the Baptist, he says, "They were initiated into the kingdom of the Redeemer, by the ceremony of *immersion* or *baptism*." And during the first century, he says, "The sacrament of baptism was administered [in this century] without the public assemblies, in places appointed and prepared for that purpose, and was performed by *immersion* of the whole body."¹ This was the primitive way of admission into the Christian church; and of its government our author says, "The people were, undoubtedly, the first in authority; for the apostles shewed by their example, that nothing of moment was to be carried on or determined without the consent of the assembly. Acts i. 15; vi. 3; xv. 4; xxi. 22. . . . A bishop, during the first and second century, was the person who had the care of one Christian assembly, which, at that time, was, generally speaking, small enough to be contained in a private house. In this assembly he acted not so much with the authority of a master, as with the zeal and diligence of a faithful servant." And he assures us, that until about the middle of the second century, "the churches were entirely independent; none of them subject to any foreign jurisdiction, but each one governed by its own rulers, and its own laws;" and that an alteration was then made, by industriously propagating the opinion, that Christian ministers succeeded to the rights and privileges of the Jewish priesthood.² Heathen philosophy was also called in to interpret the Scriptures by; from whence teachers adopted this maxim, viz., "That it was an act of virtue to deceive and lie, when by that means the interests of the church might be promoted." To which they added, in the fourth century, under Constantine, the use of temporal penalties, and corporal tortures, for the same end.³

In the mean time a controversy arose about bringing infants to baptism. In the beginning of the third century, Tertullian, who is the first writer that mentions it, opposed it, saying, "What need is there that the god-fathers should be brought into danger? because they may either fail of their

¹Mosheim's Eccl. Hist., Vol. I, pp. 32, 91, 96. Dublin edition.

²Ibid, pp. 70, 76, 77, 139.

³Ibid, pp. 155, 314.

promises by death, or they may be mistaken by a child's proving of a wicked disposition." But not long after, Origen appeared for the practice, and said, "Let it be considered what is the reason, that whereas the baptism of the church is given for the forgiveness of sins, infants also are, by the usage of the church, baptized. It is for that reason, because by the sacrament of baptism the pollution of our birth is taken away, that infants are baptized."¹ Origen is the first man that any have produced, who pleaded for infant baptism: and he also held that the torments of the damned will have an end; and that Christ will be crucified in the next world to save the devils.² Now when heathen philosophy was set up as a rule to interpret Scripture by; when the shadows of the Old Testament were taken to draw a veil over the truth and church order described in the gospel, and teachers pretended to confer renewing grace by their administrations, before the subjects were taught or believed; and also called in the secular arm to enforce their measures by temporal penalties and corporal tortures, what could be expected but the antichristian apostasy? Oh, how dark was the night that followed!

Yet God did not leave himself without witnesses in the darkest times; some of whom I will name. Peter de Bruys, during a ministry of twenty years, made the most laudable attempts to reform abuses, and to remove the superstitions that disfigured the beautiful simplicity of the gospel, and had a great number of followers, in Languedoc and Provence, in France; and he was burnt therefor at St. Giles, in the year 1130. His disciples were called Petrobrussians; and a leading article of their faith was, "That no persons whatever were to be baptized before they came to the full use of their reason." Soon after, another minister, whose name was Henry, travelled from Switzerland through various parts of France, preaching the gospel with great success, until he came to the city of Thoulouse, where the Pope and his creatures raised great opposition against him, and cast him into prison in 1148; and he ended his days there not long after. He was thus dealt with because "He rejected the baptism of infants; censured with severity the corrupt and licentious manner of the clergy, and treated the festivals and ceremonies of the church with the utmost contempt."³

This account is given by a very learned Lutheran author, who was strongly prejudiced against the modern Baptists, because he held that the Christian church was in its minority, when it was governed in the manner above described; and that in its mature age, "the regulation of it was, in some measure, to be accommodated to the time, and left to the wisdom and prudence of the chief rulers, both of the State and of the church;"⁴ which opinion the Baptists have ever opposed. He freely owns, that the peculiarities of their churches in Germany and Holland are derived from a maxim

¹Clark against Gill upon Baptism, pp. 105, 111.

²Mosheim, Vol. II, pp. 437—439.

³Mosheim, Vol. I, p. 476.

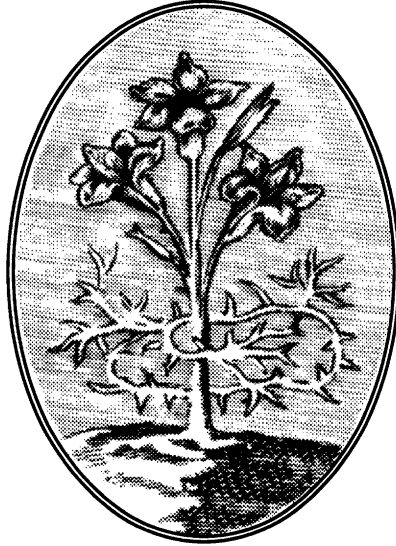
⁴Ibid, Vol. I, pp. 68—70.

of reformation, which was held by the Waldenses, Petrobrussians, Wickliffites, and Hussites, long before Luther's day; which is, "That the kingdom of Christ, or the visible church he had established upon earth, was an assembly of real and true saints, and ought therefore to be inaccessible to the wicked and unrighteous, and also exempt from all those institutions, which human prudence suggests to oppose the progress of iniquity, or to correct and reform transgressors." This maxim he declares to be the source of all their peculiarities. In 1525, and in 1533, a few men who were called Anabaptists, took the lead among mixed multitudes, that had taken up arms against cruel tyrants, in hopes of recovering both civil and religious liberty thereby; but they perished in the attempt: A sight of which carried the Baptist churches in that country so far into the other extreme, as not to allow their members to be magistrates, to use the sword, or to take an oath;¹ which are now the sentiments of the German Baptists in Pennsylvania. But the English Baptists, both in Europe and America, have carefully avoided each of these extremes, for these hundred and fifty years; yet those scandals in Germany have been constantly cast upon them, even down to this day; not because they ever had the least concern therewith, but because this has been found to be a powerful engine to prejudice the populace against allowing equal religious liberty, and for forcing people into religious covenants, before they can choose for themselves.

All the reformation that ever took place, in any age or country, was produced by the word of truth, enforced by the spirit of truth, upon each heart and conscience. And the admission of unsanctified communicants into the Christian church, and of the inventions of men to govern it, has caused endless confusions; as thereby three opposite interests have been set up. The interest of religious teachers, of civil officers, and of the people. The two former have conspired together, to enslave the latter; and yet have been far from an entire harmony betwixt themselves. Their contests for preëminence have been long and tedious in this country; but a great and effectual door is now opened for terminating these disputes, and for a return to the primitive purity and liberty of the Christian church. To trace out the evil effects of the apostasy, and to promote, as much as may be, such a return, is the great design both of this and the former volume. In compiling them a large number of records, books and papers, have been searched, and much pains taken to set principles and actions in as clear light as possible. And the author is so far from desiring indulgence in any mistakes, that he earnestly requests the help of all to correct them.

MIDDLEBOROUGH, August 2, 1784.

¹Mosheim, Vol. III, pp. 524, 525, 549.



Sicut lilium inter spinas sic amica mea inter filias

On The Cover: We use the symbol of the “lily among the thorns” from Song of Solomon 2:2 to represent the Baptist History Series. The Latin, *Sicut lilium inter spinas sic amica mea inter filias*, translates, “As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.”

“A HISTORY of the Baptists should be understood in its objects and aims; and cleared, in the beginning, of misapprehension and perversion. It is not the history of a nationality, a race, an organization, but of people, *traced by their vital principles and gospel practices*. The unity to be exhibited and demonstrated was not brought about by force, by coercion of pains and penalties, by repressive and punitive Acts of Conformity; but by the recognition and adoption of a common authoritative and completely divine standard... the WORD OF GOD.”

Dr. J. L. M. Curry (1825-1903)

President of Howard College,
Professor of English & Philosophy at Richmond College,
Trustee of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and
United States Ambassador to Spain

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