

**ECCLESIOLOGICAL DOWNGRADE:
THE LOSS OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH
*AMONG BAPTISTS***

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Introduction

Baptist beginnings in colonial America were not much different from their experiences in the Old World. When the pages of history are consulted it becomes clear that Baptists labored under great constraint and difficulty. A brief consideration of the Baptist experience in England illustrates the nature of these difficulties. Beginning in 1661 Parliament was to pass a series of religious acts known as the Clarendon Code. Though aimed at the Puritans the code directly affected Baptists, Presbyterians, and Independents.¹ These acts included the Corporation Act of 1661, which required that in order to hold public office the office holder had to conform to the state church. This was followed by the Act of Uniformity (1662) requiring all English ministers to conform doctrinally and conduct worship by the same liturgy. 1664 saw the passage of the Conventicle Act which imposed penalties for unauthorized worship services. Since many ministers simply formed their own churches the Five-Mile Act (1665) forbade preaching, teaching or even residing within five miles of the town from which they had been ejected. Finally, the Test Act of 1673 required government officials to take the Lord's Supper according to the Anglican pattern.² These kinds of impositions on Baptists made their work exceedingly difficult and, consequently, made ministry in the New World attractive. With the prospect of freedom many Baptists were to immigrate to the New World.

The prospect of freedom in the New World was no guarantee that it would be realized. Freedom of worship was especially elusive and Baptists were to continue to experience persecution for their faith. The practice of their faith

¹ Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 416.

² H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987), 115-116. With reference to the Conventicle Act McBeth illustrates the difficulties this kind of legislation imposed upon the Baptists. "This did not prevent Baptists from meeting, but did make their meetings more dangerous. They usually avoided singing, for that might call attention to their meetings. They met in homes for the most part, with a preference for back streets, and they tried not to arrive all at the same time. They often set a lookout so the congregation and ministers might have advanced warning if authorities approached. If the officers found the people sitting quietly, technically no law was broken. If the minister was not preaching, but sitting among the people, the authorities could not determine if preaching had taken place, and if so who had preached. Quite often the congregation, if they had warning, would send the minister through a trap door into a concealed basement or to an upstairs window where he could cross over into an adjoining house and thus escape. Often the Baptists would arrange to meet in an upstairs room and pack the stairway with women and children to impede the approach of authorities. We read of a few times when the lookouts, hearing the preaching, became so convinced of their own sin and need of salvation that tears obstructed their vision and they failed to sound the alarm," 115.

brought upon them fines, taxes, imprisonment, and in some cases actual physical punishment.³ The right to practice their faith did not come easy and was won only at the expense of great suffering. Yet Baptists were willing to pay the price and were rewarded with the realization of one of the greatest blessings in the history of mankind – The United States Constitution and Article One of the Bill of Rights.⁴

Along with the struggles to gain religious freedom early Baptists labored in the midst of great difficulties. They did not have the means of communication, the resources, personnel or programs that are considered so essential to the success of the ministry today. Benedict, the Baptist historian, makes the following assessment of Baptist beginnings. “Sunday schools and Bible classes, and all other institutions of modern times, for objects of benevolence and moral reform, which are now in such successful operation with us, and other communities in the land, were wholly unknown in my early day.”⁵ Most Baptists ministered in isolated situations and were not able to benefit from the support and mutual ministry of sister churches. Nor did they have the advantage of educational institutions, mission agencies or benevolent ministries.

But, in the absence of the facilities of more modern times, at the period now had in view, our brethren performed a great amount of labor, under all their disadvantages, and amidst all the hindrances with which they were surrounded.

³ Any standard work on Baptist history will illustrate the experiences of Baptists at the hands of hostile governments. The following works may be consulted. Isaac Backus, *An Abridgment of the Church History of New England* (Boston, MA: Lincoln, 1804), 39-40, 43, 72-76; Edwin S. Gaustad, ed., *Baptist Piety: The Last Will and Testament of Obadiah Holmes* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1980). Holmes along with John Clarke and John Crandall, was apprehended for conducting an illicit meeting. Holmes was sentenced to be whipped. At the execution of the sentence “as the strokes began to fall, Holmes prayed once more and in truth, he later wrote, I never ‘had such a spiritual manifestation of God’s presence’ and though the executioner spat upon his hands, and laid the three-corded whip ‘with all his strength’ thirty times across the prisoner’s bare back, yet ‘in a manner I felt it not.’ When the whipping was finished and Holmes was untied from the post, he turned to the magistrates and said, ‘You have struck me as with roses,’ ” 29. Holmes’ beating was so severe that for weeks he could only rest on his knees and elbows. See also Nathan E. Wood, *The History of the First Baptist Church of Boston* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1980); John Clarke, *Ill Newes from New England or A Narrative of New Englands Persecution*, Edwin S. Gaustad, ed., (New York: Arno Press, 1980) and Lewis Peyton Little, *Imprisoned Preachers and Religious Liberty in Virginia* (Gallatin, TN: Church History Research and Archives, 1987).

⁴ It is well known that Article One of the Bill of Rights was adopted to guarantee religious freedom. What is not well known is that the primary religious group that lobbied for Article One was the colonial Baptists, specifically the Baptists in Virginia under the leadership of John Leland. See Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge, NY: Judson Press, 1965), 241, 290. Other standard Baptist histories will bear this out. Thus, contrary to popular belief, liberty of conscience was not the “history of a puritan idea.” Indeed, the puritans were notorious persecutors. See the sources cited in footnote #3 among others. On the First Amendment see Leonard Verduin, *The Anatomy of a Hybrid* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976) and *That First Amendment and the Remnant* (Sarasota, FL: Christian Hymnary Publishers, 1998).

⁵ David Benedict, *Fifty Years Among the Baptists* (Little Rock, AK: Seminary Publications, 1977), 25.

Thus each man did his own work, and the whole body depended less on agents and substitutes than at the present time.⁶

The Baptist cause appeared to be in danger of failing. Yet by the end of the 18th century they were growing, establishing churches and posed to become the dominant expression of faith on the American religious scene.

The eighteenth century transformed Baptists in America. They entered that century with a handful of churches, divided in doctrine, dispirited by persecution, and despised by most observers. They had formed no associations, sponsored no mission efforts and launched no schools. By 1800 they were a different people with a different spirit. Their outward transformation to become the largest denomination in America seems less significant than their inward transformation into a confident, aggressive, evangelistic people. The scattered churches had become a denomination.⁷

McBeth's observation hints at what was the foundation upon which Baptists built that enabled them to achieve the success that they did. This was simply the establishing of strong local churches that were organized into associations. Between their churches and associations they were beginning to have an impact in the newly formed United States that might have rivaled previous periods of history. However, this trend was not to continue and it appears that at the start of the 21st century Baptists have become just another evangelical denomination, limping along and struggling desperately to have some measure of evangelistic success and impact on the cultural situation in 21st century America.

The question that poses itself is simply, "Why has this come about?" The answer to that question is that Baptists have experienced some changes in their theology and how they work together that have had a profoundly negative impact on their churches and associational structures. These changes will be examined in this thesis.

⁶ Benedict, 21.

⁷ McBeth, 251.

Chapter 1

HISTORIC BAPTIST THEOLOGY

By the end of the 1700's most Baptists identified themselves by the use of the term "Regular." The dominance of the "Regular" theology was so great that it captured the allegiance of 90% of American Baptists after the end of the Revolutionary War. John Asplund, an early Baptist historian writing in the late 1700's, substantiates the dominance of this theology. Asplund gives the following numbers of Baptists in the United States, based on their theological position: 1790 – 64,546 ¹; 1793 – 73,471.² Of these years, the 1790 tabulation included 58,398 Regular Baptists and 1793 included 67,574 Particular (Regular) Baptists. It is apparent that in both sample years 90% of American Baptists held to the position defined as Regular Baptist.

Asplund provides a definition of what constituted a Regular Baptist and is very clear on the point when he defines "Regular" in the following manner.

Of the Regular, Calvinists, or Particular Baptists – they are called Regulars in America, in the southern states, perhaps, because, as they generally were men of more learning, and more orthodox in judgment, so they had more regular rules of discipline and public worship, and not so enthusiastic in their proceedings as the Separates. They are called Calvinists, because they generally hold to the doctrines of John Calvin of Geneva, the great reformer. They are called Particular Baptists throughout England, because they held to particular election and redemption.³

To be a Regular Baptist meant that one espoused decidedly Calvinistic views on such doctrines as eternal election; original sin; man's impotency; the Spirit's calling, converting, regenerating and sanctifying; justification by faith; the imputed righteousness of Christ; and the final perseverance of the saints.⁴

¹ John Asplund, *The Annual Register of the Baptist Denomination in North America* (Layfayette, TN: Church History Research and Archives, 1979), 47.

² Asplund, *The Universal Register of the Baptist Denomination in North America* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1980), 91.

³ Asplund, *The Universal Register...*, 6. In order to make sure the differences are clear, Asplund continues his theological clarification by defining the "non-Regular Baptists." "The Armenian, Freewill, Separate, or General Baptists – they are called Armenians, because they generally adhere to the doctrines propagated by James Arminius, professor of Geneva – they are called Free-willers because, they believe, that the will of man is a turning point of their salvation – they are called Separates in the southern states of America, because they separated from the Presbyterians and were separated in their tenets from them, they are called General Baptists throughout all England because, they hold in General Redemption or provision, general invitations, and general workings of the Spirit."

⁴ Asplund, *The Universal Register...*, 83-84. Torbet, 254. Other historians support the Calvinistic definition of "Regular" also. Torbet notes that: "the publication of a Calvinistic Confession of Faith by the Philadelphia Baptist Association in 1742 and by the Charlestown Association in 1767 gave to the Regular Baptists a theological

The arrival at a doctrinal consensus was not without struggle and there are several factors that contributed to the emergence of a Calvinistic theology. The early associations with the Philadelphia Association leading the way in 1742 embraced Calvinism. Their commitment to a Calvinistic theology is seen in their publication of the Philadelphia Confession and the sending of this confession to the member churches.

A motion was made in the Association for reprinting the Confession of faith, set forth by the elders of baptized congregations, met in London, A.D. 1689, with a short treatise of church discipline, to be annexed to the Confession of faith. Agreed, that the thing was needful and likely to be very useful; and in order to carry it on, it is ordered to send it to the several churches belonging to this Association...⁵

While there may be some debate over whether *The Philadelphia Confession* is to be identified with *The London Confession of 1689*⁶ they were in basic agreement on soteriological issues. Due to the influence of the Philadelphia Association other associations adopted their confession as they were organized. They are as follows: Kehukee in 1765, Ketockton Association in Virginia in 1766, Warren Association of Rhode Island in 1767, General Association of Virginia in 1783, Elkhorn Association of Kentucky in 1785, Holston Association of Tennessee in 1788, and the earliest of the southern associations, Charleston in 1751. “Asplund mentions several other early Baptist Associations that adopted the Confession of Faith, that is the Philadelphia. Further reference to this question is needless. Nearly all the original Associations of America adopted the Philadelphia Confession of Faith.”⁷ Clearly, the Philadelphia Association set the theological direction of American Baptists for much of their subsequent history.⁸ Even

tradition which was in accord with the best thought of Edwards and Whitefield. As the influence of these associations developed, their point of view provided guidance to the growing number of churches which were products of the revivals. We have observed how the Separate Baptists united with the Regular Baptists, and how the General Baptists, as in North Carolina, were transformed into Particular Baptists, until by 1880, Calvinism was the prevalent theology among them.” See also William G. McLoughlin, ed., *Isaac Backus: On Church, State and, Calvinism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).

⁵ A. D. Gillette, ed., *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, A. D. 1707 to A. D. 1807* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851), 46.

⁶ William Cathcart, ed., *Baptist Encyclopedia*, (Philadelphia, PA: Louis H. Everts, 1881), s.v. “Confession,” 266. “Almost every writer on this question falls into the mistake of supposing that it is, and he proceeds to prophesy evils, if he is a scriptural communionist, or begins forthwith to whip us with the supposed liberal scourge of our fathers, if he is a free communionist.” Cathcart appears to view the communion issue as serious enough to regard the two confessions as separate documents.

⁷ Cathcart, 267.

⁸ William Cathcart, ed., *Baptist Encyclopedia* (Philadelphia, PA: Louis H. Everts, 1881), s.v. “Philadelphia Baptist Association”. 917. “The influence of the Philadelphia Association has been greater in shaping Baptist modes of thinking and working than any other body in existence. It is older by nearly fifty years than any other Association. Its *Confession of Faith* and *Treatise of Discipline* have wielded an immense power in favor of orthodoxy and piety among our rising churches...What our denomination would have been in this country without the Philadelphia Association is an interesting question.”

Newman concluded that, “Calvinism had secured almost undisputed control in the churches of the Philadelphia Association, and the vigor of religious and denominational life in these churches augured well for the future predominance of this type of Baptist teaching.”⁹

A second factor, which led to the dominance of Calvinism among American Baptists, is found in the willingness of the Philadelphia Association to undertake a form of “theological evangelism.” These early Baptists were not only concerned with the spread of the Gospel among unbelievers, they were also concerned with the propagation of all of God’s truth and this included a complete understanding of soteriology. In the 1740’s North Carolina saw a number of General Baptist churches planted so that by 1755 there were sixteen of them. By 1760 practically all of these churches had been transformed into Particular or Regular Baptist churches. This came about through the efforts of Robert Williams, pastor of the Welsh Neck church in South Carolina. His influence was to win over men such as James Smart, Henry Ledbetter, William Walker, John Moore, Thomas Pope, Edward Brown, and Charles Daniel.

It is difficult to understand how such fundamental theological shifts could take place with such seeming ease, but doubtless the movement was accelerated because most of these General Baptist preachers were untrained theologically, were aware of the lack of discipline in their churches, and were conscious of the absence of assurance on the part of their parishioners.¹⁰

Williams recognized that he would be unable to accomplish the task of bringing the General Baptists into the Regular Baptist position on his own. He appealed to the Philadelphia Association and in May of 1755 the association sent John Gano to assist the efforts in North Carolina. Upon Gano’s report to the association they subsequently sent Peter Von Horn and Benjamin Miller on October 28, 1755. These two men visited the Kehukee church where the pastor, Thomas Pope, had already embraced a Calvinistic soteriology. Under their guidance the church was reorganized on December 11, 1755. Through the efforts of these men, by 1760, all but three of the General Baptist churches in North Carolina had been reorganized into Particular Baptist churches. The significance of this effort lies in the fact that a solid Calvinistic theology provides the foundation for a strong and vibrant local church. “This Calvinizing movement was significant in that it brought new emphasis upon regeneration, church discipline, and a church covenant, all of which had been minimized under the old order.”¹¹ For these early Baptists a strong theology led to healthy churches.

⁹ Albert Henry Newman, *A History of the Baptist Churches in the United States* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1915), 239.

¹⁰ Robert A. Baker, *The Southern Baptist Convention and its People: 1607-1972* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1974), 46.

¹¹ Baker, 46.

Another factor, which led to the embracing of a Calvinistic theology among Baptists, was their willingness to engage error on all fronts. This was done through men among them such as Isaac Backus. In a life of ministry he was to use his pen, along with his pulpit, for the propagation of truth. His writings illustrate that he was willing to engage what he regarded as false theology on several fronts, all of which led to acceptance of a Calvinistic theology. In 1767 Backus was to write a work entitled *True Faith Will Produce Good Works*. In this tract he takes to task Robert Sandeman, a former Presbyterian minister who was advocating a form of hyper-Calvinism which emphasized head as opposed to heart knowledge of the Gospel. This led Sandeman and those who followed him to over-emphasize “an intellectual comprehension of doctrine” and under emphasize “the ability of the ordinary person to experience religion in his heart.”¹² To Backus, the logical result of the emphasis on the intellect militated against a Calvinistic soteriology. It was this emphasis on intellect and reason that he attacked. “The bulk of the tract attacked those who, having rejected Calvinism entirely, adopted the Arminian notions of the freedom of the will and ‘the modern scheme’ that ‘they will receive nothing for truth but what they can comprehend with their reason.’ ”¹³ This centered salvation ultimately for Backus in the freedom of man and not the sovereign work of God.

Backus was also to enter the conflict on the extent of the atonement. Did Christ die for all men in order to render them savable? Or did He die for His people in order to secure their salvation? 1771 saw the publication of *The Doctrine of Sovereign Grace Opened and Vindicated*. It was his answer to Daniel Martin, pastor of a Baptist Church in Rehoboth, who was advocating and defending Arminian theology. Part of Martin’s defense centered on a universal atonement.

Martin believed, as did most Arminians, in the theology of the General Atonement or General Redemption – that Christ died so that *all* men might be saved who believed in him and not just so that a few elect might be chosen at random by God. But, said Backus, this made God’s plan of salvation dependent upon man’s free will. If all men could be saved and each could choose whether to save himself or not, then God was dependent upon man who could frustrate His design for salvation.¹⁴

Backus did not take lightly the rise of an Arminian theology and he noted its effects in his diary on July 15, 1799 regarding the church in Marshfield. Here was a work that was progressing and in the midst of a revival until the arrival of one

¹² William G. McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 171.

¹³ McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American....*, 172.

¹⁴ McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American....*, 173.

Benjamin Randel.¹⁵ Randel's advocating Arminianism in the church brought division and ended the revival.

Backus also engaged the growing Universalistic movement in his tract, *The Doctrine of Universal Salvation Examined and Refuted* (1782). He was particularly interested in Elhanon Winchester. Winchester had accepted the pastorate of the First Baptist Church of Philadelphia at the recommendation of Backus in 1780. A year after his assuming the work he embraced Universalism much to the dismay of Backus. Backus made two distinct points in interacting with Universalism. The first upheld God's freedom in the extension of grace and mercy. The second pointed out the Universalist misunderstanding of the nature of God's love.¹⁶ Both points reinforced a Calvinistic soteriology among Baptists.

By the mid 1770's there was a growing hyper-Calvinism to which Backus turned his attention. Students of Jonathan Edwards, such as Nathaniel Emmons, Samuel Hopkins, Joseph Bellamy, and Jonathan Edwards, Jr. advocated this theology. It was their desire to take covenant theology to its logical conclusion and establish a consistently Calvinistic theology. The result was a theology that can best be described as "determinism" or "fatalism." This theology placed an individual in the position of being unable to do anything to obtain salvation. Backus answered this form of hyper-Calvinism in his 1773 tract, *The Sovereign Decrees of God*. In it he directly attacked "...the propriety of using the word 'inevitable' concerning the reprobate and 'irresistible' concerning the elect in such a manner as to exclude the idea of their own choice."¹⁷ For the determinist the entire redemptive process was placed in the hands of God. Backus argued, however, that grace and will had a direct relationship. When God's grace operated on a man's will he was enabled to respond positively to that grace in the exercise of his will.¹⁸

¹⁵ Isaac Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, William G. McLoughlin, ed. (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1979), 1444. "Found that this work began last November, by means of two young men who came from the eastward, and it went on gloriously, until one Benjamin Randel, an arminian baptist of Newhampshire came there in March and laboured for above a fortnight with much zeal, but it put a stop to conviction and Deacon Hatch and a few others of the church were taken with him, which made a division in the church."

¹⁶ Isaac Backus, *A History of New England with Particular Reference to the Denomination Called Baptists* (Newton, MA: Backus Historical Society, 1871), 295. "Because it is a most important truth that God is no respecter of persons, many deny his right to do what he will with his own grace, though in a way of perfect justice. He is perfectly just in all his dispensations, which he shows mercy to whom he will show mercy. To deny this is to deny him the right, which every human has with his own property. Oh, madness! It is also an essential truth, that God is love in the abstract; but it is a fatal delusion to imagine that he loves every individual sinner, so as not to inflict endless punishment upon such as die in impenitency. The devils are his creatures, and were a higher order of them than men; yet their endless punishment is declared as one evidence against those who turn grace into lasciviousness."

¹⁷ McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American...*, 184.

¹⁸ McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American...*, 184. McLoughlin draws the following quote from Backus. "The means of grace are calculated in infinite wisdom to open the eyes of men and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God. Precepts and promises, rewards and punishments, calls and

Through the commitment of the early associations to a Calvinistic theology, their willingness to evangelize in behalf of this theology and the efforts of men like Backus to defend it, it is easy to see why it became the dominate theology among Baptists. In coming to this conclusion the student of Baptist history is right to consider why this theology is so significant for his forefathers. Was their commitment to this theology purely esoteric? Were they simply engaged in theological and academic exercises with their opponents? On the other hand, is there a significant reason why they would value this theology so highly? Why would Wills make the following observation regarding the dominance of Calvinism among the early Baptists? "Clergy and laity alike cherished and protected the doctrines of Calvinism with an intensity that some twentieth-century historians – accustomed to thinking that only an elite few cared about theological complexities – have found hard to fathom."¹⁹ The reason for their commitment to Calvinism is seen in their church planting efforts, evangelistic efforts and rapid growth in the late 1700's and early 1800's. These Baptists were convinced that they were on the winning side. The task of extending the Kingdom was God's work from start to finish and He would accomplish it. They were convinced that their theology guaranteed them the victory. This aspect of Calvinism is recognized by no less a theologian than Augustus Hopkins Strong. Strong notes that the decrees encompass the means as well as the end and because of this, effort in the ministry is to be encouraged.

Since the decrees connect means and ends together, and ends are decreed only as the result of means, they encourage effort instead of discouraging it. Belief in God's plan that success shall reward toil, incites to courageous and persevering effort. Upon the very ground of God's decree, the Scripture urges us to the diligent use of means.²⁰

Strong points out that there are a number of practical results of the decrees of God, one of which is found in the success enjoyed by those who labor to extend the Kingdom.

It teaches confidence in him who has wisely ordered our birth, our death, and our surroundings, even to the minutest particulars, and has made all things work together for the triumph of his kingdom and the good of those who love him...yet

warnings, are all motives to influence the choice of man. And the strongest hold that the devil has in this world is to persuade man, that a being governed in his choice by motives without himself, is inconsistent with the liberty of moral agents; and to persuade him at the same time that necessity obliges God to pardon and save them, whenever they shall become sincere penitents. Thus they assume a sovereignty to themselves which they deny to their Maker," 184-185.

¹⁹ Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8-9.

²⁰ Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: The Judson Press, 1907), 364.

this doctrine of Decrees, which at first sight might seem to discourage effort, is the greatest, in fact is the only effectual, incentive to effort.²¹

This optimistic view empowered Baptists such as Isaac Backus to labor mightily in the face of great difficulties. “Just as Jefferson thought that by 1830 the whole nation would turn Unitarian in the triumph of reason over superstition, Backus fully expected that by that date the whole nation would be immersed evangelical Baptists.”²²

The results of this optimism are clearly discerned among Baptists. To begin with they were encouraged to labor long and hard in the extension of God’s Kingdom. Isaac Backus is an example of the kind of men who ascended the pulpit. In the midst of his writing ministry and his associational responsibilities he carried on an amazing preaching and teaching schedule. McLoughlin notes this as he summarizes the ministry of Isaac Backus based on his journal. Backus was a meticulous statistician and it is based on data provided in his records that McLoughlin was able to compile the following facts regarding his ministry.

From the list Backus kept of every journey taken and the number of miles traveled, it appears that between 1747 and 1806 he made 718 journeys ranging from 20 miles to 2,591 miles in length. He traveled on horseback with a small jug of rum in his saddlebag, and covered a total of 67,000 miles or on average of 1,200 a year. In many years he traveled over 2,000 miles. He delivered in this period 9,828 sermons, of which he also kept a careful record, preaching on average of four a week or 196 a year.²³

All of this while riding on the back of a horse. The incentive for such a ministry was, no doubt, the conviction that God would bless according to His will.

Another manifestation of the Calvinistic theology is found in the rate at which churches were planted. It is not the intention to provide a comprehensive tabulation here as a few examples will illustrate the point. Massachusetts provides an example of what transpired among the colonial Baptists. Baptist growth there, in terms of the number of established churches, was small. The ones that did exist, 6 in total by 1730, tended to oppose the Great Awakening. The Awakening was a period of revival in the mid 1700’s that arose as a result of

²¹ Strong, 368. It is interesting to note how Strong applies the doctrine of God’s decrees to the Arminians. “It is striking evidence of the truth of the doctrine that even Arminians pray and sing like Calvinists. Charles Wesley, the Arminian, can write: ‘He wills that I should holy be – What can withstand His will? The counsel of His grace in me He surely will fulfill.’ On the Arminian theory, prayer that God will soften hard hearts is out of place, - the prayer should be offered to the sinner: for it is his will, not God’s, that is in the way of salvation.”

²² McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American...*, 186.

²³ McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American...*, 96. It is tempting to speculate how most Baptist “pastors” in the 21st century would fare in such a ministry. Given the means of modern transportation and the advantages of technology it would seem that many ministries would dwarf that of Isaac Backus. Yet, even the casual observer of the contemporary scene realizes that ministries such as that of Backus are non-existent in the 21st century. With all of the obvious advantages available, the logical question to ask is, “Why?”

the preaching of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. The reason for Baptist opposition to the Awakening was simple.

The New England Baptists, as a rule, held aloof from the revival movement during its early stages. This was due to the fact that the great majority of their churches were Arminian and could not sympathize with the Calvinistic character of the movement; and partly due to the fact that having been so unkindly treated by the standing order they felt a natural antipathy to entering into intimate relations with its members and ministers.²⁴

While one of the major objections to the Calvinistic theology is that it is “not evangelistic,” it is interesting to note that when an Arminian theology dominated the Massachusetts churches, “no new Baptist churches had been formed in Massachusetts between 1693 and 1731...”²⁵ 1731 was to be a turning point in Massachusetts Baptist history. Between 1731 and 1740 a total of five Baptist churches were planted: Rehoboth (1731), Sutton (1733), South Brimfield (1736), Bellingham (1737), and Leicester (1738). These churches were more Calvinistic in theology.²⁶ It was in 1743 that the first solidly Calvinistic New Light Baptist church was planted in Boston. This was a split from First Baptist in Boston. Here the issue was that Jeremiah Condy, the pastor, was an Arminian who disapproved of the Great Awakening. The seven members of First Baptist who left were to establish the Second Baptist Church of Boston. Within five years this church numbered 120 and its pastor, Thomas Baldwin, was to help launch the Baptist missionary movement from this Calvinistic church.²⁷ From this point on Baptist churches multiplied rapidly. By 1768 there were 30 and by 1790 Massachusetts had 92.²⁸ Asplund tabulates that by 1793 the number jumped to 125.²⁹

The same pattern observed in Massachusetts is observed in the other states with Georgia providing an example. At the beginning of the Revolutionary War (1776) there were only 3 churches in Georgia and by 1784 the number of churches had only increased by 2. Twelve years later (1796) the total number of churches in Georgia stood at 56. Baker points out something even more astounding regarding these churches. In a comparative study of the growth rate of these churches to the population birthrate he observes that church growth rate was almost twice the population birthrate. Church growth rate stood at 17.72%

²⁴ Newman, 243.

²⁵ McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American...*, 270.

²⁶ McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American...*, 90.

²⁷ McBeth, 204.

²⁸ Newman, 271.

²⁹ Asplund, *The Universal Register...*, 91.

while the population growth rate was 9.8%.³⁰ Baker's conclusion, "a strong missionary spirit was evident in Georgia."³¹ These isolated examples explain why McBeth could draw his conclusion regarding Baptist growth.

The eighteenth century proved a turning point for Baptists in American. In 1700 they could count only 24 churches with 839 members. That number included all kinds of Baptists, fewer than half of them Regular or Mainline Baptists...

By the end of the century, Baptists had become the largest denomination in America, according to one historian. By 1790 they numbered 979 churches with 67,490 members.³²

It might be fair to conclude that the strength of the Baptist enterprise is church planting as opposed to an emphasis on "soul winning."

Not only did a Calvinistic theology stimulate numerical growth it stimulated growth in holiness among Baptist churches. In 1806, a William Barnes requested letters of dismissal from the First Baptist Church of Savannah in order to join another church. The letters were denied based on the church's observation that Barnes had absented himself from the Lord's Table. They admonished Barnes and when their efforts were rebuffed in anger they interpreted his attitude as rebellion against ecclesiastical authority. After several more months of attempting to reclaim William Barnes, Pastor Henry Holcombe preached the sermon of excommunication. "In the final action of this four-month drama, Savannah Church unceremoniously demoted 'Brother Barnes' to 'Mr. Barnes.'" ³³ By 21st century American standards this would appear to be a strange incident. Yet, these early Baptists believed there was a direct relationship between church discipline and a Calvinistic theology. They believed that God would bless their efforts by sending revival as they maintained pure churches. They took this responsibility so seriously that Wills notes, "Not even preaching the gospel was more important to them than the exercise of discipline."³⁴

Through discipline, Baptists sought to reconstitute the apostolic church and to stake their claim to primitive Christianity. Through discipline, they would, moreover, sweep the nation, for they believed that God rewarded faithful pruning by raining down revival. So they required of every member submission to church discipline and demanded from everyone – saint and sinner alike – an acknowledgment of the

³⁰ Baker, 85. For the historian interested in statistics, Baker's work is a fascinating study. It might be assumed that the situation in Georgia was an aberration, given the fact that they were Calvinists. Yet, as Baker points out, this was the common experience in state after state among southern Baptists. It was not uncommon to see them growing at a rate of 2 or more times faster than the population birthrate.

³¹ Baker, 85.

³² McBeth, 200.

³³ Wills, 11-12.

³⁴ Wills, 8.

church's right to censure and an acceptance of what they considered the orthodox tenets of Calvinist theology.³⁵

The link between God's blessing and the purity of the church is so strong in Baptist thinking that writing in 1859, at a time when Calvinism was being abandoned by Baptists, Tyree made the following observation; "We write it down as our most solemn conviction that the great obstacle in the way of the diffusion of the gospel, is the low tone of practical religion among the professed friends of Christ."³⁶ The primacy of holiness in the Christian life was so paramount for Baptists that to lose it would be to lose the blessing of God.³⁷

Due to the dominance of Calvinism among Baptists at the end of the 18th and start of the 19th centuries they appeared poised to reap a great harvest. This, however, was not to materialize. Early in the 19th century Baptists began to abandon their theological roots, a process that continued among them even throughout the 20th century. This doctrinal departure is a matter of historical fact.

The advent of the theological downgrade is well illustrated by the New Jersey Baptists. They were to organize several associations during the 1800's: the Central Association (1820), the Sussex Association (1828), and the Trenton Baptist Association in 1864. One of the main purposes for the establishing of associations of churches was to maintain theological unity. With the Philadelphia Association providing the pattern with their commitment to the Confession of 1742 it would seem that these 19th century associations would have embraced the same confession. They did not, but it was not from a desire to reject the theology of the Philadelphia Confession, "...but rather a desire to get a statement in briefer compass."³⁸ This attitude was reflected by the brief statements adopted by the Central New Jersey Baptist Association (1828) and the East New Jersey Baptist Association when they were established. "The Sussex

³⁵ Wills, 8. "Espousing a thorough Calvinism, Baptists held that preaching separated the elect from the world, the Holy Spirit creating faith in the gospel. The gospel of 'distinguishing grace' functioned as a sieve, fanning away the chaff. Discipline likewise would 'purge and scourge the wicked from among the righteous, so that a clear distinction should be made between the godly and the ungodly, the chaff and the wheat.' The highest honor that Baptists could bestow on a church was that 'you have endeavored to keep yourselves unmixed with and unspotted from the world,' "17.

³⁶ Cornelius Tyree, *The Living Epistle* (Rochester, NY: Backus Book Publishers, 1986), 20.

³⁷ Tyree, 20-21. "We have lingered to show what are not the principle impediments, that every reader may the more distinctly and realizingly ponder the main hindrance. The responsibility for the slow diffusion of Christianity lies at the door of those who profess to be the disciples of Christ. In their lives they have misrepresented the religion of the Bible; and thereby repelled from it the world...There are among the friends of the Redeemer many other causes that hold back the overflowing glories of the gospel, for which they are accountable, and which at once they should put away; but none, nor all others combined, so much retard the kingdom of Christ, as the want of a higher standard of personal religion in the churches of God...the grand evil that lies back of and gives rise to most of the difficulties in the way of the world's redemption, and towers up itself, like mountains piled on mountains, is the want of a more thorough piety in the mass of church members."

³⁸ Norman H. Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey: A Study in Transition* (Valley Forge, PA: The Judson Press, 1964), 167.

Association, in 1833, did not even adopt a Confession of Faith.”³⁹ While these New Jersey Baptists did not disavow their theology, these attitudes do reveal that it was no longer important to precisely define doctrine or hold their churches and constituency accountable for theological beliefs. As is ever the case, the trend toward doctrinal brevity opened the door for doctrinal diminution. “The associations’ earlier function of preserving the theological integrity of the churches gradually disappeared, as concern for theological preciseness had diminished.”⁴⁰

This process laid the foundation for the common belief in the 20th century that Baptists were not a creedal people. “By the twentieth century, the idea of creeds and confessions had come to seem foreign in Baptist eyes, and on the assumption that Baptists had always been non-creedal like themselves, Baptists of the new century could not believe that their forefathers ever gave importance to doctrinal statements.”⁴¹ It should be noted that these Baptists lost not only a Calvinistic orthodoxy they were to lose a commitment to orthodoxy in general as well.⁴²

The decline of Calvinistic theology among Baptists is also reflected in their confessional statements. There is no question that the London Confession of 1689 and the Philadelphia Confession of 1742 reflect a high Calvinistic theology. The most interesting example of this confessional change is seen in the New Hampshire Confession of Faith. The confession was commissioned by the New Hampshire Convention in 1830 and published in 1833. The occasion which provoked it was the ministry and theology of Benjamin Randel. Randel was the leader of those Baptists who came to be known as the Free Will Baptists. He was to make his position known. “He told his congregation that he would not preach the faith of Calvinism ‘Because I did not believe in it.’ ”⁴³ It was in response to his ministry that the New Hampshire Baptists commissioned their confession. What is interesting about this confession is how it has been assessed. “It had been sometimes criticized as aiming at the difficult task of preserving the stern orthodoxy of the fathers of the denomination, while at the same time it softens the terms in which that orthodoxy is expressed, in order to remove the objections of neighboring opponents.”⁴⁴ This confession might not have become well known except for the fact that its author, J. Newton Brown, published it in the

³⁹ Maring, 167. “They explained this omission by saying: ‘It is true, we have said nothing about a Confession of Faith in the Constitution of our Association. The establishment of Creeds, or Confessions of Faith... is the sole right of churches, not of associations.’ It was not that they had changed their doctrines, they asserted: ‘We have not changed our Confession of Faith, nor is such a change contemplated.’ Nevertheless, they did expect churches applying to the association to produce a suitable confessional statement. How they were to determine the suitability of such statements without any document which asserted their common faith, they did not say.”

⁴⁰ Maring, 250.

⁴¹ Maring, 250.

⁴² Maring, 251. “The dissolution of the theological function of the association had been long in process, but by the end of World War I, it was completed. The ironic thing about this is that many of the people who so casually dismissed the theological statements from the associations were also complaining about theological liberalism and trying to check the trends toward modernism, but they no longer had objective standards by which to determine orthodoxy.”

⁴³ McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American...*, 174.

widely circulated *Baptist Church Manual*. This led to its becoming; "...the most widely distributed creedal declaration of American Baptists."⁴⁵ Subsequent confessions, with the exception of strongly Calvinistic contemporary Baptists who adhere to the London and Philadelphia Confessions, have continued the trend of diminishing a Calvinistic theology. Thus, with the unwillingness to maintain their doctrinal purity and the softening of their doctrinal standards, the foundation was laid for the abandonment of the dominant Calvinistic theology.

The full fruition of this process is observed in the 20th century and can be seen in most major Baptist denominational expressions.⁴⁶ While attention could be given to each of the major Baptist denominations the example of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (GARBC) provides a clear illustration of the process of abandonment at work. In writing of the establishment of a new Calvinistic Baptist Association in the Great Lakes area in 1984, McBeth makes this observation regarding this group of churches; "Most of these churches have links to the GARBC movement, which has long held Calvinist views."⁴⁷ McBeth's assumption is that the GARBC is to be identified with a Calvinistic theology. How accurate is McBeth's analysis? The answer depends on whether the GARBC is examined as it was founded or as it exists today.

Dr. Kenneth Good has demonstrated that the GARBC was clearly founded on and intended to reflect a Calvinistic theology. His claim in this respect is clear.

In the perspective of American church history the GARBC stood in a unique position in the days of its beginnings. It was the first national body to reaffirm the truths of the historic Calvinistic Baptist faith as embodied within the historic documents of London, Philadelphia, and New Hampshire. It became the doctrinal heir of the established Baptist position when, after the incursion of the apostasy, it reiterated the traditional position and declared it to be its own. The GARBC intended to draw a line from itself back to the Baptists associations which had drafted and adopted those Confessions of Faith.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Sewall S. Cutting, *Historical Vindications: A Discourse on the Province and Uses of Baptist History* (Boston, MA: Gould and Lincoln, 1859), 105.

⁴⁵ Norman Wade Cox, ed., *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1958), s.v. "Confessions of Faith, Baptist," by William L. Lumpkin. Lumpkin also observes that the rise of the Freewill Baptists resulted in "...theological accommodation on the part of Calvinistic Baptists of that era...The Calvinism of the group was restated in very moderate tones in a confession which was published in 1833."

⁴⁶ Kenneth Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?* (Rochester, NY: Backus Book Publishers, 1988.) The title of Dr. Good's book is, of course, a rhetorical question. His answer is that Calvinism was historically the theological position of Baptists. He then traces each major Baptist denomination to show how the doctrinal position was changed and abandoned.

⁴⁷ McBeth, 773.

⁴⁸ Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 169. "That the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches stood in the direct line of doctrinal descent from the Particular Baptists of England who became the Regular Baptists of America, cannot be successfully contradicted."

Good advances four reasons why this claim can be made regarding the GARBC. The first of these is found in the fact that the GARBC aligned itself with the historic Calvinistic Baptist confessions.⁴⁹ Joseph Stowell, at one time a national representative of the GARBC, makes the same point in his *Background and History of the GARBC*. He cites the position of the Association as expressed in May of 1933 at Buffalo, NY.

It does not in any way propose to preserve a denominational order, but rather to reaffirm the truths of Scripture historically believed by Baptists and expressed by the Baptist Confessions of Faith of London 1689 or the New Hampshire Confession of Faith or the Philadelphia Confession of Faith or the Baptist Bible Union Confession of Faith or any such which enunciates the same truths though in other words.⁵⁰

That the founding fathers could have chosen other confessional statements also indicates their desire to identify with a Calvinistic soteriology. The General Baptists had drawn up a confession known as the “Orthodox Creed” and published it about 1679, a full ten years prior to London II (1689). Yet, the founders of the GARBC chose to ignore this confession in favor of the more Calvinistic ones. “That they did not prefer this statement of faith indicates that the common awareness of Calvinistic soteriology was the confessional alignment of the emerging association of churches.”⁵¹ Clearly, they sought to establish Calvinism as the doctrinal identity of the new association.

The second reason to believe that the GARBC was established on a Calvinistic basis is found in the words of its early national representatives.⁵² One of these representatives was Robert Ketcham. In discussing the death of Christ Ketcham’s Calvinism is clear.

Now on the cross the Lord Jesus Christ gave himself a ransom, and it was accepted by God, as was evidenced by the open tomb three days later. The question then we would now raise is, for whom was the ransom offered? If it was offered for all mankind, then the debt incurred by every man has been canceled. If Christ bore in his body on the tree, the sins of all men without exception, then none will perish. If Christ was made a curse for all of Adam’s race, then none are now under condemnation. But did Christ discharge the debt of all men without exception, if so, then there are none who will be cast into prison. Was Christ made a curse for all of

⁴⁹ Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 169.

⁵⁰ Joseph M. Stowell, *The Background and History of the GARBC* (Hayword, NJ: May Press, 1949), 9-10.

⁵¹ Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 171. “It seems fully evident that this young Baptist association at its very inception, intended to declare to the world that it was both Calvinistic in soteriology and the ‘heir apparent’ of the historic Philadelphia Association in America and the Particular Baptists in England...this strong insistence upon the standard Calvinistic statements of faith by the young association has a significance. The relationship between Arminianism and Liberalism was well known to the ‘founding fathers.’ They desired to declare themselves free of both forms of heresy.”

⁵² Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 172.

Adam's race? If so, then there are none to whom He will say – depart from me, ye cursed. If Christ died on the cross for all of Adam's fallen race, then their debt is paid and if any of them wind up in Hell, God is placed in the light and position of exacting a double penalty, one from the substitute and the other from the person for whom he substituted. Again we ask the question – For whom did Christ die? Let the Scriptures answer that question. In John 10 Christ expressly declares that he was going to die 'for the sheep'.⁵³

Along with Ketcham, Paul Jackson also wrote concerning God's sovereign mercy in electing and saving sinners. Interestingly enough, Jackson treats the subject of election and sovereignty not as a point of theology, but as a Baptist distinctive. In doing so, Jackson continued the attempt to identify the GARBC as being in line with the historic Baptist position.⁵⁴

The selection of a name for the association reflects the third reason for identifying the GARBC as committed to a Calvinistic theology. It is the selection of the term "Regular" in their title.⁵⁵ Had they been interested in identifying themselves as fundamentalists they could have used the term "Bible" or "Fundamental" in the title they selected. "One would hardly have expected the new association to have been designated 'Regular Baptist.' There was nothing in their embryonic convention nomenclature to suggest it. From whence then, came this seemingly new word?"⁵⁶ Good answers his own question – "The fact that the Americans formally adopted the London Confession of Faith as their own statement in 1742, calling it the Philadelphia Confession, without altering or softening its vigorous Calvinism, is proof sufficient that in American Baptist history *Regular = Particular = Calvinist*."⁵⁷ The conclusion to be drawn is obvious. "A Regular Baptist church (or individual, or association) is one that carries a banner with clearly identified positions, well established in history."⁵⁸ With the selection of this name the founders of the GARBC intended to indicate

⁵³ Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 222

⁵⁴ Paul Jackson, *Doctrine of the Local Church* (Chicago, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1960), 89. "Baptists believe that God, as an intelligent, rational Being, has a plan for man and for the universe and that He has the authority and the will to operate that plan. Many other groups place a great deal of emphasis on the free will of man as though God had left the outcome of His plans to the fickle decisions of men who are sold under sin and dead in sin. If God is God, then He is sovereign in wisdom, power and grace! Some people are strongly afraid of this truth, as though they felt that we would protect ourselves against unfair treatment from Him by insisting that His will is limited by our wills. This seems to be nothing less than the sin of unbelief! Shall not the Judge of the earth do right (Gen. 18:25)?"

⁵⁵ Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 173.

⁵⁶ Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 173.

⁵⁷ Kenneth Good, *Are Baptists Reformed?* (Lorain, OH: Regular Baptist Heritage Fellowship, 1986), 44.

⁵⁸ Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 175.

that their theological heritage ran back through their colonial ancestors to the English Particular Baptists who formulated the London Confession of 1689.

A fourth indicator of the Calvinism of the GARBC is found in a survey done by Kenneth Good in the early 1970's. At that time there was a controversy in the GARBC surrounding the doctrine of election. It was Good's intention to get a sense of where the majority of the pastors within the association stood on this particular issue.⁵⁹ While not going into detail with regard to every question on the survey, Good's conclusion is interesting. After factoring out those responses that were "undecided" or "confused" his conclusion was that 83.9% of the pastors in the association were to be regarded as Calvinists, while 16.1% were considered to be Arminian. Consequently, as late as the early 1970's the pastors of the GARBC indicated a commitment to some form of a theology regarded as Calvinistic.

Has the association maintained its theological heritage and if not, why not? This question may be debated one way or another, but when the facts of history are considered it is clear that the answer has to be affirmed in the negative. There are a number of reasons for this assessment. To begin with there was the willingness of the associational publishing house (Regular Baptist Press) to undertake the publication of materials that were in opposition to one or more of the tenets of a Calvinistic soteriology. An example of this effort is provided with the 1967 publication of Robert Lightner's, *The Death Christ Died: A Case for Unlimited Atonement*. This book was to crystallize opposition to the view of the atonement commonly known as particular redemption.⁶⁰ Lightner himself must bear the blame for a rising opposition within the GARBC. On page 15 of his book he presents the most common objection to a particular redemption, namely, that it is unkind, unloving or, at worst, deceitful.⁶¹ From the publication of this book on, Good noted that, "...the general attitude of suspicion or opposition regarding

⁵⁹ Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 176. The survey itself can be found on pages 260-261.

⁶⁰ Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 223. "It was not until the Regular Baptist Press published Dr. Lightner's book against particular redemption that the national association began to assume a semi-official position against the doctrine of limited atonement. That publication opened the way for a general consensus of opposition to particular redemption, and many drew the erroneous conclusion that 'Four Point Calvinism' was the official position of the association. However, this had not been established by the national body at any point in its history, in spite of the general acceptance of the Strong-Bancroft position on the atonement. It is not possible to locate any official pronouncement of the association in which particular redemption is defined as a heresy."

⁶¹ Robert P. Lightner, *The Death Christ Died: A Case for Unlimited Atonement* (Des Plaines, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1967), 15. "This subject is of paramount importance to the ambassador for Christ. Unless Christ died for all men, the message of God's love and Christ's death must be given with tongue in cheek and with some reservation, because some may hear who are really not to be numbered among those whom God loved and for whom Christ died. Consistency and honesty would demand that the one who believes in limited atonement refrain from proclaiming God's universal offer of the good news of God's love and grace in Christ to all men indiscriminately, since in that view God did not extend grace to all nor did Christ die for all. Therefore, to tell all men that these things are true and that salvation is available for them is to speak that which is not true if the limited view be accepted."

particular redemption (always called ‘limited atonement’ by its enemies’) began to assume significant proportions.”⁶²

Not only did the publication of Lightner’s book reflect opposition to a Calvinistic view of the atonement, the denominational monthly, *The Baptist Bulletin*, reflected the same tendency. In July of 1967 the Bulletin published an undated article authored by Robert Ketcham titled “*Some Thoughts on the Sovereignty of God.*” The extensive quote from Ketcham cited earlier is taken from that article. Good notes that when the article was published that quote was omitted.

When this undated article was eventually published in the Baptist Bulletin of July 1967, Ketcham’s original statements on particular redemption were deleted and two editorial paragraphs were added, one of which briefly denied any association with what was termed ‘limited atonement’. Whether Ketcham deleted and added or whether this was an editorial change is unknown.⁶³

Good, who knew Ketcham, and studied this question, “...concluded Ketcham never gave up his faith in particular redemption, but merely conceded that the “‘limited atonement’ theology which has led some into an anti-missionary stance was unscriptural.”⁶⁴ However, the publication of the article and the manner in which it was done, reflects the same general trend away from the theology espoused early on in the GARBC.

Another indicator of theological abandonment in the GARBC is seen in the redefinition of terms. The example here is in the redefinition of the term “Regular” contained in the association title. It was noted earlier what this term meant historically and what it meant for the founders of the GARBC. However, in an Orwellian sense, it has been redefined and today means something entirely different. This change in meaning has been documented and is easy to discern historically. The redefinition begins in 1949 with the publication of Stowell’s book on the history of the GARBC. He was to note that the term “Regular” was, “...meant to be a mark of distinction between those holding the regular, historical Baptist position and those irregular Baptists who are tainted with Modernism.”⁶⁵ In 1963 William Hopewell continued the shift in meaning away from Calvinism and in the direction of Fundamentalism. “The term ‘Regular Baptist’ marked those churches to be in the regular tradition of Baptist belief compared to those

⁶² Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 224.

⁶³ Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 241-242.

⁶⁴ Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 222.

⁶⁵ Stowell, 36.

churches which had left Baptist distinctives for doctrines of liberalism.”⁶⁶ By now it is clear that a redefinition has taken place.

The new definition has divested the term of virtually all its true historic significance. A church may now be truly a ‘kosher’ congregation of ‘Regular Baptist’ variety, and the only qualifications are that it not be liberal in theology and that it adhere to those distinctives which mark Baptists as different from the Reformed or the Roman Catholic. By this enlargement of Stowell’s original interpretation a church could be Arminian and ‘Regular Baptist’ at the same time.⁶⁷

The metamorphosis was completed in 1975 with the publication of Odell’s history of the GARBC. “The term ‘Regular’, to the founders denoted historic Baptists in contrast to the ‘irregulars’ who were now tainted with denominationalism and liberalism.”⁶⁸ Thus, the GARBC was to fail to maintain the heritage implied in its name. “The Stowell-Hopewell-Odell interpretive definition prevailed. The much respected term ‘Regular’ had been wounded (to death) in the house of its friends!”⁶⁹

The final step in the doctrinal decline in the GARBC came in 1975. By 1970 it had become obvious within the GARBC there had arisen a constituency that were embracing an Arminian theology and methodology. With the rising tension and polarization a committee was constituted whose task was to research the background and origins of the GARBC. Their work was completed and the results were submitted to the annual meeting in 1974 held at Ocean Grove, NJ. The issue which was of primary concern centered on the doctrine of election.

The argument afoot in the GARBC was not over particular redemption, but the nature of election. The Arminians were contending for the conditional election of Arminius and Wesley, while the Calvinists were struggling to re-establish the unconditional election of Whitefield, Carey, Spurgeon, and the original founders of the GARBC itself.⁷⁰

The report of the committee contained what has come to be called the “Ocean Grove Statement.” This statement reflected the original position of the association as understood by the committee.⁷¹ According to the rules of

⁶⁶ William Hopewell, *The Missionary Emphasis of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches* (Chicago, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1963), 33-34.

⁶⁷ Good, *Are Baptists Reformed?*, 47.

⁶⁸ Calvin Odell, *The General Association of Regular Baptist Churches and Its Attendant Movement* (Salem, OR: Western Baptist Bible College, 1975), 15.

⁶⁹ Good, *Are Baptists Reformed?*, 49.

⁷⁰ Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 225-226.

⁷¹ Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 259. “We believe that all men are totally depraved, without ability to come to God, and are hopelessly lost, but that God, in sovereign grace and apart from any consideration of foreseen human

procedure, once the initial reading of the statement was made it could not be voted on until the next annual meeting which would be at Winona Lake, IN. in 1975. During the intervening year both parties to the issue were busy.⁷² By the 1975 meeting of the association enough pressure had been exerted upon the council of the GARBC to cause them to withdraw the statement. Although this decision had been made there were two motions to be considered regarding the statement. The first called for the association to approve the Council's decision to withdraw the statement and the second called for the association to agree with the Council on the truth of the statement as reflecting the faith of the association. It did not, however, require accepting the doctrine of election as a condition of fellowship. The first motion passed by a vote of 1148 to 109. Good, who voted in the minority, records his reaction. "The author confesses to having been one of the minority. He did not think then, nor does he believe now that the Council should have been intimidated by the Arminian efforts to defeat the good work of the Clarification Committee."⁷³ It was when the second motion was under discussion that events took a turn for the worse. The second motion was never voted on and David Nettleton explains why.

The question had been called for when a surprise motion was presented. The preface of the motion is as important as the motion itself because it reveals the reason for opposing the election statement. One short phrase in the election statement seemed objectionable to the one who presented the substitute motion. It was the matter of 'apart from any consideration of foreseen human merit or response.' Note that.⁷⁴

merit or response, and in perfect consistency with human responsibility, chose some before the foundation of the world to be the recipients of His grace in Christ...As the Gospel is preached to all nations, these elect ones are caused to hear it and their hearts are opened by the Holy Spirit, so that they freely and gladly receive Christ as their Saviour, thus becoming children of God (John 6:44-45; Acts 13:48; Rom. 8:29-30; Eph. 4:1-6)."

⁷² Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 228. "While the Calvinists were gathering historical evidences and studying their Bibles along with Baptist doctrinal traditions and the established statements of faith, readying themselves for whatever debate might occur at the annual meeting, the Arminians busied themselves with methods of persuasion and manipulation. This turned out to be the deciding factor at the crucial business session. The Calvinists' preparation for discussion or debate was a waste of their time. No doctrinal or theological debate was ever conducted. The Arminians were much more politically adroit than that. History has demonstrated that Arminians are no match for Calvinists in Scriptural or theological debate. The Arminians therefore concentrated upon psychological and emotional pressures, which is the field of their expertise, and which eventually carried the day. The politically minded had assumed that a doctrinal debate would have been a tragedy and struggled to avoid it. The Baptistically minded have concluded that it was a tragedy that no debate was ever held."

⁷³ Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 231.

⁷⁴ David Nettleton, *Chosen to Salvation* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1983), 154. Good, who knew Nettleton, makes the following observation regarding this book. "Dr. David Nettleton has written a book on the subject of unconditional election in which he includes a chapter upon the crucial 1975 annual meeting. His record is both fair and accurate. This is an important document which needs to be studied by all who have an interest in the preservation of Calvinism among Baptists, especially they who are now affiliated with the GARBC, or who have been in the past." Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 229

This substitute motion passed by a vote of 665 – 401 and with its passage the Arminians were to win a tactical victory.⁷⁵ The immediate effect of this victory is felt even to this day. As Good observes,

...the GARBC now operates upon *the inclusive policy* which it so meticulously avoided in its early history. Separation from the NBC was made on the basis that the convention included Modernists with whom the Fundamentalists could have no ecclesiastical fellowship. Rigid standards against the inclusion of doctrinal Liberalism was made an absolute requirement in the early days of the association. However, in 1975 the GARBC found itself unable to implement that same ecclesiastical policy with regard to Arminianism. Before 1975 there were Arminians in the camp. Since 1975 they have gained official and acceptable status.⁷⁶

Not only is it to be regretted that the GARBC became an inclusive organization, but sadly, four years of faithful work by the Clarification Committee in behalf of the association was overturned in the space of an hour. Can this situation be reversed? Only time will tell.

Having considered examples of the demise of a Calvinistic theology among Baptists, both in the 19th and 20th centuries, the obvious question is, “How could this happen?” What factors have been at work which have led to Calvinism becoming a minority theology among those whom it once dominated? The first factor to consider in the demise of Calvinism is that it is a theology that did not fit the “American spirit.” McLoughlin notes, “...the most important reason for its unpopularity was that its doctrines ran counter to the self-confident, egalitarian optimism of the time.”⁷⁷ Backus himself failed to understand the nature of the times in which he was living. Because of his theology he never doubted that God and history were on his side, even to the point of being convinced that by 1830 most Americans would be Baptists. “Yet he would have been horrified to

⁷⁵ Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 233. “The Arminians won a tactical victory in spite of several significant factors: The report of the Clarification Committee proved that the GARBC roots and adopted statement of faith were Calvinistic, The National Council had unanimously approved the Committee’s report which was obviously Calvinistic, the circulated questionnaire had demonstrated that the pastors were overwhelmingly in the Calvinistic camp, and Dr. Nettleton’s final report to the assembly constituted a Biblical, reasonable, and gracious appeal to (at the least) adopt the Ocean Grove Statement as an expression of the associations faith. But emotion rather than cogitation ruled the day, and sentiment rather than Scripture decided the outcome.”

⁷⁶ Good, *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, 234.

⁷⁷ McLoughlin, ed., *Isaac Backus: On Church...*, 290. “According to the Arminians and rationalists of the day, Calvin’s doctrine of innate depravity made God ‘the author of evil,’ and this affronted ‘common sense.’ According to many common men, Calvin’s doctrine of a predestined elect also made God ‘a respecter of persons’ and a bulwark of aristocracy and class stratification. To increasing numbers of Americans, Calvin’s denial of freedom of the will reduced man to a pawn in the hands of fate. The assumption of men, women, and children who died without being saved by God’s arbitrary and unmerited grace were doomed to eternal torments in Hell made God more cruel a tyrant than George III. Calvinism, carried to its logical and consistent conclusion by many of the ‘hyper-Calvinists’ pupils of Jonathan Edwards, contradicted the whole concept of a just, merciful, and benevolent God. Jefferson’s unmitigated contempt for the Calvinist portrait of the Father of mankind was not untypical of the popular mood.”

discover that the Baptists and other evangelicals who came to dominate religion after 1830 had abandoned the doctrines of Calvin for those of the Arminians.”⁷⁸ America was emerging as a nation of promise, one of unlimited resources and opportunity. If a man was willing to work hard there was no reason why he could not make his own fortune. Indeed, his own ability, intellect, and industriousness would earn him the success he desired to achieve. This mindset of early America was at odds with the essence of a Calvinistic theology. Early Americans would have credited their own efforts for their success in contradistinction to the Calvinists who would, most likely, have agreed with Paul when he said, “By the grace of God I am what I am” (I Cor. 15:10). “Calvinism proved unable to maintain its hold over an America growing rich, strong, free, egalitarian, and self-confident.”⁷⁹

In this context individualism was the order of the day and Backus probably never entertained the thought that by bringing this mindset into the realm of the faith he was helping to lay the foundation for the demise of Calvinism.

The great irony of Backus’ career was that the more successful he was in overthrowing the Puritan establishment, the more unsuccessful he was bound to be in defending the Calvinistic doctrines upon which it was based. His emphasis upon individualistic, experimental religion and his war against the erroneous ‘traditions’ of the founding fathers did as much to create as to reflect the decline of Calvinism.⁸⁰

The reason why the impact of individualism on a Calvinistic theology is so significant is found in the fact that Calvinism as a system encompasses more than merely soteriological truth. The earlier Puritan expression of Calvinism included aspects of the system that included all social, political and institutional relationships.⁸¹ While pietism, along with the advent of Enlightenment philosophical concepts contributed to the development of individualism as a way of thinking, it was the winning of the Revolutionary War that spurred its development. “The political revolution which succeeded the religious revolution

⁷⁸ McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus: On Church...*, 52.

⁷⁹ McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus: On Church...*, 52. “Calvinism required a submissiveness to providence, authority, tradition, and mystery which the rationalism and ‘common sense’ of the ‘enlightened’ Americans found unnatural and even unchristian. Thomas Paine, Ethan Allen, and Elihu Palmer found it all too easy to prove that Calvin’s God was cruel, tyrannical and inconsistent – characteristics which seemed unworthy of the God who had blessed America with such good fortune,” 52-53.

⁸⁰ McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus: On Church...*, 53.

⁸¹ McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus: On Church...*, 54-55. “Can Calvinism, as a theology, be separated from the social concepts and institutions which the Puritans saw as essential to it? The breakdown of the corporate ideal of a Christian state after 1750 certainly indicates that the state no longer could or really wished to assert itself on behalf of a Calvinist way of life. And this was merely a reflection of the average man’s conviction after the Awakening that religion was no longer a part of a complex system involving God, the Church, and the state. Instead, it was a wholly individual experience, a direct personal encounter between God and man beside which all other social, political, and institutional relationships were inconsequential.”

of the Awakening amplified the latent individualism of Americans inordinately.”⁸² The expanding frontier became the venue in which the new found freedom of individualism could be expressed and Baptists were to join hands with other Americans in their pursuit of the American ideal. This was not without cost to them. “They ceased to think and act like a persecuted hole-in-the-corner sect and entered into the mainstream of American life.”⁸³

Few Americans in the mainstream were willing to embrace a religion based upon the laws of nature or the power of reason. They were, rather, inclined to cast God in a new light as they reinterpreted the Scriptures.

They concluded that God was really a God of love, benevolence, and free grace who was as eager to produce revivals and to distribute salvation as men were to receive and rejoice in them. God, the arbitrary tyrant, was succeeded on the throne by Jesus, the loving friend. After 1830 man and God worked together as partners to save the world from sin.⁸⁴

It is this shift in emphasis, one which makes man an equal partner in the redemptive process, that precipitated the decline in a Calvinistic theology. This individualistic emphasis dominates the evangelical theology even in the 21st century.

A second contributing factor to the loss of Calvinistic theology among Baptists was the growing tendency to neglect it and begin to tolerate Arminian theology. In the early 1800’s Joseph Baker, a Georgia Baptist, argued that the denial of eternal and unconditional election should not preclude anyone from fellowship. By 1843 he had begun to advocate associational fellowship with Georgia’s Arminian Baptists.⁸⁵ In 1843 J. S. Lawton, moderator of the Rehoboth Association, argued that if there was agreement on the Baptist distinctives nothing else should stand in the way of full fellowship.

Reflecting a trend that was just beginning to emerge, he argued that if Baptists united ‘on the great Baptist principles of regeneration, immersion, and strict communion,’ further differences in theology should form no barrier to church fellowship. ‘Hyper-Calvinist’ anti-mission Baptists, ‘moderate’ Baptists, and even ‘Arminian’ Baptists should be tolerated, Lawton urged, because ‘none of us are

⁸² McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American...*, 169.

⁸³ McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American...*, 170.

⁸⁴ McLoughlin, ed., *Isaac Backus: On Church...*, 53. “It is significant that few, if any, conversions during the Great Awakening took place in the church or at a worship service or even during the preaching of a revivalist. Most of them, like Backus’, took place when the individual was alone. It was sometime before the impact of this new conversion morphology produced a change in the theological framework through which man perceived their places in the universe. But the experience carried with it the seeds of a new outlook which was almost the reverse of early New England Calvinism – an outlook which denied that men were like spiders in the hands of an angry God and declared them to be rational, participatory agents in the divine processes of nature and history,” 55.

⁸⁵ Wills, 106.

infallible.’ He thought that practice was more important than belief, but he was a generation or two ahead of his time.⁸⁶

Clearly, Baptists had begun to embrace an inclusive mindset about halfway through the 19th century.

Yet, at the same time they began to tolerate Arminianism they began to neglect their Calvinism. “Although Arminianism was not widespread, complaints could be heard by the 1830’s that too many ‘Baptists nowadays are afraid to preach the doctrines of grace’ because church members complained about ‘the doctrine of eternal and particular election.’ ”⁸⁷ Wills continues his assessment of the neglect of the doctrines of grace by referring to William Holcombe. “Holcombe worried that other denominations were noticing the neglect: ‘some of the Pedobaptists are saying that Baptists are becoming ashamed of Predestination and Election, and that they will soon quit preaching it.’ ”⁸⁸ And so, as is true with any doctrine, neglect it long enough and it will die out.

With the end of the 1700’s and the start of the 1800’s there also arose within American Christianity an insurgency that was actively opposed to Calvinism. This insurgency represents the third element in the attack on Calvinism and it was to draw in Baptists along with other denominational expressions of American Christianity.

No theme united the interest of insurgent groups between 1780 and 1830 more than exaggerated opposition to official Christianity. In the face of the efforts of Calvinist coalitions to buttress Christian civilization, populist leaders worked with equal determination to withstand the control that Lyman Beecher and others worked to exert over the religious affairs of the nation. Many Methodists, Baptists, Universalists, and Disciples perceived tyrannical intent in the coordinated Calvinist schemes and launched a ferocious crusade against every facet of Calvinist orthodoxy.⁸⁹

Among those elements of Calvinism that were challenged by its opponents were, “...such Calvinist goals as home and foreign missions...”⁹⁰ Not only does Hatch note the example of the case of Benjamin Randal and his opposition to the doctrine of election, Hatch also points out the vitriolic nature of the insurgency.

⁸⁶ Wills, 107.

⁸⁷ Wills, 107.

⁸⁸ Wills, 107.

⁸⁹ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 170.

⁹⁰ Hatch, 171. “Populist leaders such as Elisas Smith, John Leland, Freeborn Garrettson, Lorenzo Dow, and John Taylor all gave serious attention to the energetic advance of Calvinist seminaries, missionary societies, and benevolent organizations,” 174. It is interesting to note that the list of individuals in this quote includes the Baptist, John Leland. What is also interesting in this quote, as well as the one from 171, is that one of the areas of Calvinistic effort opposed by the insurgents was missions.

As people became more insistent on thinking theologically for themselves, the carefully wrought dogmas of Calvin, Edwards, and Hopkins were dismissed as ‘the senseless jargon of election and reprobation.’ The unbridled Freewill Baptist William Smythe Babcock identified these eminent divines as the three frogs in the Book of Revelation.⁹¹

Nowhere is the vitriolic nature of the insurgency manifested more clearly than in the opposition to Calvinistic missionary efforts. In 1820 Theophilus Gates launched a monthly journal called *The Reformer*. While the journal itself was “unaffiliated” it took aim at, among other things, the missionary movement. “One of the *Reformer’s* chief functions seems to have been to stimulate interest in and communication about anti-mission efforts among western and Southern Baptists. Gates reported anti-mission activity among Baptists in North Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, Missouri, Illinois, and Maine.”⁹² Two Baptists, Daniel Parker and John Taylor, were both to use *The Reformer* as a venue for their opposition to missions. In 1819 Taylor published a pamphlet, *Thoughts on Missions*, that was marketed in Philadelphia by Gates. Taylor directed his writing against two Congregationalist missionaries who were seeking an area of ministry a decade earlier. In this tract Taylor noted that he could smell “*the New England Rat.*” “Taylor’s most memorable image, which became a commonplace in anti-mission circles, decried missionaries as horse leeches, always crying for more but never being satisfied.”⁹³ Parker was no less intense in his attacks on missions than was Taylor. His main efforts were directed against the Baptist missionary, John Mason Peck, who labored around St. Louis. “Parker’s anti-mission efforts culminated in the *Church Advocate*, which he published between 1829 and 1831. The papers caustic tone and use of ridicule was similar to that of *The Reformer.*”⁹⁴ *In all fairness it must be noted that both Parker and Taylor objected to the use of means, namely missionary societies, rather than to the concept of missions itself. In the final analysis though, their union with anti-Calvinists has to be interpreted negatively.*⁹⁵

⁹¹ Hatch, 173.

⁹² Hatch, 177. “*The Reformer* served as the primary agent for spreading propaganda against the missionary societies. Bryon Cecil Lambert has estimated that in 1825 alone Gates used seventy-two anti-mission items from thirty-five different papers.”

⁹³ Hatch, 178.

⁹⁴ Hatch, 178. For a more detailed analysis of Gates, Taylor and Parker see Byron Cecil Lambert, *The Rise of the Anti-Mission Baptists: Sources and Leaders, 1800-1840* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1980), 153-339.

⁹⁵ Hatch, 178-179. “*The rollicking irony of the attack of grassroots Baptist leaders John Taylor and Daniel Parker upon the pretensions of moderate Calvinism was that it was done in the name of extreme predestinarian or ‘Hard-Shell’ Calvinism. Both men believed in the conversion of the lost but took exception to ‘new-fangled’ methods for reaching them. They believed the local church was the organizational limit for evangelical efforts. Taylor and Parker stood shoulder to shoulder against the missionary menace, as did Elias Smith, Theophilus Gates, and Alexander Campbell, profaners of the Calvinist temple every one. Yet they found more in common with these bitter opponents of predestination than with those who professed Calvinism as part of a system of elite control. People intent on breaking*

The fourth and perhaps most devastating negative impact on a Calvinistic theology comes from within the ranks of Calvinists themselves and centers on the life and ministry of Andrew Fuller. Fuller, an Englishman, was born in 1754 at Wicken, Cambridgeshire. His ministry involved him in the pastorate, as well as in the infant missionary movement sparked by William Carey. Much of his life was spent in service of the Baptist Missionary Society and he was a firm supporter of Carey until his death in 1815. Regarding his interest in missions, Cathcart's *Baptist Encyclopedia* notes that Fuller:

Traveled all over England very many times, pleading for foreign missions; five times he journeyed through Scotland on the same errand of love; and he visited Ireland once to advocate the cause of the perishing. The noblest cause that stirred up Christian hearts, the cause that brought the Savior himself from heaven, found in Andrew Fuller its grandest champion, and to him more than any other human being was the first foreign missionary society of modern times indebted for its protection in infancy, and the nurturing influences that gave it the strength of a vigorous organization.⁹⁶

His intense love for missions led him to wrestle with the question of the free offer of the gospel. As he did, he drew a distinction between the moral and the natural inability of men to respond to the gospel and he set forth a general atonement that applied to all men as sinners, yet was redemptively directed toward those who would believe. Benedict notes:

This famous man maintained that the atonement of Christ was general in its nature, but particular in its application, in opposition to our old divines, who held that Christ died for the elect only. He also made a distinction between the natural and moral inability of men.⁹⁷

Benedict has zeroed in on the two key elements in Fuller's thinking that separated him from the historic Regular Baptist position. Without doing an extended analysis of Fullers theology, it is possible to cite some of his own words to substantiate Benedict's claim. On human ability, Fuller taught that there was a moral condition due to sin, that led to an aversion of the heart when it came to believing the gospel. There was, however, no natural inability to believe the gospel.

...some writers have affirmed that men are under both a moral and a natural inability of coming to Christ, or that they neither will nor can come to him: but if there be no other inability than what arises from aversion, this language is not accurate; for it conveys the idea that if all aversion of heart were removed, there would still be a

the expansive designs of moderate Calvinists could do so in the name of extreme liberty or extreme dependence on primitive models."

⁹⁶ William Cathcart, ed., *The Baptist Encyclopedia* (Philadelphia, PA: Louis H. Everts, 1880), s.v. "Fuller, Andrew", 422.

⁹⁷ Benedict, 135.

natural and insurmountable bar in the way. But no such idea as this is conveyed by our Lord's words: the only bar to which he refers lies in that reluctance or aversion which the drawing of the father implies and removes. Nor will such an idea comport with what he elsewhere teaches. 'And because I tell you the truth, ye believe me not. Which of you convinceth me of sin? And if I say the truth, why do ye not believe me? He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God. Why do ye not understand my speech? Because ye cannot hear my word.' These cutting interrogations proceed on the supposition that they *could have received the doctrine of Christ. If it had been agreeable to their corrupt hearts: and its being otherwise was the only reason why they could not understand and believe it* (emphasis Fuller's).⁹⁸

The essence of his view on the nature of man was that what the Father does sovereignly is to remove the moral aversion of a man's heart toward the gospel, thus leaving him in a position to exercise his innate natural ability to respond to the gospel.

Fuller was equally clear on his understanding of the nature of the atonement. He held that the sufficiency of the atonement for all mankind was consistent with God's justice and provided the basis for the free offer of the gospel to all men.

...the death of Christ in itself considered, i.e. irrespective of the design of the Father and Son as to its application, was sufficient for all mankind; that a way was opened by which God consistently with his justice could forgive any sinner whatever that returns to him by Jesus Christ; that if the whole world were to believe in him, none need be sent away for want of a sufficiency in his death to render his pardon and acceptance consistent with the rights of justice: and this is all that I should concede now.⁹⁹

In theological terms, what Fuller did was to shift the emphasis in Christ's death away from the design and intent of the Father in redemption. This was a clear departure from the historic, Calvinistic position of the Regular Baptists and by 1880, Cathcart made the following observation.

Mr. Fuller's doctrine of the great sacrifice is generally received by English and American Baptists, though there are still some among us who regard Dr. Gill, in the

⁹⁸ Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller* (London, Eng: Henry G. Bohn, 1856), 163.

⁹⁹ Fuller, 322. See also pp. 171, 207 and 314. It should be noted in the following quotation that Fuller clearly linked the universal offer of the gospel with the exercise of natural ability. "There is no contradiction between this peculiarity of design in the death of Christ, and a universal obligation on those who hear the gospel to believe in him, or a universal invitation being addressed to them. If God, through the death of his Son, has promised salvation to all who comply with the gospel; and if there be no natural impossibility as to a compliance, nor any obstruction but that which arises from aversion of heart; exhortations and invitations to believe and be saved are consistent; and our duty, as preachers of the gospel, is to administer them, without any more regard to particular redemption than to election; both being secret things, which belong to the Lord our God, and which, however they be a rule to him, are none to us," 171.

main, as approaching nearer to Paul's representation of the nature of Christ's glorious propitiation than the profound theologian of Kettering. Those brethren agree with Mr. Fuller in using every Christian effort to bring sinners to Jesus, and to spread the gospel throughout the whole earth.¹⁰⁰

Thus, what began as a slight modification of theological truth, admittedly for the sake of the gospel, opened the door to profound theological changes. In time the theological changes were so extensive that the majority of Baptists today cannot be theologically identified with their forefathers.

Looking back with the perspective of time, the student of Baptist history today can see very clearly that the change in thinking beginning with Andrew Fuller worked its way into all aspects of life and ministry. In 1856, about 40 years after the new theology arose, Benedict was to note that doctrinal discernment among Baptists was so low that many church members were not even aware that they had departed from their historic theology.¹⁰¹ There had also arisen a tendency to emphasize the eloquence of the pulpit, attractions that were pleasing to young people and which would build churches numerically, and a minimizing of theologically sound preaching to the point that many would be uncomfortable under such a ministry.¹⁰² Assessing his own time and looking ahead, Benedict became a prophet when he noted; "While our creed, like the thirty-nine Articles, remains the same, this moderating still goes on, in theological training, in ministerial functions, and in public sentiment, and to what point of moderation we shall in time descend, it is difficult to foretell."¹⁰³ Calvinistic Baptists at the beginning of the 21st century are well aware of how far the moderating influence has progressed. Perhaps Benedict himself, if he were alive today, would be surprised at what has transpired, perhaps not.

¹⁰⁰ Cathcart, ed., 422.

¹⁰¹ Benedict, 142-143.

¹⁰² Benedict, 143.

¹⁰³ Benedict, 144.

Chapter 2

PRIESTHOOD OF THE BELIEVER

The priesthood of the believer has historically been one of the central tenets of the Baptist expression of Christianity. Several different terms or phrases have expressed the doctrine. It may be expressed as the “soul competency” of the believer. It may be viewed from the perspective of “religious liberty” or “freedom of religion” or, it may be called the “soul liberty” of the believer.² No matter what term is used to express the doctrine its fundamental essence remains the same. “Soul-Liberty is the liberty to think and act in religious matters without human dictation or control.”³ Molly Marshall, in considering the “freedom of private interpretation,” expresses the concept quite succinctly.

A hallmark of Baptist identity is the affirmation that each individual is competent to interpret Scripture according to the dictates of conscience and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Baptist identity was initially forged by direct appeal to the authority of Scriptures as our forebears contended for believer’s baptism, voluntary faith, and the freedom of the gathered community over against the established church regulated by the state.⁴

Two elements comprise the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer as noted by Marshall. First, the individual believer is competent to interpret Scripture as the Holy Spirit guides the conscience. Secondly, the application of this interpretation is applied to the expression of the faith in those areas of practice where the corporate life of Baptists in their churches set them in opposition to the established or state churches. The Baptist expression of the doctrine of the priesthood of believers is thus seen historically in the belief that it is gathered individuals, regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit, who organize into local churches for the purpose of worshipping God. Consequently, Baptists were to find themselves in opposition to much of the theology and practice of the state churches in such areas as the recipients and mode of baptism, relationship of the church and state, and the application of God’s law in the individual citizen or

² Walter B. Shurden, ed., *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: The Priesthood of all Believers* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 1993), 2. “Traveling under various names such as ‘The Universal Priesthood of Believers,’ ‘The Royal Priesthood of Believers,’ ‘The Mutual Ministry of Believers,’ ‘Universal Christian Priesthood,’ ‘Believers’ Priesthood,’ ‘Spiritual Priesthood,’ ‘The Priesthood of the Laity,’ and many others, this idea that every Christian is a priest before God and to the world ‘expresses’ said Robert McAfee Brown, ‘the genius of Protestantism’ as few other notions can.”

³ Henry C. Fish, *The Price of Soul-Liberty and Who Paid It* (Rochester, NY: Backus Book Publishers, 1983), 19.

⁴Molly T. Marshall, “Exercising Liberty of Conscience: Freedom in Private Interpretation,” in *Baptists in the Balance*, Everett C. Goodwin, ed., (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1997), 142.

believer's life. One may conclude that there is both an individual and corporate aspect to the doctrine of the priesthood of believers.

Baptists have reflected this corporate understanding of the doctrine in their commentaries. In commenting on I Peter 2:9, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light," Thomas Schriener makes the following observation on the royal priesthood.

Now God's kingdom of priests consists of the church of Jesus Christ. It is to mediate God's blessings to the nations, as it proclaims the gospel. We should note the comparison and contrast here. Both Israel as a whole and the church of Jesus Christ are identified as a 'royal priesthood'...The difference is not the extent of the priesthood but its identity, for now the royal priesthood is the church of Jesus Christ...the priesthood here is corporate in nature, and yet this does not rule out the truth that individuals serve priestly functions.⁵

The purpose for the establishing of this royal priesthood is to demonstrate before the world the work of God in the life of the believer through priestly service and it is at this point that Baptists must be careful. The danger is in the tendency to individualize the doctrine of the priesthood in such a manner as to negate the priestly function with respect to others. Hewett notes, "Priests have two persistent purposes: they bring God to people, and they bring people to God. Interpretation and intercession are our truest functions in kingdom service."⁶ Failure to function in this manner is a failure of the priestly ministry.

It has been the emphasis on the corporate nature of the priesthood of the believer along with the commitment to expand churches through the ministerial aspects of the doctrine that formed the foundation upon which Baptists were to establish strong local churches. Their history demonstrates the number of churches planted and the spiritual strength of these churches. Today, however, Baptist churches tend to be more "evangelical" in that they have lost the corporate aspect of the priesthood of the believer. In its place they have emphasized the primacy of the individual. If anything the primacy of the

⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *New American Commentary; 1, 2 Peter, Jude* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2003), 115. See also N. M. Williams, *I Peter* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1888), 29.

⁶ John H. Hewett, "A Kingdom of Priests," in *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: The Priesthood of all Believers*, Walter B. Shurden, ed., (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 1993), 67. Hewett also notes, "When God declared us, in Jesus Christ, to be the kingdom of priests Israel was supposed to be, God was announcing not so much our transformed identity as our new job description," 64. See also W. Barry Garrett, "Priesthood of Believers," in *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1958), 1112. "Not only are believers to act as priests for themselves, but they have a priestly function in relation to others. They are to make intercession for all men (I Tim. 2:1). Paul calls upon the Corinthian believer – priests for help through their prayers (I Cor. 1:11). Priests are to bring God to the people as well as the people to God. Hence, teaching, preaching, evangelism, and missions may be considered as extensions of the priestly function of believers."

individual believer, his autonomy, authority, and independency are paramount. These understandings of the doctrine have led Baptists to elevate the individual at the expense of the corporate body, the local church. The logical conclusion of such an emphasis was to move efforts in evangelism, missions, benevolent ministries, and social concerns away from churches to the private realm. Here individuals were free to pursue whatever “ministries” God called them to, often through parachurch organizations or societies.

This emphasis on individualism is clear in much of contemporary Baptist writing and thinking and can be illustrated from a text used in Baptist colleges and seminaries for many years.

A church constituted by individuals who believe themselves endowed with competency in religion, and brought into being for the furtherance of their purpose—as in Christ they conceive them—such a church, by the very logic of its nature, must behave democratically. Any other type of organization than the congregational, democratic, would be inimical to its health. It would violate the inherent constitution conceived to be fundamental in each of its members. If the individual member is to grow, he must have a large scope in which to exercise his soul competency.⁷

Besides misunderstanding Baptist history, this quotation reflects a profound audacity in its estimation of the ability of even the regenerated believer before God. No believer sensitive to the Scriptures would posit such a radical independence of the soul that would cut off all helps to growth in grace or doctrinal formulation simply because they are external to himself. When pressed, many Baptists would probably disavow such thinking. Although when one observes the coming and going of disgruntled church members, the numbers who attach themselves to a church without assuming membership or responsibilities and the willingness to relegate portions of Scripture to the realm of the non-essential because good men have differed over some doctrinal question, the primacy of the individual is apparent. What caused the exchange of the corporate aspect of the priesthood of the believer for an emphasis on individualism among Baptists? The answer is found in considering some of the influences embraced by Baptists at work in American history.

⁷ Roy William McNutt, *Polity and Practice in Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia, PA: Judson Press, 1935), 28. “Young eagles cannot learn to fly when confined in a cage, nor young deer to leap when restrained by the high walls of the zoological garden. No more can the young Christian be expected to grow when the wings of his free soul are hurt by the scissors born of laws and the inhibitions begotten of fears. No authority, therefore, which may be conceived to interfere with health begetting freedom can be at all permitted. Such organization or polity as does come into being must rest lightly as the dawn upon the vibrant, naked soul of the individual. He is master of all polity and must never be mastered by it. Polity is made for man and not man for polity. He that was created in the image of God must not be bound by the cords of organization. Hence the ideal of each Baptist church is the attainment of a pure democracy in all its ways. And such a democracy has been and is the first strong plank in the platform of the churches that bear this honored name.”

Among the many changes taking place in the United States in the early 1800's, one of the most profound for Baptist life was the political change associated with Andrew Jackson. Jackson, elected president in 1828, is understood to represent a turning point in American political thinking.⁸ It was not only a turning point politically, but the basic premises of Jackson's beliefs were to grip Americans at every level and Baptists were not exempt from such influences.

Jackson was the first man to rise to the highest office in the land who personified the American dream. Born in a log cabin, coming from a background of poverty, possessing little formal education; he was eventually to acquire a small amount of wealth, build a mansion on his own southern estate and to serve his country as general, representative, senator and president.

The central concept that motivated Jackson's thinking can be summed up as the idea of the rugged individualist, free and unfettered, able to pursue his own goals in his own way to the extent he was capable.⁹ As this thinking began to work itself out in American life there were many individuals who were caught up by Jackson's ideas and who worked them out in their own life and thinking.

Among the Jacksonian thinkers should be included such journalists as William Leggett, William Cullen Bryant (better known in more recent times for his poetry) and William M. Gouge; George Bancroft, the historian, but also involved in Democratic politics; Francis Wayland, president of Brown University; Walt Whitman, who later achieved fame as a poet. These and others, presented and honed the Jacksonian ideas for public understanding.¹⁰

The attention of anyone who has even a basic knowledge of Baptist history will have been drawn to the name of Francis Wayland. Wayland, through his writings and his presidency of Brown University was one of the major architects of Baptist thought in the 1800's. When an examination of some of his writings is undertaken, it will not be long before the reader sees the same emphasis upon the rights and autonomy of the individual.

⁸ "Andrew Jackson," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago, IL: William Benton, 1970), 828.

⁹ Clarence B. Carson, *The Sections and the Civil War: A Basic History of the United States*, (Wadley, NJ: American Textbook Committee, 1985), 23. "Jacksonian Democracy was not simply a political movement; it was political, but it benefited from and caught up currents in the economic, social, and cultural life in America. Socially and culturally, the era of Jackson was the culmination of the long-term trend away from the European class system and continued the trend toward equality before the law. The last vestiges of monarchy and aristocracy had been shed; family background and position by birth no longer counted for so much. The Jacksonians were Americans through and through, even if they were still very much part of Western civilization, it had been winnowed through an American experience which had left it shorn of its outward forms of inequality. The Jacksonians were of the frontier spiritually, if not actually, a product of the western movement, even when it was only an inland movement from the port cities. Economically, the Jacksonians favored free enterprise, and an open field and no favors from anyone. Jacksonian Democracy was a part of an intellectual current as well, a current sweeping through America. If that current has to be given a name, it might best be called romantic individualism. It contained in it a vision of the possibilities of man in America, not simply for a few chosen people but for the generality of people."

¹⁰Carson, 27.

Regarding the subject of personal liberty, Wayland was to write in his *Principles of Moral Science*:

Every human being is, by his constitution, a separate, and distinct, and complete system, adapted to all the purposes of self-government, and responsible, separately, to God, for the manner in which his powers are employed. Thus, every individual possesses a body, by which he is connected with the physical universe... an understanding, by which truth is discovered...passions and desires, by which he is excited to action...conscience, to point out the limit within which these desires may be rightfully gratified; and a will, which determines him to action. The possession of these is necessary to a human nature and it also renders every being so constituted, a distinct and independent individual.¹¹

The two elements stressed in this quotation reveal that in Wayland's thinking, the individual is both distinct and independent. Norman Maring demonstrates that Wayland's view of man stressed not only the independency and autonomy of the individual, but that there was also a Pelagian emphasis in Wayland's doctrine of man's will. "Every individual is still free to resist or conform to the tendencies by which he is surrounded. Our free agency is in neither case either destroyed or even affected...Our own character remains by necessity dependent upon our own freewill."¹²

With the emphasis on independency and responsibility in the individual it was a logical step for Wayland to suggest that moral reform would come, not through the corporate efforts of Baptists in their churches and associations, but through the conversions of individuals. Social evils as legitimate concerns of the gospel were dismissed and the emphasis was now shifted to the message of the new birth. When men were converted, they would have the ability to obey God and holiness would permeate every aspect of American life.¹³ Thus began the emphasis among Baptists to ignore social evils as legitimate concerns of Biblical preaching, major on presenting the gospel and save their consciences by believing that they were preaching the "whole counsel of God."

An interesting question presents itself at this point. Given Wayland's stress on the freedom, independency, etc. of the individual, how would he respond when confronted with the idea of the individuals being expected to submit to such authorities as the Scripture, confessions of faith and other believers as a member of a church? These are very relevant points to consider and Wayland is not silent on any of them.

¹¹ Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Moral Science* (Boston, MA: Gould, Kendall and Lincoln, 1839), 202.

¹² Wayland, "The Fall of Man," in *Salvation by Christ*, 91-92, cited by Norman H. Maring, Francis Wayland's *Doctrine of the Church and the Ministry* (unpublished manuscript at American Baptist Historical Society, Rochester, NY, n.d.), F-8.

¹³ Wayland, F-8.

His position on the Scriptures was that they contained the moral laws of the universe and whatever was stated as a specific command was binding. Whatever was not of ethical command and could only be inferred he left to the absolute liberty of individual judgment.¹⁴ However, even the ethical precepts that were binding were limited to the New Testament. He wrote, "...we profess to take for our guide, in all matters of religious belief and practice, the New Testament, the whole New Testament, and nothing but the New Testament. Whatever we find there we esteem binding upon the conscience."¹⁵ In all fairness, he is contrasting this authority to that of tradition and councils. Yet, "...his distinction between the authority of the Old and New Testaments marked a shift from older Baptist interpretations of Biblical authority."¹⁶

On the matter of creeds and confessions he was very explicit, they were anathema to him.

It is our essential belief that the Scriptures are a revelation from God, given not to a Pope, or a congregation of Cardinals, or an Archbishop, or a bench of Bishops, or a General Assembly, or a Synod, but to every individual man. They were given to every individual that he might understand them for himself...It is hence evident that we can have no standards which claim to be of any authority over us.¹⁷

Lest the point be misunderstood, Wayland noted earlier in the same context as the above quotation that, "...Whether an established confession of faith is desirable or not, with us it is impossible."¹⁸ It is easy to show that Wayland's view regarding the place of confessions and creeds was not shared by all of his contemporary Baptist brethren. Consequently, there is some justification in saying that his position may not necessarily equal "the historic Baptist position."¹⁹

The final expression of individualism in Wayland's thought for our consideration is the relationship of the individual believer to a local church. Here again the primacy of the individual is all-important even when it relates to something as basic as church membership.

¹⁴ Wayland, F-11.

¹⁵ Wayland, *Notes on the Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1980), 85-86.

¹⁶ Wayland, "The Fall of Man", F-9.

¹⁷ Wayland, *Notes on the Principles...*, 14.

¹⁸ Wayland, 13.

¹⁹ An extended treatment of creeds and confessions is found in the work of Sewall Cutting, a contemporary of Francis Wayland. Sewall S. Cutting, *Historical Vindications: A Discourse on the Province and Uses of Baptist History*, (Boston, MA: Gould and Lincoln, 1859), 85-106.

...as a consequence of his individualistic tendencies and of his circumscribed view of the task of the churches, he tended to minimize the importance of these by making them purely voluntary associations of like-minded people. Beginning with the premise that 'religion is a matter which concerns exclusively the relations between an individual and his maker,' he asserted that one need not join the church.²⁰

Not only is the necessity for church membership minimized, but such things as church discipline and the corporate support of shared ministries in the propagation of the gospel suffer also.²¹

At this point it should be obvious that all of the essential points are present for what is commonly understood to be a standard Baptist definition of soul competency, soul liberty, right of private judgment, priesthood of the believer, etc. By 1894 Edward Hiscox could make the following two propositions as he defined soul liberty.

Proposition III. Every man by nature possesses the right of private judgment in the interpretation of the Scriptures, and in all religious concerns; it is his privilege to read and explain the Bible for himself, without dictation from, or dependence on, any one, being responsible to God alone for his use of the sacred truth.

Proposition IV. Every man has the right to hold such religious opinions as he believes the Bible teaches, without harm or hindrance from any one on that account, so long as he does not intrude upon, or interfere with, the rights of others by so doing.²²

The idea of the free individual has continued to manifest its presence in Baptist life. The doctrine of soul liberty has been so absolutized that the individual believer is a priest of such a nature that he cannot be directed in his Christian

²⁰ Wayland, "The Fall of Man," F13-14.

²¹ Wayland, "The Fall of Man," F16-17. Winthrop Hudson makes the same point regarding shared ministries. Winthrop S. Hudson, *Baptists in Transition: Individualism and Christian Responsibility* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1979), 130-131. "The structure of church life among Baptists was to persist essentially unaltered until the close of the nineteenth century, but as early as the beginning of that century its substructure of theological support was becoming badly eroded. The individualism of the frontier and the Enlightenment, finding its most conspicuous political and cultural expression in Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy, had served to weaken the foundation of Baptist churchmanship; and the definition of the Christian life in purely individualistic terms by Evangelicalism had permitted the crumbling of the foundation to be viewed with relative equanimity...the pattern of local church life remained largely unchanged, and it persisted partly by habit and partly by a continuing conviction that it had been prescribed in the Scriptures. When the authority of the Bible in a literalistic and legalistic sense was brought into question, however, the whole structure toppled almost overnight. Discipline was relaxed, the covenant fell into disuse, the pastoral office was obscured, the deacons were shunted to one side, while boards and committees proliferated. Admission procedures and baptismal practices became lax and indiscriminate; the guarding of the Lord's Table was forgotten; the covenant meeting was discarded; and the church meeting frayed out in preoccupation with trivialities. The older conception of covenanting with the Lord and with one another to walk together 'in all ways of obedience which He prescribeth,' which had been partially replaced by the notion of the church as a purely evangelistic center, was now to give way to an understanding of the church which was defined almost completely in instrumental terms."

²² Edward T. Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia, PA: Judson Press, 1944), 11-12.

walk by any source external to himself. He may only be directed by the Word, preached or read, under the leading of the Spirit as *he* interprets such leading and direction. To receive any other direction is to violate his conscience.

At the start of the 21st century how are Baptists going to interact with the individualistic mindset that dominates their churches? The answer is that they must develop a biblically and exegetically based doctrine of the priesthood of believers. The scourge of Jacksonian Democracy dressed in theological terminology has had profoundly negative implications for local churches.

With the suggestion that work needs to be done on the doctrine of the priesthood of believers, the following points of clarification are in order. First, a biblically based understanding of the priesthood of the believer does not negate the responsibilities of believers to each other. Matthew 18 and other New Testament passages remain true. Baptists cannot allow an emphasis on individualism that negates integral aspects of the local church such as mutual ministries and responsibilities to one another, nor can they permit that which undermines the corporate ministries of the church. Secondly, the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer has two key components that must be biblically developed. One is that there is an understanding of the liberty of the believer in Christ. This liberty includes freedom from sin and guilt, freedom from the Law and freedom from the commandments of men.²³ The other component of the doctrine is the one that attention has been directed to here, that is, that this aspect of the doctrine has historically been applied in the civil realm. That is to say that it spoke to the use of the power of the sword as men would use it to coerce conscience into doctrinal uniformity.²⁴ Thus, soul liberty historically meant the right of churches to enjoy freedom from persecution because of religious belief. There is a third point in the development of the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer that needs to be emphasized.

The characteristically Baptist belief that the ministry belongs to the church as a whole is expressed in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Unfortunately, this doctrine has often been misunderstood, for its conventional interpretation is that it means no more than the right of every man to approach God directly. It is true that Christ is our High Priest, and that his priestly work is unique and unrepeatable. We may indeed come to God in prayer and in humble confession of our sins without the intercession of a human advocate, but for that matter people under the Old Covenant could also do that! This interpretation is not what the doctrine of the priesthood of believers was originally intended to stress; it

²³ *Things Most Surely Believed Among Us: The Baptist Confession of 1689* (Sterling, VA: GAM Printers, n.d.), 38-39.

²⁴ *A Confession of Faith* (Rochester, NY: Backus Book Publishers, 1981), 17-18. This confession is commonly called *The First London Confession*. It was written in 1644 and went through a number of editions until being eclipsed by the *Second London Confession of 1689*. See also *Things Most Surely Believed...*, articles 21 and 24, pp. 38, 43.

emphasized responsibilities more than rights. The idea of priesthood implies something done in behalf of another; one cannot be a priest to himself.

The conception of the priesthood of believers was formulated in the Reformation era, but its foundations are in the New Testament. While the idea is implicit elsewhere, one of the few places where it is explicated is I Peter 2:9. 'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.' This statement, which was based on words originally addressed to Israel (Exodus 19:5-6), is applied herein to the church of Jesus Christ. The writer's obvious intent is to declare that as God's people the church has a priestly ministry similar to that of Israel. The idea of the priesthood of believers, therefore, might be more clearly expressed as the mutual ministry of all believers.²⁵

The implications of this quotation are profound. Recognizing that the Scriptures do not allow a man to exist in autonomous isolation and that in some sense he is not the ultimate authority in faith and practice, it may be of real benefit for Baptists to do some serious exegetical work on the subject of the priesthood of the believer and the whole matter of soul competency. This work should enable them to build the kind of churches needed to effectively minister in the 21st century.

²⁵ Winthrop S. Hudson and Norman H. Maring, *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1963), 91-92.

Chapter 3

THE ASSOCIATIONAL STRUCTURE

The expansion of the Baptist enterprise in the Colonies throughout the 17th and 18th centuries brought increasing pressure on Baptists to establish some form of co-operative effort beyond the local church. Initially, this co-operation tended to be informal in nature, usually through the informal meetings of churches in a limited geographical area. One example of such an effort is provided by churches in the Philadelphia area prior to the establishing of the Philadelphia Baptist Association.²⁶ The action of these churches, which resulted in the formation of the Association, is recorded in the minutes of 1707.

Before our general meeting held at Philadelphia, in the seventh month, 1707, it was concluded by the several congregations of our judgment, to make choice of some particular brethren, such as they thought most capable in every congregation, and those to meet at the yearly meeting to consult about such things as were wanting in the churches, and to set them in order...²⁷

The organization of this associational meeting was to set the pattern for subsequent associations to follow. The willingness of American Baptists to accept the early associational bodies was influenced by the associational structure organized in England. “As early as 1642-43 Baptist ‘associations’ were convening among English Baptists for counsel and correspondence. By 1655, several groups had been formed and the title ‘association’ was well recognized.”²⁸

Since the term “association” carries different meaning among contemporary Baptists, depending on the constituency, it would be wise to determine how the term was used historically.²⁹ Shurden defines the association as “...the first denominational organization beyond the local church level wherein churches voluntarily united and regularly convened, through delegates, for the

²⁶Hudson and Maring, 151. “Prior to 1690 the Particular Baptist churches in America were too scattered to have an associational life. By that date, there were four Baptist churches in the middle colonies, and they had begun informal meetings together. In 1688, the Pennepack Baptist Church came into existence, and shortly thereafter there were three others in neighboring New Jersey: Middletown (1688), Piscataway (1689), and Cohansey (1690). These churches held joint meetings for the purpose of administering baptism, ordaining ministers, and providing inspiration. A few years later the Welsh Tract Baptists formed the Philadelphia Baptist Association.”

²⁷ Gillette, ed., 25.

²⁸ E. C. Routh, “Association, The District,” in *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1958), 87.

²⁹ Walter B. Shurden, *Associationalism Among Baptist in America: 1707-1814* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1980), xv. “Baptist historians have had serious difficulty in arriving at a mutually acceptable definition of a Baptist association. Most of the disagreement revolves around the question of associational constituency.”

purpose of sharing fellowship and unifying denominational activities within a prescribed locale.”³⁰ Marsh expands this definition.

In our associations, not to mention other bodies, we have this principle. Associations are formed of the churches of a given territory. They are not societies or organizations constituted by some members of each church in the territory they cover; the actual constituency of an association is the sum total of the membership of the churches it includes.³¹

Since it would be impossible for all of the members of each church to gather at the same time the association met through church delegates or representatives. “A convocation of the entire constituency of the churches forming an association would be an impossibility. Its meeting, therefore, must be that of representatives elected by the churches.”³² This associational structure characterized how Baptists functioned historically. “It is clear that such a practice soon came to be common, the churches finding no inconsistency between self-government and association for united effort.”³³

With the establishing of the associational structure a number of issues arose that were of concern to Baptists. These issues centered on questions of authority, autonomy, sovereignty, and independency. For example, could churches be members of an association and retain their independency? Was it possible for an organized association to exercise authority over its constituent churches? Should a church be represented through its messengers or delegates at an association? Was it possible for churches to work together in co-operative efforts through the associational structure? The necessity to face these and other issues among Baptists was the practical result of their rapid expansion.

The increase in the number of Baptist churches in the colonies between 1740 and 1776 was significant, for by the latter year there were 472 churches as over against 60 at the time of the great awakening...By 1795 Backus estimated that there were a total of 1,152 churches scattered through 16 states and territories. The most marked growth, however, came in the postwar period, when the climate of opinion was more favorable to Baptist expansion.³⁴

³⁰ Shurden, xvi.

³¹ W. H. H. Marsh, *The New Testament Church* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publications Society, 1898), 381.

³² Marsh, 381. “In this the churches surrender nothing, but it preserves their equality. It is self-consistent with the New Testament idea of the brotherhood of baptized believers gathered into churches; each self-governing, none having jurisdiction over others, and all co-operating by means of a self-consistent method of organization.”

³³ McNutt, 142.

³⁴ Torbet, 243-244.

This rapid expansion caused Baptists to organize into regional associations. This organizational structure provided certain benefits for the churches that they could not realize on their own.

The first of these benefits was that of a mutual edification among the churches. This was accomplished through the association's use of sermons in their meetings; observance of the Lord's Table and the sending of a Circular Letter or Postal Address to the churches. Examples of such activities are provided in the Philadelphia Association Minutes.³⁵ An observation may be made at this point on the observance of the Lord's Table. This observance occurred because of the understanding of these early Baptists that when the Association met it was the "Church" that was gathered. Hence, functions of the local church were also observed by the "gathered church." This "High Church" or "Catholic" conception is hinted at in both the *First* and *Second London Confessions*.³⁶ Many contemporary Baptists, as a rule, have no conception of such an elevated view of the Church.

A second benefit of the associational structure relates to the ministry and the pastoral staffing of member churches. The need for qualified ministers was addressed immediately by the Philadelphia Association upon its inception. Due, no doubt, to the large number of itinerant preachers and Baptist churches that "...were strongly tempted to welcome any itinerant who might appear, claiming to be a Baptist preacher."³⁷ As the Association noted in 1707:

It was then agreed, that a person that is a stranger, that has neither letter of recommendation, nor is known to be a person gifted, and of a good conversation, shall not be admitted to preach, nor be entertained as a member in any of the baptized congregations in communion with each other.³⁸

It was not long before the Association was to develop the means by which recruitment, education, ordination, and placement of ministers took place. Initially, this was accomplished through the generosity of a wealthy London

³⁵ Gillette, 34-37. "The messengers shall meet on the sixth day of the week, at the time appointed, by 2 o'clock, P.M., to consider the affairs of the churches...agreed, that a sermon be preached on the seventh day, in the afternoon, as usual; - first day, a sermon to be preached in the morning, and another in the afternoon, with the administration of the Lord's supper; - on the second day of the week, a concluding sermon in the forenoon.", 30.

³⁶ *A Confession of Faith*, 16 and *Things Most Surely Believed Among Us...*, 48. Ernest A. Payne, *The Fellowship of Believers* (London, GB: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1954), 29. "All these documents are inspired by what may rightly be described as High Churchmanship. A particular group of believers is conceived as drawn together into fellowship and by the selection of officers, the proper observance of the sacraments and the disciplining of its members may be assured of the presence of Christ and may claim to be truly part of the visible Church. But it must be in communion with other local churches. This is an essential part of its churchmanship. The individual groups are regarded as 'separate parts of the whole...'"

³⁷Hudson, *Baptists in Transition...*, 43.

³⁸ Gillette, 25.

merchant, Thomas Hollis. In the early 1700's Hollis made it possible for Baptists to be educated at Harvard College.³⁹ However, when Baptist growth outpaced the ability of individuals to fund the education of ministerial candidates the Association established institutions of higher learning specifically for this purpose.

It was not until 1756 that the churches were numerous enough and strong enough for the Association to attempt to establish an academy on its own. Eight years later, in 1764, the Philadelphia Association commissioned James Manning to found the College of Rhode Island so that Baptists might have a collegiate institution of their own for the training of ministers. The educational fund to aid individual students was continued, a new academy was set up under the direction of Samuel Jones at Lower Dublin, and a form of in-service training was provided by establishment of a circulating library.⁴⁰

The matter of ministerial education was not the only concern of the associations. In the 1795 circular letter of the Shaftsbury Association Elder Powers was to address the subject of "Ministerial Commission and Reward." This circular was a spirited admonition to the associated churches in the Shaftsbury Association to encourage them to adequately compensate their pastors.⁴¹ This kind of oversight of the pastoral ministry helped to insure that Baptist churches were not lacking for want of competent ministers.

Baptist associations were to provide another important benefit to the churches through the provision of sound practical and theological materials. "These materials were designed to meet the needs of the churches, and they included the Confession of Faith, the Treatise of Discipline, a catechism for the instruction of children, and a hymnal."⁴² Appeal was also made within the Association itself to the Confession in order to resolve doctrinal questions from the churches.⁴³ This publication of doctrinal and practical material by the Philadelphia Association assured that its churches, though scattered, would be united in faith and practice.

³⁹ William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630-1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 295-296.

⁴⁰ Hudson, *Baptists in Transition...*, 44.

⁴¹ Stephen Wright, *History of the Shaftsbury Baptist Association from 1781 to 1853* (Troy, NY: A. G. Johnson, 1853), 46-50.

⁴² Hudson, *Baptists in Transition...*, 44. "In addition to these standard materials, the Association published a treatise on baptism in 1746, a treatise on apologetics in 1749, a treatise on family worship in 1769, a treatise on the parables by Benjamin Keach in 1771, an abridgment of Gill's *Exposition of the Bible* in 1787, a treatise on the education of children in 1795, and the first two volumes of Morgan Edward's history of the Baptists in the various colonies in 1770 and 1792." 44-45.

⁴³ Gillette, 27, 37.

Another benefit for the churches came through the accomplishing of the missionary task. No church was able to accomplish the missionary effort on its own and therefore the churches were forced to unite through the Association in order to send out missionaries to various fields of service. The Shaftsbury Association provides a clear example of this interest and effort.⁴⁴ Their desire to accomplish the work of missions was expressed in the following observation. “If every member of this Association would only lay by the small sum of one cent a week for the missionary fund, it would amount to the sum of \$1,857.44 in one year.”⁴⁵ Wright notes in his history that if a little self-denial was practiced that even this amount might be doubled. However, beyond the financial aspect of missions the Shaftsbury commitment was so great that the Association established a structure to accomplish the task within itself.⁴⁶ Clearly, the associational structure provided the mechanism for co-operative effort to accomplish the work of missions as well as other tasks set before them.

The benefits provided to the churches by the associational structure are beyond question. There may even be some areas of benefit to the churches that have not been considered. However, it can be concluded that it was no accident that Baptists planted and developed churches that were strong in doctrine, reflected great unity among themselves and worked together co-operatively to accomplish the tasks set before them. The development of the associational structure and the relationship between the churches and their associations raised issues among Baptists that needed to be addressed. Some of these issues were suggested by the questions posed earlier; questions of autonomy, authority, independency, and sovereignty. It is necessary to consider some of these issues in order to understand how Baptists were to reconcile them as they developed their associations.

One of their primary concerns centered on the question of authority. Did the association have or exercise any authority over the local church? The question is answered by understanding the relationship between the associations and the churches. Any authority exercised was only between it and its affiliated churches. Isaac Backus pointed this out when he noted that,

⁴⁴ Wright, 137. “Some \$120 of funds were on hand, and they had employed Elder Cyrus Andrews on a missionary tour into the Holland Purchase country, the south western part of New York, for three months, and the committee had paid in advance 60 dollars for his services. The association voted to patronize the missionary society vigorously... ‘This laudable institution has for its object, the salvation of lost sinners.’”

⁴⁵ Wright, 137.

⁴⁶ Elliot Smith, *The Advance of Baptist Associations Across America* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1979), 110. “The associations circular letter of 1802 detailed the plan for a board of missions which consisted of twelve members. There were six ministers and six others. The board’s responsibility was to raise funds and dispatch missionaries ‘to such settlements of the United States, or Canada, where the inhabitants are destitute of a preached gospel.’ Within a year \$78.94 had been raised, and Caleb Blood was sent on a ten week preaching tour to the west from Cayuga Lake to the head of Lake Ontario. There is no indication that the Shaftsbury Association considered its initial thrusts into Canada as anything other than domestic missions.”

“associations refuse to hear and judge of any personal controversy in any church, or to intermeddle with the affairs of any church which has not joined with them.”⁴⁷ Two observations may be made regarding the Backus quote. First, the authority of an association is limited. It is limited to the affiliating churches and no others. Second, by joining the association the churches understood that the association could “hear and judge of any personal controversy in any church, or to intermeddle with the affairs of any church.” Churches were expected to give an accounting to the association each year either through their messengers or by letter. Failure to do so resulted in being dropped from the association. Eventually, associational authority came to be exercised in the ways described when considering the benefits of the association for the churches. However, it also was understood that the authority of the association could extend into the churches. This would occur when situations arose within a church that threatened its well being. The Philadelphia Association took this exercise of authority very seriously. In 1707, at the first associational meeting they addressed the issue by noting that their yearly meetings were, “to consult about such things as were wanting in the churches, and to set them in order...”⁴⁸ The inner peace and harmony of the churches was so desirable that the association would act as a court of appeal for settling disputes. It was understood that the church would accept the will of the association.

It was concluded, that if any difference shall happen between any member and the church he belongs unto, and they cannot agree, then the person so grieved may, at the general meeting, appeal to the brethren of the several congregations, and with such as they shall nominate, to decide the difference; that the church and the person so grieved do fully acquiesce in their determination.⁴⁹

Associational authority was accepted by the churches and was exercised over them. There was apparently no consideration given to any conflict between the authority of the association and the authority of the church. At the same time the churches realized that the association could only withdraw what it granted to them, namely, the right of membership. Hence, the exercise of authority and power lay in the act of disfellowship or excommunication.⁵⁰ The seriousness of

⁴⁷ Isaac Backus, *A History of New England Baptists...*, 412.

⁴⁸ Gillette, 25.

⁴⁹ Gillette, 25. See also William Henry Allison, *Baptist Councils in America* (Chicago, IL: Hazlitt and Co., 1906), 26. “Here is distinctly stated the right of an aggrieved member of a local church to appeal to the Association, which itself or through a committee of its own appointment shall decide the case; the person so appealing thereby agrees to acquiesce in the verdict of this court of appeal, which the church, by its participation in the Association, has already assented to acquiescence, not in this case alone, but in all cases appealed by its members. Such an agreement shows either a high sense of the mutual obligations of the churches to each other, or else an indifference to the principles of independency in the presence of practical benefits to be derived from greater centralization. The latter is more likely the true explanation of the situation.”

⁵⁰ Paul M. Harrison, *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1959), 32. “An important distinction must be drawn between the official authority of the associations and their actual power. In cases of extreme necessity the associations and councils exercised a mode of informal excommunication by ostracizing and withdrawing fellowship from deviant churches.”

the loss of associational membership lay in the concurrent loss of benefits provided by the association. For a church to “go it alone” was to sacrifice much.

Along with issues of authority Baptists wrestled with the issue of independency. Would membership in the association compromise the independency of the local church? Here again the relationship between the churches and the association must be understood in order to answer the question. However a difficulty is created when contemporary Baptists become anachronistic. That is, when they attempt to read 21st century concepts of independency back into early Baptist history. Baptists become known as “Independents” when their opponents gave the name to them. They were regarded as Independents due to the nature of their polity. “The extent of their ‘independence’ was their assertion that a particular church, properly organized, has all the necessary means of grace appointed by Christ and has no need to derive any further authority from outside its own life.”⁵¹ This concept of independency is a far different thing than the concept of independency embraced by 21st century American political thinking. In today’s political climate independence is equated with having no authority over an individual or organization nor any accountability to a person or organization outside of oneself. Baptists have never held that they were independent of God, Christ, the Bible, or one another. This concept of independence embraced by contemporary Baptists can have only negative consequences.

The concept of ‘the independence of particular churches’ has been misunderstood and perverted into a doctrine of ‘local autonomy,’ leaving Baptists with no theological basis for denominational life. The contradiction between theory and practice is demoralizing enough, but an even more serious consequence is involved. By echoing shibboleths which stemmed from a climate of opinion which found fullest expression in Jacksonian democracy and by constantly indoctrinating members of the churches in terms of an understanding of the church which contradicts their practice, Baptists are engaged in the ironic task of sowing seeds which can only lead to their own disintegration.⁵²

Yet, it is this concept of the absolute independency of the local church that many Baptists advocate today. “Democracy and independency are the two chief planks in the platform of Baptist polity.”⁵³ While arguing for the absolute

⁵¹ Hudson, *Baptists in Transition...*, 39. “In terms of the Independents’ analysis, a particular church is not just a fraction of the Catholic Church; it is the Catholic Church. Where a church possesses the Scriptures, the preaching of the Word, the declaration of the Word in baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and properly constituted discipline and government, it is equipped to minister Christ in the place where it is set, and no body can be more fully or truly the Church.”

⁵² Hudson, *Baptists in Transition...*, 50-51. “It is sometimes suggested that Baptists churches, being wholly independent bodies, cannot delegate authority to any other body to act in their behalf, and that the only way Baptists can get anything done cooperatively is for individual members of churches to form voluntary societies for specific purposes, making sure that these voluntary societies have no ‘ecclesiastical’ basis. Such a contention, however, cannot be substantiated by an appeal to early Baptist theory or practice.” 42.

⁵³ McNutt, 31.

independency of the local church these contemporary Baptists have failed to realize that the independence of the local church is relative and not absolute. That is, they are independent with respect to their own internal affairs. A better word to describe their relationships with each other is “interdependent.” This word stresses the necessity for a wider inter-church co-operation that will strengthen the Baptist enterprise.⁵⁴ It was this interdependency that was achieved by Baptists through their associations.

Related to the issues of authority and independency is the issue of autonomy. Does the local church surrender its autonomy when it enters the associational relationship? Autonomy, the degree to which a group functions independently of other groups, implies self-sufficiency. This self-sufficiency is economic as well as political. “A high degree of independence can be maintained only if a social group remains economically and politically self-determining.”⁵⁵ The logical conclusion of this definition of autonomy is that “any social unit which engages in extensive social participation cannot maintain the degree of isolation and independence necessary to fulfill the requirements of a perfect autonomy.”⁵⁶ This implies that the autonomy and co-operative efforts of the local churches are mutually exclusive concepts. Regrettably, this is the position that many Baptists maintain. However, it is not necessarily the position Baptists have historically held. Their position has been that the autonomy of the New Testament church is not absolute; it is relative. It is a spiritual and not a secular concept that separates Baptist churches from secular organizations. As Marsh points out, the autonomy of the church being in the spiritual realm relates to worship, truth, and spiritual matters. It does not relate to other organizational structures. Consequently, autonomy has limitations. He describes five of these and concludes that a church's autonomy is, indeed, relative.⁵⁷ Chapter 26 of the

⁵⁴ Hudson and Maring, *A Baptist Manual...*, 5-6. “The notion of absolute independency of a local church was foreign to the thinking of early Baptists. They adopted the congregational principle because they believed that it would afford the possibility of fuller obedience to God, who is the only Lord of the conscience. Especially in local affairs, such as the admission and exclusion of members and the choosing of a pastor, they needed to be free to ascertain and follow the will of the Lord. This right of ‘church power’ represented a degree of independence, but it was balanced by a strong sense of interdependence among congregations. Baptists recognized an obligation to maintain a wider fellowship, within which they would give assistance, accept counsel, and work toward common ends. Today there is a widespread misconception of this strand of Baptist ideology. In its original form it is essential to the Baptist genius, but the present-day idea of ‘absolute independence’ creates misunderstanding and fosters anarchy.” See also Harrison, 204, 217.

⁵⁵ Harrison, 202.

⁵⁶ Harrison, 202.

⁵⁷ Marsh, 282. “The principle underlying this is that the local church is but one of many, all creations of the Holy Spirit, holding the same faith and assumed to be working together for the same objects. Hence the local church has no more right to do what grieves other churches with which it is in fellowship, than individuals or a faction have to grieve or distract the church of which they are members. No church has the right to so construe its prerogative of self-government as to justify itself in antagonizing the principles and practices of the body with which it is affiliated...The action of a Baptist church does not terminate upon itself...Churches insubordinate to the denomination have wrought great harm to the cause, not only where they were located, but throughout whole Associations, and sometimes far beyond.”

1689 confession deals with the local church. Article 7 sets fourth the concept that each church consists of members who are empowered to worship and equipped by God for the accomplishing of that worship as a local body. In contrast with this is article 14 which teaches that each church is “bound” to unite with churches of like precious faith for the “good and prosperity” of all and for the increase of “peace, love and mutual edification.”⁵⁸ These Baptists saw no conflict between the autonomy of the church and associational membership. Indeed, they understood that the associations were the protectors of local church autonomy, while at the same time reserving autonomy unto themselves and would probably have expressed a measure of skepticism with 21st century concepts of autonomy.⁵⁹

Authority, independency, and autonomy are three of the key concepts embraced by 21st century Baptists. However, it is clear that contemporary concepts held by Baptists differ when compared to what the forefathers understood these concepts to mean. Previous generations of Baptists understood that authority was not limited to sovereign, autonomous or independent individuals or churches. Likewise, they understood that independency did not mean that individuals or churches were without meaningful or organic relationships between themselves. Nor did their view of autonomy require that they be self-sufficient to the point where they were unable to minister to each other or to minister together. The context in which the early Baptists functioned was consequently very different from that which is experienced today and consequently, contemporary Baptist churches look nothing like those of their ancestors. Baptists today have become more “evangelical” and less “Baptist” in how they function and define themselves.⁶⁰

The argument from history is interesting and may lend itself to a better understanding of how Baptists have arrived where they are today. Most Baptists, claiming to be a “people of the book,” would argue that history is not authoritative and that when the New Testament is consulted, nothing is found beyond the independent, sovereign, and autonomous local church. Baptists today generally would argue that there is no biblical basis for any organizational structure beyond the local church. In this area too, contemporary Baptists have departed from the position of their forefathers. Early Baptists were convinced that their denominational structures had biblical warrant. Article 47 of The First London Confession (1644) is explicit.

⁵⁸ *Things Most Surely Believed...*, 46, 48.

⁵⁹ Smith, 74. “While the association has been a guardian of local church autonomy, it has been equally adamant in insisting that it, too, is an autonomous body...associations have insisted upon the right to determine their own membership, to exclude churches judged guilty of heresy or polity disorder, and to regulate their own annual meetings,” 76.

⁶⁰ The use of the term “Baptistic” has been disregarded at this point in order to emphasize the understanding of the Baptist distinctives as legitimate expressions of polity, grounded in Scripture, in the structuring of their churches.

“And although the particular congregation be distinct, and several bodies, everyone as a compact and knit city within itself; yet they are all to walk by one rule of truth; so also they (by all means convenient) are to have the counsel and help one of another, if necessity require it, as members of one body, in the common faith, under Christ their head.”⁶¹ The Second London Confession (1689) is equally explicit in Article 26, section 14 and 15.⁶² Of all the Scriptures cited in both confessions several need to be considered. In them Baptists were convinced that the principles were found upon which they established their denominational structure.

“The most commonly quoted passage of Scripture used by Baptists in America to give some degree of Biblical foundation to the associational idea was Acts 15.”⁶³ This text relates the account of the Jerusalem Council where the church at Antioch, through delegates it sent to the church at Jerusalem, met with the church at Jerusalem and its delegates to resolve the question that had arisen over the necessity of circumcision. While a full exegesis of the passage cannot be presented here some observations by Baptists of the past illustrate how they understood this text. Griffith, in his essay on the power and duty of an association, understands the text to lend itself to the associational structure.

We judge those things in the 15th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles to be imitable by an Association, viz.: 1st, their disowning of the erroneous and judaizing teachers, saying, to whom we gave no such commandment, verse 24; 2 dly, the sending delegated persons of their own number, with Paul and Barnabas, to support their sentence in the place where the debate sprung up, verse 25; and a third thing followed in consequence thereof, viz., a delivering of the decrees to the other churches, to be observed as well as the church at Antioch, chapt. XVI, 4.⁶⁴

A sampling of Baptist commentators reveals the same understanding of this text. B. H. Carroll notes that Antioch was an independent church. It was this church that was infiltrated by Judiazers alleging to come from and represent the church at Jerusalem. Rather than resolving the question at Antioch, as an independent church would be expected to do, “there was a propriety that could not be disregarded, viz.: that this matter should be referred to that Jerusalem church and to the Apostles.”⁶⁵ Carroll notes that the action taken by the church in Antioch was an example followed by the churches in his day.⁶⁶ He is equally

⁶¹ *A Confession of Faith*, 16.

⁶² *Things Most Surely Believed...*, 48.

⁶³ Shurden, 73.

⁶⁴ Gillette, 62.

⁶⁵ B. H. Carroll, *An Interpretation of the English Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1948), vol. 5, 268.

⁶⁶ Carroll, 268. “We do that now in our churches. If a man, or set of men, goes from one church to another church, and stirs up a row there on a question of intense doctrinal importance, before voting on it the latter church

clear regarding the relationship of Paul to the Antioch church. “The church at Antioch elected him as a messenger, to take this matter up at Jerusalem. Paul was accustomed to yield to a church.”⁶⁷ The delegates from Antioch were received by the delegates of the Jerusalem church and the church itself. Whereupon, a series of private (among the delegates) and public (the gathered church) meetings took place which resolved the doctrinal question. “The record says that they sent these men to the apostles and elders who were at Jerusalem, but they were received by the whole church, and when the apostles and elders had considered it, then the whole church came together and considered it, and joined in the final answer, or final decision.”⁶⁸ This decision was communicated to the churches by letter from the Jerusalem meetings through selected representatives. It outlined for the churches what was deemed binding and necessary for the gentile believers. They were not bound by the Law of Moses and were to abstain from those things that would be offensive to Jewish believers. It was this decree that Paul was to take to the churches on his next missionary journey (Acts 16:4). “In two verses (16:4-5) Luke tells us that as they went through these cities, they delivered to them, to be observed by them, the decision of the Jerusalem Conference, and so the churches were established in the faith, and increased daily.”⁶⁹ Hackett and Polhill reflect the same treatment of the Acts 15 passage as Carroll.⁷⁰ Baptist exegesis of the Acts 15 passage led Shurden to draw the obvious conclusion. “Baptists believed the event recorded in the fifteenth chapter of Acts established a precedent and offered an example worthy of imitation in interchurch co-operation.”⁷¹

The apostle Paul reminds the Corinthian believers in II Corinthians 8 of the impending trip to Jerusalem in order to deliver financial relief to the saints in the Jerusalem church. Again Baptists have found in this text principles that lend themselves to the establishing of the associational structure. In 8:1 Paul notes that the standard for the Corinthian church is that of the “churches of Macedonia.” Gould points out that the term “churches of Macedonia” encompasses the churches gathered at Thessalonica, Phillipi, and Berea.⁷² Throughout verses 2-5 Paul reminds the Corinthians that it was these churches, together, that were gathering the offering to be sent to Jerusalem. These

must decide whether these people represent the former church.”

⁶⁷ Carroll, 269.

⁶⁸ Carroll, 271.

⁶⁹ Carroll, 296.

⁷⁰ Horatio B. Hackett, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1882), 171-181 and John B. Polhill, *Acts* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 320-338.

⁷¹ Shurden, 75.

⁷² E. P. Gould, *Commentary of the Epistles to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1887), 174.

churches set the standard for the Corinthians. Paul then challenges the Corinthians (vv. 6-15) to assume their part in the coming offering. However, verses 16-24 are of interest to Baptists for it is here that Paul tells how the process of sending this offering to Jerusalem will be accomplished. It will be done through the joint efforts of specific individuals and churches. He reminds the Corinthians that one of those who will be coming to them is Titus. The involvement of Titus in this benevolent ministry comes about because of his love for the Corinthians (v 16). There may be some in Corinth who do not know who Titus and his traveling companions are or who sent them (vv. 22-23). Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are the “messengers of the churches” (v. 23). The occurrence of the term “messengers” is interesting because it is a translation of the plural form of the Greek word “apostle.” While the word is generally used of those chosen by Jesus to be his disciples and establish the church it is also used in other texts, of which this is one, in its common usage. The basic meaning of the word being that of a messenger or envoy.⁷³ It is used here to identify those who are sent by action (singular) of the churches (plural). In verse 22 an unnamed brother accompanies Titus and the brethren. This is, no doubt, a reference to I Corinthians 16:3 where Paul reminds them that they had already committed Paul to sending “whomever you approve by letters.” The significance of this action is clear. “Paul desired the Corinthians to certify by letter the one they appointed as bearer of their contribution to Jerusalem.”⁷⁴ This brother was previously referred to in verse 19 where, besides certification by the Corinthian church, he was “also chosen by the churches.” The word used here for “chosen” refers to the electing or selecting of these delegates, a process that sets them apart by action of the churches. It should be noted that the word “chosen” is a singular participle that indicates that the churches, together, took part in the singular action of choosing. “The first aorist passive participle *cheirotoneis* is from *cheirotoneo*, old verb to stretch out the hands and so vote in public. The idea is that this brother was chosen by the churches, not by Paul.”⁷⁵ This action of the churches has profound implications.

Paul identifies both the men who accompanied Titus as the messengers (apostles) of the churches (8:22). This implies that they were not chosen to go to Corinth to help them complete their donations but to represent the churches of Macedonia in

⁷³ Hans Dieter Betz, “Apostle”, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 309. See also A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Epistles of Paul* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1931), 246. “Apostles in the general sense of ‘sent ones’ (from *apostello*, to send) by the churches and responsible to the churches for the handling of the funds.” Marsh agrees with Robertson. Marsh, *The New Testament Church*, 369. “The supervision of this work seems to have been entrusted to Titus, though two others whose names are not given, were associated with him. These are called the messengers of the churches. The Greek word is *apostoles*. It means ‘one sent forth’. Its use shows its full force to be, one with power to do whatever he is appointed to do...This is its literal sense...It certainly does not unduly press the Greek term to say they were representatives of the churches.”

⁷⁴ Marsh, 337.

⁷⁵ Robertson, 245.

Jerusalem (8:19; see I Corinthians 16:3). They accompany Titus now to assure anyone who might question the integrity of the project that it is being carried out in a virtuous and unimpeachable way. If someone suspects foul play or that a conspiracy is afoot, they will have to implicate the Macedonian churches as well.⁷⁶

Clearly, this text reveals that even these early churches functioned in a manner that may rightly be called “associational.” B. H. Carroll drew exactly that conclusion.⁷⁷

Another example of co-operation between the early churches is found in II Corinthians 3:1. Here Paul reminds the Corinthians that it is not necessary for him to come to them with “letters of commendation.” These were letters of introduction that would open the door of a church to teachers who presented such a letter. Consequently, false teachers would use them to gain entrance into the churches. “When Apollos ‘was disposed to pass through Achaia, the brethren wrote exhorting the disciples to receive him. False apostles sought such letters as a means of obtaining the confidence of the churches.’ ”⁷⁸ The use of these introductory letters was a commonly accepted practice in the ancient world and these early believers also accepted the practice as the New Testament abundantly illustrates: Acts 9:2; 15:23-29; 18:27; 21:25; 22:5; Romans 16:1-2; I Corinthians 16:3, 10; Philippians 2:19-23; Colossians 4:7-9 and Philemon. It may be argued that the use of letters of commendation does not have implications for an associational relationship between the churches. However, Marsh’s treatment of this text cannot be disregarded.

We have not adduced these facts as evidence that organized fellowship was then established, much less as indicative of any form of polity, for they are neither. But we have adduced them as proof, which they are, that the New Testament churches had such knowledge of each other and of their common work as would enable them to plan wisely for concerted action, which would draw them more closely together in the bonds of spiritual fellowship. While preparing the way for organized fellowship all this would tend to predetermine its nature, purpose, and inherent limitations.⁷⁹

Marsh is implying that even in this common practice of sending letters of introduction between the churches, there are seeds planted that would bloom when the flowers of polity were fully matured.

Baptists were to take from these and other texts their principles of representation, co-operation, responsibility, and accountability to each other, and along with the development of mutual ministry efforts, establish the highly effective denominational structure known as the association. This led them to

⁷⁶ David E. Garland, *II Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 393.

⁷⁷ Carroll, 307-308.

⁷⁸ Marsh, 337.

⁷⁹ Marsh, 337-338.

wrestle with and resolve the tensions that arose centering around the issues of authority, autonomy, and independency. It is no accident that by the end of the 18th century they were planting numerous local churches that organized into a number of regional associations. They then began to consider the possibility that a national association could be organized. Such an association would unite all of their churches through their regional associations in one national association. This national association would be positioned for an even greater extension of God's kingdom. It is to this effort that attention must now be directed.

As was pointed out in the introductory material, Baptists were ready at the start of the 19th century to accomplish great things for God. The most pressing question was, "How was this to be done?" And the obvious answer was that there needed to be some kind of a corporate means by which they could work together to accomplish common goals. Up to the start of the 1800's Baptists had existed in the form of believers gathered into local churches and churches gathered regionally into bodies called associations. However, beyond these expressions of Baptist life there was not any structure that would draw them together nationally.

It was only a matter of time before the question would have to be faced as to how best to unite the growing number of Baptists in America. And growing they were, both in planting churches and establishing associations. These facts are a matter of historical record.

With the realization of the blessing of God upon them, Baptists were recognizing the need for some kind of a connectionalism that would unite their efforts. This was both a natural expression of their life and faith as well as being their stated theological position. After defining the local church in all of its aspects, the Philadelphia Confession of Faith made the following two points in Article 26.

14. As each church, and all members of it, are bound to pray continually for the good and prosperity of all the churches of Christ, in all places, and upon all occasions to further it (everyone within the bounds of their places and callings, in the exercise of their gifts and graces), so the churches (when planted by the providence of God, so they may enjoy opportunity and advantage for it), ought to hold communion amongst themselves, for their peace, increase of love and mutual edification.

15. Cases of difficulty or differences, either in point of doctrine or administration, wherein either the churches in general are concerned, or any one church, in their peace, union, and edification; or any member or members of any church are injured, in or by any proceedings in censures not agreeable to truth or order; it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do by their messengers meet to consider and give their advice in or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned; howbeit these messengers

assembled, are not entrusted with any church power, properly so called; or with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches, or persons; or to impose their determination on the churches or officers.⁸⁰

It was but natural that the expression of this life and theology led Baptists to issue several calls prior to 1800 for a national body to unify their efforts.

...the need for wider co-operation was felt, and calls were sounded for a national organization. In 1767 the moderator of the Philadelphia Association mentioned the need for co-operation; in 1770 Morgan Edwards, a prominent Baptist, suggested a plan for national organization; in 1776, Virginia Baptists called for a 'continental association,' and in 1799 the Philadelphia Association urged a national meeting.⁸¹

However, with all of the recognition that such a step was necessary, it would not come till May of 1814.

When the attempt was made in 1814 to structure a national organization of Baptists it was the direct result of a crisis in American Baptist life. The crisis arose when Baptists had to make an unexpected decision regarding foreign missions and the story is well known. Two men, Adoniram Judson and Luther Rice had been ordained and sent to India by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Through the careful reading of Scripture they both came to Baptist convictions and upon their arrival in India resigned the American Board and appealed to the Baptists for support. Judson remained in India and Rice returned to America to raise support for the new mission from among the Baptists. When Rice returned he "...made extensive tours and labored valiantly, and it was largely due to his efforts that the meeting out of which grew the first national Baptist organization was convened."⁸² When 33 delegates met on May 18, 1814, they brought into existence "the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States of America for Foreign Missions." Since it was to meet once every three years, it quickly became known as the "Triennial Convention". The actual structure of the organization was something of a hybrid. There were those who felt that the work of Baptists should encompass more than missions and that the associational structure would accomplish this. This position was represented by men such as Richard Furman and William B. Johnson. Luther Rice himself favored this approach. "While passing from Richmond to Petersburg in the stage, an enlarged view of the business opened upon my contemplations. The plan which suggested itself to my mind, that of forming one principle society in each state, and others in the same state, auxiliary to that; and by these large, or state societies, delegates be appointed to form one general society."⁸³

⁸⁰ *Things Most Surely Believed...*, 48.

⁸¹ Raymond A. Parker, "Triennial Convention", in *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1958), 1427.

⁸² Parker, "Triennial Convention", 56.

⁸³ Evelyn Wingo Thompson, *Luther Rice: Believer in Tomorrow* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1967), 97.

This associational structure was historically the primary organizational form among American Baptists.

...the Philadelphia Baptist Association formed in 1707, became a general denominational body. Covering several states from New England to the South, representatives from affiliated churches established a college, sponsored home missions, and employed an evangelist at large to preach and form churches in emerging frontier communities. The Shaftsbury Association formed a similar plan by 1802. Thus the associational plan had considerable precedent among Baptists.⁸⁴

When Baptists attempted to structure a national body they were confronted with an alternative to the associational structure, that of the society. This form of organization also had some precedent among American Baptists, although not as much as the associational.

The primary pattern for this style of structure comes from the Baptist Missionary Society of England in 1792, a body vastly influential among Baptists on both sides of the Atlantic. Picking up some patterns of English culture, where people tended to cluster into interest groups to push for certain political or economic viewpoints, the typical English society was thus adapted to religious use, as the earlier political concept of association was also adapted into Baptist usage. The Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Society, formed in 1802, provides an American example of the society method.⁸⁵

The basic differences between the two systems of organization lies in two areas: membership and goals. For the association, membership is by churches through their messengers (delegates) and the association's goals are multifold. *The society limits its membership to individuals, generally on the basis of a financial contribution, and its goals are always single purpose. The adoption of one way of organization as opposed to the other profoundly shapes the polity that results from such a selection. In order to demonstrate this it is necessary to examine those aspects of the society approach that differentiates it from the associational structure.*

As was noted, the society forms its membership of individuals who generally share a common goal and are financially committed to achieving it. The first impact of the society structure is that its membership consists of those who can afford it. The societies themselves tended, due to their structure, to be efficient revenue generators. This came to be one of the reasons suggested for the reorganization of the fledgling national association. "The publicized reason for shifting from a body of delegates from the various Associations to a body composed of individuals who contributed to its funds was the superior utility of

⁸⁴ McBeth, 349.

⁸⁵ McBeth, 349.

the latter as a money raising technique.”⁸⁶ While it may seem that this is an advantageous aspect of the society structure it did have its downside. “Without centralization all the various causes were compelled to engage in free-lance operations, and a horde of agents soliciting funds descended on churches.”⁸⁷

A second difference between the two structures centered on the goals. The association’s goals were multi-faceted. Member churches were involved in foreign missions, home missions, benevolent ministries, educational efforts, etc. As noted, the society was single goal oriented. “In its full development after 1826, the society method disclaimed all but one specific interest, whether it be home missions, foreign missions, or publication and tract work. If additional benevolences were undertaken, a new society for each one would be organized.”⁸⁸ Subsequent history reveals the proliferation of the societies.

A third difference between the two structures lies in the independence of the societies from the churches. “Societies are separate organizations, each having its own constituency.”⁸⁹ One of the practical results of this separation is that the churches have no control over the societies. It was soon recognized that societies could consist of non-Baptists, members of specific churches who are under discipline or even outright non-believers. Hudson notes how arguments were even advanced by society proponents to justify receiving funds from non-believers for the work of Christian missions.⁹⁰

Difference number four between the two structures takes notice of the associational structure as being denominationally centered as opposed to the society that is ministry centered. Consequently, all interests of the associated churches received equal consideration when structuring the denominational program. Missions did not suffer at the hand of education. Benevolent ministries did not lack due to an unwarranted emphasis on missions. Thus, in the society, “...the focus was not primarily on the balanced objectives of the whole denomination, but rather upon the immediate work and finances of the particular society.”⁹¹ This was to lead to specific ministries, such as missions, being over funded while other ministries, such as education, limped along due to substantial under funding.

Lastly, the most significant differences between the two structures are manifested in the loss of an associational interdependent and connectional

⁸⁶ Hudson, *Baptists in Transition...*, 88.

⁸⁷ Hudson, *Baptists in Transition...*, 98.

⁸⁸ Baker, 99.

⁸⁹ Marsh, 390.

⁹⁰ Hudson, *Baptists in Transition...*, 106-107.

⁹¹ Baker, 100.

relationship. This led to the destruction of the idea of the churches having any corporate life beyond the local congregation.

The churches were unable to speak or act as a denomination, and this reduced their influence and effectiveness. The society structure also tended to eliminate among church members any sense of belonging to a larger whole. Churches were simply regarded as isolated units with some members who might chance to be involved in cooperative activities that were quite independent of their local church. Such a structure was ill-designed to foster *esprit de corps*. In such a situation there was an inevitable tendency for churches to drift in contradictory directions, and for the denomination to suffer disunity and division.⁹²

The result of this is obvious. Even the casual observer of the contemporary Baptist scene notes the multitude of fellowships, societies, independent churches, and various organizations that dot the landscape. To try to bring order and structure to all of this is an impossible task.

When Baptists had the opportunity to establish a national association they failed to do so and laid the foundation for the disorder that characterizes their movement today. Attention is now turned to how this happened. Meeting in Philadelphia in 1814 Baptists began their efforts to establish a national association. At this unique moment in history advocates of the society and associational polities become locked in a struggle that would end with the victory of those who wanted to further the society approach. Initially the structure that emerged from the Philadelphia meetings was something of a combination of the two systems. Membership was granted to two delegates of each society or religious body based on financial contributions of one hundred dollars, but the goal of the new convention was limited to foreign missions. The compromise neither fully pleased nor completely discouraged the delegates; it appeared that unity had been achieved. Thompson summarizes the situation.

The convention ended on a note of thanksgiving that unanimity had been reached and all had gone harmoniously. Though there were those who were disappointed that the Convention limited its works exclusively to foreign missions, they doubtless felt this could be adjusted in time as state conventions were formed or as education societies became more generally supported. Some thought the society method of representation was a regressive step in that it relegated missions, the chief duty of the church, to a group within the church, even in some cases to one sex since Female Societies were its sole support in some instances. But the delegates could be from churches or 'other religious bodies', as the constitution clearly stated, and so most delegates who would have preferred the constitution otherwise were mollified.⁹³

Over the next few years there were indications that the natural development of the convention, if left alone, would probably have evolved into a

⁹² Hudson, *Baptists in Transition...*, 26.

⁹³ Thompson, 100.

national association. The convention began to grow and in the 1817 meeting there were 51 delegates representing 40 societies. With this growth came expanding interests and the movement toward a more associational emphasis became evident. This is seen in the fact that the convention was willing to drop the single purpose concept and begin to work to accomplish other goals equally important to Baptists. In 1817, at the very next meeting the Triennial Convention added home missions and education to its agenda. In 1820 the very name of the Convention was amended to include the words “and other Important Objects Relating to the Redeemer’s Kingdom.” They also changed the constitution to allow for the appropriation of funds for home missions.⁹⁴

However this trend was not to continue. In the 1823 meeting the convention voted to sever all ties with home missionary work, except for that work relating to the American Indians. Instead of continuing the trend toward an association there was a clear reversion to the societal structure. So much so that,

By 1826 the Triennial Convention had ‘cleansed its constitution’ of every provision except foreign missions. By a large majority the convention voted to drop every superadded enterprise...Lucius Bolles, the new corresponding secretary, called the 1826 session ‘revolutionary’ and said the convention ‘is now a simple body, with one undivided object, and that object is the promulgation of the gospel among the heathen.’ Clearly the Triennial Convention had undergone a general housecleaning, and the reversion to the society method was complete.⁹⁵

There are two primary reasons why the convention was turned back to the society structure. First, those who advocated the society approach were constantly agitating in that direction. The problem was that they were unable to stem the tide in the early years of the convention. This was due to the majority of the delegates being from the south during those years when the early meetings were held in southerly locations and the southerners tended toward the associational structure. When the 1826 meeting was held in New York it was packed with delegates from New England and the northern states overwhelming the southern men numerically. The northern delegates at that meeting were also to raise serious charges regarding Luther Rice, an agent of the Board and representative of Colombian College in Washington, D. C., and his handling of finances. Rice’s integrity was beyond question, although he did tend to be a little overzealous in his financial affairs. Nevertheless, it was enough to discredit him.⁹⁶ These men then went on to demonstrate that the cause of foreign missions was suffering because the convention was involved with other ministries. It is difficult to know today if these men by themselves would have been able to have such a significant impact. Nevertheless, when their efforts were inadvertently coupled with the second reason why the convention reverted to the society structure, their success was assured.

⁹⁴ Parker, 56.

⁹⁵ McBeth, 357.

⁹⁶ Thompson, 152-181.

The second reason why the convention could be changed had to do with the influence of Francis Wayland. At its inception Wayland supported the structure but by 1826 he had begun to work out the implications of the political thinking he had assimilated from Andrew Jackson. Not only was this thinking applied to the individual believer in the ways considered earlier, but it was also applied to the local church ecclesiology. Wayland was now taking the position that churches were absolutely independent and, as such, could not be represented. One can cite numerous statements from *The Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* that will establish this point but one will suffice. In working out his concepts of individualism, freedom and autonomy he makes the logical leap from the individual to the church and applies the same principles at the level of the local church. He says, “Such being the nature of the Christian church, I do not see how it can possibly be represented. Representation always supposes that there are certain rights, duties, obligations, in which the individual agrees to be governed by the majority.”⁹⁷ He then proceeds to discuss the nature of the political system of American government, noting especially, that representatives pass laws that are binding on all citizens.

From there the discussion moves on to the two kinds of legislation or law that are found in Scripture: that which is not commanded and that which is commanded by Christ or the Apostles. That which is not commanded is left to private judgment and that which is commanded cannot be added to, changed or modified by any representatives. The result is that:

It would seem, from these simple principles, impossible that a church of Christ can be in any proper and legitimate sense be represented...It is as truly a violation of the independence of the churches and the right of private judgment, when several hundred brethren meet in some public convention, and manufacture public opinion, and adopt courses which their brethren are called upon to follow, on pain of the displeasure of the majority, as when they establish a formal representation, to whose decision all the constituency must submit.⁹⁸

It is easy to see that this statement is a contradiction of the Philadelphia Confession referred to earlier in this section. In 1794 John Asplund wrote in the *Universal Register* under the heading of “The Plan or Constitution of the Regular Baptist Associations.” Article I states, “The association shall be composed of members chosen by the different churches in our union, and duly sent to represent them in the association...” Article VII states, “Every church in the union shall be entitled to representation in the association.” Article XV deals with several areas in which the association has power, one of which is, “To inquire into the cause why the churches fail to represent themselves at any time in the association.”⁹⁹ Based on these quotations it is a fair conclusion to draw that the

⁹⁷ Wayland, *Notes on the Principles...*, 180.

⁹⁸ Wayland, *Notes on the Principles...*, 181.

⁹⁹Asplund, *The Universal Register...*, 84-85.

position of Wayland was contrary to the faith and practice of Baptists at the end of the 1700's.

As a point of interest, Wayland goes on to talk candidly about his own position regarding the convention when it was founded.

When state conventions were first proposed, it was by many believed – and of these I freely confess myself to have been one – that through them we might establish a general Baptist organization. If the churches sent delegates to the Association, the Association sent delegates to the State Convention, and the State Convention sent delegates to the General Convention of the Baptists in the United States, or the Triennial Convention then existing, it would seem that all this might easily have been accomplished. I now rejoice exceedingly that the whole plan failed, and that it failed through the sturdy common sense of the masses of our brethren.¹⁰⁰

Wayland recognized what the real nature of the convention was when he stated:

Though the Triennial convention was thus restricted to its appropriate object, the work of Foreign Missions, its representative character remained. It was, by the community at large, considered to be the grand meeting of the Baptist denomination in the United States, a sort of General Assembly, to which all our affairs were brought for decision. Hence, if for any cause it was deemed desirable to commit the whole Baptist membership to any course of action, this was considered the proper place in which to make the attempt.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Wayland, *Notes on the Principles...*, 183-184. Wayland is not the only Baptist who changed his thinking regarding associations and representation. Any Baptist who has even a rudimentary interest in polity will own a copy of Hiscox's *New Directory for Baptist Churches*. The discussion by Hiscox on the nature and functioning of associations is illuminating. One quotation will illustrate his position. "An association is not a *representative* body, in the ordinary acceptance of that term. A Baptist church cannot appoint persons with delegated authority to act for it, so as to bind it by their action. It cannot transfer its authority and responsibility to any person or persons whatever. It can appoint persons as committees to perform service for it, and report their doings. If it be still insisted, for the sake of terms, that the churches do meet in the Association, by their representatives, the pastors and messengers, the reply must be—such is not the case, and cannot be, either actually or constructively for a Baptist Church cannot be *represented* by delegates authorized to act for it or in any other organization whatever" 334-335. The position of Hiscox on the representative nature of associations is clear in this quote and in the rest of the pages referenced in the *New Directory...* If there was a "*New*" *Directory* there must have been an "*Old*" or "*Original*" *Directory*. There was and it was published 35 years earlier. Edward T. Hiscox, *The Baptist Directory: A Guide to the Doctrines and Practices of Baptist Churches* (New York, NY: Sheldon and Company, 1859). At this point his position is equally clear on the nature of associations and conventions. "A *State Convention* is composed of the pastors and delegates from the churches, in a single State, meeting once a year, at such time and place as they shall agree upon. An *Association* is composed of the churches represented by the pastors and delegates appointed annually within a given district, usually smaller than a State, and of convenient access, meeting also once a year, as they may decide... No church or individual is obligated to unite with them; and if so united, can leave them when they wish. But while they remain connected with them, they must submit to be governed by their regulations" 131-132. When the "new" Hiscox is compared to the "old", one wonders what transpired in his thinking to effect such a change.

¹⁰¹ Wayland, *Notes on the Principles...*, 185.

Given Wayland's elevation of the rights of the individual, the personal nature of religion, the independency of the individual, the independency of the churches, it becomes very clear why he would object so strenuously to the idea of representation.

With the change in structure in the convention, Baptists were to lose the golden opportunity they had to establish a national association. From this point on they became fragmented, disunited and unable to work together in any kind of a connectional relationship. The society structure became the dominate method of operation and individual societies sprang up for almost every conceivable cause. An interesting list has been compiled by Winthrop Hudson. He prefaces the list with an observation about the single purpose nature of societies.

The singleness of aim of the society method of organization...may be illustrated by a mere listing of societies. The American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, the American Education Society, the American Peace Society, the American Temperance Society, the American Antislavery Society, the American Antidueling Society, the American Society for the Aid of Females Who Have Deviated From the Paths of Virtue, the American Seaman's Friend Society, the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, the American Baptist Home Mission Society, the American Baptist Publication Society, the American Baptist Education Society, the American Baptist Historical Society, the Chicago Baptist City Mission Society, the Anti-Saloon League, the Women's Christian Temperance Union. The list is endless.¹⁰²

For the Baptist at the start of the 21st century, if he merely substitutes the word parachurch for the word society, he can readily see that the problem has continued down into his own day. Indeed one proponent of the parachurch movement has been bold enough to state that:

The proliferation of para-local church movements and organizations will be one of the distinguishing hallmarks of the last half of the twentieth century. Para-local church groups now number between five thousand and ten thousand, and that number is increasing daily.¹⁰³

As if this were not enough, White observes earlier that "...the American church of today consists of multiple forms of church structure and non-local church organizations," all designed to preserve freedom, individuality, independency, and autonomy.⁷⁹

The triumph of the societal approach in the structure of a national association removed from Baptists the connectionalism that was so vital to their witness and existence. In its place they embraced a polity that Hudson accurately described as a "Stumbling into Disorder." The casual observer of the Baptist landscape notes the pervasiveness of this disorder.

¹⁰² Hudson, *Baptists in Transition...*, 24.

¹⁰³ Jerry White, *The Church and the Parachurch: An Uneasy Marriage* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1983), 35.

⁷⁹ White, 7.

Conclusion

The historical data and theological development considered in this thesis demonstrates that the Baptist enterprise in America reached its zenith at the end of the 1700's and continued into the early 1800's. During that time seeds were planted that came to fruition in the mid to late 1800's. The fruit harvested from the replanting of those seeds generated in the mid to late 1800's does not resemble the Baptist fruit harvested in earlier days. Indeed, the difference is significant enough to consider the later fruit more than just a hybrid; it may in fact be a mutation.

The material examined in this thesis is representative enough to make the conclusions drawn from it. However the material presented is by no means comprehensive. One of the greatest difficulties encountered in the pursuit of the subject of the Baptist decline was to set aside a great deal of data, both historical and theological. Material that could easily have turned a thesis into a dissertation. The material is there; it only awaits the efforts of an interested historian to make it available.

There was also a temptation to expand this thesis by considering other contributing factors that have negatively had an impact on Baptists churches and their testimony. Two of these factors are 20th century developments and were thus outside of the more historical nature of this work. The first of these recent contributing factors is the Baptist embrace of Dispensational Theology in the early 20th century. It needs to be demonstrated that this theology, with its emphasis on the universal church as opposed to the local church, has not contributed to the establishing of strong local churches among Baptists. Such an effort will necessitate the study of hermeneutics and historical theology, but will contribute to a greater understanding of contemporary Baptist churches.

The second factor contributing to the decline of Baptist churches is a late 20th century development. It is the rise of the Church Growth Movement. With the emphasis in this movement to remove those "obstacles" that stand in the way of the "seeker" there is a diminution of denominational distinctives. This linked with other pressures that Baptists face today, does not bode well for the maintaining of their historic identity and testimony.¹⁰⁴ However, an examination of Dispensational Theology and the Church Growth Movement must await analysis in a future study.

¹⁰⁴ This writer remembers a graduate course in contemporary theology that touched upon the subject of worship. During the lecture the professor made the following observation; "Rick Waren's *Purpose Driven Church* is an ecclesiology." At that point a light went on and the temptation to change this thesis had to be resisted. Though proponents of the Church Growth Movement like to argue that it crosses denominational lines, the fact is that when the nature and functioning of the local church is "defined," ecclesiology is being developed. It is no accident that churches who have embraced this movement all tend to look alike, a situation that will have a great impact on the Baptist identity and testimony.

The first consideration in this study was the theological change that Baptists underwent when they moved from a Calvinistic to an Arminian theology. Baptists in the 21st century who are Calvinists are generally regarded as holding some new heresy. Most contemporary Baptists are unaware that the theology they oppose was the theology embraced by their forefathers and was the theology that equipped them to enter victoriously into spiritual warfare. The reason for this is simple; Calvinism is a theology of sovereignty. The early Baptists believed that God would extend His kingdom and in doing so they were on the winning side. Consequently, when they planted churches they did so with the confident expectation that they would experience the blessing of God. Most Baptists today are, at best, hoping to snatch a few brands from the fire as they present a “gospel” in a “whosoever will may come” environment. Gone are the days when pulpits presented a sovereign God who was a conquering warrior intent on taking captives for His kingdom. An interesting example taken from the early history of the Tennessee Baptists illustrates how these early Baptists functioned in the light of their theology. The example is of a Mr. Green who, while attending a meeting at Prospect Church in London County, was one of a number of unbelievers who came under conviction.

Among the number was a Mr. Green. The preacher, noting the deep concern of Mr. Green, started to go to him, but Mr. Green, hat in hand, struck for the door, the preacher following. When out of the house the sinner ran, and so did the preacher, exhorting as he ran. Seeing the convict about to escape, as a prisoner fleeing from the officer, the preacher shouted, ‘Catch him, Jesus; arrest him and bring him back!’ When about one hundred yards from the church house the escaped convict fell prostrate on the ground, so the story goes, and had to be carried back to the house, where he was prayed for and labored with, and where, in about forty eight hours, he rejoiced in a Saviour’s pardoning love.¹⁰⁵

This reclamation of a sinner is obviously something far different from that which poses for evangelism among Baptists today.

As the ministries of these early Baptists are studied the student of history is struck by the fact that they were desirous of evangelizing consistently in the light of their theology. In preaching the sovereign Grace of God they were not inclined to preach as if a sinner had the ability to decide for Christ and then, after deciding, be disciplined to a greater or fuller understanding of God’s truth. In no way did they view the unbeliever as being able to ascertain the elementary truth of the gospel while the believer would be disciplined to greater levels of understanding of family truth. These early Baptists were not Gnostics who would bring initiates to a greater level of understanding when they entered the cult. This consistent application of truth is well illustrated in the life and ministry of C. H. Spurgeon. On February 28, 1858 he preached a sermon on “Particular Redemption” where he expounded Mt. 20:28. His opening remarks deal with this dualistic view where some elemental truth is for the unbeliever and a greater truth

¹⁰⁵ J. J. Burnett, *Sketches of Tennessee’s Pioneer Baptist Preachers* (Nashville, TN: Marshall and Bruce Company, 1919), 130-131.

is for the believer. Spurgeon points out that as their pastor he is bound to expound all of God's truth to them.

I shall not now simply confine myself to the doctrine of faith, or the teaching of believers baptism; I shall not stay upon the surface of matters, but shall venture, as God shall guide me, to enter in to those things that lie at the basis of the religion that we hold so dear. I shall not blush to preach before you the doctrine of God's Divine Sovereignty; I shall not stagger to preach in the most unreserved and unguarded manner the doctrine of Election. I shall not be afraid to propound the great truth of the final perseverance of the saints; I shall not withhold that undoubted truth of Scripture, the effectual calling of God's elect; I shall endeavour, as God shall help me, to keep back nothing from you who have become my flock. Seeing that many of you have now "tasted that the Lord is gracious," we will endeavour to go through the whole system of the doctrines of grace, that saints may be edified and build up in their most holy faith.¹⁰⁶

There are, no doubt, many Baptists in the 21st century that would draw the conclusion that these remarks by the "Prince of Preachers" would destroy any opportunity for evangelism in his ministry. Surely the truth of Particular Redemption could not be preached with the expectation that unbelievers would come to Christ. If Christ died for the elect then perhaps the remarks by Lightner quoted earlier are accurate. Yet the final paragraph of this sermon is as clear an evangelistic invitation as can be found anywhere, urging men to come to Christ.

Leaving controversy, however, I will now answer a question. Tell me then, sir, who did Christ die for? Will you answer me a question or two, and I will tell you whether he died for *you*. Do you want a Saviour? Do you feel that you need a Saviour? Are you this morning conscious of sin? Has the Holy Spirit taught you that you are lost? Then Christ died for you and you will be saved. Are you this morning conscious that you have no hope in the world but Christ? Do you feel that you of yourself cannot offer an atonement that can satisfy God's justice? Have you given up all confidence in yourselves? And can you say upon your bended knees, 'Lord, save, or I perish?' Christ died for you. If you are saying this morning, 'I am as good as I ought to be; I can get to heaven by my own good works,' then, remember, the Scripture says of Jesus, 'I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.' So long as you are in that state I have no atonement to preach to you. But if this morning you feel guilty, wretched, conscious of your guilt, and are ready to take Christ to be your only Saviour, I can not only say to you that you may be saved, but what is better still, that you will be saved. When you are stripped of everything but hope in Christ, when you are prepared to come empty-handed and take Christ to be your all, and to be yourself nothing at all, then you may look up to Christ, and you may say, 'Thou dear, thou bleeding Lamb of God! thy grief's were endured for me; by thy stripes I am healed, and by thy sufferings I am pardoned.' And then see what peace of mind you will have; for if Christ has died for you, you cannot be lost. God will not punish twice for one thing. If God punished Christ for your sin, he will never punish you. 'Payment, God's justice cannot twice demand, first, at the bleeding surety's hand, and then again at mine.' We can to day, if we believe in Christ, march

¹⁰⁶ C. H. Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1964), Vol. 4, 129.

to the very throne of God, stand there, and if it is said, 'Art thou guilty?' we can say, 'Yes, guilty.' But if the question is put, 'What have you to say why you should not be punished for your guilt?' We can answer, 'Great God, thy justice and thy love are both our guarantees that thou wilt not punish us for sin; for didst thou not punish Christ for sin for us? How canst thou, then, be just—how canst thou be God at all, if thou dost punish Christ the substitute, and then punish man himself afterwards?' Your only question is, 'Did Christ die for me?' And the only answer we can give is—'This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ came into the world to save sinners.' Can you write your name down among the sinners—not among the complimentary sinners, but among those that feel it, bemoan it, lament it, seek mercy on account of it? Are you a sinner? That felt, that known, that professed, you are now invited to believe that Jesus Christ died for you, because you are a sinner; and you are bidden to cast yourself upon this great immovable rock, and find eternal security in the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁷

These quotes from Spurgeon are extensive, but they are quoted to illustrate the point that Calvinism can be preached without the fear of negating evangelistic efforts. The result of this kind of preaching is that at his death in 1892, the Metropolitan Tabernacle's membership rivaled that of any mega-church that could be pointed to today.

As was also noted, a Calvinistic theology provided the foundation for building strong local churches. If churches were sovereignly planted extensions of the kingdom and their members were subject to the King who conquered them then it was only natural that they live life in a way that reflected their submission to this King. Hence, the importance of such doctrines as a regenerated church membership - only those who gave evidence of being conquered by the King were eligible to join; adult baptism by immersion - only those who were able to publicly identify with the kingdom outpost called the local church were eligible to join, and the practice of church discipline - those who did join were expected to maintain lifestyle standards that reflected their status as captives of the King.

The second major factor contributing to Baptist decline was the embracing of an individualistic concept of the doctrine of soul liberty that undercuts the corporate nature of the local church. Gone among Baptists are understandings of the corporate nature of the local church and in their place are American political concepts of individualism baptized with Christian terminology. Most 21st century American are committed to concepts of autonomy and authority that center in themselves as individuals. The average American today is committed to a philosophy of life governed by the principle of "do your own thing." To expect such a person to assume responsibilities in the local church that would interfere with their lifestyle, to submit to church discipline, to assent to a doctrinal statement or even to see the necessity of joining a local church is foreign to the thinking of most contemporary Baptists. Most any small group, Sunday school class, or Bible study provides an apt illustration of this principle at work. A text of Scripture may be cited only to have several different people give input as to its

¹⁰⁷ Spurgeon, Vol. 4, 136.

meaning. All contributors may have mutually exclusive meanings, yet everyone will consider each contributor correct with respect to their interpretation. All because each individual believer possesses the soul liberty that grants legitimacy to the individual interpretation of a text. This does not even take into account such things as church discipline, etc. The scourge of Jacksonian democracy dressed up in Christian terminology continues to plague local churches today.

The loss of the associational structure also has had a negative impact on Baptist churches. As they succumb to the inroads of parachurch organizations (societies) they find that talented personnel and much needed resources are siphoned off the local church. The ministries of many local churches are negated due to the plethora of men's, women's, children's, missionary, and benevolent ministries that abound in parachurch organizations. Baptist churches have also lost the opportunity to hold each other accountable and to mutually enter into shared ministries with each other.

Enough has been suggested in this thesis to draw the conclusion that if Baptists are to emulate the building of strong local churches throughout the land, as did their forefathers, they have their work cut out of them. They must recapture the theology of sovereignty that formed the foundation upon which earlier Baptists ministered. They must exegetically restore a proper understanding of soul liberty, priesthood of the believer, etc., in order to understand the necessity of putting to rest the individualism that plagues them. They must also rediscover the value of interdependent relationships that provide opportunities to work together for the greater goal of extending the Kingdom. Only by doing this can they expect to restore their testimony and have the impact on the world they once had.

Tempis Fugit

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