

MOVEMENTS AMONG THE BAPTISTS FROM 1800-1850

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An understanding of different movements within the Baptists of the Kentucky-Tennessee frontiers is essential understanding Dr. J. R. Graves' motivation in "resetting" the Baptist Landmarks during the mid-1800's.

1. Great Revivals on the Frontier

Beginning about 1800, especially in Kentucky, hundreds of people were saved, baptized, and added to the churches. Associations were organized and great camp meetings were held. On a positive note, these revivals set the tone for the eventual union of the Regular and Separate Baptists in Kentucky.

Many changes had occurred in America since the Revolution and separation from England. However, John T. Christian called attention to an observation made by Robert B. Semple, "The Revolution was very helpful to the liberty of the Baptists; however, it had the opposite effect upon "the life of religion among them." [1]

Dr. Christian added that a low standard of religion and morals prevailed, family worship was neglected, and little attention was paid to the training of youth in the fear of God. [2] In addition, the influence of French infidelity threatened to sweep away every trace of Christianity. [3]

The religious condition of Kentucky and Tennessee was particularly deplorable.. The character of the people was described as "Politically they were violent and dogmatic; morally they were corrupting; and, in respect of religion, they were utterly infidel." [4]

Dr. John T. Christian quoted a Congregational historian, "The martyr spirit which animated the first generation of Baptists had subsided with the removal of their civil disabilities, and their religious zeal suffered a proportionate decline." [5]

It was in these conditions that the revival spirit commenced in Kentucky with the first regular camp meeting which was held in July, 1800. Once these meetings were introduced "the plan spread like wildfire. One after another was held in rapid succession. The woods and paths seemed alive with people, and the number reported attending is almost incredible." [6]

Christian quoted Benedict, "This great revival...spread fast in different directions, and in a short time almost every part of the State was affected by its influence. It was computed that about ten thousand were baptized and added to the Baptist churches in the course of two or three years... Many of their ministers baptized in a number of neighboring churches from two hundred to four hundred each. And two of them baptized about five hundred each in the course of the revival." [7]

Jesse Mercer wrote in 1803, "We are authorized to say that, in six associations in Kentucky, there are at least 10,000 young converts." [8]

Spencer wrote, "The revival had an especially happy effect on the Baptists, in disposing them to make more efforts to heal some unhappy divisions that existed among them, and in enlarging the spirit of missions." [9] Dr. Christian added, "This revival brought on the great missionary era among Baptists." [10]

Although these great revivals had a positive result in revival of the churches in Kentucky, there were unfortunate by-products, which resulted in the deterioration of a positive Baptist identity. The Baptists who had fled from Virginia and other eastern

states in order to secure religious freedom were well aware of essential differences between those who practiced infant baptism and baptismal regeneration.

However, most of these revivals were actually “union” camp meetings in which the Baptists sometimes joined with the Methodists, Presbyterians, and possibly others. At this time these different denominations basically preached “repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ” as the plan of salvation. However, at the close of the union meetings an invitation would be given and those who had professed faith and wanted to receive baptism would then choose which church they wished to be baptized by and join as a member.

The situation was further exacerbated by the frontier conditions, with uneducated preachers and church members, and with few support ministries, such as religious periodicals, Sunday school literature, theological education, etc. Then add the problems presented by union Sunday schools, followed by preaching services on a rotational basis in the community meeting house by the predominant church groups of the area.

Under these conditions the distinctions between the Baptists and other faiths became obscured, and led to Baptist churches sometimes receiving members who were baptized by other churches, usually referred to as “alien immersion.” The lack of doctrinal distinctions prepared the ground for the two religious upheavals, which will be discussed in the next section, “Trouble in the Camp.” Dr. J. R. Graves addressed this difficulty as he challenged the Baptists to “re-set” the Landmarks which had been obscured by these problems during the first half of the nineteenth century.

As was previously indicated the revivals in Kentucky led to the union of the Regular and Separate Baptists as United Baptists. In like manner, the missionary enthusiasm that was experienced during the first part of the nineteenth century also led to a blurring of denominational distinctives on the part of those eastern Baptists. The enthusiasm led to the conclusion that the mission work through which people were being saved in foreign countries was more important than baptism, the Lord’s Supper, or other Baptist distinctives.

As a result many of the mission societies in the eastern states were interdenominational, and the importance of combining to sponsor mission activities had become more important than distinctive church truths.

This limited representation in the Triennial Convention primarily from the states of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania may account for the statements by James E. Tull, which asserted that alien immersion was almost a moot subject among the Baptists during this period.

These factors led to an ecumenical spirit that blurred denominational distinctives, which led to union meetings and Sunday schools, inter-denominational participation in ordinations and associational representation. To these aberrations can be added the nature of the Triennial Convention. The four articles that were quoted indicate that the Triennial Convention usurped many of the functions true Baptists believe were assigned to the local churches by Jesus in the Great Commission.

Thus the situation was ripe for the next two developments: Daniel Parker and the Primitive Baptists who were opposed to most missionary and church ministry activities, and the Campbellite “Reformation” movement which took advantage of the neglect of Baptist distinctives, or as Dr. Graves would later assert, created the need to “Re-set” the Baptist Landmarks.

Trouble in the Camp

2. Rise of the "Anti-effort" Primitive Baptists

The "anti-effort" movement that eventually led to the Primitive Baptist secession was an aggressive campaign against missions, education, Sunday schools, and indeed almost everything that organization fostered. Much of the opposition was based on ignorance, prejudice, and misunderstandings, which became the fruitful source of the denominational dissensions.

John T. Christian focused on the problem:

While there was great opposition to missions, which gradually augmented as time went on, there was, if possible, a more bitter opposition to education, and to the establishment of Baptist colleges. The expressed opposition to these benevolent enterprises, as they were designated, was the conviction that they were human institutions, inventions and schemes, and contrary to the simplicity of the instructions enunciated in the New Testament for the spread of the gospel.

There were also, of course, lower considerations, such as that preachers would not receive their support if mission collections were pressed... Others feared that educated men would take their places. The Holy Spirit instructed preachers what to say, and therefore human learning was unnecessary.

So missions and mission societies, Sunday schools, colleges and education, paid ministers, and temperance societies were denounced as contrary to the Word of God and human liberty.[11]

This conflict began somewhere about the year 1814 and increased in violence until 1835 to 1842, when many of the churches and associations were rent asunder. John T. Christian quoted the following analysis of the movement in Tennessee by I. J. Roberts:

The Baptists are divided into four shades of difference, viz.: 1. The Regular Baptists, such as live in Georgia and S. Carolina, &c., so called by way of distinction. 2. The Separate Baptists, so-called from having separated from the Regulars on Armenian principles; .. 3. Campbellite Baptists; so called from having adopted the sentiments of Alexander Campbell of Virginia. None of these commune together. 4. The seed Baptists; their preachers sometimes, by way of emphasis, are called snake preachers, because they preach that a part of the human family are the Seed of Adam, and under the law, for whom Christ died; and that a part of the Seed of the Serpent, are not under the law, for whom Christ never did die.[12]

By the year 1835 divisions in churches and associations became common. An example is the Yellow River Association in Georgia which adopted the following non-fellowshipping resolution in 1838:

That the institutions of the day, called benevolent, to-wit: the Convention, Bible Society, Sunday School Union, Tract Society, Temperance Society, Abolition Society, Theological Seminary, and all other institutions tributary to the missionary plan, now existing in the United States, are unscriptural, and that we, as an Association, will not correspond with any Association that has united with them; nor will we hold in our communion or fellowship any church that is connected with them.

Dr. John T. Christian summarized the reasons that may be given for these divisions:

The Baptist denomination, at this time, was not consolidated or unified. The Baptists until recently had been few and scattered, the churches were often located far apart, they had preaching very seldom and no local pastor, the associations met only once a year and were

frequently turned into debating societies, there were few Baptist newspapers and they only had a small circulation, and the Triennial Convention had just been organized, and was perhaps the occasion for the attack. There was as yet no common rallying point. The methods of work were new and untried. The anti-missionary newspapers, *The Signs of the Times* and *The Primitive Baptist*, were widely circulated and from every standpoint attacked the new institutions. Many of the charges preferred were unjust but they produced the desired results.

The state of religion, in this period, the country over, was very low. It was a time of chaos and confusion, of bitter animosity and dissension, and of course religious conditions were deplorable.[13]

Daniel Parker, the originator of the system, provided the catalyst for the negative sentiment that was being expressed. His labors were extended from North Carolina through Tennessee, Kentucky, Illinois, and from Indiana to Texas.

At the heart of the Primitive theology was Parker's "Two Seed doctrine" [Seed of Adam and Seed of the Serpent], which was first expressed in a tract in 1829.

Dr. Christian analyzed the effectiveness of Parker's ministry:

Several circumstances combined to give him and his doctrine extraordinary influence. Our Methodist brethren had, from the first settlement of the country, been very numerous and strong. Here the Cumberland denomination arose, and swept over the land like a whirlwind. Both those classes of Christians were ultra-Armenian, and they and the Baptists were perpetually at war. It is not surprising that, in these circumstances, the Baptists became insensibly ultra-predestinarian. Of this doctrine Parker was the champion, and therefore, the general favorite...

It may be supposed that the repugnance of his system would have destroyed his influence, but this was not the case. So ingeniously did he interweave it with Baptist doctrines, as then understood and preached, which was a kind of antinomianism, that it required much discrimination to separate them, and make them appear in contrast, with satisfactory distinctness. His views met with a spirited resistance from a few men... but the prevailing feeling was, that if he erred, it was on the safe side--in favor of the divine sovereignty, and in opposition to Arminianism.[14]

In 1820 Parker published his book, *Principles and Practice of the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions*. In that publication he wrote:

That missionary societies, not being formed and sustained by the authority of the churches of Jesus Christ, not under their control, but based upon the principle of the payment of a definite sum of money by individuals, acting independent of the churches, and who, by appointing the managing committee, exercise entire control, and thus take the appropriate work of the churches out of their hands. That in assuming to appoint missionaries, and designate their fields of labor, without any direct responsibility to the churches, they usurp another of the church's prerogatives, in controlling a portion of their ministry.[15]

Dr. J. P. Peck recorded the following terrible results of the agitation in the Sangamon Association:

We need not inform our readers that these movements, hostile to missions, were an effectual barrier to religious efforts of every kind in these churches connected with these Associations--that the spirit of God fled from such scenes of strife and confusion--that revivals of religion were withheld from such churches--that a majority of the churches then have ceased to exist--that an unusual number of the preachers have turned out to be drunkards and profligates--and that so far as religion is concerned other churches and Associations cover this field. God has spoken in his Providence, in terms too plain and fearful to be misunderstood-- "O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself." [16]

The opposition to missions and the rise of the Primitive Baptists, led the mainstream Baptists to adopt the name "Missionary Baptists" or "United-effort" Baptists to distinguish themselves from the Primitive or "Anti-effort" Baptists.

3. The “reform” movement of Alexander Campbell

Dr. John T. Christian stated,

The advent of Campbell into Kentucky Baptist affairs was under the most favorable conditions possible for the promulgation of his peculiar views. There was no general organization among the Baptists in the states and consequently no room for counsel and united action. They had but few schools and colleges, and, consequently, few trained ministers. In a technical sense there were none. There were a few struggling Baptist newspapers, but none of commanding influence. The strenuous preaching of hyper-Calvinism had produced, in many quarters, a reaction toward Arminianism. The denomination from the first had been divided upon the subject of creeds... The agitations against missions, Bible societies and theological schools had just begun. Indeed, there was a tendency to looseness of views which was a portend of danger. The Presbyterians were aggressive, and possibly sometimes arrogant, and it was felt that a Baptist champion who could combat them would be welcome. All things worked together for the coming of Mr. Campbell.[17]

Mr. McCalla, a Presbyterian for some years, had been preaching in Kentucky on baptism and kindred subjects. He repeatedly challenged the Baptists for a debate. The Baptists accepted the challenge and the debate between him and Campbell was duly arranged... It was the first discussion of any prominence that had ever taken place in Kentucky between a Baptist and a Pedobaptist...

In this debate Mr. Campbell said little or nothing which differed from the ordinary views of the Baptists on the design of baptism... Jeremiah Vardeman, the successful, the eloquent, was his moderator, and he was easily the most influential Baptist in the State.[18]

After concluding the debate, Campbell passed through all the principal towns of Northern Kentucky preaching everywhere he went to vast multitudes. Never in the history of Kentucky had a religious teacher created such a sensation or attracted such attention.[19]

Dr. Christian analyzed,

There were many things that contributed to the spread of the peculiar views of Mr. Campbell among the Baptists of Kentucky. His personal popularity in the overthrow of the Pedobaptists has been mentioned. In this debate he displayed more talent and learning than had ever been known in this State. The manner in which he performed the part not only pleased the Baptists, but gave them triumphant satisfaction. Many of them considered Campbell as the greatest living man. Thus the McCalla debate opened the way for the dissemination of his religious views among the Baptists. Never did a reformer commence his work under more flattering auspices...

Another reason for his success was that his system was slowly developed, and his views gradually expressed. In process of time he came to the position that the Christian church was buried under rubbish for ages, and that it was his mission to dig it out.[20]

He wrote in terms of ridicule of what is designated as a call “to the ministry,” and made the impression that it was as much the duty and privilege of one Christian brother as another to preach the gospel...

It was also understood that he was opposed to Bible, Missionary and Tract Societies, Sunday schools and other institutions of this kind...

The Baptists on the other hand were illy prepared to meet error. They had no general body, save the Triennial Convention, which was new and met only every three years, upon which they could consolidate their interests, or even meet for counsel. They had only a few weak and uninfluential newspapers. There were only a few Baptist preachers who had read through the New Testament in Greek or were capable of making a Greek criticism. They were not accustomed to polemical discussions. Their preaching was confined principally to experimental and practical topics while controversy was repudiated.

Those who followed the lead of Mr. Campbell became exceedingly aggressive. In northern Kentucky thousands of people were immersed for the forgiveness of sins.

The method of procedure between the parties was very different. The Baptists, whether in the majority or in the minority were in favor of a separation. The followers of Mr. Campbell, unless in the majority, were opposed to separation.[21]

Dr. Christian quoted Dr. W. C. Buck, who gave the following history of the situation and the reasons for the rise and progress of this schism among the Baptists of Kentucky:

...let us look back to the state of things as they were in 1832, when the friends of effort began to agitate the plan of a Baptist State Convention, as the only expedient which then appeared practicable, to save the denomination from utter anarchy and ruin; and what do we see? Previous to that tremendous shock which the Campbellistical heresy inflicted upon the denominations in the west, and by which one-half of the churches in this State were rived asunder, and a large proportion of the ministry subverted, the denomination in Kentucky numbered somewhere about 400 churches, contained between 25 and 30,000 members, who were served by about 250 to 300 preachers. This we suppose to be about the statistical condition of the denomination, in 1828 and '30, when Campbellism broke out in our churches; and had they been united, properly instructed and disciplined, that schism would never have occurred; but they were deficient in all these respects. They were generally descendants from Virginia Baptists, and had been cradled and schooled in settled aversion to clerical distinction and clerical support, by legal enactment, as it was in the State before the Revolution; but they had suffered these correct opinions to degenerate into an entire, practical neglect of the ministry, and with a large proportion this degeneracy had become sentimental; ... but they proceeded further to deny the authority of Christ, to demand a support for those whom they acknowledged to be chosen and sent by him, as his ambassadors.

The consequence was, the preachers had to engage in secular employment, for support, deprive themselves of study, and preach when they could; so that there was not, even five years ago, one settled pastor in Kentucky, nor one minister supported... A very few churches had preaching twice a month; once a month was thought to be the rule of perfection, and beyond this few aspired, while a large proportion were entirely destitute; and yet if you would attend one of those monthly Sabbath meetings, you would see from one to half a dozen ordained and licensed preachers...

We will venture to assert that not more than a third of the ministry were employed, taking one Sabbath with another, the year around. And yet, if this miserable state of things had been all, the trouble would not have been half so great; but, alas! the fever of faction raged in all the violence of embittered personal strife...

Nothing was heard from the pulpit but the extremes of these opposite sentiments; nothing was *Gospel* to the different parties, but what favored their side of the question in the most ultra forms; and nothing *error* but what opposed it; so, that one wide and deep line divided the denomi

nation and every church in it; giving all on one side to *Calvinism*, and all on the other side to *Armenianism*; neither party as such deserved the appellation bestowed upon it by the other, but still as perfectly separated upon these lines.

A volcanic fire burned to the very center of the denomination, which finally burst out in one widespread and ruinous disruption, by which the extremes of those parties were thrown off at opposite poles; the ultras on one side to Campbellism, and those on the other to antinomian-particularism. Few churches in the States escaped unscathed by this avalanche of error, and not one wholly untainted with the spirit of jealousy, captiousness, and discord which it engendered, and from which the denomination has not yet recovered;..

The spirit of antinomian-particularism, has not yet fairly worked off, and is still throwing up its murky fires, and threatening some of our churches with anarchy and disunion. Not so with Campbellism; it rode upon the passion of its votaries with the speed of a dromedary, and did its work of destruction in a hurry, by which the denomination in Kentucky was reduced to something like 20,000, with perhaps near 200 preachers, while the number of churches remained undiminished.[22]

Dr. Christian concluded the chapter,

This schism together with that of the Anti-Mission separations brought about untold disaster to the Baptists... In 1832 when the storm of schism had spent its fury, they had thirty-three associations in Kentucky, four hundred and eighty-four churches, and thirty-four thousand one hundred and twenty-four members. The increase since then has been unprecedented; in the succeeding ten years they have doubled their numbers.[23]

Dr. Christian began the next chapter by stating,

In all this period of strife and schism the Baptists were slowly grouping their way into a place of purpose and action. These troubles had a unifying effect. The controversies in a measure and unnecessary losses but these were not without compensations.

Dr. Christian confirmed,

The subjects of alien immersions and the proper administrator of baptism often arose among the Baptists of this period. This was especially accentuated by the defection of the anti-mission forces and the followers of Alexander Campbell. After the American Civil War it sometimes became acute. There have always been differences of opinion on this subject; but among early American Baptists, perhaps, the vast majority rejected such baptisms and accounted them as invalid.[24]

Thus, we should be able to see that J. R. Graves was not a part of the problems that had arisen among the Baptists in the period from 1800-1850; rather, he was part of the solution to the problems. His “re-setting” of the Baptist Landmarks was indeed an effort to deal with the problems that were confronting the Baptists after this devastating period.

This article was adapted from **Landmarkism Revisited**, written by Robert Ashcraft. The 297-page book was printed in 2003. The purchase price is \$12.50.

[1] John T. Christian, II, p. 345, reference to (Semple)

[2] John T. Christian, II, pp. 345-346.

- [3] John T. Christian, II, p. 347.
- [4] John T. Christian, II, p. 352.
- [5] John T. Christian, II, p. 351, and quoting Dr. Joseph B. Clark.
- [6] John T. Christian, II, pp. 358-360.
- [7] John T. Christian, II, 365, and citing Benedict, II.
- [8] John T. Christian, II, p. 366, citing quote from Jesse Mercer appended to Minutes of the Georgia Association for 1803.
- [9] John T. Christian, II, p. 366, and citing Spencer, **History of Kentucky Baptists**, I.
- [10] John T. Christian, II, p. 368.
- [11] John T. Christian, **History of the Baptists**, II, pp. 404-405.
- [12] John T. Christian, II, pp. 407-408, and citing I. J. Roberts, *The Columbian Star and Christian Index*, Oct. 9, 1830.
- [13] John T. Christian, II, pp. 411-412.
- [14] John T. Christian, II, p. 415.
- [15] John T. Christian, II, p. 418, and citing J. M. Peck [reference not given]. Peck wrote about Parker, "Parker was indefatigable in introducing a query into as many Associations as he could through the West, that would produce an answer condemnatory to mission operations, and he really deserves the credit, not only of that monstrous abortion of purblind theology, *The Two Seeds*, but as the most active and persevering opposer of missionary and other benevolent societies in the West."
- [16] John T. Christian, II, p. 418, and citing J. M. Peck [source not recorded]
- [17] John T. Christian, II, pp. 421-422.
- [18] John T. Christian, II, pp. 426-427.
- [19] John T. Christian, II, p. 428
- [20] John T. Christian, II, pp. 429-430.
- [21] John T. Christian, II, p. 431-432.
- [22] John T. Christian, II, pp. 434-436, and quoting Dr. W. C. Buck (reference not cited)
- [23] John T. Christian, II, pp. 436.
- [24] John T. Christian, II, p. 437