

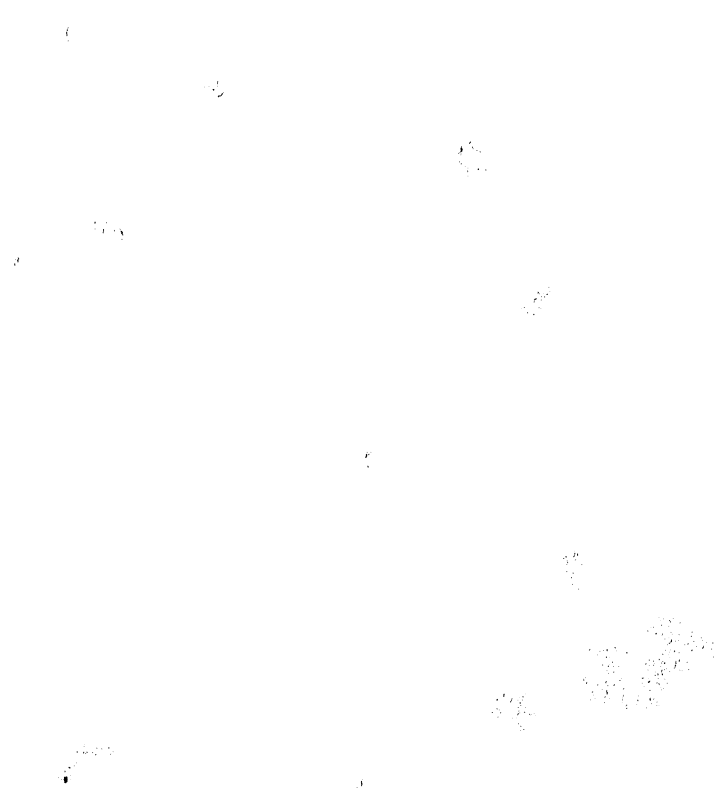
# **The Contribution of the Baptists to American Civilization**

By  
**President E. Y. Mullins, D. D.**



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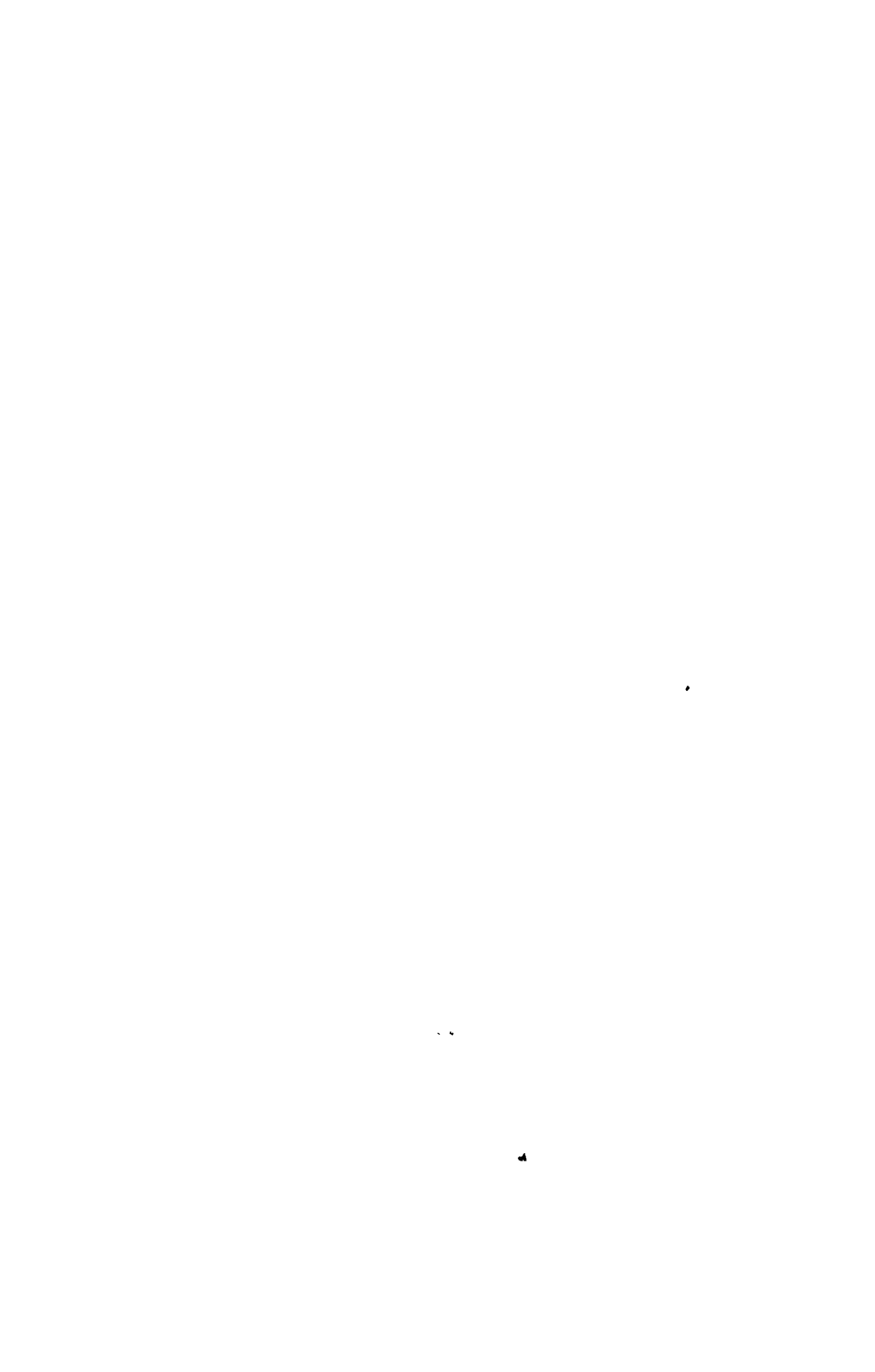
*Chapter XVI*  
*in "Axioms of Religion"*

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# THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE BAPTISTS TO AMERICAN CIVILIZATION

I read some years ago a book by Sir Walter Besant, entitled "Building the Empire," in which he sketches the development of the British empire. I was startled to observe that he excludes Ireland and India from the British empire and includes Australia, Canada, and the United States. But when I came to understand his point of view I was disposed to concede that in some sense of the word in his inclusion of the United States and his rejection of the other countries he was correct. He meant that British ideas of liberty had come to fruitage in the United States. In this sense of the word we may regard American civilization as a Baptist empire, for at the basis of this government lies a great group of Baptist ideals.

## CIVILIZATION AND SOCIETY.

Civilization is the movement of human society under the influence of general ideas. As an avalanche is a movement of a mountain-side under the action of gravity, or as the tides are the move-

<sup>1</sup>An address delivered at the Baptist Convention of North America, held at Jamestown, Va., May, 1907.

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ment of the sea under the attractive power of the moon, so civilization is the movement of the social organism under the sway of great general conceptions. In the Dark Ages the chaos was due to the conflict of general ideas. Theocracy in the form of a papacy, aristocracy in the feudal system, democracy in the free cities, and monarchy in the rise of the centralized governments of Europe in turn tried their hand at guiding human destiny. All failed because no one principle or consistent set of principles gained the ascendancy. Hence the dream of medieval Europe was unlike that of Joseph in the biblical story in which one sheaf of social ideals arose in the midst and the other sheaves stood around and did obeisance to it; it was rather a wild delirium of conflicting ideals in which the sleeper was dimly conscious of a coming day of better things, but had no clear conception of what it was to be. That day was ushered in by Martin Luther.

The historian Hasê says that since the Reformation the movement of civilization has turned on the conflict between the Catholic and the Protestant principles; that is, the conflict between human authority and human freedom. A glance at history confirms this. The thirty years' war in Europe, the struggle of the Dutch Republic, the English Revolution under Cromwell, the American Revolution, the tragedy of the French Revolution, and the conflict in modern Italy, as well as the current revolution

in Russia, are all echoes of the deep cry of man for freedom, the rise of the sense of the inherent worth and the inalienable rights of man against tyranny. De Tocqueville has remarked that this same principle is the fundamental issue in all American politics which finds expression in two tendencies—first, the tendency to extend and secondly, the tendency to limit the power of the people.

A fundamental law of all civilization is that political and religious life travel on parallel roads. They never diverge greatly in direction, so far as the great organizing principles are concerned. Religion is the ultimate fact of man, and civilization is the dim reproduction of religion. Now my thesis at present is that the Baptists have furnished the sheaf of religious ideals around which the others have gathered and have done obeisance; that those ideals have imparted their peculiar glory to our temporal and political organization; that they have fallen from heaven on the hard forms of earthly power and glorified them, like a sunbeam dancing on the helmet of Achilles, or like the sunlight gilding and glorifying the darkened face of the moon until the latter shone with a power capable of guiding the benighted traveler to his destination. I do not of course claim that Baptists have a monopoly of these ideals, that in no sense have others advocated any of them. It is a question rather of degrees, and what I maintain is that no other religious body has adequately set them forth, and that the

Baptists have done so. The contribution of Baptists to American civilization may be stated under a fivefold classification.

#### BAPTISTS INTERPRETERS OF THE REFORMATION.

i. Baptists have been the only adequate interpreters of the Reformation. The advocates of any great movement in religion or politics may usually be divided into two classes—the practical men, the men of compromises and expedients on the one hand, and the idealists on the other, the men who in their practice carry out the logic of the movement to the utmost limit, tolerating no compromises and scorning every tendency to temporize, and ready always to lay down their lives. Such were the Anabaptists of the Reformation, the idealists who alone stood for all that the great movement signified. In the abandon of their devotion they did many extravagant things. When the Scriptures said, "Except ye be converted and become as little children ye cannot enter the kingdom of heaven," they proceeded to make mud pies and to ride stick horses. When the Scriptures said, "What ye hear in the ear in the inner chambers proclaim from the housetops," they mounted the roofs of the houses and preached to the passers-by. This was folly indeed, but also remarkable courage.

Now Luther and Calvin and Zwingli suffered the Reformation ideal to pass into eclipse in large measure. In their adherence to the union of Church



and State they repudiated the modern religio-civic axiom, "A free Church in a free State." In their retention of infant baptism they violated the religious axiom that all souls have an equal right to direct access to God, and in principle repudiated their own doctrine of justification by faith and the right of private judgment in religion. Thus they introduced Romanism into Protestantism and perpetuated a double principle of religion, a double conception of salvation, a confusing and disastrous attempt to mingle the gold of the Reformation with the clay of medieval Christianity. The churches which retain infant baptism and Protestant countries which have religious establishments have never been able to cast off this burden.

The Anabaptists in Germany and the Netherlands and their spiritual successors, the Baptists of England, from the beginning grasped the inner logic of the Reformation, and were from two to three hundred years in advance of others. That they did grasp the inner logic of the Reformation is seen in many ways: in their assertion of the freedom of the individual and the autonomy of the local church under Christ for one thing. The Baptists declared for separation of Church and State in their earliest Confessions. The Presbyterians a few years ago demanded a revision of their doctrinal standards because there was no sufficiently explicit teaching in them on the work of the Holy Spirit, or on worldwide missions. In the Baptist creeds of the early

seventeenth century there are formal articles on both.<sup>1</sup>

The denominations generally, except Baptists, have been much perplexed over the salvation of infants dying in infancy, until recent years. Our Confession of 1660 contains a distinct article declaring that all infants dying in infancy are saved. I quote Article 10, p. 112: "That all children dying in infancy, having not actually transgressed against the law of God in their own persons, are only subject to the first death, which comes upon them by the first Adam, from whence they shall be all raised by the second Adam, and not that any one of them (dying in that estate) shall suffer for Adam's sin eternal punishment in hell (which is the second death), for of such is the kingdom of heaven, 1 Cor. 15 : 22; Matt. 19 : 14; not daring to conclude with that uncharitable opinion of others, who though they pleaded much for the bringing of children into the visible church here on earth by baptism, yet nevertheless, by their doctrine that Christ died but for some, shut a great part of them out of

<sup>1</sup>On missions note Article 34, Confession of 1656, of several churches of Christ in the County of Somerset, England, which says (p. 96 of "Confessions"):

"That as it is an ordinance of Christ, so it is the duty of his church in his authority to send forth such brethren as are fitly gifted and qualified, through the Spirit of Christ, to preach the gospel to the world."

This article also quotes Acts 13 : 1-3 on the separation of Saul and Barnabas to the mission work, and Acts 11 : 22; 8 : 14.

Note also Article 4, Confession of 1660

On the Holy Spirit, Articles 18, 19, and 20, Confession of 1656, give an elaborate account of the work of the Holy Spirit, in all about four pages. Also Article 7, Confession of 1660, p. 3. Also Article 12, Confession of 1660, pp. 113, 127.

the kingdom of heaven forever." More on this point is contained in Article 44, Confession of 1678, p. 163.

And so in other respects Baptists have embodied in their life the consistent working out of the great principles and ideals of the Reformation.

#### SPIRITUAL INTERPRETATION OF CHRISTIANITY.

2. Baptists have furnished to American civilization the most spiritual interpretation of Christianity the world has seen.

This interpretation is seen in the following: We hold to believers' baptism because it prevents fictitious naturalization in the kingdom of God; we reject the principle of vicarious faith involved in infant baptism because it is incompatible with the doctrine of justification by faith, and because added to that doctrine it introduces a spiritual bimetalism into the kingdom of God, or a gold and silver standard of spiritual values, with a very bad grade of silver at that. We hold to a regenerated church-membership because thus only can the church become a spiritual organism progressing by growth under God's Spirit, instead of a human mechanism progressing by accretion under man's manipulation. We reject the sacramental conception of the Lord's Supper because the "real presence" of Christ is not a fact in the realm of matter but a fact in the realm of mind. We adhere to baptism by immersion alone because the thing signified is everything in external

forms, and sprinkling or pouring destroys the thing signified in baptism. We hold to democratic polity and local self-government because we prefer to listen to God's voice as it speaks to us by his Spirit rather than to an echo of it in presbytery and synod, or an echo of an echo of it in a bench of bishops or an infallible pope. We prefer a polity which can always be made compact enough in general organization for spiritual work, but never compact enough for tyranny. We prefer a polity which is flexible enough in general organization for growth and adaptation to changing conditions to one which is forever tied hand and foot by corporate unity and legal solidarity. We believe that a polity which can organize itself for general work without disturbing anybody's peace, and can, when its usefulness is ended, dissolve itself without a denominational cataclysm, is better than one that can do neither.

Under Baptist polity you cannot organize the churches for any but good ends. You can organize them for missions and education, but not to try heretics or to impose creeds or to pass general laws. The Baptist polity has its shortcomings, doubtless, but it has unmatched advantages. It localizes disease in the particular church and generalizes health through larger organization. All these things we derive from the New Testament which we accept as the only rule of faith and practice.

Thus we make to American civilization our unique contribution, viz., an interpretation of Christianity

in the highest degree spiritual, with the fewest of the carnal elements present. Thus we hold up to civilization in doctrine and polity the burnished mirror of New Testament Christianity, in which it may study its own image to advantage and discover the spiritual basis of American institutions.

#### BAPTISTS AND DENOMINATIONAL UNITY.

3. Baptists have exhibited to American civilization the most striking example of denominational unity.

There are three forms of power which enter into denominational unity. These are the capacity for integration, elimination, and propagation. By integration I mean harmonious coherence of parts. Baptists have shown marked power of unity in this respect. In the years preceding the Civil War the various religious denominations in the United States, including the Baptists, were split asunder by the divisive issues connected with slavery. Of all those bodies the only one which has had the genius to overcome the resultant barriers and become reunited is the Baptist, and the American Baptist Convention is the living expression of Baptist leadership in the genius for denominational unity. The Methodists and Presbyterians have no corresponding organizations, and while Baptists will continue to do their mission work in Northern and Southern organizations for expediency's sake and efficiency's sake, they will nevertheless hence-

forth exhibit in American life this organization which proclaims that our church polity never rules common sense and religion out of court in the adjustment or the readjustment of ecclesiastical relations. There is indeed an older organization than this which signalizes the Baptist genius for integration—the Baptist Young People's Union of America.

Doctrinally our genius for integration has also been marked. There have always been extremists among us, and mischief-makers, but somehow the rule in railroad accidents has been reversed so that the trains on the curve of steadfast loyalty to Christ have escaped disaster, while those on the tangent have come to grief. We have two kinds of radicals among us to-day—the high church radicals who want to bind us hand and foot with the multiplication of minute tests of fellowship, on the one hand, and the broad church radicals on the other, who are without doctrinal moorings of any kind. The high church radicals would give us a creed like the tight-fitting shoes and trousers and dress coat of a dude which forbid the free action of the limbs in any direction. The broad church radicals would give us a creed like the flowing robe of the Oriental, exactly adapted to the life of indolence and self-indulgence, but not for strenuous endeavor. The great mass of Baptists however will insist on a creed like the garments, not of a dude nor yet of the voluptuary, but like the habiliments of the athlete, which gird

the body and protect it at every vital point but which leave it free for conquest.

#### A BAPTIST SPECIALTY.

We have also shown capacity for elimination. This I may say is the Baptist specialty. There is no ecclesiastical machinery in which a church can become entangled and borne onward after life is extinct. Where are the hardshells? Some one has compared their former numbers and prosperity to a great plantation with fine crops and fences and other improvements. To-day there is nothing left of them but a solitary gate-post to which the curious traveler may hitch his horse while he surveys the scene of desolation. Where are the Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit-Predestinarian-Baptists? I hear there is a church or two of them left in Ohio.

Not the least of the advantages of the Baptist polity is its facilities for burying the dead. The interment usually takes place with little ceremony and often with no flowers at all, but the operation is none the less effective for all that. The chief point is to get the corpse under ground.

In the matter of propagation also there has been unity. We have adhered rigidly in our general work to the legitimate objects, missions and education. We have never been torn asunder by a controversy over creed revision or creed construction. We have never been rent in twain by the trial of a heretic in any ecclesiastical court. There have been

heretics and heresies, of course, but they have not been dealt with by the denomination as a whole. There have been false cries of heresy also, but usually the agitators have become wiser and better men, or else they have been left as the voice of one crying in a wilderness and with diminished following and influence.

#### BAPTISTS AND LIBERTY.

4. Baptists gave to American civilization the complete idea of liberty.

Mankind has pursued liberty over mountain and across valley, by land and by sea, through fire and through flood, since the first man caught a glimpse of liberty's white robes leading on to glory. The love of liberty is now a volcanic fire which breaks out into revolution and consumes and destroys the ancient fabrics of government, and now it is a tide of life which rolls across the face of nations, causing them to burst into the beauty and fragrance of a new springtime. The spirit of liberty in its quest for the goal of its desire has sounded all the notes in the gamut of human experience, from the minor notes of abject despair to the ringing pean of victory over every foe. But liberty is a relative term. Some men employ it who do not know its essential meaning, because they have never looked into the face of the ideal itself. An ox under the yoke and groaning beneath the heavy burden has liberty—to switch his tail; and so has the Russian



peasant to-day. A bird in its cage has liberty—to hop from the lower to the higher perch and back again; and if birds have piety doubtless some of them are duly grateful. But neither the one nor the other understands what freedom is. Cardinal Gibbons has said: “A man enjoys religious liberty when he possesses the free right of worshiping God according to the dictates of a right conscience and of practising a form of religion most in accordance with his duties to God.” Dr. John Pollard comments on this as follows: “In Cardinal Gibbons’ definition of religious liberty is snugly wrapped up every religious persecution that ever raged in the world. In that definition is hidden away every fetter that ever galled the hands and feet of God’s saints, every scourge that ever tore their flesh, and every rack that ever pulled their joints asunder. In that definition, as in a heap of ashes, lie sleeping embers enough to girdle the globe with martyr flames. I am unwilling to charge that when Cardinal Gibbons framed this definition he saw all these horrors hidden away in it; but they are there, nevertheless.”

Our Anglo-Saxon forefathers knew no limit to personal liberty, except natural barriers like mountains, rivers, and oceans. But they knew little of ordered freedom under law. Our English ancestors who wrested Magna Charta from the hands of tyranny drank a deep draught from the exhilarating cup of constitutional freedom, but there were higher ranges of spiritual liberty unknown to them. Our

New England ancestors drank deeply of the enchanted cup when they came for conscience' sake to these inhospitable shores and "the sounding aisles of the dim woods rang with the anthems of the free." But they failed to grasp the idea that religious liberty requires not only that we enjoy, but that we grant liberty to others. As Josh Billings or some one else remarked, "The Puritans came over to worship God according to the dictates of their own consciences and to keep other people from worshiping him according to the'r'n."

#### ROGER WILLIAMS AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM.

Now the coming of liberty to the world has been delayed so long because men did not know where to look for the fountain-head of liberty, or what is the *rationale* of liberty, the root from which all forms of it spring, until the Baptists taught it to the world. Religious freedom is the nursing mother of all freedom. Without it all other forms of it wither and die. The Baptists grasped the conception of liberty in its full-orbed glory from the beginning. This doctrine and those related to it shine in the early Baptist Confessions of Faith among contemporaneous creeds like a constellation in the clear sky seen through a rift in the darkness of the surrounding clouds. It found its sublimest embodiment when Roger Williams took it in his hand as a precious seed and planted it in the soil of eastern New England, saying in the words of God's true

prophet, "Out of this seed shall arise the most glorious commonwealth known to human history."<sup>1</sup> The same principle found heroic champions in our Virginia Baptist fathers, who gave neither sleep to their eyes nor slumber to their eyelids until the opposite idea was not only wiped off the statute book of Virginia, but the principle itself incorporated in the first amendment to the American Constitution.

Whitelaw Reid says the greatest fact of modern history was the rise of the American nation. He is mistaken. The greatest fact of modern history was the discovery of the idea of liberty, and that discovery was made by the Baptists. The discovery of this idea is the spiritual analogue to the discovery of the New World by Columbus and its emancipation by Washington. I would like to see a heroic group in marble setting forth the facts. I would have a perfect image of liberty carved from the purest marble. I would have Columbus, the intrepid navigator and discoverer of the New World placing the pedestal in position, and George Washington, the dauntless soldier, lifting the statue into place, and Roger Williams robing the image in the garments of righteousness and placing the chaplet of divine approval upon its brow. And if the sculptor of that

<sup>1</sup> The purpose and limits of this work do not admit of discussion of the relative merits of Roger Williams and John Clarke in the founding of Rhode Island. The author appreciates the work of Clarke and in a historical discussion would emphasize it. But here and elsewhere in the book it is important only to call attention to Roger Williams as the great pioneer of religious liberty.

image of liberty should look for her original photograph in modern times, he would have to search until he found it written in the earliest Confessions of Faith of the Baptists and embodied in their church life and political creed. There is no other literature during or before the seventeenth century which portrays the perfect image.

It was no accident that a Baptist wrote our national anthem. The Baptist heart was the native place of liberty, and when S. F. Smith wrote

My Country! 'tis of thee,  
Sweet land of liberty,  
Of thee I sing;  
Land where my fathers died!  
Land of the pilgrim's pride!  
From every mountain side  
Let freedom ring!—

it was but the natural union of faith in God on the part of the Baptist preacher joined to patriotism in an American citizen. It was but the deep spring of religious liberty bubbling up and over into thrilling song through the lips of a loyal citizen of this greatest country on earth.

#### SPIRITUAL ANALOGUES.

5. Baptists have furnished the spiritual analogues of our entire political system. They supply the moral and spiritual assumptions on which is reared our political fabric. Now there are two principles which sum up the political theory of the American

commonwealth, and these are reducible to one, viz., the competency of the citizens to work out their political destiny. This applies to the individual, and is well expressed by De Tocqueville, as follows: "In the United States the sovereignty of the people is not an isolated doctrine, bearing no relation to the prevailing manners and ideas of the people; it may on the contrary be regarded as the last link of a chain of opinions which binds the whole Anglo-American world. That Providence has given to every human being the degree of reason necessary to direct himself in the affairs which interest him exclusively; such is the grand maxim on which civil and political society rests in the United States. The father of a family applies it to his children; the master to his servants; the township to its officers; the province to its townships; the State to the provinces; the union to the States; and when extended to the nation it becomes the doctrine of the sovereignty of the people." This is the political side of the fundamental Baptist conception of the competency of the soul in religion under God.

This principle of the competency of the citizen applies to the body of the people acting collectively, as well as to the individual. The town meeting is the corner-stone of our entire system. So the philosophic observers from a distance as well as our own best writers hold. Our fundamental conception is not representative government, but direct government by the people. Representative govern- ✓

ment is an expedient made necessary simply by the increase of numbers and geographical extent. Pure democracy resorts to representation only when it is compelled to, and reverts to pure democracy whenever possible. Now local church government as held by the Baptists is the religious and Christian analogue of the town meeting. It is not too much, perhaps, to say with due allowance for the figure of speech, that a local Baptist church is the town meeting of the kingdom of God, and the town meeting is the political church of the temporal commonwealth. ✓

Presbyterians seek to justify their system often on the plea that it conforms to the American system of representative government in having a graded system of courts and legislatures. But they forget a fundamental fact, viz., that in the kingdom of God the authority cannot be localized, while in the State it must be localized as soon as it assumes more than the dimensions of the town meeting. The authority of the State has to be localized and distributed because it is a human authority. In the kingdom of God it cannot be localized in a series of courts or legislatures because the authority is divine and omnipresent. Christ alone is King in Zion. So that pure democracy in the church is the only true analogue to representative government in the State, because the latter is simply an expedient for registering the will of the people. Representative government is necessary in the State when the State ✓

becomes large enough to require distribution of authority; it is never necessary in the church because the authority of Christ never can be localized or distributed.

#### A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH AND THE AMERICAN GOVERNMENT.

Look into a New Testament church and then at the American government, and insight discovers that the latter is the projection of the shadow of the former. One might in a certain sense say that the primary election which determined whether or not there should be an American government was held two thousand years ago on the shores of the Mediterranean when the little Baptist democracies assembled to worship.

I go further. Beginning with the religious competency of the soul under God as the distinctive significance of the Baptists in history, and passing to the civic competency of the citizen, we complete the analogy by showing that the six Baptist axioms of religion are the analogues of our political axioms. The theological axiom, "A holy and loving God has a right to be sovereign," has its counterpart in the recognition of God's sovereignty by this government in granting to the church the rights of an *imperium in imperio*; that is, in giving independence to the church. In so doing the State recognizes an authority higher than itself.

The religious axiom, "All souls have an equal

right to direct access to God," finds its political counterpart in the American axiom, "All men are created free and equal." ✓

The ecclesiastical axiom that "All believers are entitled to equal privileges in the church," finds its political counterpart in the American axiom that ours is a government "of the people, for the people, and by the people."

The moral axiom that "To be responsible, man must be free," finds its counterpart in the franchise and in all our American practice in legal and criminal procedure.

The religio-civic axiom, "A free Church in a free State," has become naturalized in our speech until it is as much political as religious.

The social axiom, "Love your neighbor as yourself," has its political counterpart in our political axiom, "Equal rights to all and special privileges to none."

✓ In short, the Baptist axioms of religion are like a stalactite descending from heaven to earth, formed by deposits from the water of life flowing out of the throne of God down to mankind, while our American political society is the stalagmite with its base upon the earth rising to meet the stalactite and formed by deposits from the same life-giving stream. When the two shall meet, then heaven and earth will be joined together and the kingdom of God will have come among men. This is the process which runs through the ages.



## BAPTIST BED-ROCK IDEALS.

In conclusion be it said that the intelligent Baptist can yield to none in his patriotism, for his religious ideals are the bed-rock of the political fabric. Indulge me in a little fancy as we contemplate "old Glory," the name we have learned most to love to describe our flag. The stripes of continuous color across the flag tell of a homogeneous American life, and being equal in width they tell of justice and equality; and the red, white, and blue in the color scheme tell of American variety and of unity in variety; and the cluster of stars in the flag, each star separate from the other stars, tells of the principles of autonomy and individualism which underlie our whole system; and they are stars to show that those principles of freedom were born in heaven, and that freedom and individualism are the freedom of an ordered universe, and not of chaos.

We are approaching the Baptist age of the world, because we are approaching the age of the triumph of democracy. I seem to see dimly the outlines of that coming age.

A solemn murmur in the soul  
Tells of an age to be,  
As travelers hear the ocean roll  
Before they view the sea.

Like a vine growing in the darkness of some deep cavern, and slowly stretching itself toward the dim light shining in through the distant mouth of the

cavern, so has humanity slowly crept along toward freedom. The mighty hordes of the Asiatic and the European world, weary and sad, yet courageous and resolute, are hasting forward with unresting feet toward the gates of destiny. Toward those gates these hundreds of years the Baptists have been pointing, and to-day in the foremost files of time they lead the way. As humanity enters they will shout with the full knowledge that God in Christ has led all the way:

Lift up your heads, O ye gates;  
And be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors;  
And the King of glory shall come in.  
Who is the King of glory?  
Jehovah strong and mighty,  
Jehovah mighty in battle.  
Lift up your heads, O ye gates;  
Yea, lift them up, ye everlasting doors;  
And the King of glory shall come in.  
Who is the King of glory?  
Jehovah of hosts, he is the King of glory.

And the goal of human progress shall be realized in an eternal society wherein absolute democracy is joined to absolute monarchy, God the Father being the monarch and his people a vast family of free children.



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