

SECTION 1

NORTH AMERICAN MISSIONS
& CHURCH PLANTING

“BUT YE SHALL RECEIVE POWER... AND YE SHALL
BE MY WITNESSES UNTO ME BOTH IN
JERUSALEM, AND IN ALL JUDEA...”

ACTS 1:8

AD FONTES BAPTISTS?
**CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN EARLY BAPTIST PERCEPTIONS
ON THE CHURCH AND ITS MISSION¹**

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Southern Baptists, or even Baptists generally, are known as a missions people. A people committed to evangelism, the sharing of the Gospel and the support of reaching the whole world with the truth of the Gospel. It could easily be argued and understood that this priority is an axiom of Baptist life and practice. And amazingly wherever one might look on the continuum of Baptist theology from the right to the left, the same principle, it seems, is espoused. Even Baptists of the most moderate bearing would likely endorse publicly the priority of evangelizing, realizing that to do less would be a form of financial and public relations suicide. Scan a list of Baptist distinctive produced by just about anyone and you won't have to look far to see evangelism as a principle characteristic of Baptist life, thought and practice.

But has this position always been the case for Baptists? Was there a time or place when evangelism, while important as it would be for any believers' church movement, was not the given that it is today. It is my position that evangelism, though seminal in the thinking of many Baptists, was not a principle of priority and that missions was missing from the "To Do" lists of many congregations for much of the first century of Baptist existence. Mainly I am referencing the 1600's and much of the 1700's. Calvinism and hyper-Calvinism, evidenced particularly among the element known as Particular Baptists, are most often to blame for the lack or decline of Gospel fervor in this period. Doubtlessly hyper-Calvinism contributed to missions malaise but there were other and perhaps even more fundamental ecclesio-theological factors at play during that era. The results of the position of this presentation are that the 18th century Awakenings, particularly in England, provided the fundamental experience necessary for Baptists to discover the priority of missions.

¹The contents of this paper are based on Dr. Roberts' doctoral dissertation, *Continuity and Change: London Calvinistic Baptists and The Evangelical Revival 1760-1820*, done at the Free University of Amsterdam and completed in 1989. The book is published by Richard Owen Roberts, Publishers, Wheaton Illinois, 1989. Chapters are included in it on interdenominational relations, church growth, theology, Baptist societies, etc. The research done in it supports the positions of this paper.

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Whether one accepts the Separatist-Puritan or Anabaptist theories of Baptist roots and foundations, it can be clearly seen that the earlier Baptists were anxious and eager to set the record straight on the nature and practice of the New Testament Church. *Ecclesia Semper Reformanda* was the watch word as churches sought to find the pattern which was to fit Christ's will and purpose for discipline, order and polity. Evangelism - sharing the Gospel - always, to some degree, bubbled under the surface, however, of how a New Testament Church ought to look. This dynamic is evident, for instance, in the 1677-89 London Confession, better known as the Second London Confession. Following the Westminster Confession in their attempt to prove their theological acceptability, London Baptists none the less made significant alterations to its precursor. The Baptists, among other changes, removed the statement on double predestination and included an article entitled "The Gospel," in which they advocated evangelistic preaching. But other challenges developed.

The dawning of the 18th century introduced a period believed and espoused to be an era marked by the dominance of hyper- or high Calvinism, notably via the influence of London pastors John Brine (1703-1765) and John Gill (1697-1771). Five-point or TULIP soteriology was not the issue at this point. The Second London Confession had fully embraced the Dutch flower.

Rather Pastors Gill and Brine took Calvinism further and additionally taught the tenet of eternal justification. This notion postulated the view that God from all eternity had justified the elect, based on their predestination to salvation, even before their conversion. It was an interesting bit of Scriptural inference at best, but lent itself to solidify Calvinistic soteriology. While not all English and Baptists supported Gill and Brine's stricter Calvinistic theology, almost all of them would have supported a strict view of church order that would fly in the face of the revival fervor and evangelistic zeal evidenced by the burgeoning awakening under the leadership of John Wesley, George Whitfield and many others. It was Baptist ecclesiology in addition to some of their soteriology that proved resistant to evangelistic enthusiasm.

Why or how did ecclesiology play a role in this development? First of all, remember that the revival was generally led by Non-Nonconformists or Anglicans. The personalities of George Whitefield, John and Charles Wesley, Howel Harris and many others, many of whom were Anglicans, many of whom were non-non Conformists (Moravians, in some instances, as in the case of Count Zinzendorf), were all at the vanguard of renewal. Baptist John Gill's book, *The Dissenters' Reasons for Separating from the Church of England*, 1760, which by 1839 had gone through five editions, argued extensively that the Anglican Church was illegitimate and owed its existence "by law established, man's not God's."

Additionally in the most widely read Baptist systematic theology of the period, Gill's *Body of Divinity*, it was argued adamantly that a New Testament Church was one where "the Laws of Christ" were observed - whose members, that is, were regenerate or/and their profession of faith were voiced, followed by baptism by immersion. They were received in the fellowship therefore, required to participate regularly in the Lord's Supper and worship and subjected themselves to all forms of church order and discipline under the leadership of a local church pastor and/or its elders. All of these obligations were taken extremely seriously. Later in the 18th century when evangelical missionary societies would emerge, the

pre-revival traditionalists, that is those who resisted revival, argued against these societies from the standpoint that they militated against the primacy of the church and its ordinances.

London Baptist Pastor, Benjamin Wallin, 1711-1782, considered it a travesty when, “a voluntary society of Christians, cemented by a few bylaws and inventions of their own and destitute of the special ordinances of Christ has equal authority with a church.”³ While the preaching of George Whitefield has been credited with the survival and eventual resurgence of the Baptist Movement, per Baptist pastor and historian, Joseph Iviney, nonetheless Whitefield, in his earlier days, with one or two exceptions, was resisted by London Baptist pastors. Baptist leaders earliest perception of Whitefield was that he was an “enthusiast” or a radical religionist who would disrupt and confuse the proper practice of church. His style of preaching was likely to substitute “the effects of mere passion or real religion,” while their “kindling into rapture,” “floods of tears” and “limbs trembling” had been produced only by the “loud voice and violent gesture” of an evangelist.⁴ By the way, the office of the evangelist was not even considered legitimate by pre-revivalists. It was considered as already having passed from the scene of importance and relevance at the end of the New Testament era.

Revival converts came to the false conclusion that the hearer believes that his “conversion is considered as instantaneous.” Baptist pastor, Samuel Stennett continued “that such an experience produces no real proof, but only the gay (his word, not mine) and splendid appearance of an external confession.”⁵ True conversion, pre-revival traditionalists believed, must take place only over time following the long process of the conviction of sin, dealing with bouts of uncertainty before actual faith and the reception of the assurance of salvation. Generally it was thought salvation would happen in the context of a local church and its worship. The catalyst would be the systematic expositional preaching of a pastor and would be marked by a gradual grasping of the essentials of the faith - a feeling of one’s own sinful condition, of their need for the Savior and of their actual embrasure of him as their Savior. “Light, vain, enthusiastic persons” it was sure “are strangers to such a process.”⁶ Cool, not hot, conversions, were the order of the day in pre-revival Baptist circles.

In the opinion of these pre-revival traditionalists, the old dissenters, the church should grow quietly and steadily by the gradual influence of Christian church worship, the preaching of the pastor, of the development of reasoned belief, teaching and the influences of a Christian society or church on the individual and not by “a sudden raid of evangelism” to quote a pre-revival traditionalist pastor.

Again, Benjamin Wallin argued it was the pastor’s duty to seek the increase of the flock, but not “by the opening of the door of the fold beyond the limits prescribed or to any

³ Benjamin Wallin, *The Redeemer’s Charge Against His Declining Churches*, 1748, 59.

⁴ See *Continuity and Change*, 75 for the full quote of Baptist pastor Samuel Stennett.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ A quote of Samuel Stennett – see *Continuity and Change*, 76.

who are unmeet for the communion of the saints nor by giving countenance to weak and unstable professors, converts” particularly revival converts.⁷ Consequently, disciplinary action was taken against Baptists who exposed themselves to revival influence as Baptist church minutes of the time attest. The church at Prescott’s Street in 1742 warned five members against “eating bread and drinking water in a religious manner at a love feast.” Complaints were made against the church’s narrowness and a Sister Cheffield protested that “if she must forego her place in the tabernacle, (George Whitefield’s tabernacle where he preached regularly in London) or with us, she would leave us.” The Maze Pond Church called the desire of a Sister Fuller in 1742 to join the society of The Moravians an “evil step”. When the Devonshire Square Church called John Stephens as pastor in 1750, Stephens, being a former Calvinist Methodist itinerate, the Baptist Board, i.e. the London fraternity of Particular Baptist preachers, at first refused to receive him “relating to Mr. Stephens being publicly concerned at the tabernacle,” Whitefield’s tabernacle. Only after affirming “his total separation from the Methodist was he admitted.” Quoting a pre-revivalist traditionalist, a Baptist pastor stated, “. . .no Disorder is more prejudice to the welfare of Zion nor, indeed, to themselves, than that of a willful and allowed omission of Attendance in the Appointed Assemblies of the Churches to which they belonged.”⁸

Such an emphasis led to a later critic commenting “the evil I dreaded is *this* less while we are seeking to honor Christ by the conversion of men abroad we shall dishonor him by growing relax in the discipline or order of his churches at home.” Another stated, “There never was a season (apparently, looking on this point in time, about 1760) at least since the Reformation where incorruption of doctrine was more artful, violently and generally introduced into the churches than at this moment.” One further chronicle, of the age said, “The Lord’s day is profaned by the sale of tickets, hymn books, sermons and other religious publications. The appearance of evangelical societies rivaling the churches, the numerous societies that have been of late years have produced an unfavorable impression upon the ministerial character, pastoral duties are now out of fashion and the emergence of the overseas missionary enterprise, the immense sums that have been consumed in equipping missionaries to the South Seas would have civilized all of the inhabitants in the vast church of St. Gile’s.”⁹

So how did matters change? What was it that happened among London Baptists Calvinistic churches that changed the perspective of Baptist leaders? In large part, it occurred with the conversion of young revival converts who entered London churches and who brought with them, gradually in a temperate fashion, the spirit of the evangelical revival and of a forthright emphasis on evangelism and missions.

⁷Ibid., 64. This a quote from Wallin published in 1769.

⁸Ibid., 60.

⁹Ibid., 67.

All of the process cannot be addressed here. Neither can the chronicle of events be rehearsed, but a sweeping review is possible.

By 1760 the evangelical revival had begun to influence London Calvinistic Baptists in a dramatic fashion. The impact of the Awakening for the most part however, was subtle, as many of the revival's converts became first members and then often pastors of their own churches. The Baptist doctrine of the believers church or of a regenerate church membership allowed for the newly evangelized to enter the fellowship of Baptist churches and to become their leaders, to preach the Word so that by 1760 at least two London Baptist churches, Devonshire Square and the church at Eagle Street, had revival converts as pastors. Always, by the way, it seems with one exception, the converts of George Whitefield were chosen as pastors of these Particular Baptist churches. Most of the new leaders produced by the revival were first-generation Baptists, not the sons or grandsons of Baptists or Baptist pastors. They had left Anglican, Congregational or secular backgrounds and had become Baptists out of a genuine conviction that believers' baptism by immersion was scriptural. They also came mainly to embrace Calvinistic convictions. This transition occurred, ordering the course of their conversions, as they found themselves most comfortable, theologically, in the fellowship of orthodox-Calvinistic dissenters. From all contemporary appearances, it might seem that there was an unbroken continuum in theology and practice between them and their old dissenting predecessors. As history has shown, however, this was not the case. The revival converts affected a crucial change in values in terms of theology and ministry from that of their forerunners, the pre-revival traditionalists or the "Old Dissenters", as they were called. These revival converts, and their advocates, brought with them, along with their Baptist convictions, a clear appreciation for and an affinity with the Evangelical Awakening, plus a commitment to define evangelism as a priority in the life of the church if not, in some cases, the priority.

This dynamic would slowly introduce distinct changes among the churches while maintaining the appearance of continuity with Baptist tradition. Very interestingly in this area, you will find four types of pastors. One, as has been delineated, is the old dissenting pre-revival traditionalists who would be absolutely opposed to revival influence. Only two pastors, it seems made the transition from being an Old Dissenting pastor to embracing the revival.

The second category of preacher or pastor might be labeled the "transitionalist." One of them was Andrew Gifford, who actually began as a pre-revival traditionalist of sorts, but because of some previous illconduct on his part, was dismissed from the London Baptist Board. Consequently Gifford was befriended by George Whitefield personally and is the only pastor then to advocate revival influence.

The third category of pastor were revival converts themselves. They became members of churches, attended experience meetings, which were similar events in Baptist churches like John Wesley would have had in his movement, became lay preachers, exhorters and occasionally taught from the Word and then were often commissioned and ordained as pastors.

The fourth category throughout the 18th century were the successors of these revival converts, who followed in their interest and emphasis. This dynamic but often subtle

change in church life contrasted sharply with the concerns of their immediate pre-revival predecessors who would emphasize above evangelism and sometimes it seems to the exclusion of it, the defense and maintenance of the church and its doctrine. While church order and discipline were not jettisoned by the evangelicals, they were only seemingly equal in priority to the task of propagating the Gospel. The formal retention of strict church discipline and five-point Calvinism throughout much of the 19th century continued to leave the appearance of a much undisturbed continuum. Additionally, the evangelicals themselves, except for their castigation of high Calvinism, seem for the most part to have been oblivious to the substantial alteration of priorities.

In many senses of the word, the evangelical revival may be viewed as having rekindled some of the initial fervor of the early Baptists. A renewal of experiential religion, fervent preaching, itinerant evangelism as well as consequential church expansion mark both the middle 17th century Calvinistic Baptists and their new evangelical denominational brethren a century or more later. It would be unwise, however, to assume that there were no differences. The history of the denomination demonstrates that alterations occurred clearly in the 18th century. The shift among revival converts and their leaders to bring evangelism to the place of primary concern or the key priority, or at least an equal priority with the maintenance of proper Baptist church order, contributed to doctrinal and ecclesiological shifts. This may have contributed to further alterations within the denomination in the century that followed. And some of those results, I might add, we live with today.

In the course of 1760-1820 the shift in religious perspectives among Baptist pastors were significant. They included an appreciation of non-Baptist revivals – seen clearly in a tolerance of attendance at revivalists meetings and the early 19th century “declaration of George Whitefield by Joseph Iviney as savior of the Baptist movement.”¹⁰

These changes also included a renewed emphasis on experiential revivalistic lay involvement including lay preaching and teaching. As one looks through the church minute books for this era, it becomes clear that during the first half of the century, only the pastor taught and led in church services. As you move through the second half of the century revival converts and converts becoming pastors and preaching in Baptist churches, with lay preaching, lay exhorting - allowing a person to give forth their experience in a church service - were often included. These also seemingly developed a less autocratic form of leadership by the pastors. A new but limited involvement with interdenominational missions and societies ensued, and one tends to discover Baptists being a part of many of these missionary societies and organizations, some Baptist became societal leaders. Generally, however Baptists eschewed any society that had formal Anglican representation, from which Baptists would always withdraw.¹¹

The emergence of evangelistic agencies within the denomination, including the Particular Baptist Missionary Society, the introduction and increase of open communion among the churches, a decline in the presence of strict or high Calvinism, a renewed

¹⁰Ibid., 94.

¹¹ *Continuity and Change*, chapter 7.

denominational self-confidence along with new growth and increase of and membership among the churches, for instance, also marked the period. Up until the time between 1700 to 1760, there were approximately only 15 Baptist churches in London. Only two new churches were started and were actually the products of church splits. But from 1750-1760 to 1820 Baptist churches expanded to approximately 50 to 60 in number in the metropolitan area. All of these changes occurred in a large measure without major division within the denomination or the local London fraternity of churches. They also occurred in the midst of opposition to revival, especially in the period of 1760-1770.

Parallel to these events, there also had developed within London by 1800 the seed of what would later become the Strict and Particular Baptist denomination which held to a stricter Calvinism and closed communion. As far as the Calvinistic Baptist themselves were concerned, in spite of initial inhibitions, they developed into a denomination willing to change and so prepared to reap the fruits of the evangelical revival. With a renewed emphasis on individual conversion, which the revival precipitated, the ideal of a believer's church and baptism fitted most naturally. A movement whose churches were already governed congregationally was able to allow lay initiative in the establishment of education and mission agencies as well in future leadership in the churches. With a generation of converts awakened and often uncomfortable in a more structured, hierarchical environment, Baptist congregations frequently provided a welcome home. Many of the Baptist churches were populated by people who were saved in revival circles, Whitefield's Tabernacle, open air preaching, and experience meetings and found themselves attending Baptist churches.

Consequently, London Calvinistic Baptists in the period 1760 to 1820 reaffirmed much that was intrinsic to their historical self-understanding. Their concern for church discipline, their perception of the believers' church and baptism as well as in large measure their own theology did not radically alter. They had indeed been put on the offensive, however, by the revival. Much of their earlier defensiveness had been lost. Not only were they more aligned with much of their original spirit, if not thought, but missionary evangelistic activity developed among them to a degree not previously known. They were now poised, so it seems, to play a significant part in the missionary enterprise that followed. Simultaneously, a shift in priorities and self identity would raise many new questions for them in the centuries ahead.

What lessons emerge from this study? First, we can learn how easily and subtly we can be influenced by the spirit of the age in which we live, even in the church and sometimes because we're in it. In this case the myopic view and vision of many of the early 18th century Baptists, it might be argued, was influenced by the decline of the church generally, the rise of Deism in those periods of the late 1600s and early 1700s and by what helped to precipitate a defensive reaction against it. As one historian expressed it, Dissenting churches were considered "gardens walled around," set off from the world itself.

Second, we can learn the importance of maintaining Biblical values. Which should be the priority - church order and discipline and the healthy life of congregational fellowship or evangelism? Should discipline be juxtaposed to missions? In fact, they should be held in balance. Often, it seems, in Baptist life that evangelism is offered as a panacea for all church ills. But is this the biblical perspective? Or is the challenge of church life an attempt to balance the two as much of the New Testament reveals?

Thirdly, these issues teach us the value of being a Baptist, particularly in changing times. The Baptist movement, I think, evidences to us that it often is self-correcting. Why? Number one, we don't have a centralized authority. No one can tell us this is the way, talking in terms of a human authority who has all the answers for all the problems and issues that we face. Secondly, congregational order, the influence of a regenerate laity helping to govern and guide the church, along with "preaching brethren" – the pastors, all who should be submitted to biblical authority provides for a delicate balance. When we realize, however, that like snowflakes, no two Baptist churches are alike, but that every church under the leadership of the Holy Spirit is to follow Christ in obedience to His Word and commission, we all should have great hope.