

# AMERICAN BAPTISTS

## A Brief History

### ◆ The Origins and Development of Baptist Thought and Practice

American Baptists, Southern Baptists and all the scores of other Baptist bodies in the U.S. and around the world grew out of a common tradition begun in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. That tradition has emphasized the Lordship and atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, believers' baptism, the competency of all believers to be in direct relationship with God and to interpret Scripture, the influence of the Holy Spirit on individual lives and ministries, and the need for autonomous congregations free from government interference or hierarchical polity.

The origins of Baptist thought and practice can be seen in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century in English Congregationalism, which rejected the prevalent "parish" structure of church life (Church of England) where everyone in a given community was a member of a neighborhood parish and where children were baptized.

The reaction against that structure was articulated in the concept of "the gathered church," in which membership was voluntary and based on evidence of conversion, and where baptism (for the most part) was limited to believers.

The earliest Baptist churches (1609-1612), although comprised of English-speaking congregants, flourished in Holland, where religious toleration was much greater than in England. Among their leaders were John Smyth, who led the first congregation of 36 men and women, and Thomas Helwys, who returned to England in 1612 to establish the first Baptist church in England.

From the beginning Baptists exercised their freedom in choosing to embrace either a strict (predestinarian) Calvinism or Arminianism, which held free will as the fundamental determinant of salvation. General (Arminian) and Particular (Calvinistic) Baptists were among the first distinct groups formed within the Baptist faith. Calvinism tended to characterize Baptist theology until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, when enthusiasm developed for evangelism and overseas missionary work. By and large modern Baptists are motivated by an Arminian theology that stresses free will, and have emphasized evangelism and discipleship.

Most early Baptists, while not of a single theological mindset, embraced as essential components of worship and mission the notions of the individual's "soul competency" and responsibility before God and the inviolability of church autonomy.

In the early 1630s Roger Williams, formerly a member of the Church of England, took up clerical responsibilities in Massachusetts. However, he eventually became estranged from authorities in the Massachusetts Bay Colony over the failure of church and civil functions to be independent of one another. About 1638 he established the first Baptist church in America in the then-uncolonized Rhode Island (Providence), which became the first government in history founded on the premise of absolute religious freedom. At the same time John Clarke, also originally from England and also dissatisfied with religious practice in Massachusetts, founded a Baptist church in Newport, R.I. Williams and Clarke secured a charter guaranteeing civil and religious freedom in Rhode Island from King Charles II in 1663.

Because of continuing intolerance by Puritans and others in New England,

Baptist activity developed throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century in New Jersey and Philadelphia. In 1707 the Philadelphia Baptist Association formed, comprised of five congregations in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. This and succeeding associations honored the autonomy of constituent churches, but served as councils for ordination, and a means of disciplining ministers and settling congregational disputes. By 1790 there were 35 Baptist associations, and approximately 560 ministers, 750 churches and 60,000 members in the U.S.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Isaac Backus, of Middleborough, Mass., challenged the notion that Baptists (and other Christian groups), while tolerated, still had to pay taxes to support the established (Congregational) church. Other Baptists confronted the issue in the South, where Anglican influences were prominent. In most cases change was slow to come, but progress in realizing separation of church and state had been made.

John Leland, a pastor from Virginia, actively supported Thomas Jefferson's religious freedom bill passed in Virginia in 1786. As a delegate nominee considering the proposed federal Constitution, Leland originally proposed to vote against it because of its lack of provision for religious liberty. He offered his support, however, when his opponent for the state delegate position, James Madison, convinced him provision for religious liberty would be made in what became the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution. The Baptist influence, thus, was significant in the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...."

By 1833 all of the U.S. states had, in their constitutions, affirmed the principle of separation of church and state with full religious liberty.

#### ◆ **The Call to Missionary Work**

British pastor William Carey was the most influential figure in beginning the modern missionary movement, articulating the call to overseas service with the question, "If the Gospel was worthy of all acceptance, why is it not preached to all?" He served as the first overseas representative (along with John Thomas) beginning in 1793, and remained engaged in evangelistic and educational ministries for 40 years in and around Serampore, India.

In fact the first Baptist to evangelize in a foreign country was George Lisle, a freed slave and first ordained black in America, who sailed from Georgia to establish churches in Jamaica in the 1770s.

Influenced by Carey Congregationalists Adoniram and Ann Judson set sail for India in 1812. After wrestling en route with the notion of baptism (and concluding that only immersive baptism was Scriptural) both became Baptists. No longer engaged by the Congregationalists, and forced out of India by the East India Company, they settled in another mission field, Burma. There Judson was instrumental in church growth and discipleship until his death in 1850, and his vital legacy is acknowledged by Baptist leaders there today.

Another missionary originally set to serve with the Judsons, Luther Rice, returned from India for medical reasons and to raise support for the Judsons.

His greatest contribution was motivating the creation in 1814 of the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions (Triennial Convention), the first unified national missionary-sending effort formed in the U.S. and the forerunner of today's American Baptist Board of International Ministries.

Rice preached and raised money for missionary work in many areas. He inspired Lott Cary, who later founded the African Missionary Society of Richmond and established the first Baptist church in Liberia.

Rice also influenced John Mason Peck, a pivotal figure in domestic missionary work across the U.S. in the early and mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1824 Rice and others helped form the Baptist General Tract Society, which later became the American Baptist Publication Society and eventually the American Baptist Board of Educational Ministries. The goal of that original organization was to utilize educational means “to disseminate evangelical truth and to articulate sound morals.” Its work evolved through the printing of tracts into book and curriculum publishing. Educational outreach was undertaken throughout many parts of the U.S. in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including through colporters and chapel train cars.

Within the U.S. John Mason Peck, Isaac McCoy and others exemplified the mission of the American Baptist Home Mission Society--founded in 1832; now the American Baptist Board of National Ministries--in evangelistic outreach, ministry with Native Americans and the founding of educational institutions.

#### ◆ **Origins of American Baptist Organization**

The issue of slavery reached a peak in 1845 when the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society determined that it could not appoint any candidate for service who held slaves and when the American Baptist Home Mission Society decided separate northern and southern conventions were necessary. The Southern Baptist Convention was formed in response.

Northern Baptists remained organized as a group of societies until 1907, when the Northern Baptist Convention was formed to structure coordination of the societies' work while maintaining the autonomy of constituent churches.

The Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board, founded in 1913, was begun to meet medical, insurance and pension needs of ordained and lay church workers.

#### ◆ **American Baptist Life and Mission Today**

As the acknowledgment that American Baptist life and mission transcends any set geographical area, the Northern Baptist Convention was renamed the American Baptist Convention in 1950. In 1972, in the midst of reorganization that in part reemphasized the congregation-centered mission of the denomination, its name was changed again to American Baptist Churches USA.

In geographic terms American Baptists have tended to be most numerous in northern states, although church growth in many areas of the South has been realized in recent decades. Numerically, American Baptist Churches USA, which includes about 5,800 congregations and 1.5-million members, is approximately one-tenth the size of the Southern Baptist Convention and ranks sixth in size among the largest Baptist bodies.

Growing out of the first Baptist association founded in 1707 American Baptist Churches USA now is comprised of 34 regions. They range in size from the individual urban centers of Cleveland, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Indianapolis and Los Angeles to the 13-state American Baptist Churches of the South, from the 34 congregations of the ABC of Rochester/Genesee to the nearly 500 churches of the West Virginia Baptist Convention.

The American Baptist Churches Mission Center in Valley Forge, Pa., has served since 1962 as a major site for the ongoing planning of domestic and overseas mission work, and for the production of various resources designed to help local churches and their leaders in their ministries.

Today hundreds of American Baptist home and overseas missionaries serve in partnership with others in a variety of ministries designed to strengthen spiritual, physical and social conditions in the U.S. and in more than 20 other countries.

Throughout their history American Baptists have been led by the Gospel mandates to be directly active in the institutions of society to promote holistic and healing change. The tradition of social outreach and ministry extends back to the enfranchisement and education of freedmen following the Civil War, through frontline advocacy of the Civil Rights Movement, the empowerment of women in church and society, ecological responsibility and the many contemporary issues of justice. Because of the longstanding commitment to outreach to and fellowship with all persons, American Baptist Churches USA today is the most racially inclusive body within Protestantism and will within the next few years be comprised of no racial/ethnic majority group.

In consideration of Christ's call to worldwide ministry (Acts 1:8) American Baptists always have been actively engaged in ecumenical ministry, both locally and in such bodies as the National Council of Churches of Christ, World Council of Churches and Baptist World Alliance.

Today Baptists worldwide number 43,000,000 baptized members--and a community of more than 100,000,000 people--in approximately 160,000 churches. The greatest growth can be seen in the two-thirds worlds of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

*For more information on American Baptist polity, organization and missiology:*

- ◆ *the American Baptist Churches USA Website—[www.abc-usa.org](http://www.abc-usa.org)*
- ◆ ***We Are American Baptists: A People of Faith/A People in Mission***  
(available from Office of Communication, P.O. Box 851, Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851)

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