

I

INTRODUCTION

PERHAPS NO OTHER MAJOR BODY OF PROFESSING CHRISTIANS has had as much difficulty in discerning its historical roots as have the Baptists. A survey of conflicting opinions might lead a perceptive observer to conclude that Baptists suffer from an identity crisis. Although the two most popular textbooks used in America to teach Baptist history cite Holland and England early in the seventeenth century as the birthplaces of the Baptist churches,¹ many Baptists object vehemently and argue that their history can be traced across the centuries to New Testament times. Some Baptists deny categorically that they are Protestants and that the history of their churches is related to the success of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century.²

Those who reject the Protestant character and Reformation origins of the Baptists usually maintain a view of church history sometimes called "Baptist Successionism" and claim that Baptists have represented the true church, which must be, and has been, present in every period of history.³ The popularity of the successionist view has been enhanced enormously by a booklet entitled *The Trail of Blood*, of which thousands of copies have been distributed since it was published in 1931.⁴

The thesis of *The Trail of Blood* appears in its subtitle, "Following the Christians Down through the Centuries . . . or The History of Baptist Churches from the Time of Christ, Their Founder, to the Present Day." J. M. Carroll, author of this treatise, explained that the "blood" in the title signifies suffering, because the true church has been persecuted throughout history. In fact, it appears that Carroll and some other successionist authors have made the experience of suffering persecutions *the* grand distin-

guishing mark of the true church. Successionists admit, of course, that the name "Baptist" cannot be found in every period of the Christian era, but if a group dissented from the Roman Catholic Church and suffered for its nonconformity, successionists have been quick to cite such groups as baptistic proponents of biblical Christianity. In this way, ancient and medieval religious movements such as the Motanists, Novatians, Patarenes, Bogomils, Paulicians, Arnoldists, Henricians, Albigenses, and Waldenses have been inducted into the line of "Baptist" succession. A few successionists have claimed that even St. Patrick was a Baptist.⁵

As a young undergraduate with a keen interest in history, the author of the present work was introduced to Baptist successionism through reading *The Trail of Blood* and was, for several years, a vigorous advocate of that view. Extensive graduate study and independent investigation of church history has, however, convinced him that the view he once held so dear has not been, and cannot be, verified. On the contrary, surviving primary documents render the successionist view untenable.

It is the purpose of this book to show that, although free church groups in ancient and medieval times sometimes promoted doctrines and practices agreeable to modern Baptists, when judged by standards now acknowledged as baptistic, not one of them merits recognition as a Baptist church. Baptists arose in the seventeenth century in Holland and England. They are Protestants, heirs of the Reformers.

In pursuing this inquiry, an examination of and concentration on *primary* sources is indispensable, for successionist writers have too often documented crucial points in their arguments by reference to dubious secondary sources. Therefore, every effort has been made to consult available documents. Wherever possible, the authors who spoke for the sects in question have been permitted to speak for themselves. Because these sects defied the authority of the established church, much of their literature was destroyed long ago, as, for example, in the case of those groups which were suppressed by the Roman Catholic Inquisition. However, enough primary material produced both by the sectarians themselves and by their enemies has survived, so that an informed judgment about their beliefs and practices is still possible.

Spokesmen for the Baptist successionist view of church history have tended to dismiss documents produced by opponents of the

sects as hopelessly prejudiced and therefore unreliable. As we intend to show, this contention is not always valid, for we possess documents of Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox origin that have been cross-checked for accuracy. When two or more hostile sources who have had no evident contact with one another relate the same account, there is a very high degree of probability that the account is substantially correct. Documents of this nature have therefore been cited in this study, but preference has been given to literature which has come from sympathetic sources, wherever that is available. In the case of the Anabaptists, whose significance will be considered toward the end of this book, primary material from friendly sources is abundant, even in English translations.

In a few instances extant documentary evidence about a particular sect or its leader comes from a single hostile witness. Where this condition prevails, judgment must be guarded and tentative. The absence of collateral evidence, nevertheless, does not mean that the extant account necessarily is unreliable, but it does mean that there is no way of either affirming or denying it with certainty. Where this situation arises, the historian must work with the evidence at hand; he is not free to issue conclusions based upon conjecture. It is regrettable that successionist writers have often resorted to conjecture in order to buttress their arguments, and, in some cases, they have altered material quoted from distinguished scholars outside Baptist ranks so as to make it appear to support their position.⁶

Among successionist authors some difference of opinion has arisen as to exactly which nonconformist groups belong to the "Baptist" line. Advocates of this view are not uniform in their definition of "succession" either. Carroll reported that he had discovered an unbroken line of true churches across the centuries, and he illustrated his claim with a chart that offers names and dates of the supposedly baptistic bodies.⁷ W. A. Jarrel, another Texas Baptist of the nineteenth century, however, preferred to speak of a Baptist "perpetuity," that is, a succession of true doctrine, "not a *linked chain* of churches or ministers."⁸

Since *The Trail of Blood* appears to remain the most widely circulated expression of the successionist interpretation, this study will, with the exception of the Bogomils and the intriguing question about St. Patrick, be confined to those sects cited by

Carroll. This means that no attention will be given to the Hussites and the Lollards of the late Middle Ages, even though some successionists have claimed them as Baptists.⁹

Before proceeding to an examination of the several religious movements owned by the successionists, it is appropriate to mention the doctrinal conviction which has led so many Baptists to seek a line of true churches from the New Testament period to the present. That conviction comes from a particular interpretation of the words of Jesus addressed to St. Peter, the spokesman for the apostles, after Peter had confessed that Jesus was the Messiah. Our Lord said:

Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of *Hades* [hell] will not overcome it (Matthew 16:17,18. NIV).

Many successionists believe that the term “church” (Greek *ecclesia*), wherever it appears in the New Testament, signifies a local congregation of baptized believers that maintains the pure doctrine taught by Christ and the apostles. Since Christ promised “the gates of *Hades*” would not prevail against his church the true church must be present in every epoch of history. Carroll, in his chart, claimed to have tracked the march of that church up to the nineteenth century.

Successionist ecclesiology, then, is generally at variance with the traditional Christian belief in a catholic (universal) church, and successionists interpret Christ’s promise in Matthew 16:18 as a reference to the local congregation. Hence, pure, local, visible churches must have existed throughout Christian history, and Carroll, Jarrel, et al., professed to have found them.

It appears that the successionist scheme of history is practically required by the doctrine of the church which its advocates maintain. Those who believe that *ecclesia* is used to identify the universal company of regenerate people, as well as particular local congregations of believers, understand the promise of Christ in a different way. They contend that the declaration “the gates of *Hades* will not overcome it” is a promise of immortality for all members of the mystical body of Christ, which is his universal church. *Hades* then

is taken to signify the grave or the realm of death, and children of God need not fear death because Christ has assured them that they, as members of his church, will triumph over the grave.¹⁰

It is evident that one's ecclesiological position will affect greatly one's approach to the study of Baptist history. The author of this book is thoroughly convinced that the New Testament affirms the doctrine of the universal church, and he therefore feels no obligation to reconstruct the past in such a way as to find ancient and medieval sects that might be called Baptists. That some of the sects to be examined subscribed to particular points of belief which are now regarded as baptistic will become evident as we proceed. It should also become clear, however, that many of the movements claimed by the successionists were neither Baptists nor Christians.

NOTES

1. Henry C. Vedder, *A Short History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1907); Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1950).
2. Chester Tulga, *Why Baptists Did Not Cooperate with the Reformation* (Chicago: Conservative Baptist Association of America, 1958); Vernon C. Lyons, *Why Baptists Are Not Protestants* (Chicago: Ashburn Baptist Church, n.d.).
3. W. Morgan Patterson, *Baptist Successionism, A Critical View* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969).
4. J. M. Carroll, *The Trail of Blood*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, KY: Ashland Avenue Baptist Church, 1931).
5. W. A. Jarrel, *Baptist Church Perpetuity* (Dallas: Published by the Author, 1894), 472–79.
6. Patterson, *Successionism*, 30–46, contains a penetrating analysis of this tendency.
7. *The Trail of Blood*, chart.
8. S. H. Ford, as quoted by Jarrel, *Perpetuity*, 1 (emphasis author's).
9. See G. H. Orchard, *A Concise History of Baptists from the Time of Christ, Their Founder, to the 18th Century* (Lexington, KY: Ashland Avenue Baptist Church, 1956 reprint of 1838 edition), 334.
10. An extremely cogent defense of the universal church appears in John Thornbury, *The Doctrine of the Church: A Baptist View* (Lewisburg, PA: Heritage Publishers, 1971), especially 117–30.