

THE SUCCESSIONISM VIEW OF BAPTIST HISTORY*

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Introduction

When Clarence Walker began publishing *The Trail of Blood* in 1931, neither he nor J. M. Carroll, the author, could have imagined the impact the booklet would have on Baptists in the United States and around the world. The first thousand copies had been sold quickly by another publisher and sales continued steadily from Ashland Avenue Baptist Church in Lexington, KY. Today there have been nearly three million copies sold. The booklet has been enlarged by the present publisher,¹ and it has been translated into several other languages: Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Russian and possibly others. It is now on the Internet in at least three languages.

The Trail of Blood describes in a brief outline form what successionist historians had written for nearly two centuries. They believed there had been a succession of churches that held the basic doctrines of Baptists, and they were not associated in any way with the Roman Catholic institution. *The Trail of Blood* does not claim to be a complete history as such, but what might be called a “Baptist Manifesto.” It was written in such a way that pastors and teachers could present a thumbnail sketch of their Baptist ancestors. Carroll’s idea was so successful that several authors have used a similar format,² while other authors have spent a lot of ink seeking to counter these lessons.³ W.

*Thanks to my son, James Kenneth, for assistance in research and preparation of this essay.

¹ Bryan Station Baptist Church, Lexington, Kentucky.

² For example, see Alton Arthur Davis, *The Baptist Story: Sermons on the Trail of Blood*, 4th ed. (Shawnee, OK: Oklahoma Baptist University, 1952); H. Boyce Taylor, *Why Be a Baptist?* (Lexington, KY: Ashland Avenue Baptist Church, 1963); R. Charles Blair, *Our Baptist Heritage: A Concise History of the People Called Baptists from Their Beginning to the Present*, 2d ed. (Clinton, KY: n.p., 1963).

³ See James Edward McGoldrick, *Baptist Successionism: A Crucial Question in Baptist History* (Metuchen, NJ: The American Theological Library Association and The Scarecrow Press, 1994), and Rodney Harrison, “The Dead-End Trail: J. M. Carroll and *The Trail of Blood* and Its Impact upon Church Planting in the 21st Century,” *Midwestern Journal of Theology* (Spring 2007): 54-66.

Morgan Patterson, a critic, refers to the title as having “a trace of emotive appeal.” He also references a college logic textbook for an analysis of the author's intentions.⁴ The reason so much attention is given to this booklet is because it is successful; it was not intended for academia, as most academicians know, but its nearly three million copies have drawn many Baptist church members to study history as no other publication has. Some critics criticize this publication to draw attention from their own difficulties concerning Baptist origins.

Not every Baptist historian has held this successionist view, though many historians saw some kind of connection with dissenting groups that existed during the medieval period of European history. The view was modified by some historians who refer to an Anabaptist spiritual kinship view; others believed Baptists originated with certain English Separatists. It is clear from the responses to *The Trail of Blood* and various Baptist successionism histories that the majority of Baptists, especially in the South, were successionists up through the mid-twentieth century. They acknowledge that the name "Baptist" goes back about four hundred years, but contend their doctrinal beliefs go back to New Testament times. Certainly all successionists do not agree on every detail of their history; people who speak the same language, do not always have the same accent. They do not believe, however, as some have contended, that every dissenter from Romanism was a Baptist.

The issues of Baptist history relate to the question, “What is a Baptist Church?” The issue of diversity in doctrine and polity is often viewed as a primary issue of “being Baptist.” The definition of soul liberty by many contemporary Baptists is that you can be heterogeneous and still be Baptist. Historically, the issue of infant sprinkling leading to involuntary church membership, along with compulsory church membership required by the state led to the emphasis on soul liberty. Winthrop S. Hudson addressed the issue of the over-emphasis of soul liberty among some Baptists: “The practical effect of the stress upon ‘soul competency’ as the cardinal doctrine of Baptists was to make every man's hat his church. Those who improvise in such a way feel free to do so without serious Biblical considerations.”⁵

William Brackney, a progressive historian, sees identity among Baptists today as a difficult issue. He wrote that not only is Baptist origins a point of disagreement among Baptists, but they are “equally disagreeable about what constitutes a Baptist.”⁶ Successionists claim there must be some basic principles that Baptists embrace; there must be some kind of conformity in doctrine and practice to really be a Baptist. It seems that the heterogeneous argument is used differently for different purposes.

Historical data as well as some theological issues must be a part of the answer. The *New Hampshire Confession of Faith* has been extensively used by Baptist churches and is a basis for this essay. Concerning a Gospel Church, it states: "We believe that a

⁴ W. Morgan Patterson, *Baptist Successionism: A Critical View* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 52, 48.

⁵ Winthrop S. Hudson, ed., *Baptist Concepts of the Church* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1958), 216.

⁶ William H. Brackney, *The Baptists* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), ix, cited in Tom Nettles, *The Baptists* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 11.

visible Church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel. . . ."⁷ The entirety of the statement indicates only a local church.

B. H. Carroll, the founder of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Texas, commenting on Matthew 16:18-19 wrote, "We come now to consider perhaps the most remarkable passage in the New Testament. . . ." He did not accept the claims of Romanism that their beginning was with the Apostle Peter. Carroll ties many of his views of Baptist history to this and other passages in the New Testament. He held to what might be called a theological / historical view of Baptist beginnings.⁸

So when did Baptist history begin? Some say 1609, others 1607, and others 1611. There are English and American historians, both early and later, who believe there have always been alternative voices of dissent that continued in various locales and time periods. They stood opposed to the "universal" (catholic) governmental/ecclesiastical monolith that portrayed itself as the "Vicar of Christ" during the medieval period of history. Historian Leroy Fitts wrote in 1985:

There has been considerable controversy over the origins of Baptists. Church historians of the nineteenth have held the theory that the Baptists' origin evolved from the remote ages of antiquity...The rise of the scientific approach to the interpretation of biblical and other historical data ushered in a new era in church history...Those historians began the tendency to identify Baptists as latecomers along with other Protestants of the seventeenth century."⁹

W. Morgan Patterson, near the end of an essay in 1975 wrote, "In the interest of historical accuracy and fairness . . . [there was] a view of Baptist succession which had its origin in England; and an isolation bred by the rejection of Baptists by other communions which heightened their sectarian spirit and appearance of exclusiveness."¹⁰ Successionists maintain that this view was deep-seeded and long-standing.

British Civil Activities Toward Anabaptists Before the Seventeenth Century

One criticism of successionists is that they do not use original sources to support their views. Extant British civil records extend back prior to the sixteenth century. These are

⁷ *New Hampshire Confession of Faith* (1833; rev. 1853), Article XIII, Of a Gospel Church, available online at <http://baptistdocuments.tripod.com/nhampshire.htm>.

⁸ B. H. Carroll, *An Interpretation of the English Bible*, vol. 2 (1913; reprint, Nashville: Broadman, 1942), 15-32.

⁹ Leroy Fitts, *A History of Black Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985), 19-20, cited in I. K. Cross, *The Battle for Baptist History* (Columbus, GA: Brentwood Christian Press, 1990), 118.

¹⁰ W. Morgan Patterson, "The Influence of Landmarkism," *Baptist History and Heritage* (January, 1975): 54.

known as the *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic*.¹¹ They are official records of various kings and queens who reigned in England; these records are held in the British National Archives. Records written shortly after King Henry VIII separated from Rome expressed concern regarding dissenters in England who were identified as Anabaptists.

Anabaptists were plentiful in seventeenth-century England. Henry had published by royal authority ten articles in 1536 denouncing heretics: “The error of the Anabaptists regarding the baptism of children is singled out for special reprobation.”¹² In 1538, Henry had appointed a commission that began an inquisition resulting in the burning of four Dutch Anabaptists at Paul's Cross and two at Smithfield.¹³ Did Henry VIII understand enough theology to know who these Anabaptists were? To this last question, the answer is definitely “yes.” Henry did not consider Anabaptists as a minor threat to religious life in England.

During the reign of Edward VI, Henry's only son, there was a continued concern with the presence of Anabaptists in the nation. Edward lived less than seven years beyond his coronation (1547-1553), but records show the government/church's desire to deal with Anabaptist dissenters: “January 1550. – Archbishop of Canterbury, [a list of bishops follows]: to correct and punish all Anabaptists, and such as do not duly minister the sacraments according to the Book of Common Prayer, set forth by the King's Majesty.”¹⁴ Another entry has the appointment of a Mr. Knox, who is “a confounder of the Anabaptists lately sprung up in Kent” to assist the Archbishop of Canterbury.¹⁵ It is difficult to believe that the English Baptists were not influenced by these Anabaptist groups.

Robert Torbet says, “There are conflicting opinions concerning the number of Anabaptists to be found in England prior to 1550. Some have estimated that fifty thousand Anabaptists were in England by 1573.”¹⁶ In the period from 1550 to 1573, when there were four different regents on the throne of England and two radical changes in the official religion of the nation, there was continual religious and political turmoil and turbulence. No doubt, the term *Anabaptist* was sometimes used as a broad brush to paint some groups who were true believers, and the same brush used for some who were fanatically unorthodox. However, successionists contend there were Anabaptists in mid-sixteenth century England and possibly sooner. A more thorough search of public documents could reveal more evidence of Anabaptist influence and persecution in the

¹¹These *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic* are available via Google Books and can be accessed by searching by year. See <http://books.google.com>.

¹² Henry C. Vedder, *A Short History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 193.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Calendar of State Papers.*

¹⁵ *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic* (October 28, 1552 (Vol. XV), 46.

¹⁶ Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1952), 51-52.

16th century.

In the third decade of seventeenth century England, Baptists came into the open and refused to allow themselves to be labeled Anabaptists. Was it because of the so-called “Münster Affair” (a cult of the sixteenth century led by Bernard Rothman and others in Germany that claimed to be Anabaptist and deliberately provoked social revolt¹⁷) or because the easing of repression by the governmental/ecclesiastical religion enforced by earlier kings, queens and their appointed administrators? Many successionists hold to the latter. As T. T. Eaton wrote,

Let it be remembered that the persecuting courts of High Commission and Star Chamber went out of existence August 1st, 1641, and that then the Baptists, who had been obliged to conceal themselves, came out of their hiding places and preached their doctrine boldly, and broadly, as they could not do before. This, of course, made a stir, and it was all new to many of the people of that day. What wonder, then, that these Baptists should be pronounced ‘new’ and ‘upstart?’. . . The very fact that they showed themselves so vigorously and preached their doctrines so boldly in 1641, as is conceded on all hands, just so soon as they could do so safely, proves that they did not then invent or adopt these practices. They came from their hiding places and advocated openly what they had been believing and practicing in secret all the time.¹⁸

Early Seventeenth Century Baptist Writings

In 1642, two years before the English Particular Baptists published their first confession of faith, a twenty-five page booklet titled *A Warning for England Especially for London In the Famous History of the Frantic Anabaptists, Their Wild Preachings and Practices in Germany* was printed in England. It told in vivid details of the terrible atrocities of the Münster Anabaptists in Germany (who were really hijackers of the name *Anabaptist*). This publication reminds one that even at that date the term *Anabaptist* was used to frighten the citizens of England. Fear mongering had become the trademark technique of the established church. If Baptists were to gain respectability at all, they could not be identified with the Münster group whose story had been told repeatedly in a graphic, damaging manner. There is no author listed in this booklet. From the concluding statement, it is likely that the Church of England was responsible for its publication. It reads: “*So let all the factious and seditious enemies of the Church and Hate perish; but upon the Head of King CHARLES let the crowne flourish. AMEN.*”¹⁹

¹⁷ Melchoir Hoffman, Jan Mathis and John of Leyden were also prominent leaders in this fanatic cult which practiced polygamy and eagerly killed their defectors—among other errors.

¹⁸John T. Christian, *Baptist History Vindicated* (Louisville, KY: Baptist Book Concern, 1899), vii. The Star Chamber were judicial groups appointed by and completely responsible only to those who appointed them.

¹⁹ Daniel Featley [?], *A Warning for England Especially for London In the Famous History of the Frantic Anabaptists, Their Wild Preachings and Practices in Germany* (1642), available online at

Publications in England from the decade of the 1640s indicate how difficult it was for the name *Baptist* to become established as writers continued to use the term *Anabaptists* when referring to those who immersed believers.

In 1644, a six page pamphlet was printed in London for R. W. (an unknown paedobaptist author) titled *A Declaration Against Anabaptists: To Stop the Prosecution fo [of] their Errors, falsely pretended to be a Vinidication of the Royall Commision of King Jesus as they call it*. The purpose was to answer the “Anabaptisticall Doctrine” which the author claimed was against the honor and glory of God and his church. He further claimed he was writing, “In answer to a book, by Francis Cornwall presented to the House of Commons, on Friday last, for which he is committed.” Cornwall was identified as an *Anabaptist* who opposed infant baptism and believed in “dipping.” Cornwall had presented thirteen issues against paedobaptists. The author answered them, it seems in some instances in an oblique manner. What is important relative to our subject is that paedobaptists often still used the term *Anabaptist* to refer to Baptists in their day. It was a name difficult for Baptists to discard.²⁰

Thomas Bakewell wrote *A Justification of Two Points Now in Controversie with the Anabaptists concerning Baptisme* in 1646. The first point of argument in this booklet is “That infants of Christians ought to be baptized.” The second point of argument is “That sprinkling the baptized more agreeeth with the mind of Christ, than dipping or plunging the baptized in or under the water.” Bakewell, showing his contempt for these *Anabaptists* writes in conclusion. “so these people, it is to be feared, many of them do commit the unpardonable sin, when they turn *Anabaptists*, despising and trampling under feet the Spirit of God. . . .”²¹

Early Successionism Writers

An early document, soon after Baptists became open about their views, appeared in England in 1652. *A Vindication of the Continued Succession of the Primitive Church of Jesus Christ (Now Scandalously termed Anabaptist) from the Apostles unto this present time* was published presenting a successionism view of Baptist churches.²²

In 1740, Thomas Crosby, a Baptist historian wrote, “The English Baptists, tho' they are unhappily disunited, and distinguished by the title of Generals and Particulars;

http://www.baptistcenter.com/A_Warning_for_England.html.

²⁰ *A Declaration Against Anabaptists: To Stop the Prosecution fo [of] their Errors, falsely pretended to be a Vindication of the Royall Commission of King Jesus as they call it* (London, 1644), available online at http://www.baptistcenter.com/A_Declaration_Against.html.

²¹ Thomas Bakewell, *A Justification of Two Points Now in Controversie with the Anabaptists concerning Baptisme* (London, 1646), available online at http://www.baptistcenter.com/Digital_Documents/Bakewell,%20Thomas.Controversie%20with%20the%20Anabaptists%20Concerning%20Baptisme.1646.pdf.

²² *A Vindication of the Continued Succession of the Primitive Church of Jesus Christ (Now Scandalously termed Anabaptist) from the Apostles unto this present time* (London, 1652), available online at <http://www.reformedreader.org/history/continuedsuccession.htm>.

yet it is the only point, I know of, wherein they differ from the primitive churches.”²³ Crosby, the first English Baptist historian noted earlier,

But since my publication of the former Volume, I have had such materials communicated to me, that I could not in justice to the communicators omit them, without incurring the just censure of a partial historian. Besides, it having been objected to me, that a more early account of the English Baptists might be obtained; it gave a new turn to my thoughts, and put me upon considering the state and condition of the Christian Religion, from the first plantation of the Gospel in England. Now in this enquiry, so much has occurred to me, as carries in it more than a probability, that the first English Christians were Baptists. I could not therefore pass by so material a fact in their favour: And because it cannot now be placed where it properly belongs, I have fixed it by way of preface to this second Volume.²⁴

Crosby was not a university-trained historian, as there were few at that time; however, he was an important preserver of Baptist documents and seems to have had a grasp of Baptist thought, being a deacon in John Gill's church at Horsley-Down, London. He is considered by many a successionist historian.

John Gill, noted British theologian of the 18th century, read and commented about the early dissenters from Romanism. When he looked at these dissenters for their opposition to infant baptism, he saw “infant baptism as having emerged in the third century, got ‘footing and establishment in the fourth and fifth; and so prevailed until the time of the Reformation.’ Yet he finds here and there, during the long stretch of time, opposition to the practice, even before the intense debate over the issue in the days of Anabaptist beginnings.”²⁵

English Baptist History Writers

Andrew Fuller has been greatly respected for his concern and support of missions, especially his support for William Carey, the first foreign Baptist missionary. When Fuller first recorded his interest in the origin of English Baptists on July 3, 1781, he wrote in his diary: “I was occupied to-day with *Mosheim*, whose partial account of the English Baptists would lead me to indulge a better opinion of various sects who have been deemed heretics.”²⁶ Prior to his death in the second decade of the nineteenth century,

²³ Thomas Crosby, *History of the English Baptists*, vol. 4 (London, 1740), 407.

²⁴ Thomas Crosby, *History of the English Baptists*, vol. 2 (London, 1739), preface. Note: An *f* was used as *s* in many words; these are transcribed as *s* for easier reading.

²⁵ John W. Brush, “John Gill’s Doctrine of the Church,” in *Baptist Concepts of the Church*, 68.

²⁶ Andrew Fuller, “Memoir of Andrew Fuller,” in *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, vol. 1, ed. Joseph Belcher (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1845; reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1988), 28. This was Johann Lorenz Mosheim, author of *An Ecclesiastical History, Ancient and Modern*, 1768.

Fuller wrote an essay that seems to be a reasonable assessment of his historical views. The essay was written thirty years after his acknowledged interest in early church history and the place of English Baptists in that history. His comments do not appear far from what later became known as successionism:

That some who in church history are deemed heretics were really such need not to be questioned; but let any serious Christian read the church history of Mosheim; and, unless he can find a portion of true religion under the article of “heresies and heretics that disturbed the peace of the church during this century,” it is difficult to say where he is to look for it. After the utmost search through other parts, he may ask, “Where is wisdom, and where is the place of understanding?”

There is reason to believe that amongst the *Novatians*, the *Paulicians*, the *Cathari*, the *Paterines*, and others who separated from the catholic church, and were cruelly persecuted by it, there were a great number of faithful witnesses for the truth in those days. . . .

From the fourth to the tenth century but little is said of the Waldenses in history: yet as *Reynerius*, who wrote about the year 1230, speaks of the Vaudois as “a sect of the *longest standing*,” and as the Council of Tours, about seventy years before this, speaks of the same heresy as having “sprung up long ago,” we may conclude, even from the acknowledgments of the adversaries, that God was not without his witnesses in those dark ages.

For 500 years, during the most murderous wars and persecutions, the *Paterines*, the *Petrobrussians*, the *Waldenses*, the *Albigenses*, the *Lollards*, the *Wickliffites*, &c., maintained their ground. Nor were they contented to bear witness to the truth in their own countries, but employed missionaries to almost all the nations of Europe; and this notwithstanding each missionary could expect nothing less than martyrdom for his reward!²⁷

Charles Spurgeon claimed to know of at least one Baptist church that predated John Smyth or John Spilsbury. As Spurgeon argues, “Mr. Kenworthy, the present pastor of the Baptist church at Hill Cliffe, in Cheshire, has stated that if the traditions of the place are to be trusted, the church is five hundred years old. ‘A tombstone has been lately dug up in the burial ground belonging to that church, bearing date 1357. The origin of the church is assigned to the year 1523.’”²⁸ A reprint edition of James Kenworthy, the pastor of the Baptist church at Hill Cliffe, in Cheshire, states that the first pastor, of whom

²⁷ Andrew Fuller, “Expository Discourses on the Apocalypse,” in *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, vol. 3, ed. Joseph Belcher (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1845; reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1988), 245-77, 249.

²⁸ Charles H. Spurgeon, Review of J. M. Cramp's *A History of the Baptists in The Sword and Trowel* (August, 1868): 95.

nothing is known, Mr. Weyerburton, died in 1594.²⁹

Spurgeon himself gave an oft-quoted statement that summarizes what is usually defined as successionism,

We believe that the Baptists are the original Christians. We did not commence our existence at the reformation, we were reformers before Luther and Calvin were born; we never came from the Church of Rome, for we were never in it, but we have an unbroken line up to the apostles themselves. We have always existed from the days of Christ, and our principles, sometimes veiled and forgotten, like a river which may travel under ground for a little season, have always had honest and holy adherents³⁰

It is not unreasonable to think that the opponents of Roman Catholicism during this medieval period lived in “the now” and were not primarily considering the written preservation of their beliefs or activities for future generations. Would we expect some type of exactness in their expressing themselves? No. They were first and foremost concerned for the safety of their families and fellow-believers as they worshiped God. Is there information still to be recovered? Undoubtedly so.

Continental Sources

Henry C. Vedder, in 1912, wrote of Anabaptist churches in Europe in the sixteenth century,

There were before this time [1611], it is true, here and there churches that might fairly be described as Baptist. Such was the church at Augsburg about 1525, commonly called Anabaptist, but practising the immersion of believers on profession of faith; such were some of the Swiss Anabaptist churches, apparently; such were some of the Anabaptist churches of Poland. But we find such churches only here and there, with no ascertainable connection existing between them. Further research may establish such connection.³¹

Vedder further noted, “It is also beyond question that for fully four centuries before the Reformation there were bodies of Christians under various names, who professed nearly — sometimes identically — the faith and practice of modern Baptists.”³² Concerning

²⁹ Abraham Kenworthy, *History of the Baptist Church at Hill Cliffe*, revised by James Kenworthy (Warrington, England, 1882; reprint, Gallatin, TN: Church History Research & Archives, 1987), 39.

³⁰ *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (1861), 225, available online at <http://www.reformedreader.org/spurgeononperpetuity.htm>.

³¹ Vedder, *A Short History of the Baptists*, 4.

³² *Ibid.*, 8.

documents of identity, Vedder concluded,

It is possible that with further research such proof may be brought to light: one cannot affirm that there was not a continuity in the outward and visible life of the churches founded by the apostles down to the time of the Reformation. To affirm such a negative would be foolish, and such an affirmation, from the nature of the case, could not be proved. What one may say, with some confidence, is that in the present state of knowledge no such continuity can be shown by evidence that will bear the usual historic tests.³³

Leonard Verduin emphasizes, that as in all suppressed political and religious societies, there was always a “medieval underground” in defiance of Romanism. He cites Adolf von Harnack: “In the twelve centuries that went before the Reformation it has never lacked for attempts to get away from the State-Church Priests’ Church and to reinstitute the apostolic congregational structurization. What is this but to say that throughout medieval times there never was a moment in which Constantinianism stood unchallenged.”³⁴ This concurs with what successionist Baptist historians were writing. Verduin also points out what sometimes happens in searching old records: information was deliberately left out when it did not suit the translator or editor's opinion:

When Josef Beck set himself to edit a volume of original source materials, *Die Geschichts-Bücher der Wiedertäufer in Osterreich-Ungarn* (an in-group account of the rise of the Anabaptists of Austria-Hungary) he deftly excised “a piece of Church History extending from the year 344 to 1519” for the reason that “it has nothing at all, or very little, to do with the matter in hand.” Surely this is arbitrary procedure. The people who wrote this early account — their own biography — were of the conviction that one must pay considerable attention to the events that lie between 344 and 1519 if one is to understand the origin and history of the people described. Surely it is to beg the question to wave this testimony to one side, just because it does not fit into a preconceived historical construction!³⁵

American Baptist Successionism

This long-held view by many British Baptists was adopted by some American Baptists. As stated previously, many successionists consider the story of Baptists more than an academic issue; there is theology involved as well. The doctrine of the church determines to a great degree the position one holds concerning Baptist history. Both Wendell Rone

³³ Ibid., 9.

³⁴ Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 35.

³⁵ Ibid., 14.

and Philip Bryan emphasize this in their writing on the subject, and it is demonstrated in multiple cases.

Jesse Mercer, an early Georgia Baptist, gave the reason for their churches not receiving immersion as baptism from other religious groups who were not Baptists: because it would cause disorder in the churches, and it related to successionism. His first point in the 1811 Associational Circular Letter, which had been requested to be written the previous year by the Georgia Baptist Association, is, "The Apostolic Church, *continued through all ages to the end of the world, is the only True Gospel Church.*" He further states, Christ affirms nothing shall prevail against His church, no, not the gates of hell, Matt. xiv.18. . . ." He then adds three additional points to his argument and concludes with "From these propositions, thus established, we draw the following inferences, *as clear and certain truths.* That all churches and ministers, who originated since the apostles, and not successively to them, are not in Gospel order; and therefore cannot be acknowledged as such." Mercer finished the circular by stating, "The Pedobaptists, by their own histories, admit they are not in it; but we do not, and shall think ourselves entitled to the claim until the reverse be clearly shown." The circular letter was adopted by the association as their statement on the issue.³⁶

LeRoy Hogue argues Mercer's "writings represent the clearest enunciation before [J. R.] Graves of those principles which characterized the Landmark movement." He further states Mercer "often spoke the mind of the denomination" in his day and "was a strong successionist and clearly stated that only the Baptist churches were, in his thinking, in the line of succession from the apostles."³⁷

Patrick Hues Mell, though not a trained historian, was a professor at Mercer University and later Chancellor at the University of Georgia. He wrote *Baptism In Its Mode and Subjects*, published in 1853. Mell argued, "Those who had the peculiar sentiments of the Baptists of the present day, have existed in all ages of the world, from apostolic times to the present, our opponents themselves being judges. Under various names of Disciples, Christians, Montanists, Novatianists, Paulicians, Paterines, Waldenses and Albigenes, Mennonites or German Anabaptists, Petrobrussians, Henricians, Arnoldists, Leonists, Cathari, Hussites, Picards, Lollards, and Wickliffites, and Baptists, they have existed in all ages, from the Saviour unto the present time."³⁸ He served as a pastor and as President of the SBC for seventeen years. Critics might question some of the groups he named as being associated with the forerunners of present-day Baptists. Unless he deliberately sought to deceive his readers, it is undeniable that Mell tied these groups to Baptists and he held to some view of successionism.

³⁶ The 1811 circular letter is reprinted in Jesse Mercer, *The History of the Georgia Baptist Association* (1838), 196-201.

³⁷ Jesse Mercer, "A Dissertation on the Resemblances and Differences between Church Authority and That of an Association," *Christian Index* (December 10, 1833), 86, cited in LeRoy Hogue, *A Study of the Antecedents of Landmarkism* (Th.D thesis, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1966), 255.

³⁸ Patrick H. Mell, *Baptism In Its Mode and Subjects* (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1853), 180.

Conclusion

Do successionism historians have some difficulties in their historical view? Yes, that must be acknowledged. But historians have also pointed out some of the issues of those who hold to a different view of Baptist history. Philip Bryan, after a study of the methodology of many English Separatists historians' views of Baptist origins, concluded with a three-part appraisal:

While English separatist descent historians have generally followed their goal of objectivity and scientific methodology and are due commendation for it, they have occasionally committed errors of the same type as earlier historians. Errors are to be found in: (1) their use of sources – by using doubtful sources, by showing unfamiliarity with the views of men cited as authorities, by omitting material seemingly contrary to their hypothesis, and by depending heavily upon the research of others without accepting their ultimate appraisals; (2) documentation – by failing to document references or give bibliographies, by failing to give due credit to their sources, and by misquoting and misinterpreting documents; and (3) terminology.³⁹

Wendell Rone points out some weaknesses of the Spiritual Kinship view of Baptist history. He argues proponents of this view are unable to see how that Baptist principles and practices could be preserved and propagated without it being known as Baptists. The view seems to exaggerate the faults of the dissenting sects by taking the biased testimony presented by their enemies rather than the statements of the extant writings of these Christians themselves. The spiritual kinship position seems to be an effort at holding to the succession view and not holding to it at the same time.⁴⁰ The late Kenneth Scott Latourette wrote:

[The Baptists'] record speaks for itself. That record is far from perfect. Indeed, no achievement in which we human beings share is free from defect. Every faithful account of Baptists has pages which we must view with sorrow and regret. Yet we who are its beneficiaries have reason for profound gratitude for the Baptist heritage. . . . Most of them were humble in the sight of the world and usually found no place in enduring human memory. . . . It has been a special privilege given to the Baptists, more than to any other body of Christians of comparable size, to preach the gospel to the poor. For the most part the poor leave no written traces of their lives. The historian is often baffled when he seeks to reconstruct what they have said and done. For this reason no history of the

³⁹ Philip Bryan, "A Critique of the English Separatist Descent Theory in Baptist Historiography" (M.A. thesis, Baylor University, 1966), chapter 5.

⁴⁰ Wendell H. Rone Sr., "The Problem of Baptist Successionism," available online at <http://baptisthistoryhomepage.com/rone.w.h.successionism.html>.

Baptists can ever be complete. . . .⁴¹

There is an identity problem among present-day Baptists and the gulf seems to be widening. As some so-called Baptist churches are being constituted under different names (often without the term “church” or “Baptist” in their name), it makes identity more difficult, and it will be a great burden for future historians to tell today’s Baptist story. Will this lack of identity be a future historical researcher dilemma? No doubt.

There is no way to calculate how many Anabaptists and dissenters by other names have been martyred during the medieval period of history by those who despised their doctrine and practice. Successionists believe there is evidence of a continuum of dissent from paedobaptist/government controlled religionists that substantiate their view of Baptist origins.

⁴¹ Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, 8.