THE PEOPLE CALLED BAPTISTS (Continued)
Psalm 16:6

This is the second in our series of studies of The People Called Baptists, wherein we are attempting to learn more about our origin, history, and doctrines. This series is intended to increase our knowledge, to help us to appreciate more fully our heritage, and to give us courage to stand more firmly for the truth in these days of uncertainty and widespread false teaching.

Last week we discussed three things: first, who are the Baptists?, from whence did the Baptists come?, and what others have said about the Baptists.

In the early days of the Christian movement, under the loving touch and miracle working power of Christ, and the marvelous preaching of the apostles and their immediate successors, Christianity spread rapidly and widely. However, it left a terribly bloody trail behind it. Judaism and Paganism bitterly contested every forward movement.

The Lord Jesus Christ was crucified on the cross. Following their Saviour, in rapid succession, fell many other heroic martyrs. Stephen was stoned to death. Matthew was slain in Ethiopia. Mark was dragged through the streets until he died. Luke was hanged on an olive tree. John was boiled in a caldron of oil. Peter was crucified with his head downward. James the Apostle was beheaded in Jerusalem. Bartholomew was flayed alive. Thomas was run through with lances. James the Less was cast down from the temple and beaten to death with clubs. Jude was shot to death with arrows. Matthias was stoned to death. Paul was beheaded at Rome. This hard persecution continued through the third century, and yet mightily spread the Christian religion. The churches multiplied greatly. Some of the earlier ones, such as Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, and Corinth grew to be very large.

Many of the churches remained true and obedient to the ideals and teachings of the New Testament. For the first three centuries, the Lord placed Christianity in the most unfavorable circumstances in order that it might display its moral power, and gain its victory over the world by spiritual weapons alone. Until the reign of Constantine, it did not have a legal existence in the Roman Empire. It was first ignored as a Jewish sect, then slandered, proscribed, persecuted, as a reasonable innovation and the adoption of it made punishable with confiscation and death. Besides, it did not offer the slightest favor to the corrupt inclinations of the heart, but against the current ideas of the Jews and heathen it so presented its demand of repentance and conversion, renunciation of self and of the world, that more were kept out of the new sect by love of pleasure than by the love of life.

One of the first errors, or changes from the New Testament teachings, had to do with church government. It had to do with the officer who formerly had been known by the name of elder, bishop, or presbyter (terms which are exactly synonymous in the New Testament) now became distinguished by the elevation of the bishop above his brethren, and each of the three terms was carried out into a distinction of places in the church. Some of the bishops or pastors became ambitious for power, trampled upon the independence of the churches, and assumed authority which had not been given to them in the New Testament. They began to claim authority over other and smaller churches. Some of them began to lord it over God's heritage. Here began what resulted in an entire change from the original democratic policy and government of the early churches. This irregularity began in a small way even before the close of the second century. This was the first serious departure from New Testament church order.

As the times changed some of the churches changed with them. Many church members had itching ears and sought after novelties. One of the vital changes which had its beginning before the close of the second century was on the great doctrine of salvation. The Jews, as well as the Pagans, for generations had been trained to place great emphasis upon ceremonials. They had come to look upon shadows as real substances, and ceremonials as real saving agencies. They reasoned that the Bible had much to say about baptism, that much stress is laid upon the ordinance and one's duty concerning it, and that surely it must have something to do with one's salvation. Therefore, some of them advanced the idea of baptismal regeneration. They wanted to change the New Testament teachings about regeneration to baptismal regeneration.

The dogma of baptismal regeneration was early accepted by many, and men sought to have their sins washed away in water rather than in the blood of Christ. The New Testament taught that salvation was by Jesus Christ alone. Men perverted this New Testament teaching, and said that salvation was by Christ plus baptism. This addition unwarrantably and tacitly denied both the sufficiency of Christ and the competency of the soul.

Christ meant that baptism should be declarative; men sought to make it procurative. Christ meant that it should fulfill righteousness; men sought to make it procure salvation. Paul offered it as a symbol of grace bestowed; men turned it into a means of securing grace.

Soon after the death of the last of the apostles, or early in the second century, evidences appear that the doctrine of baptismal regeneration had become somewhat widely prevalent.

When Constantine made Christianity the state religion, he was not himself a professing Christian. He had agreed to become one. But as the irregular churches had gone with him into this organization, they had come to adopt the error of baptismal regeneration. A serious question arose in the mind of the Emperor, namely, "If I am saved from my sins by baptism, what's to become of my sins which I may commit after I am baptized?" That question has puzzled the world in all succeeding generations. Can baptism wash away yet uncommitted sins? Or, are these sins committed prior to baptism washed away by one method (that is baptism) and the sins committed subsequent to baptism washed away by another method?

Not being able to settle satisfactorily the many questions thus arising, Constantine finally decided to unite with the Christians, but to postpone his baptism until just preceding his death, so that all his sins might be washed away at one time. This course he followed, and was not baptized until just before he died.

Once the people came to believe that there was no salvation without baptism, devoted parents began to feel a natural solicitude for their newborn children. If adults cannot be saved without baptism, what of babes? Did not the taint of original sin rest upon infants? As they considered the frailty of their babes and the possibility of their death before they could receive baptism, they began to insist upon baptism for their children. Thus the ordinance was perverted from its original purpose as a symbol of acceptance of Jesus as Saviour. The introduction of infant baptism has wrought evils beyond the ability of man to conceive. It is both unscriptural and anti-scriptural. There is not the slightest sanction for infant baptism in the Word of God. It tends to ritualize Christianity and reduce it to lifeless forms.

The earliest clear evidence of infant baptism is found in the writings of Tertullian, who opposed the practice in 185. The first direct evidence in favor of it is found in the writings of Cyprian in 253. He took the position that infants should be baptized as soon as they were born.

In 313 Constantine called for a council of the representatives from the churches. There were many of the churches and their members who refused to convene. They did not want any marriage of the church and the state, any centralized religious government, or any higher ecclesiastical government of any kind, other than the individual church.

This alliance which Constantine created soon became a legislative body, annulling old laws or enacting new ones which were foreign to the teachings of the New Testament. One of its first legislative enactments was the establishing by law of infant baptism. By this new law infant baptism became compulsory. This was done in 416. Infants had been baptized infrequently for probably a century before this. In so far as this newly enacted law became effective, two vital New Testament laws were abrogated--believer's baptism and voluntary personal obedience in baptism.

As an inevitable consequence of this new doctrine and law, these erring churches were soon filled with unsaved members. In fact, it was not very many years until probably a majority of the membership was composed of the unsaved. So the great spiritual affairs were in the hands of an unregenerate temporal power. What could be expected?

Loyal churches and their members, of course, rejected this new law. Believer's baptism or New Testament baptism was the only kind for them. They not only refused to baptize their children, but they refused to accept the baptizing done by and within the churches of this unscriptural alliance. If any of the members of the churches of this new organization attempted to join any of the churches which had refused to affiliate with it, a Christian experience and a scriptural baptism were required.

In 426, or ten years after the legal establishment of infant baptism, the awful period know as the "Dark Ages" had its beginning. What a period! How terribly black and bloody! For more than ten centuries thereafter the trail of loyal Christianity was largely washed away in its own blood.