

# THE BAPTIST LANDMARK

“REMOVE NOT THE ANCIENT LANDMARK, WHICH THY FATHERS HAVE SET.” PROVERBS 22:28

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## CHURCH SUCCESSION

by M. A. Brawner

It is important to first establish what is meant when discussing Church Succession. Two brethren who wrote extensively on this topic will be quoted to establish what was meant historically when speaking of Church Succession.

J. R. Graves wrote that a succession of true Baptist Churches exists from the Church the Lord organized during the days of John the Baptist to this day. This Church is to perpetuate the doctrine of the divine origin and sanctity of the churches of Christ, and unbroken continuity of Christ's Kingdom “from the days of John the Baptist until now.” According to Brother Graves, once the Lord established His Church during His personal ministry, this Church has had a continual existence from that time until now. The total number of these churches in existence during any period of time makes up the Kingdom spoken of in Daniel 2:44. This information was taken from chapter 10 of *Old Landmarkism, What Is It?*

D. B. Ray also wrote on this topic. He stated that all well-informed Baptists are agreed in the belief that we, as a people, have continued from the time of Christ until the present time resulting in a Baptist Succession. When describing the nature of this succession, he said that true Baptist Churches can be traced down through history by the beliefs and practices they held rather than by any particular name. A more detailed explanation is found in chapter 7 of the 1912 edition of the *Baptist Succession*.

When confronted with this topic, there are a number of people who find the idea of a Baptist Succession offensive. A number of their objections have been gathered by brethren such as Brother Graves. He pointed out that some object to a Baptist Succession by claiming for it to be true the identical organization which Christ established—the First Church of Judea—would need to have a continued existence until today. Sometimes these same people state for the succession to be true, the identical churches planted by

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## UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

by H. B. Little

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.” Hos 4:6. Hosea spoke these words to God's chosen people around the year 764 B.C. This was after God's people had been divided into two nations. The northern nation, Israel, was steeped in idolatry. They had forsaken true worship of God at Jerusalem and were worshipping golden calves in Bethel and Dan. The southern nation, Judah, had maintained worship at the Temple Mount, but they were also worshipping at forbidden altars.

Because of their transgressions, both Israel and Judah were chastened of the Lord. God withheld blessings from them. He removed His protective hedge from them, so that they were troubled on every side. Hence Hosea said “my people are destroyed.” How did these nations—God's elect—drift so far from their Head and Founder? They did so through “a lack of knowledge.” They had forgotten the law of their God and were living contrary to His commands.

Solomon wrote, “For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth *cometh* knowledge and understanding.” Pro 2:6. The knowledge needed for God's people to flourish comes from the mouth of God. What does “from the mouth of God” mean? Paul wrote, “All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God.” 2 Tim 3:15. This inspiration means God-breathed. In other words, scripture comes from the mouth of God.

When God's people study, understand, and apply scripture, we receive God's blessings. On the other hand, when we neglect, misunderstand, or misapply scripture, we are destroyed. Seeing the importance of rightly understanding the Bible, let's consider some principles by which we can rightly divide the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15) and avoid wresting the scriptures to our own destruction (2 Pe 3:16).

First, we should pray for understanding as we study the Bible. The Lord Jesus said, “the words that I speak unto you, *they*

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## D. B. RAY ON SUCCESSION

D. B. Ray (1830-1922) was a Baptist preacher, author, and editor of the *Baptist Sentinel* and the *American Baptist Flag*. He wrote a few books. Two popular ones were *Text-Book on Campbellism* and *Baptist Succession*. He was a well-known debater, holding forty oral discussions. One of the topics he discussed was church succession.

Brother Ray believed that Baptist churches have existed in unbroken succession since the foundation of the first church in Judea by the Savior. His convictions for this belief were founded on the Bible and supported by ecclesiastical history. This he summarized in his debate with J. R. Lucas entitled *Church Discussion*, found on pages 250-252. He stated:

[The Baptist Church] has been the martyr church long before the voice of Luther was heard at the Diet of Worms, long before Calvin emerged from the bosom of the Catholic Church; and that kingdom was battling for the truth of God before Henry was divorced from his wife and married Anne Boleyn, and became the head of the British church; that kingdom rallied under the blood-stained banner of the cross, battling for the truth of God amid the frowning monarchies of old continental Europe, while from the seven-hilled city, that triple-crowned tyrant fulminated his anathemas against the world, and sent out crusading armies to break the succession and destroy the church of the living God; and yet it stands, and has stood...when at last the stars of heaven shall fall, and the moon grow pale and turn to blood, and Christ shall come, the bride will not be a *reformed church*, it will be the same identical kingdom, the church of the living God—that bride—the Lamb's wife that has borne on her bosom the emblems of the dying Savior in the Lord's supper, and the token and remembrance of his resurrection in baptism...

While others persecuted, she has persecuted no one, but has suffered

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are spirit, and *they* are life.” Joh 6:63. The Bible must be “spiritually discerned.” 1 Co 2:14. No amount of education or intelligence can give understanding of the word of God. However, the same Lord who inspired the Bible has promised to “guide [us] into all truth” through His Spirit. Joh 16:13.

Let’s consider the testimony of James P. Boyce (1827-1888) regarding the need for prayer to rightly interpret scripture. Bro. Boyce was a Baptist preacher. He was an intelligent man. He was educated at Brown and Princeton. He founded the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Yet with all of his intelligence, education, and accomplishments, he understood he needed God’s help to understand the Bible. He wrote, “we should study Theology...with earnest prayer for Divine help.”

Second, we should approach the Bible with an open mind to what God has said. Paul wrote this regarding the word of God: “let God be true, but every man a liar.” Rom 3:4. In other words, we should let the Bible say what it says. If it teaches something contrary to what we believe on any topic, we should be willing to admit we are wrong.

I remember when I began studying the Bible. I was determined to prove myself right by it. I tried to apply every passage according to my preconceived notions. I found several contradictions with what I thought the Bible should say, and I became discouraged. Finally, I decided that I would let the Bible say what it says. When I did, the Lord started helping me to understand His word.

Let’s consider again the testimony of James P. Boyce. He wrote, “we should study Theology...with careful searching of heart against prejudice...with a spirit willing and anxious to examine, and to accept whatever we may be convinced is true.” This quote and the previous one can be found in his *Abstract of Systematic Theology*. He wrote this book late in life. He saw it published the year before his death. With all those years of learning, teaching, and preaching, he was open minded as he studied the Bible and was willing to accept its precepts.

Third, the Bible is a book. It is God’s book. His thoughts are conveyed to us through His book by use of our language.

The Bible ought to be understood according to the rules of language and grammar as with any other book. If we understand any passage of the Bible contrary to the language and grammar of the passage, we misunderstand it.

J. R. Graves (1820-1893) spoke on interpretation of scripture in The Great Carrollton Debate. In this debate, Bro. Graves, a renowned Baptist preacher, contended with Jacob Ditzler, a Methodist minister, on several topics. The first address of Bro. Graves was regarding the mode of baptism. During this address, he said:

*To attempt to gather the sense of words from things rather than what we ought to think of things from the words of the Holy Spirit, is deceptive and fallacious. Ernesti quotes Melancthon as saying: “The Scripture cannot be understood theologically until it is understood grammatically.” Luther also says: “A certain knowledge of the sense of Scripture depends solely on a knowledge of words.”*

Bro. Graves explained that we cannot understand any passage of the Bible if we do not know the meanings of the words and their relation one to another within the passage.

How then should we learn the meaning of the words in the Bible? We understand many of the words in the Bible by our regular use of them. We may learn the meaning of words outside of our normal usage by means of a dictionary.

We must use some caution when we use a modern dictionary to define words in our King James Version. This version was translated into our language over four hundred years ago. Because of this, many of the words in it are antiquated. Their definitions have changed over time. For this reason, an older dictionary is better suited for defining words of the Bible. Noah Webster’s *American Dictionary of the English Language* published in 1828 is one such book.

Let’s consider the example of the word *conversation*. “Be ye holy in all manner of conversation.” 1 Pe 1:15. According to Merriam-Webster’s *Collegiate Dictionary: Eleventh Edition*, the most common meaning of conversation is “oral exchange of sentiments, observations, opinions, or ideas.” Noah Webster’s most common meaning is a “general course of manners; behavior; deportment;

especially as it respects morals.” The latter definition is the biblical one.

We must also use some caution when we use any dictionary to define words which are purely religious in nature. With these types of words, dictionary definitions can be merely the author’s interpretation of the word or a mainstream use of it. Either of these may be contrary to biblical meaning.

Let’s consider the example of the word *church*. According to Noah Webster’s dictionary, the word church means “a house consecrated to the worship of God, among christians; the Lord’s house.” This definition is clearly not the biblical definition of the word. Can we tell things to a building? Mat 18:17. Can a building be fed? Act 20:28. The biblical *church* is an assembly and not a building. How then are we to arrive at the biblical definition of *church* or other words with only religious meanings?

We can safely understand the meaning of religious terms by considering their use throughout the Bible. This can be done with use of a Bible concordance. A concordance is a book that lists words of a text alphabetically with citations of the passages in which they are found. When I began studying the Bible, I often made use of Young’s Concordance of the Bible to find passages discussing a particular word. In this way, I studied words and was able to define them by their use in the entire Bible. A searchable Bible is another way to compare uses of a specific word. A good web-based searchable Bible can be found at [blueletterbible.org](http://blueletterbible.org). It is free for its users.

Fourth, we must consider the context of a passage in determination of its meaning. If the passage is a historical text, what were the circumstances of the events? Who were the people involved? If the passage is found in an epistle, to whom was it written? When was it written, and why? Answers to these questions can help us better understand the text.

Fifth, we must consider the context of the entire Bible in determining the meaning of any passage. The Bible is inspired by God and contains no contradictions. If we interpret any passage and find a contradiction in another passage, our interpretation of one passage or both passages must be incorrect. However, if our understanding of a passage agrees

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the apostles, or, at least, *some one* of them, would have needed to have continued until now. Likewise, they state that Baptist ministers would have to be the successors of the apostles for the Baptist Church succession teaching to be true. In a word, they claim that our position is the same as the old Romish and Episcopal doctrine of apostolic succession. In opposition to what these claim, Brother Graves noted that we as Baptists repudiate the doctrine of apostolic succession; we do not believe *they* ever had a successor, and, therefore, no one today is preaching under the apostolic commission any more than under that which Christ first gave to John the Baptist. However, as stated earlier, the historic Baptist position has been that from the time of Christ until the present time, true Churches of the Lord Jesus Christ can be traced down through history by the beliefs and practices they held rather than by any particular name.

With these few words provided by Brother Graves and Brother Ray, we turn to consider why it is important to firmly hold to the belief of the succession of the Church the Lord personally established. By examining the beliefs and practices of sound Old Time Baptist, non-Protestant, churches in this day, churches can be found who are linked to the succession. This examination must be conducted in light of the Word of God, along with their historical heritage, in order to prove all things, holding fast that which is true. But we must ask, why is it important to carefully examine the beliefs and practices of churches in this way? Should we honestly be concerned with such matters? Should we lay such matters aside in order to focus on the souls of those around us to labor for their salvation? When taking up the Word of God, the answers to these questions are evident.

For any of the great commission to make sense to sound churches, it is important to believe that the Lord has kept His promise that the gates of hell will never prevail against the Church. Belief in the succession of the Lord's Church is linked directly in belief that the Lord is able to keep His word. To say, "I just don't believe a Church has remained in existence believing and practicing the same things the Lord entrusted to His original Church" is the same thing as saying, "I just don't believe the Lord is

able to keep His word." Some will find this statement to be shocking, but this is just how serious the matter is.

In the same manner, it is important to believe that the Lord has kept His word that His kingdom will never will be destroyed. This statement is found in Daniel 2:44. (Lord willing, a course will be presented this Fall to show what the Bible teaches about the establishment of the Kingdom by the Lord Jesus Christ during His personal ministry.) Everyone can clearly see by reading the gospels that both John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus Christ preached that the Kingdom was at hand (Matt 3:2 & Mark 1:15). Likewise, Paul told the Colossians that they had been translated into the Kingdom after being born again (Col 1:13) just as John stated in the Revelation that he was a brother and companion with the seven churches of Asia in the Kingdom (Rev 1:9). Seeing then that Daniel 2:44 was fulfilled when the God of Heaven, namely Jesus Christ, established His Kingdom, what should we think of its continued existence seeing that Dan 2:44 states that the Kingdom never will be destroyed? Simply put, we are called upon to believe that God is able to do what He said He would do regardless of what anyone else may believe. In fact, if the whole world stands up and says that a statement in the Bible is not true, the servants of the Lord should stand firm and trust God. Such is the case with the succession of the true Church and Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If the Lord has not kept His promise concerning His *Church* to keep it, how can I trust Him concerning *my salvation*? If He has not the power to keep His *Church*, He certainly has not the power to keep me. Can anyone doubt these statements? Why is it important to believe in the succession of the true Church of the Lord Jesus Christ? It is important because the Lord said it would occur.

It is important to believe in the succession of the Lord's true Church in order to have confidence that children of God are able to follow the Lord in baptism in order to receive the same baptism He received. The Lord received baptism at the hands of the only God-authorized agent in the world. For children of God in this day to truly follow the Lord in baptism, they must meet the pattern established by the Lord at His baptism. For one, the children of God

need to be baptized under the authority of the God-authorized agent in the world today. I'm stunned at the ignorance and arrogance of those who say "I only need the authority of the Bible to administer baptism." That same Bible they claim that authorizes them teaches that the Lord sent one, and only one, Church into the world with the authority to do His work. In other words, only one Church is working for the Lord. He conveyed His authority on it when He said "Go into all the world" (Mark 16:15). Children of God need the baptism only this Church is authorized to administer in order to follow in the steps of the Lord Jesus Christ. However, if the succession of the true Church has failed, then the children of God have no way to follow the Lord in baptism. Yet, because God is true to His word and the Lord Jesus Christ has promised He would never forsake His Church, children of God can be assured the God-authorized agent remains in the world today. They can follow in the steps of Jesus Christ and receive authorized baptism just as He did.

Let's notice the basic fact that the Lord gave direction to His Church what it is to do in His name. We know that for churches down through time to remain in the succession, they would need to be faithful to these directions. We know that He instructed the Church to go, teach all nations (present the gospel to the lost), baptize those who get saved, then teach these Church members to be keepers of the commandments of the Lord. Is it acceptable to leave off part of what He said? Can we "go and present the gospel to the lost" then feel confident that we will hear, "well done, My good and faithful servant" one day in the future? By adopting this practice, would a Church be able to remain in the succession line? What if a Church "goes, presents the gospel, then baptizes" with no particular regard for the model of baptism the Lord left for the Church in His word? More than this, can a Church leave off teaching new Church members to "observe all things whatsoever the Lord has commanded" and feel that it can stand before the Lord with all confidence when He returns? Surely, the answers to these questions are too obvious to miss. We must realize how this would impact a Church with regard to its part in the succession of the Lord's true churches.

Do we remember the parable the Lord gave of two sons in Matthew 21:28-32? I

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believe we would all agree that these are two sons. One was not illegitimate, lost, or the son of another man. Both were sons of the same man. They were fully brothers. However, when given direction by their Father, the one refused to obey but repented then went. The other, however, committed to going then failed to do so. We all know that the first son was credited as actually doing the will of the Father. I'm thankful to know this to be the case. There are times when the true churches of the Lord, who stand in this succession, get entangled in good intentions but in truth fail to do all the will of God stated in the great commission. Then, they have an eye-opening experience causing them to repent and get back to doing what they should have been doing all along. Thank God for His mercy to allow us to do so. But those, who talk a lot about doing all the will of God yet never do so, are like that second son. They have a day like five foolish virgins in their future unless they open their eyes to the full counsel of God. How could such expect to be counted among the faithful, succession pursuing churches who serve the Lord?

It is apparent that the succession of the Lord's true Church is an essential doctrine for this generation in which we live. We are called on to believe this doctrine because to do so is simply to believe God keeps His word even in times when we struggle to see how He did so. We simply let God be true and every man be a liar. Children of God can trust that the God-authorized agent is in the world today. They don't have to just settle for something called baptism. They can take up their Bible, consider its teachings in its historical context, and identify the true Church of the Lord. If some good intended group of people started their own church 200 or even 500 years ago, their history tells on them. They have no succession back to the Church the Lord established and, therefore, have a man as their head rather than the Lord. They have no authority to work for the Lord and administer His ordinances. But, praise God, the true agent is still in the world, and God will help His children find them. We must hold to this doctrine of true Church succession in our teaching based on the promises of God so that the unchurched children of God can find the blessings God placed therein.

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with the rest of the Bible, we can have confidence that we have rightly understood the text.

B. H. Carroll (1843-1914) wrote on this topic in his *Interpretation of the English Bible*. Bro. Carroll was a Baptist author, professor, and preacher. He was a man of great learning and deep understanding in scripture. He wrote this concerning interpretation of scripture:

*The Bible is its own interpreter. That is, we arrive at the meaning of any passage by a comparison of scripture with scripture. Revelation is a unit, or system of truth. The parts must be interpreted to agree with each other, and with the trend of the whole system. A difficult or doubtful passage, here or there, must not be set aside but must conform to what is clearly taught in many unambiguous scriptures.*

In other words, Bro. Carroll stated that we can understand a passage by considering other passages pertaining to the topic. All of these passages agree in the mind of God. When we come to understand what God has revealed in them, they will agree in our minds also.

While this article does not include all that is needful for proper interpretation, I hope it will be helpful to the Bible student. I hope it will encourage us all to study the word of God. If we study it, we will be better for it.

**CORRESPONDENCE**

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for the cause of the Master. This is the church of which Jesus said, "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it;" this is the church concerning which he said, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

Brethren, when you take away from me that truth of God's word, and say that his promise has failed—*his kingdom has had an end*—then I must fold up this old Jerusalem sword, that sword of the spirit, this Bible that the church has ever loved more than all else on earth. It is the word of God that calls me to labor on, to toil for that cause and for that kingdom; but if the Savior's word has failed, and that kingdom has been prevailed against, if that church has ever come to an end, if there has ever been an hour since it was first set up, when there was no church, then the church of the living God has ceased to exist, and there is not a witness for the church of God, not one voice in all the world.

Darkness, black as Egypt, the type of eternal night, will settle on our earth. No church of Jesus Christ on earth! I say, if you make me believe that, I must deny the word of God, and become skeptic—I must become an infidel. But, No! *Let yonder heavens first pass away with a great noise, let the elements take fire and be consumed with fervent heat, yet God's word will stand.* If history was a total blank, except the prophetic word—except the inspired word—if all the past was blotted out, and there was not one line left to mark the footprints of the church of the living God, I would plant myself on the eternal truth of God, and I would stand against all skepticism and the powers of hell itself, and I would say, *the church has stood to the present time.*

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Bro. Michael Brawner has developed a study course on the Kingdom of God. The course allows participants to study at their own pace. Each lesson includes a lecture and optional assignment. A textbook is also available. For more information, please contact Bro. Brawner at [mike6154488802@gmail.com](mailto:mike6154488802@gmail.com).