

THE SPIRITUAL KINSHIP THEORY OF BAPTIST ORIGINS

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Introduction

During the last half of the 19th century, particularly in the South, Landmarkism was a force to be reckoned with among Baptists, especially as the new “scientific” approach to history became dominant in academic circles. The Whitsitt Controversy at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in the 1890s serves as a stark reminder of the power that Landmarkists once possessed.¹ Landmarkism’s power centered on a belief that there existed an unbroken succession of Baptist churches from the first century to the present. Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and even other Protestants were not true churches. Landmarkists believed that the true New Testament churches went underground continuing throughout church history in the persecuted dissenting sects comprising a martyr’s “trail of blood.”² Although these dissenters were not *named* “Baptist,” they nevertheless represented the true New Testament church model, and therefore *were* “Baptist.” This claim of lineal succession gave Baptists a sense of triumphalism in the 19th century when denominational competition was at a fever pitch.

While there are still pockets of Baptists who believe that the Baptist tradition began with “Jesus, John, and the Jordan River,” and that the church in the Acts of the Apostles was really the First Baptist Church of Jerusalem, for the most part, it is understood today that the Baptist witness began in the early 17th century. Baptist historians in the 19th century “became virtually obsessed with the question of their

¹ See James H. Slatton, *W. H. Whitsitt: The Man and the Controversy*, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2009) for a good discussion of Whitsitt’s life and the controversy that ultimately drove him from the presidency of the seminary. For a general description of Landmarkism, see James E. Tull, “A Study of Southern Baptist Landmarkism in Light of Historical Baptist Ecclesiology,” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1960) and Rosalie Beck, “The Whitsitt Controversy: A Denomination in Crisis,” (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 1984).

² See James Milton Carroll, *The Trail of Blood*, (Lexington, KY: Ashland Avenue Baptist Church, 1931). Carroll, was the younger brother of Benajah Harvey Carroll, the founder of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. Both Carrolls were ardent Landmarkists. *The Trail of Blood* chronicled the lineal succession of the “Baptist” churches through persecuted dissenting sects and came complete with a chart of church history to illustrate the point. The book is still published today in some conservative Baptist circles.

historical origin.”³ This was largely in response to lineal successionist claims of Landmarkism and the development of history as a professional academic discipline.⁴ Eventually, two responses to lineal succession emerged as professional historians examined the thorny question of Baptist beginnings.

One group, led by historians such as William Heth Whitsitt, Henry Dexter, William T. Whitley, Winthrop Hudson, and more recently, H. Leon McBeth, argued that the Baptist tradition developed out of English Separatism rejecting any notion of influence from the 16th century Anabaptist movement or earlier dissenters. These historians contend that the historical record does not bear witness to Baptists in every era of Christian history and the Baptist movement can only be traced to the early 17th century when some English Separatists discovered the New Testament model for baptism.⁵

Spiritual Kinship

A second group of Baptist historians comprised a perspective that historian Robert G. Torbet identified as the “Anabaptist spiritual kinship theory” of Baptist origins. The spiritual kinship theory was a type of Baptist successionism although different than Landmarkism. Spiritual kinship advocates started with the assumption that New Testament Christianity represented a pristine form of the faith which became almost non-existent by the 4th century. The Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy of the Middle Ages represented further perversion of the New Testament norm. When Baptists arose in the 17th century, they comprised a restoration of New Testament Christianity and represented to the world once again the true witness to the faith. Between the 4th and the 17th centuries the dissenting groups could not be called “Baptist,” according to spiritual kinship adherents, but did share “Baptist-like” qualities such as rejection of infant baptism, congregational autonomy, rejection of clergy hierarchy, and opposition to a state church. In other words, these groups were “spiritually kin” to modern Baptists but were not actually Baptist, a subtle but important distinction from lineal succession. For most of these historians, the Anabaptists of the 16th century represented an important bridge between the dissenting sects and the 17th century Baptists. Torbet writes that although “many of its adherents admit the difficulty of establishing any historical connection between these groups, they find a satisfaction in the succession of regenerated baptized believers which may be traced through such minority groups during the centuries following the defection of New Testament Christianity.”⁶

³ Mark Steven Fountain, “A. H. Newman’s Appropriation of the Spiritual Kinship Theory of Baptist Origins as a Historiographical Via Media,” (Th.M. thesis: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986), 2.

⁴ For a discussion about the development of history as a professional academic discipline and more particularly how this impacted the study of church history, see Henry Warner Bowden, *Church History in the Age of Science*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971).

⁵ See Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, 3rd Ed., (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1980), 20-21, and H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 49-52.

⁶ Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, 19.

Several prominent Baptist historians from the 19th and early 20th centuries were champions of the spiritual kinship theory of Baptist origins. David Benedict, in 1848 wrote, “that the peculiar sentiments of that portion of Christian professors, now called baptists, have always lived, and been maintained among the different sects and parties which have been constantly seceding from the Greek, the Roman and other great bodies, which may properly be denominated.”⁷ Richard B. Cook, in his *The Story of the Baptists in All Ages and Countries* (1884), described how various dissenters through the centuries maintained biblical principles such as regenerate church membership, authority of scripture, believers’ baptism by immersion, and rejection of the union between church and state. “Many of them,” Cook wrote, “who were stamped as heretics, were noble reformers who sought to resist the progress of apostasy and tried to bring the church back to the simplicity and purity of the Scriptures, or failing in this they separated from that church which had finally become hopelessly corrupt, and established churches of their own, after the gospel pattern.”⁸ Thomas Armitage rejected lineal succession, arguing that “the unity of Christianity is not found by any visible tracing through one set of people.”⁹ Instead, “it has been enwrapped in all who have followed purely apostolic principles through the ages.”¹⁰ Armitage claimed that his true intent with his *A History of the Baptists* was “to follow certain truths through the ages . . . down to their chief conservators of this time, the Baptists.”¹¹

Albert Henry Newman and Spiritual Kinship

The most prolific promoter of the spiritual kinship theory was historian Albert Henry Newman. With a bibliography of writings that encompasses at least twenty-one pages, Albert Henry Newman (1852-1933) ranks as one of the most prolific and competent church historians that Baptists have ever produced. Born in the Edgefield district of South Carolina, Newman received his education at Mercer University, Rochester Theological Seminary, and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. His teaching career lasted fifty-three years and included positions at Rochester Theological Seminary (1877-81); Toronto Baptist College (1881-91); McMaster University (1891-1901); Baylor University

⁷ David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other parts of the World*, (New York: Lewis Colby and Company, 1848): 1, cited in Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, 19.

⁸ Richard B. Cook, *The Story of the Baptists in All Ages and Countries*, (Baltimore: Rev. H. M. Wharton, 1884), 33. Cook uses the first 70 pages of his book to describe the apostasy of the true faith and the rescue by the dissenters before discussing the beginning of the Baptist witness in the 17th century.

⁹ Thomas Armitage, *A History of the Baptists: Traced by Their Vital Principles and Practices From the Time of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to the Present*, (New York: Bryan, Taylor and Co., 1893), 1.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 11.

(1901-08, 1913-21); Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (1908-13); and Mercer University (1921-28).¹²

Newman's spiritual kinship interest begins with his impression that Baptist churches were congruent with apostolic Christianity.¹³ His study of the apostolic era led him to conclude that the distinguishing marks of the apostolic churches were: (1) ascription to the absolute lordship of Christ; (2) regenerate church membership; (3) independence of each local church; (4) egalitarianism among all members in rank and privilege; (5) separation of church and state; (6) each church's leaders chosen from among their own ranks for the performance of certain tasks; (7) believer's baptism and the Lord's Supper as the only two ordinances.¹⁴ When he compared Baptist principles with those identified from the apostolic period, he concluded that Baptist churches were almost identical with the churches of the first century.¹⁵

After concluding that similarity existed between apostolic Christianity and modern Baptists, the task before him was to investigate what happened to the apostolic principles between the first century and his era. He thought that the second century represented the beginning of the decline because of the introduction of infant baptism, a practice he considered to be unwarranted by scripture. "If the apostolic churches were Baptist churches," he said, "the churches of the second century were not. Still less were those of the third and the following centuries."¹⁶ Much of his work as a historian was an effort to find traces of apostolic principles and identify their location. The most important work of his career, *A History of Anti-Pedobaptism: From the Rise of Pedobaptism to A.D.*

¹² There are two published accounts of Newman's life. First, Frederick Eby, *Newman the Church Historian: A Study in Christian Personality* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1946). Eby was Newman's son-in-law and this biography tends to be more hagiography rather than an objective analysis of Newman's life. More recently, W. Glenn Jonas, Jr., *A Critical Evaluation of Albert Henry Newman, Church Historian* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992). Additionally, there are two other studies of Newman's life which have not been published. See Jerry Breazeale, "Albert Henry Newman, Historian and Theologian" (Th.D. diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1960), and Fountain, "A. H. Newman's Appropriation of the Spiritual Kinship Theory of Baptist Origins as a Historiographical Via Media."

¹³ For a fuller discussion of Newman's spiritual kinship concept in the broader context of his Anabaptist interests see chapter three of my *A Critical Evaluation of Albert Henry Newman, Church Historian*, 93-122. Much of the discussion that follows below is drawn from that chapter.

¹⁴ Albert Henry Newman, "Baptist Churches Apostolical," in *Baptist Doctrines: Being an Exposition in a Series of Essays by Representative Baptist Ministers of the Distinctive Points of Baptist Faith and Practice*, ed. by Charles A. Jenkens, (St. Louis: C. R. Barns, 1892), 236-82.

¹⁵ Newman defined apostolic Christianity on another occasion as well. In "the apostolical and immediately post-apostolical times the churches were composed of those who had been baptized upon a personal profession of faith; that in them the Supper was restricted to church members; that churches were organized on a congregational basis with a plurality of elders or bishops; and that each church of Christ embracing usually the baptized believers of the entire community, was independent in respect to every other." See Albert Henry Newman, "Traces of Baptist Teaching and Practice During the First Sixteen Christian Centuries," *The Baptist Standard* (October 17, 1901): 1.

¹⁶ Albert Henry Newman, *A History of Anti-Pedobaptism: From the Rise of Pedobaptism to A.D. 1609* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1896), 3.

1609, sought to “to trace and account for the protests against incoming perversions of apostolic precept and example regarding the subjects of baptism.”¹⁷

Newman believed that even though apostolic Christianity began to decline in the second century, a remnant of it continued to exist through the history of the church in the dissenting sects. He believed that “from the apostolic age to this good day the religion of Christ has persisted in its saving and sanctifying power.”¹⁸ He cautioned, however, that the dissenters were far from what could be termed the apostolic norm, even though they did subscribe to some of its principles.¹⁹ Here Newman’s spiritual kinship can be differentiated from the type of lineal succession found in James Milton Carroll’s *The Trail of Blood*. Carroll identified the dissenters as Baptist churches but Newman refused to go that far recognizing that he was unable “to find a succession or organized churches in which Christian doctrines were maintained incorrupt.”²⁰

For Newman, the Middle Ages represented the period when apostolic Christianity gradually began to resurface.²¹ With the Petrobrusians and the Arnoldists in the twelfth century, Newman found a form of Christianity he believed could be regarded as “measurably conformable to the apostolic standard.”²² The Waldenses and their related groups followed the Petrobrusians and the Arnoldists, leading eventually to Wycliff and Hus. But Newman noted that apostolic Christianity still did not come to complete realization in the Middle Ages. For instance, he noted that Wycliff and the Lollards still retained the practice of infant baptism.²³ He said, “Even those who rejected infant baptism and practised [sic] rebaptism had much in their doctrine and practice that present-day Baptists would not fellowship.”²⁴

Newman placed so much emphasis on the medieval dissenting groups because they prefigured the Protestant Reformation which did not begin with Luther, the Humanists, Wycliff, or even Hus according to Newman. It began with the “so-called

¹⁷ Albert Henry Newman, “Traces of Baptist Teaching and Practice During the First Sixteen Christian Centuries,” 1.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Newman, *A History of Anti-Pedobaptism: From the Rise of Pedobaptism to A.D. 1609*, 15-29.

²⁰ Newman, Ibid, 28. For other statements that Newman made against lineal successionist claims see Albert Henry Newman, “The Significance of the Anabaptist Movement in the History of the Christian Church,” 15, and idem, *A Manual of Church History*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1903), 178 concerning successionist claims among the Mennonites.

²¹ For instance see Albert Henry Newman, *A Manual of Church History*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1899), 374-76 concerning the Jovinianist Controversy. Newman believed that this group kept the evangelical witness alive and that it influenced the rise of the Arnoldists, Petrobrusians, and Henricians in the twelfth century.

²² Newman, *A History of Anti-Pedobaptism: From the Rise of Pedobaptism to A.D. 1609*, 30.

²³ Ibid., 55.

²⁴ Ibid., 61.

heretical . . . parties protesting with terrible earnestness against the corrupt hierarchy.”²⁵ These groups became the seed from which later sprang the Anabaptist movement.

It is not denied that most of the phenomena of the Anabaptist movement could be accounted for without the supposition of the persistence in it of mediaeval types of evangelical life and thought; but it seems more reasonable to postulate the perpetuity of the older types than to suppose that so many varieties of teaching had independent origin in the two periods and that the older types that can be traced to the Reformation time should have suddenly become extinct to give place to similar parties newly originated.²⁶

Newman held that the Reformation provided the best expression of apostolic Christianity since the first century. The evangelical witness progressed through the centuries and produced an air of expectancy at the beginning of the sixteenth century. “A spirit of revolution was abroad,” he said. “Enough of evangelical light and enough of the spirit diffused among the masses to insure an enthusiastic reception for any movement that should give fair promise of relief from priest craft and of social amelioration.”²⁷

Luther and the other magisterial reformers proved to be a disappointment in Newman’s estimation. They turned their backs on apostolic Christianity when they retained infant baptism and united church and state. The Anabaptists, contrarily, continued the course of medieval evangelical life. Regarding the Swiss Anabaptists, Newman said, “Anabaptists of this type superadded to what was best in medieval evangelical life and thought.”²⁸ He concluded therefore, that the Anabaptist movement served to complete the process of reform originally begun by the magisterial reformers.²⁹

Because Newman believed the Baptists to be the full expression of apostolic Christianity, and because he saw the Anabaptists as the group that came the closest to that apostolic standard, he attempted to determine all that he could about their movement and their influence on the rise of the Baptists in the seventeenth century. Frederick Eby, declared that Newman’s quest was “[t]o trace the history of the Baptists and their doctrines.”³⁰ Since the study of the history of the Baptists was Newman’s lifelong

²⁵ Albert Henry Newman, “The Reformation From a Baptist Point of View,” *The Baptist Quarterly Review* 6 (January 1884): 52.

²⁶ Newman, *Manual*, 2:151.

²⁷ Newman, *A History of Anti-Pedobaptism: From the Rise of Pedobaptism to A.D. 1609*, 63.

²⁸ Albert Henry Newman, “Some Biblical Anabaptists,” *The Baptist Standard* (September 19, 1901): 5.

²⁹ Newman, *Manual*, 2:151. Newman went so far as to say that “Lutherans had no sooner thoroughly overthrown Scholasticism than they had introduced an era of Protestant Scholasticism, with the same deadening and despiritualizing effect as had marked that of the Middle Ages.” See idem, “The Reformation From a Baptist Point of View,” 61.

³⁰ Eby, *Newman the Church Historian*, 123.

pursuit, he naturally wanted to investigate any group with similar distinctives. This explains his interest in studying the history of the Anabaptists. He admitted that there were differences between the Anabaptists and Baptists.³¹ But he saw in the Anabaptist movement the antecedents of the Baptists, the recovery of apostolic Christianity in its infancy, and argued that although they were not identical to 17th century Baptists, they were thoroughly imbued with Baptist principles, and were . . . the forerunners of all that was best in Puritanism and in the great modern Baptist movement.”³²

Conclusion

The spiritual kinship theory of Baptist origins represented a compromise position between two divergent perspectives. Landmarkism’s “trail of blood” proponents identified the apostolic churches as Baptist and suggested a continuous presence of Baptist churches throughout Christian history in the dissenting sects. The English Separatist descent advocates saw no historical evidence of Baptists until the early 17th century when the movement arose out of radical Puritanism. Spiritual kinship advocates such as Albert Henry Newman provided the *via media* between the two perspectives.³³ The spiritual kinship theory provided reputable Baptist historians a convenient means by which to embrace restoration of New Testament Christianity by the Baptists in the 17th century and yet maintain commitment to sound historiography as professional historians. It represented a version of succession, but would not allow conclusions to be drawn any further than the sources permitted.

There are no modern advocates of the spiritual kinship theory of Baptist origins although a variation of the position does exist. Leon McBeth divided Torbet’s “spiritual kinship” perspective into two categories: “continuation of biblical teachings” and “Anabaptist influence.” The “continuation of biblical teachings” position is equivalent to Torbet’s spiritual kinship theory. The “Anabaptist influence” position includes scholars such as A. C. Underwood, E. A. Payne, James D. Mosteller and William R. Estep who argued that even though Baptists “emerged through English Separatism . . . Anabaptism both on the Continent and in England prepared the way for Separatism.”³⁴

³¹ Newman, “The Significance of the Anabaptist Movement in the History of the Christian Church,” 22.

³² Albert Henry Newman, “The Whitsitt Controversy,” in *A Review of the Question*, ed. by George A. Lofton (Nashville: University Press Company, 1897), 173.

³³ This is essentially the thesis of Fountain’s work cited earlier. He argues that Newman’s spiritual kinship theory of Baptist origins provided a historiographical *via media* between the lineal successionists and historians of his day like W. H. Whitsitt who were dedicated to the “scientific” approach to church history. See especially Fountain, “A. H. Newman’s Appropriation of the Spiritual Kinship Theory of Baptist Origins as a Historiographical *Via Media*,” 1-8.

³⁴ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 52. While several historians can be found who argue the presence of Anabaptist influence on the rise of the General Baptists, very few have ventured to argue that Anabaptists influenced the rise of the later Particular Baptists. One Baptist scholar, Glen Stassen, argued convincingly that the theological foundation of the Particular Baptist tradition lay in the work of Menno Simons, a leading 16th century Anabaptist leader. Elements of *The Foundation of Christian Doctrine*, Simons’ most widely distributed work, can be seen in the first confession of faith written by the Particular

The intellectual world at the beginning of the 20th century produced new challenges to the old ways of understanding the Christian religion. The same was true with Baptist history. W. H. Whitsitt was forced to resign as the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky in 1899 because his conclusions about Baptist origins conflicted with Landmarkists. The spiritual kinship theory provided a gentler attempt to introduce Baptists to their history by asserting that modern Baptists were congruent with apostolic Christianity and that Baptist principles had continued unbroken throughout Christian history, thereby allowing a sense of Baptist triumphalism to continue unabated.

Baptists. Therefore, Stassen argues, the “Particular Baptists should not be ignored in our assessment of Anabaptist influence on Baptist origins.” See Glen Stassen, “Opening Menno Simons’s Foundation-Book and Finding the Father of Baptist Origins Alongside the Mother—Calvinist Congregationalism,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 33 (Spring, 1998): 34. Another version of this article was published by Stassen in an article titled, “Anabaptist Influence in the Origin of the Particular Baptists,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 36 (October 1962): 324-333.