
WHY AM I A BIBLE- PRESBYTERIAN?

THE HISTORY AND DISTINCTIVES OF THE BIBLE-PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

PROBLEM

We thank the Lord for raising up Truth Bible-Presbyterian Church in 2006, for providing us with a place where we can worship God and serve Him. The Lord has brought us to this church by His hand of providence in many ways – some have been there from the beginning, while others have joined along the way. However, regardless of how the Lord has brought us to this church, do we know what it means when this church is Bible-Presbyterian? And more crucially, are we convicted from Scripture that the Bible-Presbyterian tradition is most faithful to Scripture?

To answer these questions, we must first consider what Bible-Presbyterianism is. This is because there are more than 40 Bible-Presbyterian (B-P) Churches in Singapore,¹ and while they may all bear the same B-P name, a brief survey of some of these churches would show that not all these churches hold to the same convictions. Why is this the case? How did these B-P Churches come about? And what truly is Bible-Presbyterianism?

PURPOSE AND APPROACH

To answer these questions, we must look at both history and theology. We shall first examine the origin and historical developments of the B-P Movement in Singapore. After which, we shall consider the doctrines behind these developments and examine them in light of Scripture.

PRESUPPOSITION

Scripture must be our ultimate authority.² Our ultimate loyalty must not be to a denomination or a person, but to the Scriptures alone.³ Where a denomination veers from the truths taught in Scripture, we must be ready to hold on to Scripture and reject the errors of any system or denomination.

This is what is also affirmed in the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1.10:

The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines

¹ <https://www.bpc.sg/directory/index.htm>

² 1 Thessalonians 2:13 “For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, 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 also in you that believe.”

³ Acts 17:11 “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.”

of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.⁴

All systems of theology and denominations must bow the knee to the authority of Scripture. As Christians, our allegiance must be to the Scriptures alone.

CHAPTER 1: HISTORY OF THE B-P MOVEMENT IN SINGAPORE

The Bible-Presbyterian Denomination in Singapore began in 1950 with Rev Dr Timothy Tow, the founding pastor of the B-P Movement in Singapore. To understand how the B-P Movement in Singapore began, it would do us well to look at his writings to understand the circumstances in which the B-P Church in Singapore started and hear from the horse's mouth as it were. In his book "The Singapore B-P Church Story" published in 1995 by Life Book Centre, Rev Tow describes the origin and development of the B-P movement in Singapore.⁵

ORIGIN OF THE B-P CHURCH IN SINGAPORE

In his book, Rev Tow describes the B-P church using the illustration of a tree with seven roots. In his own words,

"From the parable of the mustard seed (not mushroom) which grew into a tree with outstretching branches, so that it gave shelter to the birds, we could visualise the many roots that succoured the tree. Hence, the title, "The B-P Singapore Tree Has Seven Roots." For, without the roots, there would be no tree. And by corollary, the stronger and deeper the roots the sturdier and greener the tree and its branches."⁶

To understand the history of the B-P Church in Singapore, we have to understand each of the seven roots. The next section will consider the seven roots of the Singapore B-P Church briefly. After which, we shall take a deeper dive into the American root to understand some of the doctrinal distinctives of the B-P Church.

⁴ *The Westminster Confession Of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1646).

⁵ Timothy Tow, *The Singapore B-P Church Story* (Singapore, Singapore: Life Book Center, 1995).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

SEVEN ROOTS OF THE B-P CHURCH⁷

FIRST ROOT: FRENCH ROOT

The French Root is the Calvinistic root. The Singapore B-P Church is first a Protestant Church. It finds its roots in the 16th Century Reformation. Christianity was in the darkness of the Roman Catholic Church where the Bible, and consequently the gospel, was hid from the laity. The Reformation brought the Gospel to light once again. John Calvin was a French theologian, pastor, and leader of the Reformed Faith. This is most expressly seen in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The Singapore B-P Church is Reformed.

SECOND ROOT: ENGLISH ROOT

The English Root is the English Presbyterian root. In the 1600s, there was a group within the Anglican Church known as the Non-Conformists. These were they who held on to their biblical convictions even though it opposed the State Church. The Anglican Church followed an Episcopal system where one man ruled (the bishop). The Presbyterian Non-Conformists believed that the Church should not be ruled by one man, but rather governed by elders or presbyters according to the Scriptures – i.e. a Presbyterian system. In 1662, the Act of Uniformity was passed by the Anglican Church, and 2,000 English Non-Conformist ministers lost their positions, were put out of their churches, and were barred from preaching because of their unwavering stand. The Singapore B-P Church is Presbyterian.

THIRD ROOT: SCOTTISH ROOT

The Scottish Root is William Chalmers Burns. In the early 1840s, revival had come to the English Presbyterian Church, and they began to send missionaries to foreign lands to spread the Gospel. The first missionary whom they sent was not an Englishman but a Scotsman – Rev William Chalmers Burns. He was sent to China as a missionary and preached the gospel to the Teochew in Swatow and the Hokkien in Amoy. George Smith succeeded William Burns in the work, and his first convert was Tan Khai Lin, Rev Tow's maternal great-grandfather. The believers in Swatow and Amoy later emigrated to Singapore and Malaysia. In 1881, the English Presbyterian Mission sent Rev John A B Cook to Singapore to organise these believers into churches, one of which being Life Church (Say Mia Tng), Prinsep Street (1883). It is from this Church that the B-P Movement came.

FOURTH ROOT: GERMAN ROOT

The German Root is Dr Rudolph Lechler, who planted a church in Iam Tsau before the English Presbyterians established a work in Swatow and Amoy. Later, Tan Khai Lin, Rev Tow's great-grandfather became the superintendent pastor of Iam Tsau. Some believers emigrated from here to Singapore, including the Tow family.

⁷ Ibid., 9-18.

FIFTH ROOT: CHINESE ROOT

The Chinese Root is none other than the revivalist Dr John Sung. In 1935, there was a revival that swept across Singapore through the ministry of Dr John Sung. Under his ministry, the founding fathers of the B-P Church of Singapore were not only saved but also called to fulltime service. From Dr John Sung, the founding fathers were first introduced to the doctrine of Premillennialism. From Dr John Sung, the founding fathers were fired with a zeal for evangelism and set the pace for the extension of God's Kingdom through the B-P Church Movement to this day. The Singapore B-P Church is Premillennial and evangelistic.

SIXTH ROOT: AMERICAN ROOT

The American Root is Dr Carl McIntire. When Timothy Tow, the founding pastor of the Singapore B-P Church was called to the ministry, he first studied under Dr Chia Yu Ming of Nanking, China, and Dr A B Dodd, a missionary from the Independent Board for Foreign Missions (IBPFM). He was then introduced to Faith Theological Seminary, USA. This was a seminary established by the Bible Presbyterian Church, USA that was Reformed and Premillennial. Dr Carl McIntire was the president of the Seminary Board and one of the founding fathers of the B-P Church in America. He spoke up against the compromise of liberalism and ecumenism in his day, calling for a 20th Century Reformation, which fruit was the International Council of Christian Churches (ICCC). Tow, who heard this clarion, felt God's call to join the movement. Fired with zeal to defend the Faith, he wrote to Elder Quek Kiok Chiang, then of Life Church (Say Mia Tng) to join the ICCC. Thus, the Singapore B-P Church practices Biblical Separation.

SEVENTH ROOT: SINGAPOREAN ROOT

The Singapore Root is Rev Dr Timothy Tow. After his graduation from Faith Seminary in May 1950, he was requested by Life Church (Say Mia Tng) to inaugurate an English Service. This English service would be the seed of the B-P Movement in Singapore. The English service of Life Church would later separate from Say Mia Tng due to its association with the Malayan Christian Council (a national arm of the World Council of Churches), forming Life B-P Church, the first B-P Church in Singapore. With Rev Tow were also Rev Quek Kiok Chiang, Rev Silas C T Hsu, and Rev Dr Tow Siang Hwa.