

# **THE HISTORY OF REFORMED BAPTISTS IN AMERICA**

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*“Isaac unstopped the wells the Philistines had stopped up ...”* Genesis 26:18

## **The 17th and 18th Century Explosion of Calvinistic Baptists**

America was settled by Europeans seeking religious freedom, political freedom, economic opportunities, wealth, adventure and frequently an admixture of more than one ingredient. Apart from the Calvinist radical Roger Williams, who was briefly a Baptist, Baptists had scant representation in the 17th century colonies. But by the 18th century “Evangelical Awakening” (called the Great Awakening in the colonies), Baptists, especially Calvinistic Baptists, began to make their mark. The revival not only brought many of the unchurched into the Kingdom of God, but it also split many Congregational, Anglican and Presbyterian churches. Some of the resulting “Separatist Churches” became Baptists *en masse*. Baptist churches grew from 96 to 457 in forty years. Most of them were Calvinistic Baptists. Pastors and itinerant evangelists whose names are almost forgotten saw a multitude of souls come into the Kingdom through their preaching and an equal number of revived Christians becoming Baptists: Isaac Backus, Hezekiah Smith and Morgan Edwards from the northern colonies; Shubal Stearns, Daniel Marshall, Oliver Hart and Richard Furman in the southern colonies. Like mushrooms after a summer rain, Baptist churches sprang up all over the 13 original colonies. While observing the hard-won Baptist doctrine of the independency of each local congregation, Colonial Baptists also associated with other like-minded churches in local and regional associations. The earliest and most famous associations, Rhode Island, Philadelphia and Charleston, each adopted the 2nd London Confession of 1689. [e.g. Elias Keach, son of Baptist patriarch Benjamin Keach, helped the Philadelphia Association adopt the 2nd London Confession, with an appendix on singing hymns – hence the Philadelphia Confession of Faith.] By the early 1800s, there were 128 Baptist associations. Baptists had come to outnumber Anglicans who had a century and a half start on them.

## **The 19th Century Consolidation, Division and Splintering**

With their numbers rising, Baptists entered the 19th Century with some confidence. Though religious freedom for Baptists would not yet be a full reality in some states of what was formerly Puritan New England, Baptists could point with pride to Adoniram Judson, the first Baptist foreign missionary from America. Though Calvinistic and Arminian Baptist churches were divided, there was much else to

## THE HISTORY OF REFORMED BAPTISTS IN AMERICA

encourage Calvinistic Baptist leaders. Numerical and financial growth gave impetus to an on-again, off-again vision for missions: to the Native American Indians, black slaves and migrating white settlers who were on their way to the churchless frontiers of the West. In the South, the “West” was Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas and Arkansas. In the North, the “West” was what is now called the Midwest (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, etc.). Recent studies have shown that Calvinistic orthodoxy was the predominant doctrinal position among Baptists in the Carolinas and Georgia. Baptist leader Jesse Mercer would serialize the 1689 Baptist Confession in his state Baptist newspaper, THE CHRISTIAN INDEX of Georgia; his assistant editor noted that all regular Baptists in the South used the 1689 Confession or their own local adaption of it. More than one local association in the South debated the question: ”Could a pastor be considered orthodox who claimed to believe in the five points of Calvinism but did not preach it?” The resounding vote of the association was “No!”

By mid-century, the issues of slavery, how to view Native American Indian missions, eastern establishment versus western settlers, the Finney-inspired “new measures” and “revivalism” of the 2nd Great Awakening (1790-1830) versus historic Calvinism and the normal means of grace, local fears over loss of autonomy, voluntary societies (19th century “para-church ministries”) versus local church-based ministries, financial concerns about the equitable distribution of mission funds, the rise of hyper-Calvinism and anti-missions associations, Alexander Campbell and the rise of Restoration Churches (Churches of Christ; “Christian” churches), questions about ministerial training, *et al* would further divide then splinter Calvinistic Baptist churches. The Civil War (1861-1865) killed more men than all our other wars combined, and divided the nation into two halves, North and South, including the churches. Besides the decimation of a whole generation of young men in the war, moral and social unrest soon followed as it does most other wars. Though retarded to some degree by the 1858-59 revival (which spilled over into the armies of the North and the South during the Civil War), the young nation and its Baptist churches were further weakened and becoming easy prey for yet more vicious forces at work.

The last third of the 19th century saw virulent forces at work which preyed upon the weakened body of the Protestant and Baptist churches. The nation would grow by 40 percent through the immigration of millions of baptized unbelievers from Roman Catholic Ireland, Italy, southern Germany and Poland. Cities in the North were overrun with immigrants hungry for the jobs rumored to exist in the steel mills, factories and stockyards. Once overrun, they were quickly overwhelmed with problems the young nation and its Protestant establishment had not seen

# **THE HISTORY OF REFORMED BAPTISTS IN AMERICA**

before. Baptists struggled how to evangelize and plant churches in the teeming slums of European immigrants, many of whom could not speak English. The new scientism of Darwin and Lyell brought into question the long understood biblical world view of both Christendom and European civilization in favor of naturalistic evolution. Unbelievers and skeptics found the leverage they had previously lacked to attack the Protestant intellectual consensus. German higher criticism of the Bible, adding its subtle attacks on the authority of the Bible and Christian doctrine, brought intellectual pressure to bear upon the growing dominance of Enlightenment rationalism. Baptists, especially in the northern states, were not immune from such widespread cultural struggles. Baptist pulpits and seminaries capitulated to the spirit of the age, rushing to jump on the bandwagon of intellectual respectability. The rise of prophetic speculation and Dispensational theology were red herrings that drew the energy and focus of many Baptist churches and pastors away from the historic faith and further weakened the churches.

Ironically, the South, so ravaged by the war and the harsh realities of Reconstruction afterwards, was spared many of the social problems of the North. The shattered southern economy did not generate industries and the jobs which immigrants would travel far to fill. The Protestant and Reformed churches, including the Baptists, were never overwhelmed by foreign immigration. They still had to deal with the millions of freed slaves in their midst and would fail for another century to offer social political and economic freedom to the emancipated slaves and their descendants. But their universities and seminaries did not look to New England or European trained academics for its professors. The acid corrosion of unbelief would not impact the South for another half century. However, the growing acceptance of Charles Finny's "new measures" and Pelagian theology along with the explosive growth of Wesleyan Arminianism would further weaken the Calvinistic heritage of Baptists in the South.

## **The 20th Century and the Present State of Reformed Baptists**

Resurgent Calvinism began in the 1950s. The 1920s/1930/s saw the rise of Dispensational theology, alongside the vicious Modernist-Fundamentalist battles and the loss of northern denominations to theological liberalism. World War II brought horror to the world and finished off the giddy optimism of Liberalism still struggling to recover from World War I. But Baptists were struggling like other denominations to find their way. Theology was in disarray. The Bible was suspect. Presbyterian scholar/Reformer J. Gresham Machen, when asked why he did not call himself a fundamentalist, though he was a hero to many fundamentalists,

## **THE HISTORY OF REFORMED BAPTISTS IN AMERICA**

responded to the effect that fundamentalism was too small a ledge to stand upon as the waves of modernity swept over the shores of America. He stood for full-blooded, confessional Protestantism of the Westminster type. By the 1950s, some Baptists, disillusioned with Dispensational theology and fundamentalism's "easy believism", refusing to believe that Barthian theology was an improvement over liberalism, began to see in scripture and history the old wells of theology from which their ancestors had drunk deeply and which changed their lives and their nations. They wanted both the doctrines of grace of the Protestant Reformation, but also the evangelical and Baptist doctrines of their Puritan Baptist forefathers.

In the 1960s, Baptists began to adopt the 2nd London Confession of 1689 as their understanding of the Bible and its theology. Baptist churches in the Mid-Atlantic States of Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York began to form around the 1689 Confession, holding family conferences, pastors' conferences and publishing materials consistent with their theology. The Banner of Truth placed its North American headquarters in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, largely through the impetus of Reformed Baptist Ernie Reisinger and Grace Baptist Church of Carlisle. By the 1970s, conferences and influence were growing just as Calvinistic Baptists began to struggle to understand their own theology in greater depth and how it related to other Protestant Reformation theologies and the Word of God. What was the place of the law of God in the New Testament? How did the Old and New Covenants inter-relate? Was Dispensational theology compatible with Reformed theology? Did one need to be covenantal to be Reformed? Could one be covenantal and a Baptist? What, if anything should be retained from Fundamentalism? Was Fundamentalism's practice of seeing the local pastor as the Baptist Pope biblical? Was the Kingdom of God shaped like the USA? How was American Civil Religion intertwined with Baptist understanding of Christianity in the late 20th century? What was the place of associations of churches? What was "hyper-autonomy" and were some Baptists guilty of it? Were all Elders also Pastors? What was the authority of Elders? What was "authoritarianism" and what was it like to be infected with it? And as before, whenever true Calvinism is recovered, hyper-Calvinism arises as a plague to confuse the saints and give fodder to the Truth's enemies. What's more, the moral crisis of the West which followed the demise of Protestantism and confidence in the Word of God also plagued Reformed churches of Baptist persuasion. Prominent Baptist leaders fell into immorality and spoiled not only their own testimonies but also the credibility of the doctrines they were called to adorn and defend.

In 1997, the first national association of confessional Baptists was formed in Mesa, Arizona. Delegates from across the U.S. and Canada gathered to formally adopt

## **THE HISTORY OF REFORMED BAPTISTS IN AMERICA**

the 2nd London Confession of Faith of 1689 as their organizing document and secondary authority, after the authority of the Word of God. This group is called the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America (ARBCA). [It arose out of cooperation among 1689 confessional Baptists in foreign missions, the Reformed Baptist Missions Services (RBMS) which was formed in 1985 and sought to honor the local church autonomy of Baptist polity while cooperating together to better accomplish foreign missions.] ARBCA churches work together in foreign missions, stateside church planting, ministerial training and literature production. Though small in number and growing in their own understanding of the Word of God and the 2nd London Confession, Reformed Baptists greatly need your prayers to live humble and holy lives as an adornment to the Savior they confess and to preach the glorious doctrines of Christ recovered at the Reformation and heralded by our Puritan Baptist forefathers in the 2nd London Baptist Confession of 1689. Our God and Savior has seen fit to unstop the wells of salvation which the Philistines had stopped up. Like Isaac, we must drink deeply, and give to others this precious water of life.