

James T. Jeremiah  
History: The Heritage of Baptists  
June 22, 1965

Transcript

James T. Jeremiah:

I suppose that the heritage of our faith will deal with antiquities and to some people antiquities are rather dry. Just the other day, I was going by a store in a town near Des Moines, saw a very interesting sign. It said this, we buy old junk and sell antiques. It's the first time that I ever knew of an antique dealer to be so honest. I want to deal with some things today that may in the minds of some, be classified as antique. But I submit to you my friend, that it's not old junk. Our Baptist people, it seems to me would be far more concerned about maintaining their faith if they could become aware of the price which has been paid, that we may have it.

James T. Jeremiah:

Study a Baptist history, a reading of a book on Baptist history, will put some iron in your blood. Make you glad that by the grace of God, he brought you to be identified with the people with this name. I shall be using the word Baptist today without apology and without concern as to whether any of my interdenominational friends like it.

James T. Jeremiah:

I like to read some scripture from the 11th chapter of the book of Hebrews, beginning with verse 36. I think we have here a scriptural basis for considering our heritage. "And others had trial of cruel mocking and scourging, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented. Of whom the world was not worthy, they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And these all having obtained a good report through faith received, not the promise. God having provided some better thing for us, but they without us should not be made perfect."

James T. Jeremiah:

Americans ought to be interested in their American heritage. Baptist who live in America ought to have a double interest, an interest in their Baptist heritage.

James T. Jeremiah:

When we use the term heritage, we refer to the achievements, the positions, and the blessings inherited from those who have gone before us. And it's a very interesting thing to see what we enjoy today, because there were many willing to pay the price. That the doctrines which we hold dear may be able to be held by men and women of our time. The word Baptist to many people, has a strange connotation. Whenever you use the term with some, they immediately identify you with a man whose name was John, John the Baptist. I don't mind that, for John was a great preacher and a great man of God. I think however, there is a little more involved in it than that.

James T. Jeremiah:

Others think of a Baptist as belonging to one of the Protestant denominations. Well, you may be a Protestant, but I'm not so sure I want to be so identified. Most Baptists I know have been protesting

James T. Jeremiah  
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June 22, 1965

those so perhaps in that case, we could qualify. Sometimes we're classified as nonconformist, and that we ought to be, so far as the trend of our day is concerned. I have heard Baptists mentioned as that class of people in the lower socioeconomic level. Just a highfalutin way to say, Baptists are the poorer folks in Earth. And there have been times, as the President of a school, when I am inclined to agree.

James T. Jeremiah:

Then sometimes we're merely identified as immersers, people who immerse. But just to say that, Baptists are Baptists because they immerse is to miss the point entirely. All the Mormons immerse. And the people called the Christian Church, so the Church of Christ, people immerse. And in these days, if you want immersion bad enough, you can even get a Methodist or a Presbyterian to do it, but that doesn't make you a Baptist. If I understand it correctly, Baptist people have been those who have held a certain distinctive, and it takes all of these distinctive put together to make a person a Baptist.

James T. Jeremiah:

Baptists have held on through the years in the final authority of the scriptures. They believed in the priesthood of believers, or the right of soul liberty. They believed in the autonomy of the local church. They have believed and have fought for the doctrine of regeneration of church members, and of course the immersion of believers. They've held to the position that the Lord's Supper is a memorial and not a sacrament. They have taken the position that there ought to be clear cut separation of church and state. It takes all of this, and this is the minimum, to make a person a Baptist. And I believe in these days, we need to examine these distinctives in the light of the scriptures and in the light of our heritage. And when we do, if we are people who can read and understand, we'll come back to these distinctives with more conviction than ever.

James T. Jeremiah:

If we have any problems, it seems to me in our church, in our churches with regard to this, it is the problem which comes because many people have entered our congregations as immersed Methodists or Presbyterians or Congregationalists, but they have never changed their church polity. I would suggest my friend that if you've come to a Regular Baptist church from another denomination that you ought to have your church polity baptized at the same time you get baptized. Because if we do not, we're going to find a great deal of difficulty simply on the basis of immersion. There are other things involved.

James T. Jeremiah:

Some of the principles, which we shall emphasize today, may be illustrated from biographical sketches from Baptist church history. Thomas Carlisle said the history of the world is but the biography of great men. We might say today that the history of the Baptists is but the biography of some great Christians. We shall discover that Baptists are a biblical people. I do not mean by this that we can go back to the New Testament and find the Baptists by name there. I do mean by this, that Baptists have always been people of the book. We find many scriptures in the New Testament, which have been precious to Baptists in this regard.

James T. Jeremiah:

In first Thessalonians 2:13 we read, "When ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh in

James T. Jeremiah  
History: The Heritage of Baptists  
June 22, 1965

you that believe". This has been a great desire of Baptist people to lead men to the Bible and have them believe it as the word of God.

James T. Jeremiah:

Psalm 119 we read. "The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding to the simple". Baptists have never accepted creed as final authority. Baptist people in all of their history, have never been a credal people. This does not mean that they have not declared themselves in statements of faith, but it does mean that they do not interpret the Bible in the light of a creed. They test the creed by the truth of the Bible.

James T. Jeremiah:

Someone of course has said that when he was asked what he believed, he said, I believe what my church believes. And what does your church believe? The church believes what I believe. We both believe the same thing.

James T. Jeremiah:

Baptist people ought to have a better reason for their belief than that. In faith and practice, no theory, scientific hypothesis, philosophical concept, or human speculation, can be substituted for biblical authority. Baptist people have always been and are, if they are a Baptist, a biblical people. It may not be possible in every sense of the word to trace our Baptist heritage line by line and church by church, back to John the Baptist. I do have a book in my library however, that traces the Baptist cause all the way from a church in Tennessee, back to John. I might've been more interested if they'd found a church in Ohio from which they could have traced their origin.

James T. Jeremiah:

However, there were those from the early days of church history who practiced many of the doctrines which we now hold. Some of them practice other doctrines which we will reject, and therefore we cannot classify them in every sense as a Baptist people. What they did emphasize in most cases, the doctrine of the authority of the scriptures and the autonomy of the local church. Such people as the Monastist, the Novation, the Donatist, the Paulicians, the Albigenses, and others. It is interesting to note what some of the historians have said about these people. Gibbon who wrote the Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire, had this to say about the Paulicians who lived in the last half of the seventh century. He said this, they protested against the tyranny of Rome and embraced the Bible as the rule of faith and purified their creed from all versions of Gnostic theology. Gibbon was not a friend to the cause of Christ, but he was an honest reporter when it came to the Paulicians.

James T. Jeremiah:

The Albigenses lived in the 12th and 13th centuries. The Encyclopedia Britannica, which is another book on not exactly friendly to the Baptist cause, had this to say of them. What is certain is that above all, they formed an antisacerdotal party in permanent opposition to the Roman church and raised a continued protest against the corruption of the clergy of their time. They also rejected infant baptism and were condemned for it at the council of Toulouse in 1119. They were persecuted for all these beliefs and pronouncements, the inquisition oppressed them, and they eventually became more and more scattered hiding in the forests and mountains and only meeting occasionally. This is a testimony of these

James T. Jeremiah  
History: The Heritage of Baptists  
June 22, 1965

people from a source, which would not be friendly. I think it can be demonstrated from the records of history, the records which are available, that these people were willing to stand for the faith. Stand for the word of God, in spite of the opposition, which was brought against them. Baptist did not only base their convictions upon the precepts, the pronouncements of scripture, but they have followed the principles of scripture.

James T. Jeremiah:

Many of the groups held some Baptist distinctive in the years gone by, but it's unlikely that one could prove that there is any one of them, which consistently and continually held to the entire body of truth as we hold it. Let me say it this way, we are not here to defend apostolic succession. I believe we ought to defend the succession of apostolic principles and apostolic teaching. And we can do this without belaboring the problem of tracing our lineage word by word and line by line, back through a succession of peoples.

James T. Jeremiah:

Someone has illustrated Baptist history in this fashion. They refer to it as a river, a river which flows clearly observable for some time and then it goes into a marsh and perhaps flows underground and eventually emerges again into the light where it can be identified. Baptist history, because of persecution reveals that men and women were forced to go underground. They were forced to flee to the mountains and to the forest because of their faith. We can identify the stream, not by apostolic succession, but by a book called the Bible. We can take this old book and read it and find there the same doctrine, the same policies, the same blessed realities that they had in the early church when Paul and the others lived.

James T. Jeremiah:

The early church became corrupt, as we well know. This came about because of the evil corrupt nature of the human heart, because of a perverted Judaism. And because of the Greek philosophies, which came into the church as a result of men turning their backs upon the word of God. We were told that by the fourth century, such doctrines or dogmas such as penance, absolution, purgatory, the invocation of saints, and the use of images and worship, were doctrines fully developed. Those who opposed these doctrines were persecuted and they were caused to, as I mentioned a moment ago, go underground.

James T. Jeremiah:

Therefore to accurately trace a visible and historical succession of churches through this maze of doctrinal confusion is probably impossible with any authority and it is certainly unnecessary, but we have a far more substantial background and basis for our doctrine than the interpretation of history or the ideas which men may write into history. We have the Bible, the word of God, anyone who must depend upon an historical Baptist tree, in order to prove himself a Baptist, is neglecting a far more substantial foundation. The word of the living God.

James T. Jeremiah:

Any group of people, anywhere, saved by the grace of God with the New Testament in their hand, can and probably will develop a Baptist Church without the aid of external influence if they but read and practice the New Testament teaching. I believe with all my heart that anybody who'd take the Bible and

James T. Jeremiah  
History: The Heritage of Baptists  
June 22, 1965

read it, without any help from anybody outside with all of the theories of men, would eventually come to the conclusions which Baptists have held down through the years. Baptists are not only in their history, a biblical people, they have been a persecuted people.

James T. Jeremiah:

In Acts 14:22, we read Paul and Barnabas returned again to Lystra, Lyconium, and Antioch, "Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God". Now this subject is not particularly inviting, may not be particularly challenging in a nation such as ours, in a time when everything seems to be relatively easy. My dear friend, it seems to me that in the light of the approaching storm, we Baptist people could gain some encouragement. As we have seen in history, the picture of those who had gone before and laid down their lives. That we might meet in this great city, in an auditorium such as this, and do it with freedom. We're here in great measure because many died to make it possible.

James T. Jeremiah:

We can trace the Baptists, it seems to me far more by blood, than we can by baptism, as important as that is. Better states that so long as the church was feeble, persecuted and poor, it was comparatively pure in doctrine and light, and maybe we might add to that. In the day when there's wealth and materialism, and there is the lack of persecution, the church may lack pure doctrine and pure life.

James T. Jeremiah:

In order to illustrate some of these pictures of persecution today, I'd like to take a few minutes to give you some illustrations from Baptist history concerning those who have been willing to sweat blood for what we hold sometimes so glibly. We will start with some who lived in the days of Zwingli, the Swiss Anabaptists. As you know, Zwingli started out in his part of the reformation quite favorable to the Anabaptist. He was favorable until he discovered that it would be a very difficult thing to have a reformation without a relationship to a state church. When he found this to be more convenient, then he turned his back upon his Anabaptist friends.

James T. Jeremiah:

One of the men we'll mention, and there are many unsung heroes in the books of history, one of those men was a man by the name of Conrad Grebel. He became a disciple of Zwingli, and then he learned from the scriptures that infant baptism was an unscriptural doctrine and he broke with this man. The Zürich Council, shortly after this break, according to the historical records, ordered all children to be baptized. Grebel and his friends were ordered to stop their arguing. The Council ordered all Anabaptists drowned, and he suffered martyrdom for the views which Grebel held. He was in prison and for several months he spent in isolation, away from his friends, because why, what was the reason? Just because he repudiated the doctrine of infant baptism. He and others were caused to suffer because of their views.

James T. Jeremiah:

George Blaurock, once a monk, came to the conclusion that infant baptism was unscriptural. He was baptized by this Anabaptist Grebel. He was opposed by Zwingli, and finally burned at Innsbruck in 1529. Burned because he believed in the Bible teaching, a believer's baptism, and repudiated the doctrine held by men, called infant baptism. Felix Manz, another friend of Zwingli, questioned infant baptism, and he

James T. Jeremiah  
History: The Heritage of Baptists  
June 22, 1965

tried to convince Zwingli of his errors. He was arrested, driven from the city, later he returned and was imprisoned for a long time he spent in isolation away from his friends. Release was offered if he would recant, but he would not. He escaped with others, and you know what they had in mind when they escaped? They thought they would have better treatment if they could reach the Red Jews across the ocean.

James T. Jeremiah:

Now that means they thought the Indians were the Jews, and it means that they thought they'd have better treatment in the hands of the Indians, then they would have with the hands of the Reformers. Not a very good commendation for the Reformers. This man was executed in a very cruel way. He was put on a boat, his hands were bound over his knees, and a rod was placed between his knees and his arms, black cap over his head. He was placed on a hurdle, thrown into the waters of the lake of Zurich. Then his property and his possessions became the property of the government.

James T. Jeremiah:

Ah, we could sit here today, we can think about these stories and we can say, it'll never happen to us. We will never have to face that. That's all in the past. We live in an enlightened day. I wouldn't want to base my eternal salvation on the possibility of escaping it. We may face it. We better know how to do it. From an historian, who was not at all friendly, we have this word concerning this man's faith. He reports his mother and brother came to him and exhorted him to be steadfast and he persevered in his folly even to the end. When he was bound upon the hurdle, was about to be thrown into the stream by the executioner, he sang with a loud voice, into thy hand, O Lord, I commend my spirit. My, what faith. My, what courage. What willingness to stand for the faith. This my beloved brother is part of our heritage, and we ought to thank God there were those who were concerned enough about the truth to give their life for that cause.

James T. Jeremiah:

A German Anabaptist by the name of Balthasar Hubmaier, is a man who all knew the Scriptures. He rejected the same old doctrine that was quite a popular one of those days, infant baptism. He was a professor in a university and this didn't stop the persecutors. The emperor demanded his surrender. The people refused to permit it, and he was afraid that the emperor would hurt his friends. So he ran from the city and finally in fleeing from the Austrian army, he sought refuge, with all people Zwingli, who was at one time his friend now his enemy. The end of 1527, he was seized, taken to Vienna, kept in prison for a while while the Roman theologians tried to make him recant. And he was brought to the streets of the city in a wagon, red hot tongs were put into his flesh, and on a public square of Vienna, he was burned. His wife encouraged him to remain true, and in a very short time thereafter, she was drowned in the river. Here's another case for some people who were willing to suffer for what they believed.

James T. Jeremiah:

The Anabaptists Hubmaier insisted on and paid a price for the pitting of three great doctrines. The authority of the Bible, the baptism of believers, and the separation of church and state. But my friend, we do not need to leave all the persecution in Europe. We can bring some of it to the United States of America. We've often read the story of our friend, Roger Williams, who came into this country to escape the persecution from Archbishop Laud. When he arrived in this land, he found that he had jumped from

James T. Jeremiah  
History: The Heritage of Baptists  
June 22, 1965

the frying pan into the fire. Here he discovered that he could not hold to the position that the church could be separated from the state because the Puritans did not believe this. They had established in New England a Theocracy. And if you were a member of the church, you were a citizen of the land. If you were not a member of the church, you were not a citizen.

James T. Jeremiah:

This didn't seem to bother Williams. He took his stand for the doctrines which he believed. And one day he heard that they were going to send him back to England. So rather than go to England and face the same thing there, he took off to spend some time with the Indians. Isn't it a strange thing that this man like others who had some convictions had a better time with the Indians than they had with the Puritans? In any rate, he was welcomed because he had befriended them. He bought, notice, he bought Providence from the Indians and established his colony.

James T. Jeremiah:

Then one day he discovered that the Indian nations we're going to unite and seek, if they could, to obliterate the Puritans and the folk from England. It took a lot of grace to intercede and save the very people who threw him out, but this he did. Okay. Roger Williams was not a Baptist very long, but he was one long enough that we can claim him. He became a seeker, but he always held to the truth of separation of church and state.

James T. Jeremiah:

I like to read the story of John Clark. John Clark was a doctor who came to this country because of persecution in England. He found that when he landed here, and landed in Boston, that he was facing persecution again. He was driven to Providence to inquire about the possibility of freedom at the hands of Roger Williams. I was interested in reading some time ago, a statement which Clark is reported to have written back to his friends in England. This is what he wrote.

James T. Jeremiah:

"A year in this hot bed of religious tyranny is enough for me. I cannot bear to see men in these uttermost parts of the earth. Not able to bear with others in matters of conscience to live peaceably together. With so much land before us, I for one will turn aside, shake the dust of Boston off my feet and be take me to new place. There I shall make... Or there I shall have a haven for all those like myself, or just who are disgusted and sickened by a Puritan dictatorship. I shall make it a place where there will be full freedom of thought, and religious conscience.

James T. Jeremiah:

Clark was the man who established the second Baptist church. Some argue that it was the first in this land. He spent 12 years in England after this, and succeeded in obtaining a far better charter for Rhode Island than anyone yet received.