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Justification and Sanctification ≠ A Baptist Perspective

In looking at a Baptist understanding of the doctrines of justification and sanctification from an historical perspective, it is apparent that these doctrines did not define Baptists. They were accepted by Baptists and interpreted by Baptists, but they were not the crux of what made Baptists Baptist.

In his book, *The Baptist Heritage*, H. Leon McBeth made no mention of justification and sanctification. One chapter was devoted to explaining how the first Baptists defined their faith. Early Baptist beliefs were categorized under the following headings: The holy Trinity, Scripture, atonement, the church, the ministry, baptism, communion, relation to the government, religious liberty, and eschatology.¹

Baptists did not struggle to define themselves by what they believed about justification and sanctification. This does not mean, however, that these were not important doctrines to Baptists. E. Y. Mullins, Baptist theologian and interpreter in the early years of the 20th century, said: ,justification by faith was a central principle in Luther's teaching, and has become a part of the common Christian heritage of the succeeding centuries. Baptists here share with others the possession of a great truth.'² Later in this work Mullins said: ,on many vital matters of doctrine Baptists are in substantial agreement with the evangelical world in general.'³

Another Baptist interpreter, H. Wheeler Robinson, addressed sanctification broadly when he described how Baptists emphasized ,inward and ethical' holiness. According to Robinson, ,the chief content' of the fellowship of believers was ,moral holiness, that the believers are called to be saints, consecrated to the holy God by moral character.'⁴ There is, again, nothing distinctively Baptist in this emphasis, but again it demonstrates

¹ H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987), Chapter 2, pp. 64-98.

² Edgar Young Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908), p. 51.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴ H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Life and Faith of Baptists* (London: The Kingsgate Press, 1946; 1927), p. 19.

how with these doctrines Baptists have much in common with the whole body of Christ.

Brooks Hays and John E. Steely put the doctrines of justification and sanctification in the category of an inheritance from the 16th-century Reformation which Baptists share with other Protestants. They are among the 'key ideas' which these groups share, even though they have never been able to establish 'organic unity'. 'Thus Baptists owe a continuing debt to the representatives of the „mainstream“ of the Reformation, especially to the reforming labours and the theological affirmations of Luther and Calvin.'⁵

A study paper issued by the European Baptist Federation (EBF) in 1993 said, 'Baptists understand themselves to be part of a continuing stream of Christian truth and devotion that has flowed from biblical times. However, they trace the more immediate origin of their congregations to the period of the Protestant Reformation in Europe, and are indebted to the recovery at that time of the biblical principle of „justification by God's grace through faith alone.“'⁶ It is key to understanding Baptists to recognize that they emphasize justification as a biblical principle, rather than as Luther's insight. From the beginning Baptists freely accepted insights from other traditions when they believed those theological insights were found in Scripture.

In defining their theology, Baptists are usually described as a confessional people, not a credal people. Baptists did not necessarily reject the content of the creeds of the church, but they definitely rejected the way creeds were used as tests of fellowship and to justify persecution. Confessions were recognized as limited documents; limited to the people who signed them as well as to the time in which they were formulated, therefore not binding even on other Baptists, never mind other Christians. Part of this rejection of canonizing statements of faith came from what is today called 'the voluntary principle'. People should be free to express their faith and to subscribe voluntarily to statements of faith. This emphasis on freedom, however, was not grounded in the freedom of the believer to believe anything, but in the passionate belief in the freedom of God to continue revealing God's self, especially through the interpretation of

⁵ Brooks Hays and John E. Steely, *The Baptist Way of Life* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. xvi.

⁶ Division for Theology and Education of the European Baptist Federation, 'What are Baptists? On the Way to Expressing Baptist Identity in a Changing Europe', 1993, p. 1.

Scripture.⁷ As the preface of the London Confession (1644) said, holding Jesus Christ to be our head and Lord; under whose government we desire alone to walk, in following the Lamb wheresoever he goes; and we believe the Lord will daily cause truth more to appear in the hearts of his saints ...⁸

The beginnings of the earliest groups self-consciously identified as Baptists can be traced back to 17th century England. Therefore, the 17th century English Baptist confessions of faith are an appropriate vehicle for examining Baptist roots because they were formal attempts to define Baptist identity. Because of the fear of our forebears that the confessions would be elevated to the status of creeds, however, many Baptists today are unaware of these confessions. After serving its immediate purpose, each confession fell into disuse. While copies of the documents were saved, the confessions were not used in worship, nor did they become part of popular tradition. Yet, in the 17th century, the century of Baptist beginnings, Baptists wrote these confessions to define themselves over against their opponents, to educate those who joined them, to identify like-minded congregations for forming associations, and to deal with controversy among those who called themselves Baptist.⁹ These confessions include statements on justification and sanctification that show these doctrines were a part of Baptist identity from the beginning.

The 17th century confessions were written by two groups of Baptists, the General Baptists and the Particular Baptists. When a group emerged strong enough to be persecuted and identified as Baptist, there was not one group, but two. These groups were not the result of a split among Baptists, but had different beginnings. They took different names because they had different doctrines of the atonement.

The General Baptists believed that all who believed in Christ would be saved – general atonement, not atonement only for the elect. The Particular Baptists believed that salvation was only for particular people, the elect. The Particular Baptist confessions tended to follow the Calvinist

⁷ For discussions of Baptist use of confessions in addition to the citation below from McBeth see also William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1989 (1959), p. 16; Hays and Steely, *Baptist Way of Life*, pp. 53.159, and Albert Wardin, editor, *Baptists Around the World: A Comprehensive Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995), pp. 2-3.

⁸ Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, p. 155. Lumpkin's book is the source for the Baptist Confessions used in this article. In all quotations I have modernized the spelling.

⁹ McBeth, *Baptist Heritage*, pp. 20.66.68.

system of election, justification, sanctification, perseverance, while the General Baptist confessions did not put forth such a developed doctrinal system. So while 17th century Baptists believed in justification and sanctification, they disagreed as to whom these doctrines applied.¹⁰

The *London Confession* (1644), the earliest of these confessions and written by representatives of Particular Baptist churches, states that justification is the free gift of God to those who are in union with Christ. 'That those which have union with Christ are justified from all their sins, past, present, and to come, by the blood of Christ; which justification we conceive to be a gracious and free acquittance of a guilty, sinful creature from all sin by God through the satisfaction that Christ hath made by his death; and this applied in the manifestation of it through faith.'¹¹ These same themes are seen in other Particular Baptist confessions. The *Midland Association Confession* (1655) emphasized that 'faith is the free gift of God, and the mighty work of God in the soul, even like the rising of Christ from the dead ...' and 'that every man [sic] is justified by Christ ... apprehended by faith; and that no man is justified in the sight of God partly by Christ and partly by works.'¹² The *Somerset Confession* (1656) stressed 'that God in his Son did freely, without respect to any work done, or to be done by them as a moving cause, elect and choose some to himself before the foundation of the world (Eph 1.3,4; 2 Tim 1.9), whom he in time has, does, and will call, justify, sanctify and glorify (Rom 8.29, 30)'. This confession continued by defining justification and declared that it is only through faith in Jesus Christ.¹³

The Particular Baptist confession that represented the largest group of people and found the most widespread use of any 17th century Baptist confession was the *Assembly, or Second London, Confession* (1677). This confession was based directly on the *Westminster Confession* (1647), as Baptists were here intentionally demonstrating where they were in agreement with Presbyterians and Congregationalists. While this confession showed independent thinking especially in sections on religious liberty and separation of church and state, for example, the section on justification was taken entirely from the *Westminster Confession*, with the addition of a few words on Christ's active and passive obedience.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 21-63.

¹¹ Lumpkin, p. 164.

¹² Ibid., p. 199.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 205.209.

Those whom God effectually calls, he [sic] also freely justifies, not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting, and accepting their persons as righteous; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone, not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing Christ's *active obedience unto the whole Law, and passive obedience in his death, for their whole and sole righteousness*, they receiving, and resting on him, and his righteousness, by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.¹⁴

While the General Baptists were organized first, they were later in publishing confessions. Certainly there is nothing in their confessions that differs from the Particular Baptist, or even general Protestant understanding, of justification by faith. For those who accepted, were in union with, Christ as saviour, justification was the free gift of God. The evidence that General Baptists did not always develop as precise doctrinal formulations as did the Particular Baptists can be seen in *The Faith and Practice of Thirty Congregations* (1651) where justification by faith is never mentioned. That salvation is the free gift of God available to all who accept Christ is, however, strongly emphasized. 'That the gifts of God spring from the pleasure of his will, or of his free grace; even the Lord Jesus Christ sprung from thence, from whom comes all spiritual mercies: Rom 8.32, Heb 2.9.'¹⁵

The confession continued by stressing that even the ability to believe was a gift of the free grace of God and no amount of ability and power proved salvation, but gifts from God were to be exercised in faithfulness to God. 'That whosoever obeys God with those gifts of his free grace (as abilities and power to do his will) never so faithfully, evangelically, or unfeignedly, giving him the glory of those performances; yet thus believing or obeying does not procure salvation as eternal life, neither are they any cause at all to move God to bestow it ...'¹⁶ The confession issued in 1654 with the title, *The True Gospel-Faith Declared According to the Scriptures*, simply stated, 'thirdly, that no man [sic] can redeem himself from this death, Ps 47.7. None of them can by any means redeem his

¹⁴ Ibid., pp 265-266. Where the words are in italics, the Westminster Confession read, '... but imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them ...'

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 179.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 180.

brother, or give to God a ransom for him, Eph 2,8: For by grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves.¹⁷

The *Standard Confession* (1660) was signed by 40 men representing the major General Baptist areas. This confession also illustrated more developed doctrinal formulation and referred specifically to justification by faith:

That the way set forth by God for men to be justified in, is by faith in Christ, Rom 5.1. That is to say, when men shall assent to the truth of the gospel, believing with all their hearts that there is remission of sins, and eternal life to be had in Christ. And that Christ therefore is most worthy of their constant affections, and subjection to all his commandments, and therefore resolve with purpose of heart so to subject unto him in all things, and no longer unto themselves, 2 Cor 5.15.

And so, shall (with godly sorrow for the sins past) commit themselves to his grace, confidently depending upon him for that which they believe is to be had in him: such so believing are justified from all their sins, their faith shall be accounted unto them for righteousness, Rom. 4.22,23,24, Rom 3.25,26.¹⁸

The most developed of the General Baptist confessions is, interestingly enough, called the *Orthodox Creed*. It was adopted in 1678 out of a desire similar to the *Second London Confession* (1677), to show that they held views in common with all Protestant Christians as well as to refute an aberrant christology being preached by a General Baptist in Kent and Sussex, and to bring together the views held by Particular and General Baptists. While 54 representatives of General Baptist churches signed this confession, it did not appear to circulate beyond the Midlands area of England.¹⁹ Article 23 stated, 'Faith is an act of the understanding, giving a firm assent to the things contained in the holy Scriptures. But justifying faith is a grace, or habit, wrought in the soul, by the Holy Ghost, through preaching the word of God, whereby we are enabled to believe, not only that the Messiah is offered to us, but also to take and receive him, as a Lord and saviour, and wholly and only to rest upon Christ, for grace and eternal salvation.'²⁰ This article was followed by an extensive article defining justification by Christ and which parts of the justification process

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 192.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 226.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 295,296.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 314.

applied to which members of the Trinity. Article 25 declared that, 'Two privileges flow out of our justification by faith in Christ, viz., our reconciliation, and adoption, or sonship.'²¹

Thus, in examining the early confessions of Baptists, it is obvious that the first Baptists did not develop their own vocabulary or even a peculiarly Baptist doctrine of justification by faith. The doctrine mattered to them and appeared in their confessions, affirming the tradition developed by the 16th century Protestant Reformers as foundational to their understanding of salvation. A similar process of acceptance can be seen in the early Baptist understanding of sanctification.

Baptists tend to define sanctification as a lifelong process of perfecting. As Hays and Steely state, 'Baptists in general do not recognize the possibility of sinless perfection in the life of the Christian. We prefer to speak, instead, of the lifelong pilgrimage of the Christian toward that full maturity which is held up before us...'²² This lifelong pilgrimage requires being what the early Baptists called 'holy in life and conversation' for the glory of God. One did not live a holy life in order to earn salvation, or even keep salvation, but because one was saved and wanted to give glory to God.

Again, we see the pattern of the General Baptist confessions being composed of simple statements and Scripture passages. *The Faith and Practice of Thirty Congregations* (1651) declared 'that the ground or principle end of men's believing or obeying God ought to be for the advancing of the glory of God, or for the praise of his [sic] free grace; 1 Cor 6.19,20.'²³ According to *The True Gospel-Faith* (1654), the church is composed of baptized believers joined together and '... every one of them ought to be holy in life and conversation, 2 Cor 7.1; 1 Pet 1.15.'²⁴

By 1660, when the General Baptists issued the *Standard Confession*, the sections that could be identified as referring to sanctification were more developed. In Article 7 it was emphasized that sanctification was a free gift of God. 'That there is one Holy Spirit, the precious gift of God, freely given to such as obey him, Eph 4.4, Acts 5.32, that thereby they may be thoroughly sanctified, and made able (without which they are altogether unable) to abide steadfast in the faith, and to honour the Father, and his Son Christ, the author and finisher of their faith; 1 Cor 6.11.'²⁵

²¹ Ibid., Article 24, pp. 314-315, Article 25, p. 315.

²² Hays and Steely, *Baptist Way of Life*, p. 43.

²³ Lumpkin, p. 181.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 194.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 227.

Later on, in Article 14, focus is on the necessity for a holy life: 'That although we thus declare the primitive way, and order of constituting churches, yet we verily believe, and also declare, that unless men [sic] so professing, and practising the form and order of Christ's doctrine, shall also beautify the same with a holy and wise conversation, in all godliness and honesty, the profession of the visible form will be rendered to them of no effect; for without holiness no man shall see the Lord, Heb 12.14, Is 1.11,12,15,16.'²⁶

An extensive section on sanctification is found in the *Orthodox Creed* (1678). The focus on living a holy life for the glory of God is still present in this section.

Those that are united into Christ by effectual faith are regenerated, and have a new heart and spirit created in them, through the virtue of Christ his death, resurrection, and intercession, and by the efficacy of the Holy Spirit, received by faith, and are sanctified by the word and spirit of truth, dwelling in them, by destroying and pulling down the strongholds, or dominion of sin and lust, and more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, in the practice of holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.²⁷

This sanctification would continue throughout the person's entire life, 'there abiding still in the best saints, some remnants of corruption ...' The only ability the human has to do good and live a holy life ... is of God, who works in us both to will and to do, we have no cause to boast, nor ground to conclude we merit any thing thereby, we receiving all of free and undeserved grace ...²⁸ Yet believers are to be obedient and to do good works in order 'to show our thankfulness to God, for the grace of the new covenant by Christ, and to fit us more and more for glory.'²⁹

The Particular Baptist confessions did not differ essentially from the General Baptist confessions even though they were more detailed doctrinal statements. The *London Confession* (1644) stated that the requirement was to be obedient to all the commands of Christ. 'That all believers are a holy and sanctified people, and that sanctification is a spiritual grace of the new covenant and effect of the love of God, manifested to the soul, whereby the believer is in truth and reality separated, both in soul and body, from all sin and dead works, through the blood of the everlasting

²⁶ Ibid., p. 229.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 316.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 317.

covenant, whereby he also presses after a heavenly and evangelical perfection, in obedience to all the commands which Christ as head and king of this new covenant has prescribed to him.³⁰

The *Midland Association Confession* (1655) stressed that God's glory was the goal. 'That all who have faith wrought in their hearts by the power of God, according to his [sic] good pleasure, should be careful to maintain good works, and to abound in them, acting from principles of true faith and unfeigned love, looking to God's glory as their main end ...'³¹ Conformity to the Lord Jesus was the reason for a holy life found in the *Somerset Confession* (1656). 'That this faith being wrought in truth and power, it doth not only interest us in our justification, sonship, and glory, but it produces as effects and fruits, a conformity, in a measure, to the Lord Jesus, in his will, graces and virtues ...'³²

The *Second London Confession* (1677) gave a clear statement of sanctification as a lifelong growing in grace. According to this confession, union with Christ creates within a person a new heart and a new spirit. It is the Spirit within the person that weakens the power of sin, and they more and more quickened, and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of all true holiness, without which no man [sic] shall see the Lord.³³ While sanctification is throughout the whole person, it is 'imperfect in this life; there abides still some remnants of corruption in every part ...' The image of a war between flesh and Spirit was used to illustrate what happens in the Christian and it was acknowledged that for a time corruption may appear to prevail. However, the confession concluded this section with the promise: '... yet through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ the regenerate part doth overcome; and so the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God, pressing after an heavenly life, in evangelical obedience to all commands which Christ as head and king, in his Word hath prescribed to them.'³⁴

After examining the 17th century confessions, it is clear that justification and sanctification were important concepts to Baptists, although the sections in the confessions on these doctrines varied from one sentence to

³⁰ Ibid., p. 164.

³¹ Ibid., p. 199.

³² Ibid., p. 209.

³³ Ibid., p. 267.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 268. While there is some rearrangement of the words, this section is essentially the same as the Westminster Confession, 1647. At the end of the section on sanctification Second London adds the words beginning with pressing after an heavenly life and continuing to the end of the quotation in this citation.

developed paragraphs. Baptists made no distinctive contributions to the development of these doctrines. Yet Baptists granted no authority to any Reformation leader, so why do these doctrines appear to be part of the received tradition from the 16th century?

Baptists accepted the doctrines of justification and sanctification handed down from the 16th century because they believed they were found in Scripture. Scripture was authoritative for Baptists: what they could support with Scripture, that they believed. Every confession buttressed the understanding of justification by faith and sanctification with numerous Scripture references either in its margins or in the text itself. Passages from both the Old and New Testaments were used to prove the truth of what the confessions said, albeit the dominant resource was the New Testament. For the early Baptists, it was essential that the authority for everything they believed be found in Scripture.

In fact, Baptists were willing to stand with others in affirming the same beliefs only if they could prove that what had already been articulated was proven by Scripture. The preface to the *Second London Confession* (1677) stated that Baptists wanted 'to convince all that we have no itch to clog religion with new words, but to readily acquiesce in that form of sound words which has been, in consent with the holy Scriptures, used by others before us; hereby declaring before God, angels, and men [sic], our hearty agreement with them in that wholesome Protestant doctrine which, with so clear evidence of Scriptures, they have asserted.'³⁵ The *Orthodox Creed* (1678) went so far as to include in its text the Nicene, Athanasian and Apostles' creeds saying that these creeds 'ought thoroughly to be received and believed. For we believe they may be proved, by most undoubted authority of holy Scripture, and are necessary to be understood by all Christians ...'³⁶ Baptists were more literal practitioners of what had been a fundamental Protestant insight, the authority of Scripture.

On the authority of Scripture, then, not by virtue of the authority of tradition, not even the Protestant tradition, Baptists voluntarily aligned themselves with other Christians in professing their faith. Baptists benefited from emerging in the second century of Protestantism. By holding to the authority of Scripture Baptists could hold together in the same confession influences from groups that in the 16th century had been mutually exclusive. With the doctrines of justification and sanctification the influence of the Magisterial Reformation can be seen. With the doctrine of the

³⁵ Ibid., p. 245.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 326.

church and the practice of believer's baptism the influence of the Radical Reformation can be seen. Baptists forged their identity and reached understandings that would be seen as their contribution to the larger body of Christ because they evaluated all claims for faith and practice by the standard of Scripture.

Zusammenfassung

In historischer Perspektive haben weder Rechtfertigung noch Heiligung eine den Baptismus definierende Rolle gespielt. Beide Lehrpunkte werden zwar akzeptiert, aber nicht als charakteristische Besonderheiten, sondern als Erkenntnisse die man in der Bibel fand. Baptisten haben keine bindenden Bekenntnisschriften bzw. Glaubensbekenntnisse. Sie haben zwar Bekenntnisse oder Rechenschafts vom Glauben verfaßt, die aber die Freiheit des Einzelnen nicht einschränken sollten. Das Freiwilligkeitsprinzip heißt hier: Gott die Freiheit lassen, sich durch die Interpretation der Schrift immer neu zu bezeugen.

Baptistische Identität drückt sich in den Bekenntnissen des 17. Jahrhunderts in England aus. In ihnen finden sich auch Artikel über Rechtfertigung und Heiligung. Die „particular Baptists“ folgten dem Aufbau calvinistischer Lehrpunkte, z. B. London Confession (1644); die zweite London Confession (1677) übernahm den Artikel über die Rechtfertigung wörtlich aus der Westminster Confession. Die „general Baptists“ folgten in der Regel dem Sprachgebrauch, aber es gibt auch Bekenntnisse (z. B. von 1651), die Rechtfertigung überhaupt nicht anführen. Im allgemeinen aber ist Rechtfertigung ein Lehrpunkt, von dem man weiss, dass er Grundlage des Heilsverständnisses ist, wie es die Reformation des 16. Jahrhunderts entwickelt hatte.

Den Artikel von der Heiligung definieren Baptisten im allgemeinen als lebenslangen Prozess der Vervollkommnung, als Pilgerschaft zur vollen Reife, aber nicht um das Heil zu erlangen, sondern um Gott zu verherrlichen im Gehorsam gegenüber den Geboten Christi.