

The Baptist Scene Today in the U.S.A.

THROUGHOUT America's fifty religion-conscious states are scattered some 21,396,000 Baptists who together comprise the largest Protestant denomination in America, a denomination nearly twice the size of the Methodists (12,632,000), two-and-a-half times the size of the Lutherans (8,340,000), and five times larger than the Presbyterians (4,327,000) or the Disciples of Christ (4,047,000).¹ Baptists of America are united in their witness supremely to Jesus Christ, as well as to the four cardinal distinctives of the denomination as a whole—the centrality of the Bible in their faith and life, the baptism of believers only, a "gathered" church embodying believers alone, and religious liberty for all men, including the separation of church and state. Beyond this point, however, unity subsides and is replaced by the disconcerting multiplicity of twenty-nine different bodies not all of which live harmoniously with one another.

The bewildering disarray which the flourishing Baptists of the United States manifest is as confusing to the average American as it is to the on-looking Englishman. In size Baptist groups range from the mammoth Southern Baptist Convention, with nearly 10,000,000 members congregated in 32,598 churches, to the Independent Baptist Church of America, with its seventy members and two churches. Structurally they vary between the more organizationally-minded American Baptist Convention and the Primitive Baptists, who disavow centralization of any kind. There is likewise no unity on such matters as theological freedom (or the lack of it), involvement in social problems, ecumenical co-operation, or even missionary endeavour, the Primitive Baptists being also opposed to modern missionary societies. Nevertheless, for purposes of discussion the various Baptist bodies may reasonably (if arbitrarily) be categorized into three groups: (1) the four major conventions; (2) the "doctrinal separatists," that is, those groups which because of particular theological emphases have deemed it right to remain separate from those not so inclined; and (3) the remaining smaller conferences and associations, including those with particular nationalistic origins.

I. The Major Conventions

The largest of all the Baptist bodies is the 9,978,000-member Southern Baptist Convention, the churches of which are concentrated predominantly in those States stretching from the Atlantic seaboard through the Deep South and the South-West and spilling into California and the Midwest. Vigorous and evangelistic-minded,

¹ Membership statistics are based on the 1963 edition of the *Yearbook of American Churches*.

Southern Baptists have taken advantage of the ready receptivity to the Christian message of the people of the "Bible-belt" in building their mushrooming churches, some of which are able to number their members in the thousands. Formed in 1845 in the dark days prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, the Southern Convention has always remained conservative in its social, cultural, and theological outlook. Close co-operation with other Christian bodies has been generally frowned upon, with the result that there has been no participation in the ecumenical endeavours of either the National or the World Council of Churches. Missionary activity is extensive and globe-encircling, reaching from southern Europe and the Middle East to Central and South America, and from Africa to the Far East. The training of missionaries as well as of pastors is undertaken predominantly in six strategically-located seminaries in North Carolina, Louisiana, Kentucky, Texas, Missouri and California.

Baptists in the northern half of the United States belong mostly to the 1,521,000-member American Baptist Convention, the roots of which go back to a series of societies founded between 1814 and 1832, and which were reorganized to form the present convention in 1907. Its work was long centred among the lower classes of American society, and it is partially due to this fact that it developed progressive views both socially and culturally. American Baptists have attempted to maintain a tolerance of varying theological concepts, and hence there exists at the present time a healthy divergence of interpretations on knotty doctrinal questions. Such an attitude has enabled them to assume an active role in the movement for church unity, a role which includes membership in both the National and World Councils. The value of an educated ministry has been especially appreciated by American Baptists, a fact which is indicated by its eight seminaries, located in Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania (two), Illinois, Kansas and California (two).² From these seminaries go missionaries to such places as India, Burma, Congo, the Far East and Central and South America, and with them go dedicated Christians to serve as secretaries, mechanics, printers, agricultural workers, doctors, nurses and teachers.

Negroes in the United States have been especially attracted to Baptist tenets, and prior to 1961 had organized themselves primarily into two large bodies—the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., with 5,000,000 members, and the National Baptist Convention of America, with 2,669,000 members. Originally one, the two groups split in 1915 as the result of a disagreement over the control of property and publications. A further division occurred in 1961 when

² There is also a small seminary for Spanish-speaking students in California.

the larger of the two conventions was disrupted by a quarrel over the election of a president, ending with the withdrawal of 504 churches to form the Progressive National Baptist Convention. These Negro bodies have played a vital role in preaching the gospel to the members of their own race, a people who have been tragically neglected and spurned by those Baptist churches which have erected a colour barrier. Yet there is an optimistic note for in recent years there has been increasing co-operation between the Negro Baptists and particularly the American Baptist Convention, and within the latter body the Negro is more and more being welcomed as an equal member of the Christian fellowship. Their participation in the ecumenical movement provides additional opportunities to further co-operation, integration, and understanding on the part of all concerned. The warmth of their testimony to Jesus Christ is ample proof that Christ died for all men, regardless of their race and colour.

II. Doctrinal Separatists

In a sense all Baptists can be said to have separated themselves from Christians of other denominations over a doctrinal issue—the conviction that only believers and not infants are the proper subjects of baptism. Other issues have subsequently arisen, however, which have provoked disagreement to such an extent that, for some, unity among all Baptists was no longer felt to be possible. Various groups throughout the years have therefore thought it necessary to separate from their fellow Baptists in order to preserve what they regarded as the uncompromisable truth.

One of the most historic of these groups still existing in America is the Seventh Day Baptist General Conference, the members of which, as their name suggests, are convinced that the proper day on which to worship God is Saturday. Possessing a heritage going back to Francis Bampfield and the religious turmoil of seventeenth century England, their existence in the New World began in Rhode Island in 1671. They have since spread primarily to New York and the Midwest, but their growth (present membership: 5,800) has been severely limited by the unacceptability on the part of the vast majority of Baptists of that one concept which has resulted in their existence as a separate body. A similar group, who call themselves simply Seventh Day Baptists, emigrated to Pennsylvania in 1720 as refugees from religious persecution in Germany. Often labelled "Brethren" or "Dunkers," they have only three churches and 150 members.

The controversy between Calvinism and Arminianism which originated in Holland in the seventeenth century, and which subsequently marked the division between the General and the Particular Baptists of England in the same period, continues to perpetuate

itself in several Baptist groups in contemporary America. The General Association of General Baptists, which traces its descent to the two founders of the English General Baptists—John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, was transplanted to America in 1714. Although it eventually disappeared along the Atlantic seaboard, it was revived in the Midwest in 1823, and currently has a membership of 58,900. The largest of the Arminian groups, however, is the 193,700-member National Association of Free Will Baptists. Organized in the South in 1727 and in the North sixty years later, this Association now has churches in thirty-four States, Cuba, Africa, Brazil, Central America, Japan and India. Somewhat smaller is the 100,000-member United Freewill Baptist Church, organized in 1870, and having most of its congregations in the South.

The advocacy of Arminian tenets in the South did not go unchallenged, however, for in the latter half of the eighteenth century a new group came into existence known (in a rather picturesque manner) as Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Baptists. Today these 201 defenders of Calvinism are members of sixteen independent churches, linked together in only informal associations.

Controversy over doctrinal issues has continued to divide Baptists visibly even in the present century. Conventions as well as churches have experienced bitter divisions over problems of doctrinal rigidity and "orthodoxy", and the precise and schematic delineation of eschatological events (resulting, for example, in post-millennialism, amillennialism, and premillennialism, and within the latter of post-tribulation, mid-tribulation and pre-tribulation schools) has been a cause of grief in the more fundamentalistic quarters. A secession of fundamentalists from the American Baptist Convention in 1932 resulted in the formation of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, a relatively small group (143,800 members) having as its geographical focal point the State of Michigan. Adhering rigidly to the five "fundamentals" of the Christian faith (the verbal inerrancy of the Bible, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the substitutionary theory of the atonement, and the physical resurrection and bodily "second coming" of Christ) General Baptists are bitterly conservative in their entire outlook, and have wanted little to do with either the ecumenical movement or the concern on the part of many Baptists with social problems. The accepted doctrinal statement is the historic New Hampshire Confession of Faith, but with a premillennial ending.

The outcome of a second secession of fundamentalists from the American Baptist Convention was the organization of the Conservative Baptist Association in 1947. Particular stress is laid by Conservative Baptists on the infallibility of the Bible and the independence and autonomy of the local church. In recent years there has been further division within this Association over the question of

premillennialism. With a membership of some 300,000, its congregations are located predominantly in the States of Oregon, Minnesota and Arizona.

The spectre of this seemingly irreconcilable fighting between certain Baptist groups, particularly on the part of those advocating a rabid and exclusivistic fundamentalism, is indeed a sad commentary upon Baptist life in America. If the message of the gospel is reconciliation, then surely there is some work to be done in the Baptist fold.

III. The Smaller Conferences and Associations

One of the most colourful aspects of Baptist history in America has been provided by the various groups which have been founded on nationalistic ties, among them being the Finnish, Swedish, Danish and German conferences. Apart from the very small Independent Baptist Church of America, a group of Swedish Free Baptists organized in 1893, only two continue to maintain a separate existence. The larger of these is the Baptist General Conference (Swedish), dating back to 1879. With a membership of 75,600, concentrated mostly in Minnesota, Iowa and California, this group is typical of many of the smaller conferences and associations, having its own college and seminary (in Minnesota), a limited but enthusiastic missionary endeavour (principally Japan, India, Ethiopia and Argentina), and an essentially conservative outlook both theologically and socially. The second of the two groups is the North American Baptist General Conference (German). With 51,600 members, this Conference has a decided interest in missions, and includes some churches which continue to conduct services in German as well as in English.

There are a number of Baptist bodies in the United States which have carried the reformation in polity to the extent that most, if not all, forms of centralized authority are rejected. Among these groups the largest (650,800 members) is the American Baptist Association, a group of independent, mission-conscious churches in the South and South-West, originally organized in 1905. A newer group, organized in 1950, is the 330,300-member North American Baptist Association, whose churches are scattered throughout the same area, and are fundamentalistic, premillennial, and likewise interested in missions. Not quite as loosely organized is the National Primitive Baptist Convention, who, as their name implies, have a national convention as well as local associations. Organized in 1907, its 86,000 members are concentrated predominantly in the South. A second group of Primitive Baptists, with 72,000 members who are also located in the South, is opposed to any centralization and also to modern missionary societies. Finally, mention may be made of the 17,200 Regular Baptists, whose churches belong to twenty-two

associations in the South, but have no general organization.

Four of the most interesting groups among the Baptists in America are the National Baptist Evangelical Life and Soul Saving Assembly of the U.S.A., "a charitable, educational and evangelical organization" founded in 1921, and numbering 57,700 members in the South and Midwest; the Separate Baptists in Christ, whose origin occurred during the Great Awakening in 1758, and whose 7,400 members are now found primarily in Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee and Illinois; the Duck River (and Kindred) Associations of Baptists, with 3,100 members in Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi; and the General Six-Principle Baptists, who derive their name from Hebrews 6: 1-2, and who, although they were organized in Rhode Island as early as 1653, have only 258 members in four churches.

A Look at the Future

Generally speaking, Baptists in the United States remain cautious in their approach to any changes, be they theological, cultural, social, or ethical, although from their ranks have come such pioneering and progressive thinkers as Walter Rauschenbusch, leader of the "Social Gospel" movement, and Harry Emerson Fosdick, noted propagator of "liberal" theology. The need for more of such daring and imaginative thinkers is becoming critical as the church faces a vast array of vital and problematical issues: nuclear warfare, integration, "population explosion," space exploration, expanding nationalism, to name only a few. The effectiveness and the ability of twenty-nine different types of Baptists to meet these issues is to be seriously questioned. The time has come—and had come some time ago—when Baptists must cease the petty bickering among themselves and practise the toleration toward one another which they advocate as part of their Baptist heritage. To search for ways to justify a segregated church when there is an urgent need to proclaim the full equality of all men before both God and man, to perpetuate division over whether Christ will come before or after the tribulation while much of the human race does not even know the message of reconciliation in Christ, to quarrel over how autonomous a local church should be when Christ has commanded us to evangelise the world—these things are sheer hypocrisy.

Yet the future picture is not wholly pessimistic. There are increasing efforts, particularly among the major conventions, to unify their witness and to experience a closer fellowship. The vast majority of Baptists are also very much aware of their missionary responsibility, and are becoming aware of the need to consistently re-evaluate the motives and methods of mission work.

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“Can you not see that while there is jealousy and strife among you, you are living on the purely human level of your lower nature? When one says, ‘I am Paul’s man’, and another, ‘I am for Apollos’, are you not all too human? . . . Never make mere men a cause for pride. For though everything belongs to you, Paul, Apollos and Cephas, the world, life and death, the present and the future, all of them belong to you—yet you belong to Christ, and Christ to God.” (1 *Corinthians* 3 : 3-4; 21-23, New English Bible.)

This is what is implied when we declare our belief in the Holy Catholic Church. As a youth, Nathan Söderblom, later the Lutheran Archbishop of Uppsala, set down in his diary this prayer : “O God, give me the wisdom and humility to serve the great cause of the free unity of Thy Church.” It is a prayer we may well make our own.

There is this further truth to be remembered. I give it you in the words used by the Baptist Union Council in 1948, but there is nothing exclusively Baptist about the point that is being made :

“It is in membership of a local Church in one place that the fellowship of the one holy catholic Church becomes significant. Indeed, such gathered companies of believers are the local manifestation of the one Church of God on earth and in heaven . . . The vital relationship to Christ which is implied in full communicant membership in a local Church carries with it membership in the Church which is both in time and in eternity, both militant and triumphant.”

ERNEST A. PAYNE

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An awareness of the necessity of a better-educated ministry and of more effective ways in which to present the essential gospel message is being impressed upon Baptists by the vast panorama of a complex nation whose society is populated by such extremes as the “organization man” and the “beatnik.” The outlook for the future, then, is one concerned with the propagation of the gospel and the growth of the Church of Christ by the patient witnessing and work of believers empowered by the Holy Spirit—of proclaiming the message that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, in terms intelligible and meaningful to a world caring little for its eternal destiny.

RICHARD L. GREAVES