

American Baptists: Northern and Southern.

DR. ROBERT ANDREW BAKER, of the South-western Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, has produced a most valuable factual study of the "Relation between Northern and Southern Baptists." It has been awarded a doctorate by Yale University and should help those on both sides of the Atlantic to understand better the complexities of Baptist relationships in the United States. American books are not easy to obtain, American Baptist history all too little known in this country. The subject is of such importance both historically and in terms of immediate practical issues that we make no apology for presenting here a summary of Dr. Baker's book, which runs to nearly 300 pages. In what follows we have kept as closely as possible to the author's own words. Our own comments and additions are few.

The earliest Baptist churches in America were to be found in three distinct areas: New England, Pennsylvania and Jersey, and Southern Carolina. Organised connectional or denominational life developed slowly, though local Associations were formed in the eighteenth century according to the English pattern. The earliest of these was the Philadelphia Association, formally constituted in 1707. During the closing decades of the century the Associations undertook home missionary activity within and beyond their own borders.

With the establishment in 1802 of the Massachusetts Domestic Missionary *Society*—that is, a voluntary organisation of individuals, not churches—a different principle and method of activity appeared. Shortly afterwards, in 1814, there was formed the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions. It was organised by Luther Rice to provide support for Adoniram Judson and other foreign missionaries. As in the case of the English Baptist Missionary Society, this was the first general organisation embracing the whole country. Unlike the B.M.S., however, its membership consisted of societies, churches and groups of churches, but not of individuals. It may be regarded as a hybrid type of organisation, part society part Association. In its early years it seemed possible that this General Convention would undertake to foster education and home missions, as well as foreign missions, but the tide of opinion in favour of societies for special

purposes proved too strong. In 1832 the American Baptist Home Mission Society came into existence, as a channel for the efforts of those seeking to follow and evangelise the men and women engaged in the great expansion westwards. A proposal to convert the General Convention into a general denominational body was rejected. This Home Mission Society worked by encouraging existing State or Association efforts and by initiating new ventures. In its early years it drew support from the whole Baptist community in America. It proved, however, very difficult to satisfy conflicting claims in so vast an enterprise; and the slavery issue soon proved divisive.

Within a few months of the founding of the Home Mission Society, the Baptist Board of London addressed a famous letter to American Baptist ministers on the subject of participation in the slave system, sending it to the General Convention (that is, the missionary organisation) under the impression, apparently, that it had general denominational supervision. A year later Frederick Augustus Cox and James Hoby were sent over to America by the Baptist Union "to promote the sacred cause of negro emancipation." In the ensuing decade English Baptists tried by many communications of one kind and another to stimulate the abolitionist cause. But the General Convention, drawing support from both northern and southern states, insisted that its business was limited to that of foreign missions. The issue, however, could not be avoided. Many of the keenest American abolitionists were Baptists, but in the south generally a different attitude prevailed. In 1845 Southern Baptists withdrew both from the General Convention and the Home Mission Society. They established for themselves the Southern Baptist Convention, which again was a new kind of organisation.

"The financial basis of representation was carried over from the society method, but the fundamental principle of the society idea—one society for each kind of benevolence—was rejected. This Southern constitution put all benevolences under one convention. Separate Boards were named to function for each benevolent task and to act during the recess of the convention" (p. 90).

There resulted what Dr. Baker calls "an ideological conflict between Northern and Southern Baptists." Their polity became quite different. For some time the Home Mission Society tried to continue its activities in certain of the southern states. Inevitably the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 widened the breach between the Society and the Southern Baptist Convention, but it also quickened the interest of the former in the freedmen. In 1869 one third of the agents of the Home Mission Society

were at work in southern states, in spite of the claim of the Southern Convention to be recognised as the only general organisation for missions within the territorial limits of the south. There had by then grown up, however, not only parallel evangelistic activities by the Southern Convention, but also a widespread desire on both sides for better relationships, or even union. During the same period those who had been slaves withdrew from the white Baptist churches of the south, forming their own organisations, most of them connected either directly or indirectly with the Home Mission Society. The National Baptist Convention of the Negro Baptists—not mentioned by Dr. Baker—was formed in 1880.

The Southern Baptist Convention, with its tightly-knit connectionalism, had some difficulty in establishing its authority even within its own constituency. From 1882 onwards, however, it grew rapidly in strength and by the close of the nineteenth century it had clearly become not only effective for its own immediate purposes, but a centre of denominational consciousness to which there was no parallel in the northern states. "From 1882 to 1894," writes Dr. Baker, "the Convention gained in favor and strength and a denomination was born" (p. 184).

A conference held at Fortress Munroe, Virginia, in September, 1894, proved a landmark in modern American Baptist history. Representatives of the Southern Convention and the Home Mission Society there agreed on principles of co-operation which removed many of the causes of friction and difficulty which had marred relationships in the previous half century. The Society gradually reduced its work in the southern states, and the way was prepared for a gentleman's agreement accepting a geographical division of interests based on an imaginary line running south of Delaware, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana and Oklahoma, and bisecting Illinois and Missouri. The situation improved still further when, in 1907, Northern Baptists reorganised themselves by drawing together their three principal societies into a general body. The Northern Baptist Convention, which was then formed, was not exactly like the Southern Convention, but it did provide a centralised organisational and financial unity, its aim being

"to give expression to the sentiment of its constituency upon matters of denominational importance and general religious and moral interest; to develop denominational unity; and to give increasing efficiency to efforts for the evangelisation of America and the world."

Representation in the Convention comes from the churches and Associations, with officers of recognised denominational societies

and organisations regarded as ex-officio members. To safeguard their endowments, however, the three major societies retained a semblance of continued legal independence. This somewhat anomalous situation has provided the opportunity for new complications of recent years. The Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society, formed in 1943, asked to be recognised by the Northern Convention as a missionary agency. To agree would have undermined the basis of the Convention (leaving aside altogether the theological controversies which caused the formation of the new society). On the other hand, the refusal of recognition may provoke the formation of a wider new organisation of an even more disruptive character. The particular manner in which these difficulties present themselves comes in considerable measure from the special kind of organisation adopted by the Northern Baptists in 1907.

The principles of comity first agreed by North and South in 1894 were re-affirmed and extended in 1912. It has not always proved easy to apply them, particularly in border states such as Illinois, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Missouri. But responsible leaders on both sides have desired amicable settlements. The general tendency has been for churches in border territories to affiliate more closely with the Southern Convention. There remain certain areas of present tension, including Alaska.

Differences of polity between North and South have, of course, been accompanied by differences of theological outlook and sympathy. The North has favoured open communion, inter-denominational comity agreements in America and overseas, and co-operation with the Federal Council of Churches and the Ecumenical Movement. The South has been more conservative; isolationist, so far as close relationships with other denominations are concerned, expansionist, in regard to the recognition and affiliation of groups of its own *diaspora*.

Dr. Baker's book ends on a grave note. Serious problems now face American Baptists in their mutual relationships. Geographical boundaries inevitably cause tension, and the number of places where there is friction is likely to increase rather than diminish. But newer issues are even more serious. The Conservative Baptist Fellowship of Northern Baptists has shown a disposition to seek support in the south, but has not hesitated to criticise some of those associated with the Southern Convention. There appears to be danger of an attempt to win local churches in both north and south on the basis of a doctrinal emphasis—which would be a new principle altogether in American Baptist history. Further, the proposed union between Northern Baptists and the Disciples of Christ contains new elements of unusual complexity. The Disciples have many churches in

southern territory. What will happen to geographical comity agreements if Disciples' churches are united with the Northern Convention? Dr. Baker thinks that the only wise solution is to do away with geographical boundaries, leaving each church or other Baptist body free to determine its own affiliation. "It is entirely possible," he says, "that the greatest encouragement ever given to the unification of Baptists in America may be the infiltration of Baptists from each section into the other" (pp. 251-2).

Faced with the fact that in Alaska and even in Chicago there are now churches of "Southern Baptists" affiliated to the Southern Convention, the Northern Baptist Convention at its annual meeting in San Francisco in June of this year boldly voted to invite all Baptist groups in the United States to join a single denomination. Formal invitations are to be sent to the Southern Convention, the two Negro Conventions and to bi-lingual conventions consisting chiefly of Germans and Scandinavians. At the same time Northern Baptists moved a step further towards their proposed merger with the Disciples of Christ.

American Baptists must work out their own salvation. Their brethren overseas will follow developments with concern and sympathy, knowing how much depends on a united and strong Baptist community in the United States. Dr. Baker nowhere refers to the Baptist World Alliance. All that he records, however, surely emphasises the importance of this uniting fellowship and the need for establishing it firmly and effectively in the heart and life of Baptists in every hand. "Baptists," says Dr. Baker in his closing paragraph, "should always be conscious, not only of the tired eyes of history gone by, but of the yet unfashioned eyes of Baptists who will live centuries hence."

ERNEST A. PAYNE.