This Sacred Land

by Anthony Stanonis

The populace of the Antebellum South stood defiantly for the ideals considered vital to their way of life as issues such as states' rights, slavery, and tariffs were debated in the national political arena. Eventually, a distinct Southern agenda and ideology developed that permeated all aspects of southern life. Even religion did not escape untainted. As stated by the character Augustine in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Southern planters, clergymen, and politicians "may warp and bend language and ethics to a degree that shall astonish the world at their ingenuity." <1> By studying the Baptist faith of the early 1800s in particular, the gradual emergence of the South's sectional interests can be recognized, leading to a schism that foreshadowed the Civil War.

Baptists first arrived in the American colonies in the 1600s, coming from England, these faithful settled in three distinct areas, New England, Pennsylvania-Jersey, and South Carolina. From the beginning, sectional interests were destined to influence the Baptist faith's theology. <2>

Overall, the Baptists trusted in Calvinism's strict discipline and independence. <3> Ministers such as Isaac Backus also believed that God had "appointed two kinds of government in the world which are distinct in their nature and ought never to be confounded together, one of which is called civil the other ecclesiastical government." <4> Besides supporting the separation of church and state, Baptists attempted to be as decentralized as possible. <5> After the establishment of the first Baptist church by Roger Williams in Providence, Rhode Island in 1639, however, the concept of possessing some sort of unity among the colonies' churches grew as the number of places of worship increased. <6> Thus, the idea of forming associations, a denominational program that focused on the formal participation of several churches came into existence. The first, the Philadelphia Baptist Association, was created in Pennsylvania in 1707. Associations soon represented a common part of the organizational structure of Baptist churches. In 1751, the Charleston Association of South Carolina, the South's first Baptist organization, was established, followed in 1758 by the Sandy Creek Association of North Carolina. <7>

The Philadelphia Association, however, retained a certain leadership among the Baptist congregations despite the distrust that individual churches had for granting any central authority to such an organization. <8>

At mid-century, two developments in the Philadelphia Baptist Association would impact the faith for the next hundred years. In 1749, a decree based on the Biblical passages of Acts 15 was issued. Citing the Scriptures' account of how the Council of Jerusalem sent out representatives to spread Christianity, as well as how the disciple "Paul insisted that they should not take with them someone who had deserted them at Pamphylia and who had not continued with them in their work," the Philadelphia Association declared the right to withdraw fellowship from a church or person who practiced misconduct. <9>

Furthermore, the edict defined the powers possessed by associations. The second development was the establishment of local missions by the Philadelphia Association in
An evolution of the Baptist religion in the South was also taking place. Particular, or Calvinistic, Baptists were mixing with and giving way to Separatist, or New Light, Baptists. In the late 1700s, the revivalistic and emotional Separatists slowly migrated westward, spreading the Baptist faith throughout the region. By the end of the Revolutionary War, Baptists dominated the South and were second in numbers only to the Methodists in the entire United States.

At the turn of the century, the Presbyterian version of the Great Revival, originating in Logan County, Kentucky, by a minister named James McGready, swept the country. Since the new nation provided no state support for religion, each denomination needed to exert itself in order to prosper. Camp meetings, revivals, and missionary societies became necessary to attract new followers and increase finances. Although Presbyterian ministers had introduced the evangelical gospel to the South, the restrictions and education requirements placed on these evangelists allowed Baptist ministers, who took advantage of the spiritual thirst brought about by the Presbyterian Revival, to make great inroads in the region. By 1812, the Baptists were so successful below the Mason-Dixon line that they had doubled their membership nationwide.

For the most part, southern Baptists espoused the concept of an equalitarian and simplistic government. Ministers were self-supportive, providing for themselves and their families by farming. The use of slave labor, even on the homestead of a reverend, was not an uncommon practice in the South. One of the primary reasons southern theology slowly took on a proslavery tone is thus rather clear. Furthermore, Baptists in the South were conservative. The Bible was law. This marked the establishment of what is known as "old time religion," the conviction that religious truths were not subject to change merely because of new scientific revelations or social whims. As time passed, the southern Baptists' concrete faith in the Scriptures combined with proslavery theology to form a "solid" justification of this harsh institution.

Slowly, disagreements between northern and southern Baptists began to develop over the mission movement and the type of organization under which the missions would be directed. In 1802, the Massachusetts Domestic Missionary Society was formed. In contrast to the associations, societies were created solely for the practice of missionary work. Another major difference was that, while associations depended on churches, the society centered on individuals who volunteered to participate in the society's activities. Baptists in the South firmly believed in the freedom of congregations as opposed to the freedom of the individuals within the congregations. When the Baptists met in Philadelphia on May 18, 1814, to give support to the missionary work of Adenerain Judson and Luther Rice, the Baptist religion was faced with a dilemma similar to the one in the political arena in the 1830s between supporters of states rights and popular sovereignty. What Alexander H. Stephens would later write about the Civil War also applies to the Southern concept of sovereignty: "It [Civil War] was a strife between
the principles of Federation, on the one side, and Centralism, or Consolidation, on the other." In order to ease the southern Baptist's distrust of societies, a compromise was reached in the creation of the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States of America for Foreign Missions, its sole purpose being the support "of Missionary life among the Heathen." Although the title suggested that the organization was a society, the General Convention did not allow individual representation. Up until 1832 when the society method won out, the General Convention struggled between the two types of fellowship. Southern Baptist opposition to missions, however, continued to grow. The antimission movement had first appeared in the 1750s when the New Lights and Particulars came into contact. As the nineteenth century neared, the struggle between the two groups quieted. Tensions that had existed melted away in the turmoil of the Revolutionary War and the creation of the United States. When the concept of missions started to take a greater hold among Baptist churches, the anti-mission movement was again awakened by Daniel Parker of Tennessee during the 1810s. A Baptist minister with strong Calvinistic leanings, he opposed not only missions but also Sunday schools and instrumental music. As most antimissionists, Parker believed in predestination and considered missionary work useless. Though also present in the North, the anti-mission movement was primarily rooted in the South, especially in the backcountry. For the most part, southern Baptists, such as John Taylor, disliked the idea of educated easterners influencing the religion of the western Baptists. In his 1820 book, Thoughts on Missions, Taylor stirred a widespread response by claiming that evangelicalism was not scriptural since it was the responsibility of God to convert people and not the work of men. He even went so far as to say that the mission societies smelled of "the New England Rat." Fear of becoming engulfed in a national organization also played a role in creating these sentiments, especially when abolitionist views began to surface. Sects, such as the extremely conservative Hard-Shell Baptists and Parker's predestination believing Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Baptists, were formed. By aligning with the moderate opponents of abolition, the antimission movement was able to stall any attempt of the Baptists to oppose slavery until the 1830s. In that decade, however, a vigorous, militant revival movement engulfed the North in particular, causing a weakening of the faith's slavery policy. Meanwhile, the South was clearly developing its own philosophy. State Baptist conventions were formed, the first being established in South Carolina in 1821. These state conventions consisted of delegates from churches within the state who gathered once a year to review church affairs. Frequently, these meetings became forums for political discussions. Southerners began seeing Northerners as vulgar, materialistic, and deceitful. Missions started suffering as Southern distrust of the missionary movements' mostly Northern leaders mounted. Before long, the South also complained of neglect, claiming that the aid received did not equal the amount of money given to the missionary societies. Although not entirely true, these arguments and beliefs by southern Baptists would play a large role in creation of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845.
The early 1830s brought other events that caused great charges in the South and the Baptist faith. In 1831, the Nat Turner insurrection erupted in Southampton, Virginia. Fifty-five whites died, causing great anxiety throughout the South. The fact that this revolt happened shortly after the establishment of William Lloyd Garrison's antislavery newspaper, *The Liberator*, only heightened Southerners' suspicions of northern antislavery groups. In reaction to the growing abolitionist movement, the South embraced and refined the proslavery ideology that had existed in the United States for some time. The job of religion was to buttress this message. <35>

Slavery had been a difficult issue to reconcile with religion during America's Colonial Period. When slaves were introduced to Virginia in the 1600s, the colonial government labored to make slavery and Christianity compatible. The idea that baptism meant emancipation was reformed in order to allow masters to Christianize their slaves without having to worry about losing them. <36> In 1682, all non-Christian servants in Virginia were defined as slaves. <37> Despite the tolerance of slavery, most Baptists, such as the General Committee of the Virginia Baptists, believed until the late 1700s that this institution was an evil that needed to be removed. Time and consideration of the region's economy, however, would bring an evolution in the South's beliefs. <38>

One of the major tasks of the missionary societies was to spread the Gospel to the non-Christian slave population. This became especially true in the 1830s when a spirit of humanitarianism swept through New England. <39> Although the South had used religion to support its purposes before abolitionism, the region now added emphasis to the practice. <40> Black preachers had long been trained and censored by whites in order to maintain some control over the slaves. Well educated and powerful orators, African-American ministers frequently spoke to their congregations about the importance of obedience to their masters. <41> Although religion helped to relieve some of the slaves' fear of their masters and provided them with some solidarity, the planter class of the South was still fairly effective in restraining their black servants. <42> Despite those restrictions, however, many black abolitionists such as J. W. C. Pennington, had to admit, "Our [black] churches, as a general rule, are respectfully represented in their [Baptist] bodies, and coloured pastors are permitted to sit and deliberate." <43>

On April 27, 1832, the American Baptist Home Missionary Society was created to serve the spiritual needs of immigrants who were entering the United States. The organization was also a center for publishing the progress of domestic missions and collecting financial donations. An auxiliary program was formed so that various Baptist societies could join in the mission's activities. One of the most profound aspects of the Home Mission Society, however, was that its first two directors, Elon Galusha and Duncan Dunbar, were future abolitionists. <44>

The abolitionist movement, which experienced its greatest growth in the 1830s, was creating extreme friction within the Baptist church. As the New England Baptists began emulating their fellow Baptists in Britain and their antislavery doctrine of immediatism, the voice of those who opposed slavery grew in the United States. <45> Northern Baptists soon rejected the opinion that Africans were descendants of the Biblical Ham.
These Baptists came to see blacks as possessing some self-worth. This contrasted greatly with the beliefs of southern men, such as Thornton Stringfellow, who wrote, "Under the gospel, it [slavery] has brought within the range of gospel influence, millions of Ham's descendants among ourselves, who but for this institution, would have sunk down to eternal ruin." 

On April 28, 1840, a three day antislavery convention was held by Baptists in the McDougal Street Baptist Church in New York. By the time the American Baptist Anti-slavery Convention closed, it had issued a decree calling for the immediate emancipation of slaves. Furthermore, the convention warned the South to repent the sins of slavery. Neutral Northerners were torn between breaking with the radical abolitionist elements in the North who they lived with or the conservatives in the South and the prospects of converting the Africans.

In response to the convention's decision, southern Baptists became more determined to adapt their religion to the region's needs. Slavery was no longer presented as an evil but as a holy institution established by God in which the white aristocracy took a paternal interest in their black laborers. Eventually, the North was accused of rejecting fundamental principles of the Bible and, as Jefferson Davis would later write, of being intimidated by "a few zealots." Southern Baptists saw New England's concept of reform as interfering with the southern way of life. Planters believed slavery would end when the black man was ready, and God saw fit to free him. In the meantime, Southerners, such as Albert Bledsoe, declared slavery a blessing: "His [Africans] dispositions have been softened, his intellect sharpened, and his sensibilities roused to a new life, by society and Christianity." The Baptists were ripe for a schism.

During the early 1840s, the Home Mission Society, which had declared that its constitution forbade the addressing of slavery as either appropriate or immoral, became a hotbed of tension as Northerners and Southerners continued to argue the morality of slaveholding and the appointment of slaveholders to positions within the organization. Despite the previous declaration, 1845 brought a change when the Home Mission Society decided by vote not to license slaveholding missionaries. This was also true of the General Convention. When the General Convention was petitioned by the Alabama Baptist Convention to state if slaveholders would be appointed, the response was negative. 

These proclamations forced the southern Baptists to come together in a consultative meeting in Augusta Georgia on May 8, 1845. The idea of separating from northern Baptists had long been discussed and now became a reality in the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention, which most Baptist churches in the South recognized as legitimate. The Convention placed all benevolent agencies under its jurisdiction and established individual boards to carry out the Convention's various activities. Northern Baptists reacted with mixed opinions. Overall, the reaction was much like that of the General Convention:
"The circumstances under which the separation took place, are of themselves sufficiently painful, and it may well be a matter of solicitude with all the parties concerned, that no new questions . . . should, without the most urgent necessity, be started." <58>

The nation could no longer stand together as one. As the Baptists and other religious denominations divided in the 1840s, the nation's political parties disintegrated in the next decade. The 1860s would bring the dissolution of the United States and a war between the different philosophies of the North and South that would claim the lives of approximately 360,000 Northerners and 258,000 Southerners. <59> Religion, the pillar of society, crumbled under the weight of sectionalism. For the Baptist faith of the mid-1800s, "the veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom." <60>

Notes


3 Baker, 8.


7 Baker, 11-12.

8 Baker, 9, 10.


10 Baker, 11.

11 Thompson, 261.

12 Smith, 361-362.

13 Thompson, 259.

15 Thompson, 257-258.


17 Simkins, 158-9.

18 Baker, 12.


20 Baker, 14.


23 Baker, 15.


25 Eighmy, 125.


27 Brown, 502.


29 Brown, 510.

30 Thompson, 268.

31 Eighmy, 126.

32 Brackney, 16-17.

34 Baker, 33-34.


37 Morgan, 329.

38 Eighmy, 4.

39 Simkins, 161.


42 Blassingame, 147.


44 Baker, 28-29; Brackney, 17.

45 Baker, 40.

46 Simkins, 165.


48 Baker 49, 67.

49 Baker 52; Bailey, 242.

50 Fish, 283-284; Bailey, 221.


52 Fish, 283.
53 McWhiney, 7.


55 Bailey, 241; Baker, 68.

56 Baker, 81-82.

57 Baker, 82-83

58 *The American Baptist Magazine*, no. 11, vol. XXV (Boston: Board of Managers of the Baptist General Convention, November 1845), 293.


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