

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT

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At the request of the "Answer Please" column in the Arkansas Democrat, the following information is given.

The question "Are Baptists Protestants?" has been raised often in the last one hundred years as a result of the exclusiveness of the Landmark movement, founded in the 1850's by J. R. Graves. The issue really centers upon two things: (1) What is meant by the word "Protestant," and (2) one's view of Baptist history.

The term "Protestant" has a variety of meanings and applications. Its earliest use was by a group of German nobles who opposed the Catholic majority at the Diet of Speier in 1529. In reaction to certain Catholic threats, the Lutheran minority drafted a statement of "protest" and thus became "protesters" or "protestants." Its first use, therefore, was in a civil context.

Secondly, there is a real sense in which the word might be restricted to the Lutherans. It was the sympathizers of Martin Luther who in the sixteenth century became the first Protestants. But words often undergo a change of meaning with the passing of years, and this is true of the word "Protestant." It has come to designate those many groups and individuals who withdrew from the Roman Catholic Church in the period of the Reformation. In effect they protested against what they felt to be the corruption, superstition, and doctrinal distortions associated with the Roman Church. These protesters were the followers of Calvin, Knox, Zwingli, and others as well as Luther.

There is another sense in which the historian uses the term "Protestant."

As he studies the development of Christianity in western Europe and in this hemisphere, he discerns two major traditions: Catholic and Protestant. This is a convenient way to distinguish in general terms the two significant segments of Christianity. Within this division it is obvious where Baptists belong.

One well-known church historian speaks of the basic characteristics of Protestantism to be "the acceptance of the Bible as the only source of revealed truth, the doctrine of justification by faith only, and the universal priesthood of all believers."* To all of these Baptists wholeheartedly subscribe. Robert G. Torbet, author of A History of the Baptists (rev., 1963), is typical of the many Baptist historians who place Baptists squarely in the Protestant tradition because of the heavy influence of the Reformation on them.

The point is that Baptists are theological Protestants, but not historical Protestants. That is, Baptists hold to the basic views of Protestantism, but they are not historically descended from the sixteenth century Reformers. This leads then to the second consideration: one's view of Baptist history.

When and under what circumstances did Baptists originate? Most Baptists who scorn the designation of Protestant believe that Baptists can trace themselves in an unbroken line back to the first century. Using the many dissenting groups of Christian history, certain Baptist historians have worked out a Baptist genealogy. Church history has been ransacked to produce such groups as the Novatians, Donatists, Paulicians, Waldenses, Albigenses, and numerous others who ostensibly hold one or two things in common with modern Baptists. These sects supposedly appear in chain-like fashion and allegedly

*F. L. Cross, ed., The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 1116.

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were the Baptists of other days. It is believed that an uninterrupted succession of Baptists is thereby guaranteed.

However, the fact is that knowledgeable and competent Baptist historians of today reject such a view as without historical foundation. Furthermore, it is little more than a Baptist adaptation of "apostolic succession." Both the principle and the results of the two views are the same.

Research into Baptist beginnings shows that Baptists as a self-conscious and self-perpetuating denomination appeared in England in the seventeenth century. In this setting they emerged as a second generation of Protestantism with their roots deep in English Puritanism and Separatism.

Interestingly enough, despite the vigorous protests of some Baptists against being called Protestants, it is nonetheless true that historically Baptists have always protested what they regarded to be the excesses and errors of the Roman Catholic Church. If Protestants are characterized by protest, Baptists are the first to qualify.