

# Baptists We Should Know:

## Ollin Heber Neale (1808–1879)

Dr. Mark Rasmussen



Ollin Heber Neale was born in Southington, Connecticut, on February 23, 1808. He graduated from Columbian College in Washington, D.C., in 1830. While he was in college, he was ordained as pastor of the Second Baptist Church and preached there during his junior and senior years of college. Upon graduating, Neale was called to the First Baptist Church of Boston where he served for nearly forty years.

First Baptist Church experienced tremendous harmony during Neale's four decades of leadership. Neale was given an honorary Doctor of Divinity by both Brown University in 1850 and by Harvard College in 1857. Neale's sermons have been described as the "outgushings of a warm, sympathizing heart." He was known for his eloquence and God's evident hand upon his preaching.

Neale was very interested in what was going on politically in the country. He did not hesitate to address the moral questions that troubled America during this era. While he was kind, his stance for that which was right and difficult impacted his community for Christ.

Neale, still in Boston where he had lived for many years, went home to be with the Lord in 1879.

## John Oncken, 1800–1884

Dr. Mark Rasmussen



Thousands of German Believers turned to salvation by faith alone through the ministry of John Oncken. Oncken was born in Germany, but as a young man he went to England where he accepted Christ as his Saviour. His fervor for seeing people saved led him to return to Germany as a missionary of the British Continental Society in 1823.

Oncken was known for his strong convictions, his insight into the Word of God, and his oratorical abilities. Because of John Oncken's preaching many were converted, and a powerful spiritual awakening swept through Germany.

Through faithful Bible study, Oncken concluded that baptism was by immersion and only for believers. After he came to this conviction, Oncken was baptized by immersion by Reverend Barnas Sears in 1834. Oncken and six other men who were baptized at that time constituted the first modern German Baptist church, with Oncken as the pastor.

As is often the case when someone chooses to do right, persecution began. The clergy in Germany, the police, and others strove to destroy this young Baptist church. Oncken, who had a spirit of love and firm determination, refused to be silenced.

Oncken's piety, courage, tireless spirit, and ability to organize helped him to lead his church. Churches across Germany looked to him as a leader and respected his judgment and direction. In 1884, Oncken went home to be with the Lord at the age of eighty-four. Because of his impact on Europe, Oncken has been called the Father of Continental Baptists, the Father of German Baptists, and the Apostle of European Baptists.

## John Clarke, 1609–1676

Dr. Mark Rasmussen



Dr. John Clarke (1609–1676) was a leader in American political and religious history. In England he studied to become a doctor. Clarke was called a Puritan of the Puritans and dedicated himself to eliminating the king's ability to direct the church.

Finding it impossible to keep the monarchy out of the church, Clarke decided to leave with his family and go to the New World. He arrived in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1637. After arriving, he was stunned to find that there was a major controversy over the issue of antinomianism. Dr. John Clarke was discouraged by the heresies he thought were obviously evident, and he decided to plant another colony.

These men and women found in the Word of God their source for government and decided they would have a democracy based on their beliefs of the Word of God. This is the history behind the founding of Rhode

Island.

While Clarke helped lead this colony, he was also the religious teacher of the church. After the church was founded the following year, Clarke became the pastor and primary teacher. Though the church members lived some distance from the church, they were often visited by their pastor, Dr. Clarke.

It is said that Clarke showed that the best safeguard of personal rights is Christian law. A number of people have called him the “Father of American Baptists.” Isaac Backus said, “He possessed the singular honor of contributing much towards establishing the first government upon the earth which gave equal liberty, civil and religious, to all men living under it.”

## Rufus Burleson, 1823–1901

Dr. Mark Rasmussen



Rufus Burleson was born in August, 1823, near the town of Decatur, Alabama. At age sixteen he accepted the Lord Jesus Christ and was baptized the following Sunday by William Holcombe. At age seventeen he went off to Nashville University to study law. The Lord spoke to his heart, and Burleson laid aside his aspirations in order to pursue a life of ministry. That same year he was licensed to preach at the First Baptist Church of Nashville. He was forced to withdraw from the university due to poor health, but he diligently studied the Word of God along with Greek, Hebrew, and Bible history as he recuperated.

After regaining his health, he finished his education through Nashville University while establishing several schools in Mississippi. Burleson then went to receive another diploma at the Western Baptist Literary and Theological Institute in Covington, Kentucky. Burleson was an example of someone who was in the ministry while preparing for the ministry. During his seven years in college and seminary he preached almost every Sunday, and scores of people were converted.

After leaving seminary, Burleson was called to the First Baptist Church of Houston, Texas. Although he was only there for three and a half years, the church became the largest in the city and paid off a large debt during his pastorate.

In 1851 Burleson was elected president of Baylor University. He left his church because he felt the need for a great Baptist university. He was a believer in co-education and trained thousands of young men and ladies at Baylor University.

Burleson was a man who was fixed with a purpose, full of courage, and yet amiable and generous. God’s hand was on Burleson and the churches in which he pastored. He led many people to Christ, including General Sam Houston, the first President of the Republic of Texas. Burleson was the president of the Baptist

General Commission of Texas from 1892 to 1893. He helped establish the Peabody Education Fund and a state teacher's training school. Burleson passed away in Waco, Texas, on May 14, 1901.

## Isaac Backus, 1724–1806

Dr. Mark Rasmussen



We cannot be thankful enough for the influence of Isaac Backus among Baptists and upon our nation. He was born in 1724 to a Congregationalist family. He followed in that tradition and became a member of the congregational church during a time of controversy. The Half-Way Covenant, which allowed people to become members of the church without a salvation testimony, had split the Congregationalists into two factions. Backus' family became convinced of the need for saved membership and joined the "New Light" faction.

Because of this controversy, Backus began to study the issue of baptism more in depth, and eventually became convinced that baptism by immersion after salvation was the biblical model. Backus was baptized in 1751, and as Backus studied the other convictions of the Baptists, such as spiritual liberty and the local church authority, he identified himself with their teachings fully in 1756.

As pastor of the First Baptist Church of Middleborough, Massachusetts, Backus fought for religious liberty in that colony. He spoke out against taxation to support Congregationalist churches. He wrote "In all civil governments some are appointed for others, and have power to submit to their judgment; but our Lord has plainly forbidden us, either to assume or submit to any such thing in religion." Backus was once thrown in jail for his own personal refusal to a five pound tax to support establishment churches.

Backus was one of the biblical voices in the religious liberty debate. He advocated obedience to government authority, but also argued it should not intrude on spiritual authority. He said, "Those who blend church and state together usually violate Christ's commands to both."

Isaac Backus understood the need of government, the role of the church, and the individual liberty of the believer. God used Backus in a mighty way to lay the spiritual foundation of our nation's freedoms.