40. From the Reformation to the Baptists

How the Protestant Reformation began, how its radical wing broke away, and how the Baptists emerged a century later from English Separatism, and which parts of each reformer's teaching Baptists kept. The timelines give the dates in sequence; this chapter gives the narrative.

Luther, Zwingli and Calvin

The Reformation's conventional starting point is **October 31, 1517**, when Martin Luther, an Augustinian friar and professor at Wittenberg, circulated his Ninety-Five Theses against the preaching of indulgences. What began as a dispute over one abuse widened within three years into a challenge to the whole structure: at the Leipzig Debate (1519) Luther argued that popes and councils could err and that Scripture alone was the final judge; in 1520 he was threatened with excommunication (the bull was carried out in January 1521) and published the treatises that set out justification by faith alone, the priesthood of all believers and a reduced number of sacraments; at the Diet of Worms (1521) he refused to recant. Protected by the Elector of Saxony, he translated the New Testament into German (1522) and organized a reformed church under the princes.

Independently, **Ulrich Zwingli** led a reform in Zurich from 1519 that went further than Luther on worship and the sacraments: images were removed (1524), the Mass abolished (1525), and the Lord's Supper understood as a memorial. Luther and Zwingli could not agree on the Supper at Marburg (1529), and the two streams of the Reformation, Lutheran and Reformed, went their separate ways. **John Calvin** (*Institutes*, 1536–1559) gave the Reformed stream its most systematic theology from Geneva, and Reformed churches spread to France, the Netherlands, Scotland and parts of Germany and Hungary.

The **Church of England** broke with papal jurisdiction under Henry VIII in 1534 for dynastic rather than doctrinal reasons. Under Edward VI and Elizabeth I it adopted Reformed doctrine (the Thirty-Nine Articles, 1571) while keeping bishops and much of the old liturgy, and so became a tradition with both Catholic and Reformation inheritances. From its Puritan and Separatist wing the Baptists would later emerge.

The **Catholic response** came at the Council of Trent (1545–1563), which rejected justification by faith alone, reaffirmed the seven sacraments, the Mass as sacrifice, purgatory and the full canon, and reformed the abuses the Reformers had attacked: it abolished the sale of indulgences, required bishops to live in their dioceses and ordered seminaries for training priests. The Jesuits (founded 1540) and a generation of reforming bishops and saints carried the Catholic revival into the following century.

The German Peasants' War, 1524–1525

The largest popular uprising in Europe before the French Revolution. Peasants, miners and townspeople across southern and central Germany (Swabia, Franconia, Thuringia, Alsace and Tyrol) rose against their lords. An estimated 70,000 to 100,000 were killed, most of them in the suppression.

Causes

The grievances were old: rising rents and labor dues, serfdom, lords enclosing common woods, fields and streams, and heavy church tithes. Earlier "Bundschuh" revolts had broken out from the 1490s. The Reformation added a new spark: Luther's language of Christian freedom and of Scripture as the final authority led peasants to argue that serfdom and many dues had no biblical basis.

The Twelve Articles (Memmingen, March 1525)

- the right of each community to elect and dismiss its own pastor
- an end to serfdom, since Christ redeemed all men
- abolition of the "small tithe" and the death tax
- free hunting and fishing, and access to woods and common land
- fair rents and justice according to Scripture

The articles promised to drop any demand shown to be unscriptural.

Course of the war

Peasant bands looted monasteries and castles. At Weinsberg (April 1525) they killed Count Ludwig von Helfenstein and other nobles, which turned public opinion against them. The princes' Swabian League under Georg Truchsess von Waldburg defeated the poorly armed bands one by one. The decisive slaughter came at Frankenhausen on May 15, 1525; Thomas Müntzer, a radical preacher who presented the rising as God's apocalyptic judgment, was captured, tortured and beheaded.

Luther's role

In April 1525 Luther's *Admonition to Peace* blamed the lords for oppression but told the peasants rebellion was un-Christian. After Weinsberg he published *Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants*, urging the princes to "smite, slay and stab." Many commoners felt betrayed, and from then on Lutheranism leaned on the princes and developed into state churches under their authority.

Why it matters in the debate

- **Catholic argument:** the war is cited, then and now, as a fruit of private interpretation; once every man judges Scripture for himself, social and religious order collapses.

- **Protestant reply:** the causes were mainly economic and predated Luther, and Luther opposed the revolt.
- **Anabaptist link:** Balthasar Hubmaier at Waldshut sympathized with the peasants and may have helped shape their demands; Hans Hut survived Frankenhausen and became an Anabaptist missionary. Authorities afterward treated Anabaptists as potential rebels, a fear Münster (1534–35) seemed to confirm. Mainstream Anabaptists, such as the Swiss Brethren in the Schleitheim Confession (1527), turned to strict pacifism partly in reaction to the Peasants' War.

The Anabaptists, Münster and Marburg

Swiss beginnings

The Anabaptist movement is conventionally dated to **1525**, especially the circle of **Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and George Blaurock** in Zürich. They rejected infant baptism and insisted on baptism following personal repentance and faith.

Münster Rebellion, 1534–1535

A radical apocalyptic branch seized control of Münster and proclaimed it the **"New Jerusalem."** Major figures included **Jan Matthys** and later **Jan van Leiden**.

- Adult rebaptism was imposed.
- Opponents were expelled.
- Communal property policies developed.
- Polygamy was instituted.
- Jan van Leiden adopted apocalyptic kingship.
- The prince-bishop besieged the city.
- The regime fell in **June 1535**.
- Leaders were tortured and executed; their bodies were displayed in iron cages on St. Lambert's Church.

> **Historical nuance:** Münster should not be treated as representative of all Anabaptists. Pacifist Anabaptists, especially those associated with **Menno Simons**, sharply rejected Münsterite violence.

Marburg Colloquy

A related Reformation topic was the **Marburg Colloquy of 1529**, where Luther and Zwingli agreed on many doctrinal points but failed to reconcile their views of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. Luther insisted on a real sacramental presence; Zwingli emphasized a memorial/sign understanding.

Baptist origins: John Smyth, Thomas Helwys and the Trail of Blood

Mainstream historical account

Modern Baptists are generally traced to **English Separatism in the early seventeenth century**.

John Smyth

- Born c. 1570; died 1612.
- Former Anglican clergyman.
- Led a Separatist congregation to Amsterdam.
- Around **1609**, baptized himself and then members of his congregation.
- Later sought union with the Waterlander Mennonites.

His later move has been interpreted either as repudiation of self-baptism, concern about proper church order, or a desire for unity with a pre-existing believer-baptizing community.

Thomas Helwys

Helwys broke with Smyth on the need to unite with the Mennonites, returned to England with a small group, and around **1612** established the first lasting Baptist congregation on English soil. He also became an important early advocate of religious liberty.

Why some Baptists reject the label "Protestant"

Some Baptists argue that believer's baptism and congregational principles represent a direct continuation of New Testament Christianity rather than a movement "protesting Rome." Mainstream historians, however, generally classify Baptists as arising from the post-Reformation English Separatist world.

The Trail of Blood

J. M. Carroll's *The Trail of Blood* (1931) presents a successionist history tracing Baptist-like groups back through the centuries to the apostles. It remains influential in some Baptist circles but is historically selective and is not accepted as a reliable continuous institutional genealogy by most professional historians.

Reformed Baptists

Reformed/Particular Baptists are associated with the **1689 London Baptist Confession**, Calvinist soteriology, covenant theology, congregational church polity, and believer's baptism.

Southern Baptist Convention

The SBC was founded in **1845** and has historically contained a spectrum from strongly Calvinist to non-Calvinist evangelical Baptist theology.

Which reformer do Baptists follow? The Baptist synthesis

Modern evangelical Baptists agree with Luther on justification, with Zwingli on the Lord's Supper, with the Anabaptists on baptism and with Calvin on the security of the believer, and reject most of what else each of those men taught. Critics call this a pick-and-mix theology in which each pastor assembles his own blend. Baptists reply that they follow no reformer at all, only Scripture, and agree with each man only where he agreed with it. This section sets out what came from where, the principles that did the selecting, and where the combination is under strain.

What came from where

Luther (Wittenberg, from 1517)

What most Baptists keep: Justification by faith alone; Scripture as the final authority; the priesthood of all believers; rejection of the papacy, purgatory, indulgences and the Mass as sacrifice

What they reject: Real presence in the Supper; baptismal regeneration; infant baptism; private confession; a liturgical, state-supported church; Mary's perpetual virginity

The Baptist reason for rejecting it: Luther kept what Scripture does not forbid; Baptists keep only what Scripture commands. His sacramental views are seen as leftovers from Rome.

Zwingli (Zurich, from 1519)

What most Baptists keep: The Lord's Supper as a memorial ("is" means "signifies"); sacraments as signs of a faith already present; plain worship without images

What they reject: Infant baptism; a church governed by the city council; the use of force against dissenters

The Baptist reason for rejecting it: By Zwingli's own principle, a sign of faith should follow faith. His students drew that conclusion in 1525, and Zurich, with his support, punished them for it.

Calvin and the Reformed (Geneva, from 1536)

What most Baptists keep: The perseverance of the saints ("once saved, always saved"); for Reformed Baptists, the whole of Calvinist salvation doctrine and covenant theology

What they reject: Infant baptism; government by elders and synods; a state-enforced church; for most Southern Baptists, unconditional election, limited atonement and irresistible grace

The Baptist reason for rejecting it: Baptism belongs to the new covenant, which includes only believers. Non-Calvinist Baptists also hold that Scripture teaches a free response to a universal offer.

The Anabaptists (Zurich and Schleitheim, 1525–1527)

What most Baptists keep: Believer's baptism; a gathered church of the converted; church discipline; separation of church and state; religious liberty

What they reject: Pacifism; refusal of oaths and public office; withdrawal from society; Münster's extremes

The Baptist reason for rejecting it: Romans 13 and the example of believing soldiers and officials. Most Baptist historians deny direct descent from the Anabaptists.

English Puritans and Separatists (1580s–1640s)

What most Baptists keep: Congregations gathered by covenant; the "regulative principle" (worship only as Scripture commands); the 1689 Confession, adapted from the Presbyterian Westminster Confession and the Congregationalist Savoy Declaration (1658)

What they reject: Infant baptism; for most modern Baptists, strict Sabbath keeping and much of covenant theology

The Baptist reason for rejecting it: The Baptists were Separatists who carried the Separatist principle one step further, to baptism.

Arminius and the General Baptists (Helwys, 1612)

What most Baptists keep: Christ died for all; grace can be resisted; a real free response to the gospel

What they reject: The Arminian teaching that a true believer can fall away and be lost

The Baptist reason for rejecting it: Most Southern Baptists combine an Arminian view of conversion with a Calvinist view of perseverance.

American revivalism (1740s–1900s)

What most Baptists keep: The altar call, the "sinner's prayer," conversion as a dated personal decision, mass evangelism (Chapter 14)

What they reject: Charles Finney's perfectionism and his denial of original guilt

The Baptist reason for rejecting it: The methods are seen as means of evangelism, not doctrine. Calvinist Baptists reject many of them.

Dispensationalism and temperance (19th century)

What most Baptists keep: For many: the pre-tribulation rapture (Darby; Scofield Bible, 1909; Chapter 36); grape juice at the Lord's Supper (Chapter 19)

What they reject: Neither is required by Baptist confessions

The Baptist reason for rejecting it: Held as matters of interpretation or prudence, not essentials.

The table shows that the modern evangelical Baptist package draws at least as much from 18th- and 19th-century America as from 16th-century Europe.

The principles that do the selecting

Baptists did not pick from the reformers piece by piece. A few principles, applied consistently, produce most of the pattern:

- **Scripture over every teacher.** No reformer has authority as a package. To accept everything Luther or Calvin taught because they taught it would, on Baptist terms, repeat Rome's mistake of placing a human authority over the Bible.
- **The believer's church.** The church consists only of people who are already regenerate and have professed faith. Believer's baptism, congregational government, church discipline, separation of church and state and the memorial view of the ordinances all follow from it. This is the principle Baptists regard as their distinctive contribution, and it explains why they reject infant baptism in every reformer who kept it.
- **Soul competency and congregational autonomy.** Each believer is competent to read Scripture and answer to God directly (E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, 1908), and each congregation governs itself under Christ. Confessions describe what Baptists believe but bind no church.
- **Consistency, not eclecticism.** Baptists argue that they did not reject Zwingli on baptism but applied his own principle more consistently than he did. Zwingli admitted in *On Baptism* (1525) that he had once thought it better not to baptize children until they came to years of discretion. When his students acted on that view (Conrad Grebel baptized George Blaurock in Zurich on January 21, 1525), Zwingli defended infant baptism from circumcision and the Zurich council made rebaptism a capital offense.

One convention, two Baptist streams

The mixture of Calvinist and revivalist beliefs among Southern Baptists has a specific historical origin. The **Regular Baptists** of the Charleston and Philadelphia associations were confessional and Calvinist and used the 1689 Confession. The **Separate Baptists** came out of the Great Awakening (the Sandy Creek church in North Carolina, founded by Shubal Stearns in 1755). They were revivalist, emotional in worship and wary of creeds. The two streams merged in Virginia (1787) and Kentucky (1801) and later formed the backbone of the Southern Baptist Convention (1845). Holding Calvinist perseverance together with an altar call that presumes a free decision is the legacy of that merger, not of any one theologian. The Calvinist strand never disappeared: the 2012 "Traditional Southern Baptist" statement rejected most of Calvinist salvation doctrine except perseverance, and Calvinist and non-Calvinist pastors continue to coexist uneasily in the convention.

Where the combination is under strain

- **Eternal security without the rest of Calvinism.** Many Southern Baptists are "one-point Calvinists," keeping perseverance and rejecting the other four points. Reformed Baptists make the same criticism Catholics do: in Calvin, perseverance rests on God's unconditional choice and His effectual grace. Without them, security rests on a past decision, a doctrine neither Calvin nor Arminius taught (Chapter 10).
- **The memorial view against the Baptist confessions.** The 1689 Confession teaches that worthy receivers "spiritually receive and feed upon Christ crucified," Calvin's view rather than Zwingli's. Bare memorialism became the Baptist majority view later (Chapter 20).
- **No one can settle a dispute.** Because confessions do not bind congregations and every church is autonomous, Baptists differ among themselves on Calvinism, spiritual gifts, the end times, open or closed communion, wine or juice, and women in ministry. On anything beyond the shared core, the pastor and congregation decide. There is a floor: Baptist associations and conventions can withdraw fellowship, as the Southern Baptist Convention did with Saddleback Church in 2023 over women pastors.
- **Where does reform stop?** The Baptist account of the magisterial reformers as "half-reformed" implies that reform continues until Scripture is fully obeyed. Critics answer that once each generation may judge its predecessors by its own reading of Scripture, there is no principled stopping point short of the individual.

How Catholics and Orthodox see it

- The pattern shows private judgment at work. Each Baptist keeps what he finds in Scripture, and what he finds depends on who taught him to read it.
- Every Baptist distinctive is a choice between earlier Protestants, so the result is a sixteenth- to nineteenth-century synthesis, not a recovery of the first century.

- The disagreements among Baptists on secondary matters, and over which matters are secondary, are what the magisterium (or the consensus of the Fathers and councils) exists to prevent.
- Baptism's meaning was treated as essential by every church for fifteen centuries. Reclassifying it as secondary is itself an act of authority.

How Baptists see it

- Agreeing with a teacher only where he agrees with Scripture is not eclecticism; it is the only consistent way to hold Scripture as the final authority.
- The believer's church principle is applied consistently, and it explains most of the choices that look arbitrary.
- Diversity on secondary matters is the price of liberty of conscience and is preferable to unity imposed by authority.
- Catholics also select: the Church does not accept everything Origen, Tertullian or any single Father taught. The difference is only who does the selecting.

The underlying question. Every tradition is selective in its use of earlier teachers. Catholics select through the magisterium, the Orthodox through the consensus of the Fathers and the ecumenical councils, and Baptists through Scripture as each believer and congregation reads it. Whether the Baptist pattern looks principled or arbitrary therefore depends on the answer to the question of authority (Chapter 1; Chapter 8).

Across the traditions

How each major tradition regards the Reformation, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

Trent answered the Reformers by condemning justification “by faith alone” understood as requiring no willed preparation (Session VI, 1547, canon 9), and by reforming discipline. Vatican II added that for the separations “often enough, men of both sides were to blame,” and that those now born into these communities

Orthodox

Orthodox engagement began when Patriarch Jeremias II answered the Augsburg Confession article by article (1576, with further replies in 1579 and 1581): he welcomed some points but rejected the Filioque, faith without works and the reduction of the sacraments, and finally asked the Tübingen theologians to write only

cannot be accused of that sin (Unitatis Redintegratio 3; CCC 817–818). After the Joint Declaration (1999), Pope Francis and the Lutheran World Federation at Lund (2016) gave thanks for "gifts received through the Reformation" while lamenting wounded unity.

Sources: Council of Trent, Session VI (13 January 1547), Decree on Justification, canon 9 (papalencyclicals.net); Vatican II, Unitatis Redintegratio (1964) 3 (vatican.va); Catechism of the Catholic Church 817–818; Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (Augsburg, 31 October 1999) §§40–41 (ewtn.com); Joint Statement on the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation, Lund, 31 October 2016 (Vatican Radio archive).

for friendship's sake. The Confession of Dositheus (Synod of Jerusalem, 1672), rejecting Calvinist teaching, affirmed that the Church cannot err (Decree 2), justification "through faith which works through love" (13), seven sacraments (15) and transubstantiation (17).

Sources: Patriarch Jeremias II, First, Second and Third Answers to the Tübingen theologians (1576, 1579, 1581), in G. Mastrantonis, Augsburg and Constantinople (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1982) — checked via Gabe Martini, "Lutherans Write the Patriarch" (Pravoslavie.ru, 2013), not the book; Confession of Dositheus (Synod of Jerusalem, 1672), Decrees 2, 13, 15, 17 (crivoice.org).

Lutheran

Lutherans regard the Reformation as a recovery of the gospel within the catholic church: the Augsburg Confession says its churches dissent "in no article of the faith from the Church Catholic" and only omit some new abuses (introduction to Arts. XXII–XXVIII). Lutherans have also repented of parts of the record: in 2010 the Lutheran World Federation assembly unanimously asked forgiveness for the persecution of Anabaptists. LWF churches signed the Joint Declaration (1999), but confessional bodies such as the Missouri Synod judged it unclear on whether justification is forensic.

Sources: Augsburg Confession (1530), introduction to Part II ("Articles in which are reviewed the abuses which have been corrected") (bookofconcord.org); LWF Eleventh Assembly, Stuttgart, action of 22 July 2010 on the legacy of Lutheran persecution of Anabaptists (ELCA News Service release, archive.wfn.org/2010/07/msg00207.html); LCMS, The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in

Reformed

Reformed churches regard the Reformation as the church reformed by the Word: the Second Helvetic Confession (1566) denies that only the Roman Church is catholic or that the pope is the church's supreme head, and answers the charge that the Reformed left the true church (ch. 17). The Westminster Confession holds that "the purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error" and that Christ alone is head of the church (25.5–6). In 2017 the World Communion of Reformed Churches associated itself with the Joint Declaration at Wittenberg.

Sources: Second Helvetic Confession (1566), ch. XVII (ccel.org); Westminster Confession of Faith, 25.4–6 (OPC text, opc.org); Vatican Radio note on WCRC association with the JDDJ, Wittenberg, 5 July 2017 (archivioradiovaticana.va).

Confessional Lutheran Perspective (1999), p. 17, as cited in T. M. Dorman, JETS 44/3 (2001).

Anglican

Anglicans see the English Reformation as a national church reforming itself: the Articles hold that "the Church of Rome hath erred" (XIX), that general councils may err (XXI), that the Romish doctrine of purgatory is "a fond thing vainly invented" (XXII), and that the Bishop of Rome has no jurisdiction in England (XXXVII). Anglo-Catholics, after Newman's Tract 90 (1841), read the Articles as "not uncatholic"; evangelicals stress their Reformed sense. In 2016 the Anglican Consultative Council affirmed "the substance" of the Joint Declaration (Resolution 16.17).

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles, XIX, XXI, XXII, XXXVII (churchofengland.org); J. H. Newman, Tract 90 (1841), Introduction (anglicanhistory.org); Anglican Consultative Council, Resolution 16.17, Lusaka, 19 April 2016 (iarccum.org/doc/578).

Methodist

Methodists receive the Reformation through Luther and the Church of England: Wesley felt his heart "strangely warmed" while Luther's Preface to Romans was read at Aldersgate (Journal, 24 May 1738). Wesley was also critical, judging Luther's Galatians commentary "deeply tinctured with Mysticism" for coupling God's law with sin and death (Journal, 15 June 1741). The Methodist Articles keep the Anglican rejection of purgatory and the invocation of saints (Art. XIV), and in 2006 the World Methodist Council affirmed the Joint Declaration, crediting justification "as it was understood by Luther and the other reformers."

Sources: John Wesley, Journal, 24 May 1738 (as quoted from Works 18:249–50 at wesleyscholar.com); Journal, 15 June 1741 (page scan, wesleyscholar.com PDF, pp. 315–316); United Methodist Articles of Religion, Art. XIV (umc.org); World Methodist Council Statement of Association with the JDDJ, Seoul, 23 July 2006, §4 (christianunity.va).

Baptist

Baptists accept the Reformation's appeal to Scripture but see the magisterial Reformation as incomplete, since it kept infant baptism and state churches that persecuted the Anabaptists. Thomas Helwys's *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (1612) attacked Rome, the Church of England and the Puritans, and told King James he had no power over his subjects' souls; Baptists still hold that "Church and state should be separate" (Baptist Faith and Message, art. XVII). Landmark writer J. M. Carroll called the

Reformation's hope “a bloody delusion” (*The Trail of Blood*, Lecture 3, §15).

Sources: Thomas Helwys, A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity (1612), as described by J. R. Vile, “Thomas Helwys,” Free Speech Center / First Amendment Encyclopedia (firstamendment.mtsu.edu); Baptist Faith and Message (2000), art. XVII (bfm.sbc.net); J. M. Carroll, The Trail of Blood (1931), Lecture 3 §15 (SermonIndex edition); H. Leon McBeth, “Baptist Beginnings” (Baptists emerged from the Puritan-Separatist movement).

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