

THE
BAPTIST
HERITAGE
SERIES

Crises in Baptist Life

by Walter B. Shurden

LANDMARKISM
ANTI-MISSIONISM
SLAVERY



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History often hinges on how a people meet a crisis. "CRISIS!" That is one of those hot, red-flag words which signals danger, dread, or fear. Though often viewed as negative, a crisis does not have to be negative. To the contrary, it may be positive and highly productive.

The word "crisis" comes from a Greek word which means "to decide." Southern Baptists have faced numerous crises in the past. They have often found themselves scratching their heads at the crossroads of a decision which has determined their future. A good guess is that they will face even more "decision-moments." To look over our denominational shoulders and see how we made it through some of yesterday's crises will help us deal with the present and the future.

The Missions Crisis

The first big internal crisis which Baptists in America faced was highly explosive and potentially very destructive. Concerning the Baptist posture toward missions, it occurred during the years 1820-1840. Baptists had not always been ardent advocates of missions. The reason was quite simple: they had been busy getting established as a denomination. They formed their first church in America in 1638/39. Throughout the 1600's and 1700's, however, they had grown rather slowly. They were also busy during those years fighting for their religious freedom. After they secured their freedom and established their denominational identity, they turned toward the missionary enterprise.

William Carey, an English Baptist minister, ignited the Baptist conscience for missions in 1792. Baptists in America were profoundly influenced by Carey. In 1814, under the leadership of Luther Rice, Baptists in the United States organized for missions. Things looked bright for Baptists. Then came the crisis!

The crisis is known as the anti-missions controversy. While this controversy occurred primarily in the South and early western frontier of Kentucky, Tennessee, Indiana, and Illinois, it was not restricted to these areas. The Atlantic seaboard also faced the crisis. The rural-urban conflict certainly touched the anti-missions controversy, but that theory alone cannot adequately explain the struggle. In truth, no single factor can explain the rise of anti-missions.

What factors were involved? What causes lay behind the first internal crisis of Baptists in the United States? We can point quickly to four causes. One was *jealousy*. Much of the jealousy was regional and sectional. As Baptists followed the American expansion westward on to the Kentucky-Tennessee frontier, a geographical rivalry developed in Baptist life. Baptists on the frontier and in the South viewed Easterners as blue-blooded aristocrats. Compounding this regional prejudice was the fact that Baptist missionary organizations had originated in the East. Missionary leadership was also in the hands of Easterners. Given their existing prejudices toward the East, some frontier people viewed the missions movement as a plot to milk them of their money by dollar-mad city-slickers. Although that was not the case, the pioneers recoiled at the smell of what John Taylor called "the New England Rat."

A second factor was *money*. The frontier people did not pay their preachers. In fact, some frontier ministers would never have thought of getting money for doing God's work! The frontier people, said someone, "loved the gospel, and they loved its ministers, but the sound of money drove all the good feelings from their heart." You can imagine what happened when the Triennial Convention (the Baptist Foreign Missions Society) sent agents to try to raise money for the missionaries. According to the anti-missionists, the Triennial Convention was based upon the evil principles of "money and power."

Power! That was a third dimension of the crisis. The anti-missions folk viewed the formation of missionary societies and conventions as centralization in church government. They feared that authority and power were being taken from the local churches. The individualism

of frontier life compounded this unwarranted suspicion.

A fourth ingredient in anti-missions was *theology*. The theology was hyper-Calvinism. Its essence was that the sovereign God did not need man's help in the missionary enterprise. God could convert whom he wanted where he wanted when he wanted! The missionary movement was seriously hurt because of this theology.

Anti-missionism grew rapidly among Baptists and threw the denomination into chaos, wrecking state conventions and associations while chilling missionary fervor. By 1846 there were almost 70,000 anti-mission Baptists in the United States out of about 750,000 total Baptists. This was a crisis of immense proportions.

What could the missionary Baptists do? What should they do? They had to make a decision for certain. Fortunately, they decided to press on with the propagation of the gospel to all the world. What were the results? First, a denominational split occurred. The anti-missionists separated and became known as Primitive Baptists. Baptist ranks in the South became smaller. Such numerical decline by way of denominational division is not the worst that can happen to a religious body. Quantitative decline does not necessarily mean a qualitative reversal. The missionary Baptists in the South emerged from the division more committed than ever to Christian missions.

Second, the missionary Baptists came out of the crisis firmly committed to some form of centralized missionary operations. They recognized that the job could not be effectively carried out by local churches alone. Thus, when Southern Baptists organized their Convention in 1845, they established Foreign and Home Mission Boards. These boards have never usurped local church independency; instead, they have provided a strategy for local churches to cooperate in missions.

Third, the anti-missions crisis helped chart the theological future of Southern Baptists. Hyper-Calvinism was out! Missionary Baptists of the South continued to affirm God's sovereignty, but they refused to use it as an excuse for doing nothing. The result was that Southern Baptists developed a theology of missions and

evangelism which called for human participation.

The Racial Crisis

About the time that the anti-missions crisis was reaching a peak, a new, more intense, and long-lasting struggle emerged in Southern Baptist life. This was the crisis of race. Davis C. Woolley, the late executive secretary of the Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, once described the racial issue as "one of the most inflammatory subjects ever to be discussed in the Convention."

For Southern Baptists, as with other southern denominations, the crisis began with slavery. By the mid-1800's Baptists of the South aligned themselves rather solidly in defense of slavery. This had not always been the case, however. In the 1700's individuals, churches, and associations had raised serious questions about the morality of slavery. Some Virginia Baptists asserted in 1790 "that slavery is a violent deprivation of the rights of nature and inconsistent with a republican government." They went on to suggest that Baptists "make use of every legal measure to extirpate the horrid evil from the land."

As some Baptists uttered this prophetic word against slavery, they began to face stern opposition. From about 1790 Baptists in the South began to justify and defend slavery. What caused the change? For one thing, anti-slavery voices found themselves opposing an entire culture which was increasingly based on slavery. Also, Whitney's cotton gin in 1792 made slavery more economically profitable. As cotton became king, denunciation of slavery declined. Moreover, a growing sectionalism polarized the North and the South. Baptists in the South began defining "the Southern way of life." Northern abolitionists increased in militancy and fervor. This resulted in greater defensiveness on the part of Southerners.

The growing alienation between the North and the South profoundly affected Christian denominations. For Baptists the crisis developed primarily within the mission organizations in the 1840's. At first, the Foreign Mission Society (the Triennial Convention) and the Home Mission Society sought to take neutral positions on the issue of slavery. Harmony within the mission

societies took priority over taking stands on slavery. This kind of neutrality could not last since the issue was too important for that approach.

By 1844 both mission societies stated that they could not, in good conscience, appoint slaveholders as missionaries. Baptists in the South viewed this as a "breach of trust" and a violation of the proper position of neutrality. They also pointed out that the constitutions of the mission societies did not address themselves to slavery. In a very real sense, the Southerners were right. What they failed to see, however, was the greater moral issue of slavery and human servitude. Baptists in the South had become captives of a slave culture. Rather than challenge that culture, they chose to defend it. That was a decision with important consequences.

The first and most obvious result was the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention at Augusta, Georgia, in May, 1845. A second and most unfortunate result was the increasing sense of rivalry between Baptists of the North and the South. This sense of rivalry was intensified during the Civil War and the Reconstruction Era. It left a legacy of charges and countercharges, suspicion and misunderstanding, which have not yet entirely disappeared.

Southern Baptist identification with mid-nineteenth century southern culture had another consequence, and this had to do with relationships between the races among Baptists in the South. Prior to the Civil War, Baptist churches in the South consisted of blacks and whites. More accurately, blacks belonged to white churches, for control was firmly in white hands. After the Civil War, blacks wanted to escape white domination. They withdrew and began forming black Baptist churches. Whites encouraged the segregation of the churches just as they sought to enforce segregation in the whole of southern society.

Just as Southern Baptists had to face the crisis of slavery in the mid-1800's, they encountered the crisis of segregation in the mid-1900's. Following the Supreme Court decision of 1954, the racial situation in the South became most intense. The emerging civil rights revolution angered many southern whites

— many of whom were Baptist. By any account, desegregation has come gradually, painfully, and controversially among Southern Baptists.

Even in the face of the racial crisis, Southern Baptists have made progress. In 1968 the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a document called "A Statement Concerning the Crisis in Our Nation." Among other things the statement said, "We will personally accept every Christian as a brother beloved in the Lord and welcome to the fellowship of faith and worship every person irrespective of race or class." That statement represents considerable advancement over the mid-nineteenth century defense of slavery and the twentieth century defense of segregation.

The Landmark Crisis

In 1855 the term "Landmark" was used for the first time on the floor of the Southern Baptist Convention. It would not, however, be the last. Throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, Southern Baptists confronted the issue of Landmarkism. The movement had as much impact on the organizational life of the Southern Baptist Convention as any other single development in the nineteenth century. What was it? Who started it? What were its results?

Landmarkism was a movement that began among Southern Baptists in the early 1850's and which insisted that Baptist churches are the only true churches. The name came from two Old Testament passages: "Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set" (Proverbs 22:28), and "Some remove the landmarks . . ." (Job 24:2). Advocates used the word to point to what they considered to be endangered distinctives of Baptist life. A "landmark" was, therefore, an ancient Baptist principle. The problem was that certain "landmarks" were not as ancient as Landmarkers suggested.

J. R. Graves (1820-1893) was the founder and high priest of Landmarkism. Born in Vermont, he lived for a while in Ohio and Kentucky before settling in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1845. He became editor of *The Tennessee Baptist* in 1848 and retained that position until his death in 1893. Through his newspaper and

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many other publications, Graves spread Landmarkism among Baptists in the South and Southwest. The *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* said that Graves "influenced Southern Baptist life of the nineteenth century in more ways, and probably to a greater degree, than any other person." Many Southern Baptist historians would agree.

Working with Graves were J. M. Pendleton (1811-1891) and A. C. Dayton (1813-1865). The three leaders are known as "The Great Triumvirate" of Landmarkism. Pendleton, while pastor in Bowling Green, Kentucky, wrote an important little tract called "An Old Landmark Re-Set." Dayton is remembered primarily as the author of a religious novel, *Theodosia Ernest*, which depicted the true church, which for Dayton was Baptist.

J. R. Graves and his Landmark ideas gained a wide following among Southern Baptists for two big reasons. First, Landmarkism developed in the context of bitter denominational rivalries. Graves endeared himself to a number of Baptists by defending the denomination against the attacks of Methodists, Presbyterians, and the followers of Alexander Campbell. In many cases, Graves had precipitated these attacks. Second, Graves' genius capitalized on the media of the day — the printed word.

What did Landmarkism mean for Southern Baptist life? As a result of the teachings of J. R. Graves, some Southern Baptists hardened their attitude toward other denominations and their ministers. Prior to the rise of Landmarkism, Southern Baptists had, for the most part, a good working relationship with other denominations. Ministers of other groups were received cordially both at Baptist associational meetings and at the Southern Baptist Convention. Pulpit-exchange was a common practice between Baptists and other Protestants, especially Presbyterians and Methodists.

In 1851, J. R. Graves led a group of Baptists in Tennessee to adopt the "Cotton Grove Resolutions." Both the "Cotton Grove Resolutions" and J. M. Pendleton's "An Old Landmark Re-Set" rejected the practice of "pulpit-affiliation." Ministers of other denominations were not considered official gospel ministers. This meant that their

administration of baptism, even if it were the baptism of a believer by immersion, was not valid. Landmarkers rejected, therefore, what they called "alien immersion" — the immersion of a believer by a non-Baptist minister. There were also implications for the practice of the Lord's Supper. Arguing that only Baptist baptism is valid baptism and that baptism is a prerequisite to the Lord's Supper, Landmarkers advocated a practice of "closed communion," that is, only members of each Baptist church could partake of the Lord's Supper in that church.

Even before the rise of Landmarkism, Baptists had been divided over the validity of alien immersion and closed communion. The error of Landmarkism was in distorting Baptist history and claiming that all Baptists had denounced alien immersion and practiced closed communion. To the contrary, Baptists had often accepted alien immersion and practiced "open" communion for all believers.

A second result of Landmarkism centered on the doctrine of the church. "Church" to a Landmarker meant an independent, local congregation of believers. No allowance was made for the universal church. Baptists prior to Landmarkism, both in England and America, had always stressed the independence of local Baptist churches. They had also emphasized, however, that the word "church" could be used to include all Christians.

With their stress on localism in church life, Landmarkers became gravely suspicious of all denominational organizations beyond the local church level. Radical Landmarkers rejected mission boards and their authority for supervising missionary activities. J. R. Graves once declared, "No man has lower views of the authority of a Missionary Board . . . than we have." If that viewpoint had triumphed, Southern Baptists would never have been able to cooperate through Convention-wide agencies. Beginning in 1905, many Landmarkers began pulling out of the Southern Baptist Convention to form their own Baptist denominations.

A third feature of the Landmark movement was its peculiar interpretation of Baptist history. Known as the "Successionist Concept" of Baptist history, this view maintains that Baptist churches began in the New Testament era and

have continued in unbroken succession since that time. Graves manipulated history to reinforce his presupposition that Baptist churches were the only true churches. He also used it to insist that Baptists were not Protestants. If Baptists had existed since the first century, reasoned Graves, then surely they did not come from the sixteenth century when Christian groups "protested" against Roman Catholicism.

Southern Baptist historians today do not accept the Landmark interpretation of Baptist history. Rather, most see Baptists originating out of seventeenth century English Separatism. Some Baptists, however, still hold the Landmark view of Baptist origins. In fact, Graves, through his writings, helped make it a part of standard Baptist orthodoxy in the nineteenth century. W. H. Whitsitt, president and professor of church history at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in the 1890's, lost his job because he disputed the Landmark theory. Whitsitt followed the English Separatist theory of Baptist origins which says that Baptists began in England in the early 1600's.

Lessons from Baptist Crises

Only three crises — the missions, the racial, and the Landmark — which affected Southern Baptists have been discussed. Many more could have been described. The Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention has faced crises of survival. The Sunday School Board and the publication ministry of Southern Baptists faced difficulty in getting started. The Southern Baptist Convention has faced several financial crises, particularly during the years of the Great Depression.

Theological crises over such issues as evolution and biblical interpretation have been a real part of Southern Baptist life in the twentieth century. They have often taken on the names of prominent individuals involved in the controversies. For example, the Norris Controversy of the 1920's revolved around J. Frank Norris, pastor of the First Baptist Church, Fort Worth, Texas. The Elliott Controversy of the early 1960's concerned the teachings of Ralph H. Elliott, professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and his book, *The Message of Genesis*. In the late sixties and early seventies, Southern Baptists were engaged in the

Broadman Commentary Controversy, which in many ways was a repeat of the Elliott Controversy. These are only a few of the Southern Baptist crises.

What can be learned from crises in Baptist life? First, where there is freedom, strife goes with life. This is as true in religion as in politics. Totalitarianism may bring peace, but it also demands a freedom-denying uniformity. Baptist life, however, is built upon basic democratic principles and calls for freedom for the individual, the local church, and the denomination. Baptists have in them a stubborn streak of individualism which cries for freedom. Just as freedom creates diversity, diversity often leads to crises. Again, the alternative is a deadening uniformity. Few would suggest that as a means for avoiding crises.

Second, Baptist crises have not always been negative. Even schism, while never the ideal, has often produced positive results. This may be seen most clearly in the anti-missions and Landmark controversies. Southern Baptists were not stunted by those two separations. To the contrary, they moved forward in their organization for missionary endeavors. This progress would not have been made as rapidly if the separations had not occurred.

A positive feature of the Landmark crisis was that it created a new interest in Baptist history. Scholars such as W. H. Whitsitt emerged who sought to write denominational history apart from denominational prejudices. Whitsitt wanted to give an honest and objective description of the Baptist heritage. Certainly that could have been accomplished without the Landmark crisis, but Landmarkism did facilitate, although unwittingly, the self-understanding of Baptists.

Third, Baptist views have often involved moral issues of supreme importance. This was especially true in the racial crisis. As Baptists moved away from defending slavery and segregation, they got a firmer grip on the gospel of Jesus Christ and the principles of brotherhood which are basic to that gospel. Pain accompanied the crisis; progress, also.

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Cover graphics:

- (1) *James Robinson Graves, founder of
Landmark movement;*
- (2) *Slave auction*

*This pamphlet is one of ten in a series
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