

## The Trail of Blood-Baptist Successionism

By Steve Ray

An article in the soon to be published “*Catholic Dictionary of Apologetics and Evangelism*” by Ignatius Press

\*\*\*\*\*

When Baptists attempt to discover the origins of their tradition they are faced with a historical dilemma. The search for Baptists roots hits a dead end in the sixteenth century. Most acknowledge that Baptist tradition is a tributary flowing out of the Protestant Reformation, but others attempt to discover a line of historical continuity, of doctrine and practice, back to Jesus and even John the Baptist. These Baptists are commonly referred to “Baptist Successionists”.

Such a historical continuity is a factual impossibility though the proponents continue aggressively promoting their theories. First, we will summarize the popular theory as espoused in the popular booklet *The Trail of Blood* and secondly, we will analyze their position historically. It is helpful to remember, according to W. Morgan Patterson, associate professor of church history at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, that the “Baptist historians”—those who are proponents of this view—“have been preachers and pastors first of all, and historians second” (*Baptist Successionism*, [Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1980), 5.

*The Trail of Blood* was written by J. M. Carroll in 1931 and is published by Ashland Avenue Baptist Church in Lexington Kentucky. It is a small booklet of fifty-six pages containing a proposed timeline of Baptist churches back to Jesus. By 1994 over 1,955,000 copies had been printed and it has gained great popularity among Fundamentalist groups. The author unabashedly attempts to denigrate the Catholic Church while attempting to establish his own legitimacy as the true church.

Carroll presumes to lay out the true marks of the Church through his interpretation of the Bible alone. Several of his marks of the Church—“landmarks or earmarks of this religion”—are the belief that the Bible, actually “the New Testament and that only,” is the sole rule of faith; Jesus is the only head of the church with no visible head possible, and each congregation is autonomous. Carroll says the authority of each local congregation is “to be congregational, democratic. A government of the people, by the people, and for the people” (p. 8). Carroll presumes to found all his assertions on Scripture, yet this “prerequisite” of church government is found not in Scripture but in Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Carroll makes great use of Catholic tradition and history when it suits his purpose, but rejects and ignores them both when they contradicted his presuppositions.

The Trail of Blood theory alleges that true churches—as opposed to the Catholic Church—have been persecuted and forced underground throughout most of history. The alleged carnage and bloodshed following the persecutions is called the “Trail of Blood”. There is no evidence that any “Baptist churches” ever existed before the Reformation, but

that, it is claimed, is because the Catholic Church destroyed all the evidence as they chased the Baptists to the ends of the earth.

Carroll identifies many divergent groups throughout history, claiming them as baptistic. These groups are a montage of unrelated sects and heretics, including the Albigenses, Cathari, Paulicians, Arnoldists, Henricians and more. The Cathari and Albigenses taught that Christ was an angel with a phantom body whose death and resurrection were only allegorical and the Incarnation impossible since the body was evil, created by evil. They also rejected the resurrection of the body and the existence of hell. Since the Catholic Church took the New Testament literally, the Church was viewed as corrupted and doing the work of the devil.

The Paulicians, similarly believed that there were two fundamental principles: a good God and an evil God; the first is the ruler of the world to come and the second the master of the present world. By their reasoning, then, Christ could not have been the Son of God because the good God could not take human form. They were basically dualists and Gnostics. Other groups rejected the government of the Catholic Church but not her dogma. What linked many of the groups was not a denial of Catholic dogma but a common concern for rigorous spirituality, a demand for the return to apostolic poverty, the refusal to take oaths, criticism of lax clergy, etc. many believed in the Real Presence, the ever-virginity of the Blessed Virgin, regenerative baptism and the rest of Catholic dogma. The Waldenses, started by Peter Waldo (c. 1150–1218) are an example of a group Baptist successionists would consider baptistic, maintaining “Baptist churches” in the midst of persecution during the medieval period.

Edward T. Hiscox, author of the classic Baptist handbook, *Principles and Practices for Baptist Churches* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1980) claims the Waldenses and the above mentioned groups held to the principle points “which Baptists have always emphasized”. Hiscox, however, doesn’t inform his readers that the Waldenses for the most part believed in the perpetual virginity of Mary, the effectiveness of the sacraments, infant baptism, that “the Sacrifice [of the Mass], that is of the bread and wine, after the consecration are the body and blood of Jesus Christ”, that good deeds of the faithful may benefit the dead, to name just a few. That Baptist successionists can claim the Waldenses as their ancestors-sharing a common belief and practice-is quite untenable, if not disingenuous.

Baptist James Edward McGoldrick, professor of history at Cedarville College, summarizes the situation well. “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. . . . 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. Those who reject the Protestant character and Reformation origins of the Baptists usually maintain a view of church history sometimes called ‘Baptist Successionism’ . . . enhanced enormously by a

booklet entitled *The Trail of Blood.*”

After acknowledging his initial advocacy of “successionism”, McGoldrick explains, “Extensive graduate study and independent investigation of church history has, however, convinced [me] that the view [I] once held so dear has not been, and cannot be, verified. On the contrary, surviving primary documents render the successionist view untenable. . . . 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” (*Baptist Successionism: A Crucial Question in Baptist History* [Metuchen, NJ: American Theological Library Assoc. and Scarecrow Press, 1994], 1–2).

Baptist Successionists frequently claim that they are not Protestants. To this, Leon McBeth, professor of Church History at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary writes, “Are Baptists Protestants? One sometimes hears the question whether Baptists are to be identified as Protestants. Whether one takes the shortcut answer, or goes into lengthy explanation, the answer is the same: Yes. Such important Reformation doctrines as justification by faith, the authority of Scripture, and the priesthood of believers show up prominently in Baptist theology. Further, the evidence shows that Baptists originated out of English Separatism, certainly a part of the Protestant Reformation. Even if one assumes Anabaptist influence, the Anabaptists themselves were a Reformation people. The tendency to deny that Baptists are Protestants grows out of a faulty view of history, namely that Baptist churches have existed in every century and thus antedate the Reformation” (*The Baptist Heritage* [Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987], pg. 62). (See a longer excerpt below.)

\*\*\*\*\*

Recommended Reading:

McGoldrick, James Edward, *Baptist Successionism: A Crucial Question in Baptist History* (Metuchen, NJ: American Theological Library Assoc. and Scarecrow Press, 1994).

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

McBeth, Leon, H. *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987).

Hiscox, Edward T., *Principles and Practices for Baptist Churches* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1980).

Cross, F. L. and Livingstone, E. A., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997).

\*\*\*\*\*

Excerpt from *The Baptist Heritage* written by Leon McBeth, professor of Church History at Southwest Baptist Theological Seminary and has served as chairman of the Texas Baptist Historical Committee, as president of the Historical Commission of the Southern

Baptist Convention, and as president for the Southern Baptist Historical Society.

**“Succession of Baptist Churches** A fourth way of looking at Baptist history arose in the nineteenth century. Denying that Baptists originated from English Separatism and disdaining a continuity of mere principles, the Organic Successionist school would settle for nothing less than tracing actual Baptist churches from the New Testament to the present.

“Highlights of this view. By use of a “trail of blood” view of history, some affirmed that earlier dissenters were simply Baptists under other names. Thus such early groups as Donatists (fourth century), Cathari (eleventh century), Waldenses (twelfth century), and Anabaptists (sixteenth century) represent an unbroken continuity, or succession, of true biblical (Baptist) churches. This view is sometimes called the Jesus-Jordan-John, or JJJ theory, that Baptists originated with John the Baptist, Jesus, or baptisms in the Jordan. This theory assumes that John the Baptist represents a denominational affiliation and that Jesus formed a Baptist church and promised in Matthew 16:18 that Baptist churches would never vanish from the world. However, even among successionists, few have been willing to go so far as one historian, who traced Baptists back to Adam!

“In studying successionism, Patterson showed that there are variations within this group. Some hold that organic succession can be proven and that it is essential; others hold that succession is essential and does exist, but cannot be proven; others that it can be proven, but is not essential.

“Representative writers. Some historians who have advocated some version of successionism. include Adam Taylor, G. H. Orchard, D. B. Ray, J. M. Cramp, and J. M. Carroll. Though not primarily a historian, J. R. Graves also held and disseminated this view, especially among Southern Baptists.

“Adam Taylor published his two-volume work, *The History of the English General Baptists*, in 1818. Taylor’s table of contents lists “Book I. A Sketch of the History of the Baptists from the Commencement of the Christian Era to the Reformation.” He affirmed that “in all ages of the church there have been Baptists.” Taylor identified John the Baptist as the founder of the denomination, which has continued ever since.

“A more militant successionism was taught by G. H. Orchard, who published *A Concise History of Baptists in England* in 1838. Orchard sought to prove that Jesus established a Baptist church, that Baptist churches (under various names) have continued throughout history, and that such successionism is essential to church validity. Orchard began with Matthew 11:12, and the phrase, “from the days of John the Baptist until now, ...” captures his view of Baptist history.

“Orchard’s book had its greatest impact in the United States. J. R. Graves, a leader of the Landmark movement, republished Orchard in 1855 and distributed it throughout the South. Graves included an “Introductory Essay,” affirming that “*all* Christian communities during the first three centuries were of the Baptist denomination,” that

despite use of various names these Baptist churches never disappeared, and that Baptists can use this information in debates with other denominations.

“Perhaps the most vivid example of successionist history is the booklet by J. M. Carroll, *The Trail of Blood*. Published posthumously in 1931, this booklet has gone through dozens of editions and is still being republished. This booklet is a popularization of Orchard’s ideas, but includes a vivid chart which purports to show that “according to History ... Baptists have an unbroken line of churches since Christ.” Baptists are traced back through the centuries by a series of connected red dots representing the blood of those who have suffered for the true faith, thus a “trail of blood.” The “false churches” (i.e., all that are not Baptist), are traced by a line graph. This chart is set forth as “Illustrating the History of the Baptist Churches from the time of their founder, the Lord Jesus Christ, until the 20th century.”

“Other works which embrace church successionism include J. M. Cramp, *Baptist History: From the Foundation of the Christian Church to the Close of the Eighteenth Century*, D. B. Ray, *Baptist Succession: A Hand-Book of Baptist History* (1883); and John T. Christian, *A History of the Baptists* (1922). Though not widely known, these books are still sometimes quoted. No major historian today holds to the organic succession of Baptist churches. This view was based on inadequate sources, was more polemical than historical, and made large assumptions where evidence was lacking. This interpretation arose in a time of intense denominational competition and helped reassure some Baptists that theirs was the true church. It received wide dissemination in the South by becoming identified with Landmarkism. J. R. Graves insisted that Baptists “are descended from the Waldenses, whose historical line reaches far back and connects with the Donatists, and theirs to the Apostolic Churches” (pgs. 58-60).