

A History of the Bible Churches

by

G. Harry Leafe, Th.M., D.Min.

INTRODUCTION

During the 1960's and 70's, a very noticeable surge in the establishment and growth of Bible Churches took place across America. Many people, becoming aware of this phenomena, began to ask questions. What is a Bible Church? Where do Bible Churches come from? What do Bible Churches believe? The purpose of this paper is to provide answers to these kinds of questions.

The logical place to begin a study of the historical development of the Bible Churches is to briefly review the development of the various denominations that are scattered across America.

First, a rather lengthy summary of the development of the denominations from the Reformation to the present time will be given, followed by a brief discussion of why some chose to leave the denominations to form independent churches. Finally, the distinctives of Bible Churches will be discussed.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DENOMINATIONS

The Influence of the Reformation and Pietism

When we begin to investigate the history of the Bible Church movement, we very quickly come to the conclusion that its roots are grounded in the theology of the Reformation and the rise of Pietism.

The Reformation occurred against a vast background of unrest and change in Europe. The most important area of unrest and change was centered in the troubled state of the Western Church. Linder sets the scene clearly when he writes: It was an age of decline for a church faced with persistent heresy...; an outburst of popular piety...; a loss of papal credibility resulting from the years of "Babylonian Captivity" in Avignon, the Great Schism which followed, and a secularized Renaissance papacy; widespread clerical ignorance and abuse; and the unrelenting insistence of the Christian humanists that the church be reformed. Thus the seeds for Reformation in the sixteenth century were nurtured in the fallow soil of discontent at nearly every level of human existence.¹

The actual beginning of the Reformation came on October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. In his studies, Luther had come to the realization that justification was by faith alone (*Sola Fida*), and he had succeeded in gathering about himself a loyal band of fellow professors and students who accepted the faith that was to spread all over Germany.

By this time, Luther had become convinced that it was time to challenge the perversion of the doctrine of indulgences² and the papal authority which made such abuses possible. In his Ninety-five Theses, he condemned the abuses of the indulgence system and challenged all comers to debate the matter. Concerning the Ninety-five

Theses Cairns writes:

A reading of the Ninety-five Theses will reveal that Luther was merely criticizing abuses of the indulgence system in order to reform it. However, during the years between 1518 and 1521, he was forced to accept the idea of separation from the Roman system as the only way to get a reform that would involve a return to the ideal of the Church revealed in the Scriptures.³

Eventually, Luther was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. But this did not stop him, however, and while he remained the prophetic voice of the Reformation, Philip Melanchthon became its theologian. His little work, *Loci Communes*, was the first theological treatise of the Reformation.

Melanchthon put the Bible above the Roman Church, the Church Fathers, the canon law, and the Scholastics. The purpose of *Loci Communes* was to deal with the most common topics of theology in a methodical fashion with the hope that it would get the people into the Scriptures.⁴

The two outstanding features of the Luther led reformation in Germany were *Sola Fida* (faith alone) and *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone). By mid-century, the Lutheran Church had taken form and become the dominant faith of much of Germany and most of Scandinavia. It also had by this time made a significant impact on the religious life of the remainder of Europe.⁵

In Switzerland the influence of the Lutheran Reformation touched Ulrich Zwingli who began the Reformation in that country. The Reformation spread from Zurich under the direction of Zwingli westward through German Switzerland, finally reaching the French cantons where John Calvin became its leader.⁶ But before we deal with the contribution of Calvin, we should first mention the Anabaptist movement that was at first closely linked with the Zwinglian movement in Northern Switzerland.

Conrad Grebel (1498-1526), may be regarded as the founder of the Swiss Anabaptist movement.⁷ Grebel worked closely with Zwingli until he broke with him in 1525 over the issue of infant baptism. Zwingli was an advocate of infant baptism, but because of the lack of scriptural support, Grebel, as well as the other Anabaptists would not go along with him. In 1526, the Zurich council decided to punish those who advocated the Anabaptist views by drowning them! Because of this treatment, the Anabaptists fled to the other lands and the movement was practically nonexistent in Zurich by 1535.

In Germany many of the Anabaptists involved themselves in fanatical excesses. And because of their excesses and because they denied the ideas of Luther and Zwingli, the Anabaptists brought condemnation and persecution upon the movement -- from both protestants and Roman Catholics.

Menno Simons was the leader of the Anabaptist movement in Holland (Netherlands). Simons and his followers were concerned about the stigma that had come to be attached to the Anabaptist movement, and they adopted the name Brethren for themselves. After the death of Simons in 1561, the Brethren became known as Mennonites.

Theologically, the Anabaptists believed in the authority of the Bible, including its literal interpretation; that the local church was to be an association of regenerated, baptized Believers; opposition to infant baptism; and the separation of church and state.

The Anabaptist movement is the spiritual and lineal ancestor of both the modern Mennonite and Baptist churches throughout the world.⁸

We will now turn our attention to the contributions of John Calvin. Calvin (1509-1564), is recognized as the leader of the second generation of reformers.⁹ Those today who accept the Reformed Tradition as their doctrinal understanding do so with the realization that theirs is the system of theology developed by John Calvin.

Calvin and Luther differed both personally and theologically. Concerning their theological differences Cairns writes:

Luther emphasized preaching, but Calvin was interested in the development of a formal system of theology. Both accepted the authority of the Bible, but Luther's main emphasis was upon justification by faith, whereas Calvin stressed the sovereignty of God. Luther held to consubstantiation as the proper explanation of the Lord's Supper, but Calvin rejected the physical presence of Christ in favor of the spiritual presence of Christ in the hearts of the participants. Luther only rejected what the Scriptures would not approve, but Calvin refused everything of the past that could not be proved by the Scriptures. Luther believed in predestination of the elect but said little about election to condemnation. Calvin held to a double election to salvation and condemnation based on the will of God, and he rejected any idea of merit on the part of the elect or foreknowledge on the part of God, in the sense that God elected to salvation those whom He foreknew would believe.¹⁰

Calvin's greatest contribution to the Reformed faith was his Institutes of the Christian Religion which express the Reformed theology. In this work, he laid the foundation for the Reformed emphasis upon the importance of doctrine and the centrality of God in Christian theology.¹¹ Calvin's view of the church is described by Latourette when he writes:

The church, so he maintained, is not identical with any visible institution, but includes all the elect, the dead as well as the living. As the creed declares, the Church is Catholic, that is, universal. It can not be divided, for this would mean that Christ is divided, and that is impossible. Its head is Christ, and through Him all the elect grow together as one body. The Catholic Church is invisible and is known only to God. Calvin also believed that there is a visible Church, which, though composed of particular churches in different towns and villages, yet embraces all the living throughout the world Who consent to the same truth of divine doctrine and are united by the bond of the same religion. As to the structure of the visible Church, Calvin held that it should ensure that everything be done decorously and in order. It should have judiciaries appointed to censure vice and excommunicate. For officers of the Church, Calvin, quoting Paul, held that they were originally apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. The first three, he declared, are raised up only for special occasions, while the pastors

and teachers are constant. He held that the terms bishop, elder, pastor, and minister have the same meaning. There are also deacons, who administer the alms and care for the poor. Ministers have the inner call of God and are to be chosen with the consent and approbation of the people at elections over which other ministers preside.¹²

Calvin also encouraged education and even went so far as to set up a three-level education system in Geneva. He wrote many commentaries on books of the Bible and had a great influence on the growth of democracy and capitalism.

With the passage of time, the ideas of the Reformers had become so systemized and schematized that there was little comfort to be found in them. In 1674, Philipp Spener wrote an introduction to a new edition of sermons by Arndt, and this introduction proved to be the manifesto of what is called the Pietest Movement. The manifesto included six requirements for reformation: 1. A better knowledge of the Bible on the part of the people; 2. The restoration of mutual Christian concern; 3. An emphasis on good works; 4. Avoidance of controversy; 5. Better spiritual training for ministers; and 6. A reformation of preaching to make it more fervent.¹³

The Pietest Movement continued to develop and spread. Another of its leaders, A. H. Francke, secured an appointment at the University of Halle in 1692. Francke developed a tremendous concern for the destitute and depraved people of Halle and he led in the founding of schools for the poor, an orphanage, a hospital, a widow's home, a Bible school, a book depot, and others. The school at Halle became the first center of world missions, sending out two missionaries to India in 1705.

Much could be said about this great movement (e.g. the Moravian Church that was founded by Count Von Zinzendorf), but for our immediate interests it can best be said that the Pietest Movement made its greatest contribution in emphasizing holy living, biblical scholarship, and missions.¹⁴

With the discovery of the New World came an increased desire to experience its invitation to the adventure of a new life together with its promised freedoms. And with the freedoms came the opportunity for a fresh expression of the Reformation theology that was sweeping over Europe.

The Colonial Period in America

Between 1620 and 1789, the period of church history in America is known as the Colonial Period. It was during this time that settlers came from England and Europe and established the various Christian denominations.

Congregationalism was established by the Pilgrims and Puritans. The Pilgrims were led by William Bradford and William Brewster, while the Puritans were led by John Endicott and John Winthrop. The Congregationalists settled in the northeast, mainly in Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Hampshire.

Anglicanism was established in six of the thirteen colonies: Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and New York. The Americans wanted an Anglican bishop, but England said no. This caused suspicion and the American Revolution brought the formation of the Protestant Episcopal Church.

The Baptists were first established under Roger Williams in Boston in 1631, but

grew rapidly in the middle and southern colonies.

Roman Catholicism was established in Maryland by George Calvert. Presbyterians settled both in New England (before 1720), and the middle and southern colonies (after 1720). The Quakers, under the leadership of George Fox, settled in Pennsylvania, while the Lutherans settled in the Dutch Colony of New Amsterdam and the Delaware Valley. Several other groups settled in Pennsylvania, among them the Moravians, the Mennonites, the Dunkers, and the Schwensfelders.

The Colonial Period also saw a decline in commitment to biblical theology which resulted in almost anyone being permitted to join a church, whether saved or unsaved. Solomon Stoddard, a powerful church leader, even allowed the unsaved to participate at the Lord's Table! It was also during this time that the famous witch trials of Betty Panness and Abigail Williams took place in 1692. And it was into this environment of apostasy that the Holy Spirit moved to bring about revival in the hearts of God's people. This time of revival is called the First Great Awakening. It was real revival for many in which there was true repentance and renewed commitment to Christ and the authority and integrity of the Scriptures. But for many others it became a time of emotional excess, which very often led to unacceptable and distasteful behavior.

In New England the Congregationalists split over the revival. One segment became known as the Old Lights, those who neither liked the emotional excesses nor saw the need for personal conversion. Not surprisingly the others became known as the New Lights.

The era also saw the establishment of Methodism, primarily under the direction of Francis Asbury in 1771, as well as a rise in higher education. Harvard (1630), was the first college in America; and it, along with Yale (1701) and Princeton (1720's), was founded to provide training for young men going into the ministry.

The National Period in America

Between 1789 and 1865, America and her churches entered a period that is now called the National Period of Church History. During this time religious liberalism was on the rise in Europe. And while it is not our intent to discuss the European situation at length in this brief paper, suffice it to say that Emanuel Kant was the key to the emergence of the religious liberalism in Europe. Hannah summarizes Kant's theology in the following way:

Kant postulated through his Critique of Judgment and Critique of Practical Reason that there are two realms of reality, the noumena, which is beyond time and space, and the phenomena. Truth for Kant resulted from interplay between impulses from the phenomenal world and innate categories within the mind. The noumenal world is unknowable to man since he cannot perceive such impulses except through an innate categorical imperative, moral conscience. By moral duty (rightness) man can use his rational ability to find God. The Bible, a book which is part of the phenomenal world, is only a subjective record of man's religious experience and is knowable by reason and sensation. Kant's emphasis provided the seedbed for the subsequent development of destructive biblical

criticism.¹⁵

From Kant religious liberalism began to grow and spread, eventually finding its way to America. The rationalism of Kant plus the emotionalism of the First Great Awakening gave rise to Unitarianism. Unitarianism actually occurred as a result of a split in Congregationalism that took place in 1805. The other group that formed from the split became known as New Divinity Congregationalism.

The National Period also saw the rise of theological seminaries. The Revolutionary War had cut America's ties with England so that it was no longer practical to think in terms of sending men there to receive training for the ministry. Also, the trend at that time shifted from the development of church schools to the development of state schools. To further complicate the situation, the expanding frontier brought an increased demand for ministers. All of these things played an important role in the establishment of theological seminaries.

In the later years of the National Period there was a significant decline in commitment to orthodox, biblical theology. The theology of the New Divinity Congregationalists denied the imputation of original sin, the depravity of man, the deity of Christ, and the inspiration of the Scriptures.

The development of religious liberalism also brought about controversy among the Presbyterians. The controversy is referred to historically as the New School - Old School Controversy. The conflict arose over a plan of union in 1801 which was intended to unite the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians in an evangelistic effort to reach the West. It was at this point that New Divinity Theology penetrated the Presbyterian Church and caused the first theological split in Presbyterianism. Union Seminary was founded in 1836 to propagate the New Theology. In 1837, the conservatives dropped out of the plan of Union; and in 1838, the division occurred between the New Schoolers (mostly in the North) and the Old Schoolers (mostly in the South). The Old Schoolers were declared the legal successors of historic Presbyterianism.

There are many other features of this period that could be mentioned here, but our primary interest is in the formation and development of the denominations. And with that in mind we need to add that the National Period also saw the establishment of the Cumberland Presbyterians and the Cambellites (Disciples of Christ), as well as the rise of the four major cults: Mormonism, founded by Joseph Smith; Seventh-Day Adventism, founded by William Miller; Jehovah's Witnesses, founded by Charles Taze Russell; and Christian Science, founded by Mary Baker Glover Patterson Eddy Frye.

The Civil War brought further division to the denominations. The issue was slavery. Splits occurred among the Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists. After the war the Methodists got back together. With the others, however, the splits ultimately resulted in new denominational groups. Among the Presbyterians two new groups were formed and became known as Northern Presbyterians and Southern Presbyterians. The Baptists also formed two new denominations along geographical lines, Northern Baptists and Southern Baptists.

Because of the penetration of New Divinity Theology (primarily in the North), both northern groups, i.e., Northern Presbyterians and Northern Baptists, embraced a liberal theology from the outset. The two southern groups remained mostly conservative.

The Modern Period in America

The period of time between 1865 and the present is called the Modern Period of Church History in America. It is also a time referred to as the Rise of American Fundamentalism. The main thing that we want to deal with here is the advent of Modernism (liberalism) and the effects that it had on the denominations.

Modernism can best be defined as that movement which rejects the authority of the Bible as the inerrant Word of God, tending to interpret it in the light of modern-day science and philosophy. The so-called higher criticism which was born in Europe had cast shadows of doubt on the authenticity of the Bible, thus making it a human book. The social gospel promised utopia through the reforming of institutions. Darwinism attacked the first three chapters of Genesis, which was now a human book, thus doing away with the sinfulness of man. This kind of thinking also became embedded in the colleges and universities and they began to drop biblically oriented courses from their curricula.

The conservative reaction to this movement resulted in what is called the Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy, the Fundamentalists having come to the fore to oppose the insurgence of the liberal theology. The Fundamentalists reemphasized the inerrancy of the Scriptures, separation from liberalism, biblical miracles (especially the virgin birth of Christ), the physical resurrection of Christ and His substitutionary atonement.¹⁶

This controversy is still going on in some form or another today. There have been new denominational groups that have formed from it such as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1936, and the Bible Presbyterian Church in 1937. These two groups were formed off of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (Northern Presbyterians).

Among the Northern Baptists there were two splinter groups that formed: the General Association of Regular Baptists in 1932 and the Conservative Baptist Association in 1947.

There were also others who left denominations over this controversy and formed independent associations such as the American Council of Christian Churches and the Independent Fundamental Churches of America.

THE DEPARTURE FROM DENOMINATIONALISM

During the Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy, there were those churches who decided to break with the denominations altogether. The Independent Bible Church is an example of this departure. The question is, why?

Louis Gasper gives us two of the basic reasons. First, the Conservatives (Fundamentalists) wanted to maintain the autonomy of their local congregations, which they feared would disappear as soon as the denominations tightened their control over each church. Second, those whose churches (including their property) were controlled by a centralized body had to choose between secession from their denomination which had gone over to modernism and thereby risking the loss of their church properties, or to remain as they were – unwilling, but contaminated members of apostate denominations. For those who chose the former, they lost the right to any use of the property which had been supported by their contributions.¹⁷

Another reason was over the voice of the denomination. That is, when a church or church council pretended or ever purported to speak for the entire membership when

addressing the social, economic and political issues of the day.¹⁸ Many conservatives did not (and still do not) wish to be identified with a denomination or group that expressed beliefs or positions that were contrary to what they believed the Scriptures taught.

A fourth reason why some chose to leave denominations was over the issue of separation.¹⁹ Their rationale went something like this: religious liberalism is certainly sin. And since a Christian is to refrain from sin, it only follows that Christians should refrain from aligning themselves with those who embrace religious liberalism.

Education provided another reason for leaving denominationalism. As the denominations began to embrace religious liberalism, their colleges and seminaries did also. And because of this, many of the newly formed independent groups began to establish their own schools to train ministers in the orthodox tradition.²⁰

Concern for missions was an important issue in the break as well. Most of the mission boards were controlled by the denominations and the independents no longer wished to support them. As a result, new independent mission boards were instituted.

In summary, then, we can say that those who broke with the denominations did so basically over theology and autonomy. Some of those who left still chose to wear a denominational name i.e., Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, etc. Others, however, dropped the denominational name, choosing rather to use non-denominational terms in their new names. The Bible Church is but one example.

THE DISTINCTIVES OF BIBLE CHURCHES

The Bible Church movement as we have been able to trace it thus far is really not a movement as much as it is a mind set or philosophy of ministry that characterizes those churches who call themselves Bible Churches. There are certain distinctives by which they are generally characterized, but there are also areas in which they differ.

Generally speaking, Bible Churches hold fast to the Fundamentals of the Faith. These include the deity of Christ, His virgin birth, His substitutionary atonement, His bodily resurrection from the dead, His second coming, the inspiration (including inerrancy) of the Scriptures, and salvation by grace through faith in Christ apart from any human merit.

Most are dispensational in their interpretation and understanding of the Scriptures. And one of the distinctives that is very prominent in most Bible Churches is their emphasis on the practical teaching of the Word of God.

As we previously mentioned, there are also some differences between Bible Churches.²¹ If one were to visit several Bible Churches in different cities, he might find some of them operating under a Presbyterian form of church government (Elder rule), while others might be under a congregational form of government. In one, one might find baptism by immersion, while in another, baptism by sprinkling or pouring. In some you might find traditional forms of worship, while in others you may find so-called modern forms. Some Bible Churches have developed music programs, while others have no choirs at all (congregational singing, however). One would also find varying degrees of emphasis on pulpit evangelism.

The list of similarities and differences could be expanded further I am sure, but we have listed the most basic of each. It seems clear, then, that in many cases one would

not be able to distinguish between some Bible Churches and some badge churches. But it is good to keep in mind that as Believers are confronted with religious liberalism in their denominational churches -- and choose to leave, they most often do not care to put on a badge, and the Independent Bible Church provides a viable option.

A final word must be added with regard to the part that Dallas Theological Seminary has played in the growth of Bible Churches. This is not to say that other schools have not played an important part, too, but it is clear that Dallas Seminary has had the most prominent role.²²

Although having become very diversified in recent years with regard to the educational requirements of the various functions of Christian ministry, the core curriculum at Dallas Seminary is designed to equip men to be expositors of the Word of God. They are not involved in teaching men to function under a denominational job description. Consequently, most of the graduates of the Master of Theology program at Dallas Seminary either become teachers at Bible colleges or seminaries, missionaries, or pastors of Bible Churches. But even among graduates of Dallas Seminary one may find vast differences in philosophy of ministry and teaching style.

Current trends and recent history clearly indicate a sharp decline in the Bible Church Movement in America. To be sure new Bible Churches are still being planted. But because of a major shift in large segments of the Church away from biblical exposition to a more experience oriented ministry, the demand for churches with Bible Church distinctives has all but vanished in most areas of our country. However, for those new Bible Churches that are being formed, as well as those already in existence, if they maintain their distinctives and remain committed to the biblical objectives of the Church, the Bible Churches in America will continue to provide a tremendous force for the gospel of Christ.

END NOTES

1. Robert D. Linder, *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), p. 830.

2. In the Roman Catholic Church this is the remission of all or part of the debt of temporal punishment owed to God due to sin after the guilt has been forgiven. This grant is based on the principle of vicarious satisfaction, which means that since the sinner is unable to do sufficient penance to expiate all his sins, he is able to draw on the spiritual treasury formed by the surplus merits of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. The authority for granting indulgences rests with the pope, although he may designate others (e.g., cardinals, bishops) to have this power, with the exception of indulgences for the dead. Clouse, *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 508.

3. Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1967), p. 315.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 317.

5. Linder, *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 831.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 831.

7. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, p. 331.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 331. 9. *Ibid.*, p. 334. 10. *Ibid.*, p. 335. 11. *Ibid.*, p. 338.

12. Latourette, Kenneth Scott, *A History of Christianity* (New York, Evanston, and London, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1953), p. 756.

13. Clouse, *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p.

780. 14. *Ibid.*, p. 780.

15. John D. Hannah, *James Martin Gray, 1851-1935 His Life and Work* (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1974), pp. 22, 23.

16. Louis Gasper, *The Fundamentalist Movement* (The Hague: Moulton & Co., 1963), p.

13. 17. *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 21.

18. Robert P. Lightner, *Church Union - A Layman's Guide* (Des Plains: Regular Baptist Press, 1971), p. 17.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

20. Gasper, *The Fundamentalist Movement*, pp. 35, 36.

21. In April of 1987, two months after Grace Bible Church of Houston, Texas was formed, an announcement appeared in a local newspaper stating that a new church was being formed which was to be called, *Grace Bible Church*. The announcement further stated that the ministry of the new church was designed to bring about a life of *health and wealth* for its members. Those interested were given the meeting location and a phone number to call for information. Being a little more than interested, I made a call for information.

The voice on the other end announced that I had reached the Pastor of Grace Bible Church, to which I responded, *Pastor, this is Dr. Leafe and I am Pastor of Grace Bible Church of Houston, Texas*. I explained that our church had been chartered by the State of Texas in the name of Grace Bible Church of Houston, Texas, to which he responded that his church had not. I further suggested that their announcement was creating some amount of confusion in the community because of their stated theological beliefs -- beliefs with which we were not in agreement. The result was that they changed the name of their church.

Our experience at Grace Bible Church in Houston was not an unusual one. And in other similar cases, it has most often been independent charismatic groups who have who have used the name *Bible* or *Community* in their names.

22. Some of the other schools that have contributed to the tradition of the Bible Church Movement include: *Talbot Theological Seminary, Grace Theological Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Seminary, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary (Western Seminary), Denver Conservative Baptist Seminary (Denver Seminary), Moody Bible Institute, Philadelphia College of Bible, and Columbia Bible College*.