



Transformation Ministries
970 South Village Oaks Drive - Suite 101
Covina, California 91724-0609
800-299-3448 or 626-915-7641
www.transmin.org

A Brief History of a Mission Movement

(edited by Dr. Dale V. Salico, Executive Minister, Transformation Ministries)

~ The Origins and Development of Baptist Thought and Practice

Baptist bodies in the U.S. and around the world, grew out of a movement begun in the early 1600's. That movement has emphasized:

- the Bible as the ultimate authority on issues of belief and practice for the church;
- the Lordship and atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ as the basis for salvation;
- the necessity of a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord as prerequisite for baptism and church membership;
- the immersion of believers in water as the form of baptism found in the New Testament;
- the ability of all believers to be in direct relationship with God and to understand Scripture as illumined by the Holy Spirit;
- the influence of the Holy Spirit on individual lives and ministries; and
- the need for autonomous congregations free from government interference or hierarchical polity.

~ From Parish Church to the Gathered Church

In the late 1500's the Church of England was organized around the concept of the "parish church." Everyone in a given community was a member of a neighborhood parish and all children born in the parish were baptized in the Church of England as prescribed by law. Congregationalists (and later, Baptists), however, articulated the concept of the gathered church, in which membership was voluntary and based on evidence of conversion. Because church membership was limited to believers in Christ, this came to be known as regenerate church membership.

The earliest Baptist churches (1609-1612), although comprised of English speaking people, 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. Smyth, who had already separated from the Church of England before he arrived in Holland, was challenged by the teaching of Anabaptist Mennonites in Amsterdam regarding baptism. After a serious study of Scripture Smyth became convinced that believer's baptism was the practice and teaching of the New Testament. He then was baptized, and formed a new church based on believer's baptism.

~ Baptist Confessions of Faith

From the beginning, Baptists expressed their understanding of Christian faith in confessional statements, beginning with confessions written by John Smyth in 1609 and Thomas Helwys in 1611. Better known are the First and Second London Confessions (1644 and 1677) in which Calvinistic Baptists sought to demonstrate both their allegiance to historic Christian faith and their understanding of biblical teaching in doctrines that were distinctively Baptist. The Orthodox Creed of the General Baptists (1678) served a similar purpose for Arminian Baptists. The significance of these confessions can hardly be overstated as doctrinal summaries widely adhered to by Baptists. In the New World, the Philadelphia Baptist Association adopted the Second London Confession as its statement of belief in 1742. The confessions helped demonstrate that Baptists were not heretics, but legitimate members of the body of Christ. In addition, as examples of their understanding of the Bible, the confessions won many converts to the Baptist position.

In the United States the New Hampshire Confession (1833) attained the widest circulation of any Baptist confession in history. Its statement on Scripture demonstrates the Baptist understanding of the supreme authority of the Bible over even the confession itself:

We believe the Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired, and is a perfect treasure of heavenly instruction; that it has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth without mixture of error for its matter; that it reveals the principles by which God will judge us; and therefore is, and shall remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which human conduct, creeds, and opinions shall be tried. (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, pp. 361-362.)

The place of confessions of faith in Baptist history is widely misunderstood in our day. Baptist historian Norman H. Maring observed, "It is often said today that Baptists are a non-creedal people, but that idea is not historically accurate. While it is true that they regarded the Bible as their rule of faith and practice, they felt that some sort of summary statement was needed to set forth the most fundamental teachings of Scripture." (Baptists in New Jersey, p. 98)

In the 1700's Associations (formed by a number of churches banding together for fellowship, mission and instruction) adopted confessions of faith to maintain the theological integrity of congregations. Churches then wrote confessional statements in conformity to their association. Ministers were expected to make affirmations of faith at their ordination, which would be in keeping with the beliefs subscribed to by the churches.

By the second half of the 1800's, a growing indifference toward theological precision led first to the downsizing, and later, the elimination of confessions from association and church documents. "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 any importance to doctrinal statements." (Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey*, pp. 250)

In spite of this widespread misunderstanding regarding the place of confessions in their own history, many Baptist churches, associations, and some American Baptist Regions, including the American Baptist Churches of the Pacific Southwest, continue to express their faith through confessional statements.

~ Baptists in the United States

About 1638, Roger Williams, estranged from authorities in the Massachusetts Bay Colony over the mingling of church and state functions, established the first Baptist church in America in the then uncolonized Rhode Island (Providence). Rhode Island colony became the first government in history founded on the premise of absolute religious freedom.

Because of continuing intolerance by Puritans and others in New England, Baptist activity developed throughout the 1600's in New Jersey and Philadelphia. In 1707 the Philadelphia Baptist Association formed, comprised of five congregations in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. By 1790 there were 35 Baptist associations, and approximately 560 ministers, 750 churches and 60,000 members in the U.S.

~ The Separation of Church and State

Even after the American Revolution, a portion of the tax money paid by citizens supported the "established church" of the state in which they lived. Isaac Backus, of Middleborough, MA, challenged the notion that Baptists (and other Christian groups), while tolerated, still had to pay taxes to support the established church of Massachusetts, the Congregationalists. Other Baptists confronted the issue in the South, where the Anglican Church was similarly "established." 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. Nominated to be a delegate from Virginia to the Convention called to write a new federal constitution for the United States, Leland was committed to vote against the proposed Constitution because of its lack of provision for religious liberty. He offered his support to James Madison, however, when Madison promised him that provision for religious liberty would be made in the Constitution in a 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 states had affirmed the principle of separation of church and state with full religious liberty.

~ The Call to Missionary Work

Back in England, 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?" Having become convinced through his study of Scripture of both believer's baptism and the permanency of God's call of the church to mission, Carey won the minds of British Baptists to the mandate to take the gospel to every nation. He served as the first British overseas missionary, beginning in 1793, and remained engaged in evangelistic and educational ministries for 40 years in and around Serampore, India.

While Carey is remembered as the man who launched the modern missionary movement, 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 1770's.

Influenced by Carey, Congregationalists Adoniram and Ann Judson set sail from Salem, Massachusetts, for India in 1812 as Congregationalists, prepared to baptize believers and their households. As the slow sailing ship made its way across the Atlantic, Adoniram, using the time for Bible study, concluded that the New Testament made no reference to the baptism of infants. The Judsons became Baptists, settling in a new mission field, Burma, northeast of India. There, Judson was instrumental in church growth and discipleship until his death in 1850. His vital legacy is acknowledged by Baptist leaders there today.

Another missionary originally sent to serve with the Judsons, Luther Rice, returned from India for medical reasons and to raise support for the Judsons among Baptist churches in the United States. 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, Virginia, 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 1800's.