

# Baptists in America

Taken from "Our Baptist Story", 1957

## THE GREAT AWAKENING

Revival never comes too soon. Colonial America in the early part of the eighteenth century was far from being the ideal place that it has sometimes been pictured. If the contemporary records are to be believed, immorality of all types abounded, and the churches found tasks most difficult because of apathy and sometimes downright hostility. Beginning between 1725 and 1750, and continuing for many years, there were great and prolonged religious revivals throughout the Colonies. They are called the Great Awakening by historians. Some of the leaders became famous, among them Jonathan Edwards, George "Whitfield, William Tennent, and his son, George Tennent.

Baptists were not as intimately involved in the early stages of the Great Awakening as were some other groups, particularly the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists. In New England the majority of their churches were General Baptist churches. Naturally, they did not sympathize with the Calvinistic, predestinarian, character of the revivals. Nevertheless, it was not long before the revival spirit passed to many Baptist churches.

## RISE OF SEPARATE BAPTISTS

Baptists profited from the revival in another and rather unusual way. The Congregational churches had ceased emphasizing the necessity of an experience of regeneration for membership as in previous years; and, when the revival began once more to insist upon personal regeneration, some Congregationalists began to look with favor upon the Baptist emphasis at this point, particularly as it was symbolized in the baptism of believers. As a result, many of them became Baptists.

A closely related development had to do with the controversies which arose over the revivalistic methods which were used, particularly the high emotionalism evident in most of the meetings. These controversies resulted in the schism of many Congregationalist churches into the New Lights who favored the revival and the Old Lights who opposed it. As a result many so-called Separate or strict Congregational churches were organized which insisted upon a personal experience of regeneration for membership. Quite often the separate churches contained both, pedobaptists, who practiced infant baptism, and antipedobaptists, who opposed it. In numerous cases these separatist churches became convinced that the New Testament taught either the baptism of infants or sprinkling as baptism. They therefore became Baptist churches. So there developed a group of churches known as Separate churches, as over against the older Baptist churches which were called Regular Baptist churches.

Separate Baptists usually employed a highly emotional type of evangelistic preaching, appealing particularly to the poor and less well-educated, were intense individualists who looked with some suspicion upon any tendency toward associational authority over the churches, and normally

would not adhere to the Philadelphia Confession of Faith but insisted upon the Bible alone as their creed. The Separate Baptists were highly successful, particularly as they pushed south under the preaching of such men as Shubael Stearns, Daniel Marshall, and Samuel Harris. Nevertheless, by the early part of the nineteenth century. Separate and Regular Baptists had united their efforts in most areas.

### **STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM**

Baptists, more than any other group, insisted upon religious freedom. Toleration was not enough. They insisted on freedom, not toleration. Rather than merely the concession of the right to exist, religious liberty involves also the right to express one's views in public through any and all means of communication. It involves one's right to proclaim his views freely in order to persuade others to embrace them. It means that no disability shall ever be placed upon a person by the state on account of his religious beliefs and connections. It means that all stand in the same relation to the law regardless of their religion or lack of it. The early seventeenth century British Baptist, Thomas Helwys, had said that the king might punish any person for temporal offenses; yet, for spiritual error, "Let them be heretikes, Turks, Jews or whatsoever, it apperteynes not to the earthy power to punish them in the least measure."

American Baptists were no less hesitant than their British cousins to express the same opinions. From Roger Williams and John Clarke through James Manning, John Gano, Isaac Backus, and John Leland to the present there has been a continuous and vigorous witness to principles of religious freedom. In colonial days Baptists were almost constantly harassed in New England and in Virginia, but in the other colonies of the South and in the Middle Colonies they had relatively little difficulty. The first association of Baptists in New England, the Warren Association, was organized in 1767 for the primary purpose of strengthening the fight for religious liberty. Over and over again the Warren Association made representation to the general courts of Massachusetts and Connecticut for redress. The association also sent Isaac Backus to lay before the Continental Congress its desire for complete religious liberty.

Almost all of the Baptists supported the Revolution. One of their strongest hopes was that out of it would come religious as well as political freedom. By working with all non-Baptists who wanted religious liberty, they succeeded in disestablishing the Anglican (Episcopal) Church in Virginia and procuring the adoption of the Bill of Rights to the Federal Constitution. The last state church to go was the Congregational Church of Massachusetts in 1833.

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