

Historical Overview of Baptist Life and Practice

By Gary Long

Let me say how honored I am to make this historical presentation on this special day. In 1851, Sewall Cutting who was the editor of The Christian Review of New York had the following observation:

"No Christian denomination has been so indifferent to its history as our own. Our fathers have been left to sleep in unhonored graves. The labors they performed - the sufferings they endured - the heroic characters they bore - have alike been forgotten. The books which, amid penury and toil, they wrote in defense of their persecuted faith, are almost wholly unknown to those who now possess the noble heritage of religious freedom and Christian truth which they bequeathed. It is time for the honor of our name, as a Christian people, that this indifference were broken up, and that we began to study for ourselves, and to teach to our children, the lives and deeds of the founders and fathers of our churches. We hail therefore with delight any discussion which shall make our brethren acquainted with the early history of their own denomination, or lead them to linger in pious reverence around the graves of those who, amid blame and contempt, first taught the faith we cherish, and first established the institutions of religion and learning to which we are so largely indebted."[\(1\)](#)

I pray that this day, September 11, 2001, will prove to be a grand day in the history of modern day Baptists. For on this day most of us have been delegated by our respective churches to form an official *Fellowship* of historically Calvinistic Baptist and Baptist Churches, which is in itself a "first." We have agreed to venture forth on new ground.

I have been asked to present a historical message but since we are "new born" and have not yet made our contribution to Baptist history, it is necessary for us to consider how Baptists worked together in the past- and, hopefully, to derive instruction and encouragement. In doing this there will be, of necessity, a great deal of reference to Baptist Associations, particularly the *Philadelphia Baptist Association*, since historically, Baptists were associational. *Fellowships* which are deliberately less organizational, are of recent origin and are basically, for better or worse, formed in reaction to the centralization of too much power in a convention or association.

As far as we can determine there are no organized *Fellowships* before 1900. Prior to the formation of the *Sovereign Grace Baptist Fellowship* most other Fellowships in America have organized in reaction to liberalism or to withdraw from domineering leadership. And so, today we form a Fellowship somewhat on a bases of reaction. Not *reactionism*, rather as an affirmation of Calvinistic Baptist Churches willing to work together in evangelism, missions, education and for fellowship. We willingly react to the continued downgrade among present day Baptist churches and the rampant Arminianism that prevails in America.

This *Fellowship* has formed because we have too often witnessed the surrender of local churches, as they yield their autonomy to an all-powerful Convention or Association. We have seen *life* give way to *structure*, *order* has been replaced by *organization*, missionaries are "hired" out by a handful of icons and are unknown in and to the local churches, where *denominational prestige* takes precedence over *denominational purity* and where *doctrinal stability* is divisive and is replaced by a *blissful pragmatism*.

Almost 300 years ago five churches around Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, formed "The Particular Baptist Association annually held at Philadelphia." It is the oldest Regular Baptist Association in America and was used of God to expand the New Testament Baptist cause over the colonies and at the same time, was the instrument in establishing doctrinal stability as well as an encouragement for holy living among the churches.

The Philadelphia Baptist Association adopted the London 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith until 1742, when the association added two articles and made it the Philadelphia Baptist Confession of Faith. This strongly Calvinistic confession not only became the standard for the Philadelphia Association, but also for Regular Baptist Associations in the other colonies. It is difficult for us to imagine the importance of this confession, for it bonded the brethren and kept error at bay. There were other means used as well, to promote stability, unity and growth, for with the confession, the association also provided the very influential "Circular Letters" that were annually sent to all association churches. These circular letters, written by different pastors, challenged, warned, rebuked, comforted and instructed. The letters were prized by all, but were especially esteemed by the many circuit churches, and churches without pastors.

Also the catechism was advanced in the homes and proved highly beneficial in instructing children. There were also those brethren whom the association would send forth as missionaries to aid

struggling churches anywhere there was a need. Then too, the association played a major role in assisting pastorless churches by screening the many traveling preachers who were only seeking a flock to fleece. In reflection on the importance of this association, Thomas Armitage says:

"The establishment of this Association formed a great epoch in Baptist history, because it fostered those educational and philanthropic causes which needed the co-operation of the sisterhood of Churches, and could not be sustained by purely separate congregations. When Isaac Eaton had it upon his heart to raise an academy in connection with his Church at Hopewell, N. J., the Philadelphia Association passed the following resolution, October 5th 1756: 'Concluded to raise a sum of money toward the encouragement of a Latin Grammar School, for the promotion of learning amongst us, under the care of Rev. Isaac Eaton, and the inspection of our brethren, Abel Morgan, Isaac Stelle, Abel Griffith and Peter P. VanHorne.' It is said that the first student at this academy was James Manning, afterward President of Brown University. Samuel Jones and Hezekiah Smith were also amongst the early students, as well as Samuel Stillman, John Gano, Charles Thompson, Judge Howell, Benjamin Stelle, and many others of note, both in Church and State. So many of the Churches were supplied with able pastors from this seminary that the Baptists were moved to establish a college, and the result of their effort was the founding of that noted seat of learning now known as Brown University. In a sense, the Philadelphia, aided by the Charleston and Warren Associations, gave birth to all the Baptist institutions of learning in America by nursing the enterprise at Hopewell."⁽²⁾

So many things could be done collectively that individual churches could not do alone.

There is another characteristic of the Philadelphia Association which the Sovereign Grace Baptist Fellowship has very much in common and that is, the preservation of each churches' autonomy. This was closely guarded and all agreed that any association would need to be constantly watched. The well-known John Leland always distrusted associations and for years refused to unite with them⁽³⁾..... many still follow him in such aversions.

"The Philadelphia Association began to set the pattern concerning the powers and duties of an association in its early decisions, which limited its powers to infringe upon the independency of the churches. This pattern set by the early

decisions was further clarified and reinforced by other decisions throughout the first century of its existence. Even when the opportunity presented itself this body continually refused to usurp authority over any of the churches." [\(4\)](#)

We read in Cathcart's Baptist Encyclopedia,

"What our denomination would have been in this country without the Philadelphia Association is an interesting question. We cannot suppose that the Associational institution would have had no existence among us. It flourished in England long before 1707. But this mother Association had men of learning even in her early history, with sound Baptist principles, great practical sagacity, and with a love for struggling Baptists in the farthest East and in the most distant South; and, as a consequence, the Associational plan became popular, and the spirit of the old Philadelphia body was grafted upon every kindred institution all over the land." [\(5\)](#)

There have been organizations that, in some respects, were *Fellowships*. It may surprise you to know that as late as 1921 there was an active *State Pastor's Conference* in New York that disclaimed 'all rights to legislate for the churches' yet associated themselves to 'maintain the essence of Christian brotherhood.' Their 1921 constitution stated,

"Pastors of regular Baptist Churches within the State and also those who, having formerly held such pastorates, continue to be still engaged in ministerial work and reside within the State, may become members of this Conference by paying the annual dues of fifty cents." [\(6\)](#)

This Pastor's Conference met annually in connection with the Baptist Missionary Convention of New York and seems to have started in 1867 in Poughkeepsie. What is interesting about this State Pastor's Conference was its brief doctrinal statement which says,

"Receiving the Scriptures as a great basis and bond of their union and 'calling' as those Scriptures enjoin 'no man their master' in the faith, yet in order to declare briefly and historically their prevalent mode of interpreting these Scriptures, this Conference describe themselves as composed of the Pastors of Churches, generally designated heretofore as Particular Baptist Churches, Congregationalists in policy, Calvinistic for substance of doctrine, and agreeing as to all the main elements of the Christian faith with those views of Scripture doctrine, taught, nigh two centuries since, in the

confession of faith of our English Baptist Brethren, adopted in the year 1688. We do not regard this, and we accept no other human statement, as our final and exact standard; but we use it as being in the main a just compend of the utterances of the Bible as to what men must be, must hold, must do, that they may best serve Christ, and show forth most faithfully His Gospel and Himself to the world." [\(7\)](#)

Remember this was in 1921!

Sovereign Grace Baptist Fellowship has adopted a modified New Hampshire Confession of Faith so, where does the New Hampshire Confession come in? Dr J. Newton Brown (1803-1868) presented this confession in 1833. It was prepared with a view "to pending controversies with the Free-will Baptists,"⁸ who were numerous in New Hampshire. William Cathcart says of Dr. Brown,

"He was the author of the little creed so commonly adopted in newly organized Baptist churches, and known as 'The New Hampshire Confession'. Like the mild Dr. Brown, it is gently Calvinistical." [\(8\)](#)

Dr. Sewell Cutting (1813-) said,

"It (New Hampshire Confession) has been sometimes criticized as aiming at the difficult task of preserving the stern orthodoxy of the fathers of the denomination, while at the same time it softens the terms in which that orthodoxy is expressed, in order to remove the objections of neighboring opponents." [1\(9\)](#)

Cathcart adds,

"We have unlimited faith in the goodness and sanctity of the late Dr. Brown, but we very much prefer the Philadelphia Confession of Faith, so dear to our fathers, to the New Hampshire Creed." [1\(10\)](#)

As you can tell Cathcart was a firm Calvinist.

***Sovereign Grace Baptist Fellowship* has taken the liberty to strengthen the good Dr. Brown's hand on the grace of God, for it is our desire to see a return to the clear, definitive Calvinism our forebears held.**

Along with a mild protest against the inroads of Arminianism, there were two other major attacks to which Dr. Brown, in the confession,

was responding. First, the *anti-mission movement* was spreading rapidly. This movement among Baptists was made an issue by many earnest and sincere Calvinists who were not so fatalistic, as the 'hyper-Calvinists' were at that time, but who were concerned about missionary societies and other agencies as being unscriptural.

Anti-missionism swept, not just churches but some entire associations into its ranks. Dr. Brown's milder Calvinistic Confession was designed to counter the advancing extreme 'anti-mission Calvinism' of his day, but in so doing, it actually weakened the historic position of a clearly defined and well established Calvinism.

The second issue confronting Dr. Brown and Baptists of the early 1800's was a different movement, that also happened to be *anti-mission*. This movement's momentum came from a detestation by its leaders of what they held to be the overt Calvinism of the Philadelphia *Confession of Faith*. The powerfully clever leader of this movement held sway over many, less stable Baptists. His name was Alexander Campbell and he put a great strain upon the Baptist cause and was successful in drawing away many.

With Arminianism, the hyper-Calvinism of anti-missionism and Campbellism facing Baptists in the early 1800's, J. Newton Brown responded in a pro mission, less Calvinistic, clearly Baptist confession and it has been a standard ever since. SGBF should be well satisfied with its clear New Testament Baptist espousals and we have taken an important step to reintroduce a definitive Calvinistic theology.

Is it perfect? Of course not and we may be criticized by some who prefer more or less detail, but it is a good general expression of what we all agree on as New Testament Baptists and we are happy to recommend it.

And what of our constitution, is it without error? No! We are working to build a document that protects as much as it promotes. Baptist autonomy is vital to any Baptist organization but, as great of importance as autonomy is, it can just as easily be taken to the other extreme. Autonomy does not give us license to be territorial. We are not islands unto ourselves. Whether we appreciate it or not, we are very much involved with each other. Some are ultra independent out of necessity, as being unable to get along with anyone. And there is nothing noble, sacred, historical or New Testament in the extreme independence that many of us have heretofore practiced, and of which I also am guilty.

There is no question that Baptists of the 17th century onward have been associational both in England and in America. The historical fact is, that early Baptists would have held an 'independent Baptist' as a contradiction of terms if you were historic Baptist, you were interdependent and much involved with other churches of like faith, while fully autonomous.

We are independent churches, not independent kingdoms; we are accountable to no 'hierarchy,' but we are accountable to each other; we have so long stressed our *Baptist independence*, that we sacrificed any semblance of an effective unity. Baptists in England and Colonial America knew each other, needed each other and supported each other and never gave away their autonomy. Shame on us if we have made autonomy and independence, *Baptist idols!*

We must learn from history and we must learn how to lovingly deal with each other. If your every breath is an "issue" then you will be a detriment to this Fellowship. There have always been issues, there always will be, but the issues are not as important as the Christian manner in which we address them.

Some of the issues that exist in which there will be difference are: Bible versions, music, communion, Free offer, law/grace, eschatology, elder rule, methodology, and a host of others. And that is not even mentioning differences we will face in this Fellowship's structure and practice. All of these issues are important, but we have put forth a confession of faith in which we are all in general agreement. Most of the issues, even if addressed in a Fellowship Meeting, will be left with the local church and we will love and respect others with whom we differ..or we shall end this Fellowship in the valley of humiliation. This Fellowship must agree with William Carey to 'expect great things from God and to attempt great things for God.'

This Fellowship should be historic in its goals, as we desire to lovingly work together in foreign missions, church planting, evangelism, literature, education of our ministerial candidates, keeping accurate records of this organization and to enjoy the rich, sweet fellowship we have in Christ. I trust we shall work wisely and to leave the next generation something of such value, that they too, will abhor the downgrade and hold tightly to the *Rock of Ages* and the faith of our fathers.

If we are to identify with early Calvinistic Baptists, then we should be willing to promote this *Fellowship* in every way including financially. We should require a doctrinal message at our annual meeting. In early Baptist Association meetings, a pastor was chosen a year in advance to prepare a doctrinal paper the following year. These

written presentations were kept for possible future publication. When is the last time you heard a doctrinal presentation...on baptism? On the Lord's Table?.... or on church discipline?

We should see if the Lord would bless in a special joint meeting with the Southern Baptist Founder's Conference, the Reformed Baptists, Sovereign Grace Baptist Association, and The Fellowship of Independent Reformed Evangelicals, and any other Calvinistic Baptist group. While there are distinct differences among these groups, there is a unifying factor that is greater than our differences. A statement of unity and comradely is long overdue from Calvinistic Baptists. We should be eager to declare to the world a unity of spirit in the bond of peace concerning what we believe of Gods' sovereign grace.

SGBF has no control over any Baptist Church! This Fellowship cannot tell any pastor what he is to believe! This Fellowship can advise, recommend or suggest but cannot demand, nor threaten. We carry no sword of compliance but we are joining hands to grip together the Sword of the Spirit and the trowel of Grace. If God chooses to bless SGBF it will be on the basis of our doctrinal unity, of loving humility, and of active involvement.

Maybe there is a lesson for us in II Kings 13:20, 21 -

And Elisha died, and they buried him. And the bands of the Moabites invaded the land at the coming in of the year. And it came to pass, as they were burying a man, that, behold, they spied a band of men; and they cast the man into the sepulchre of Elisha: and when the man was let down, and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived, and stood up on his feet.

You see it is important to stay in touch with the men of God who have gone before and whom God has blessed. Would that we could touch the bones of our godly forefathers and be revived and stand on our feet and become *giants* of the faith!

I respect and appreciate those who love and promote our Baptist heritage. On May 8th of this year, we attended a monument dedication in Frankfort, Kentucky. There were two impressive granite monuments, one to William Hickman, a Calvinistic Baptist pioneer preacher of Kentucky and the second monument was to John and Sarah Gano. There were about sixty to eighty present, including representatives of the Daughters of the American Revolution, who had refreshments following. As impressive as these two excellent monuments were, about \$9000 to \$10,000 worth, what was of greater impression to me, was the brethren who were in attendance. There was a full bus load of Baptist preachers who had left North Carolina on their annual Baptist history tour. These brethren are not

Calvinistic, but they raise money to erect monuments over our Baptist forefathers, who are in the main, Calvinists.

Only a few hours out, as they were in Tennessee, the bus they were in, went off the side of the road and rolled down an embankment. They left seven Fundamental Baptist pastors in the hospital, patched up that many more, and got on another bus and they next day were in Frankfort, Kentucky. Some of these men were on crutches, in neck braces, slings and bandages. Their love of our Baptist heritage caused them to truly persevere. It was an honor to be with them.

Finally, I see SGBF like a sailing vessel. Many here today have boarded with hesitation, others eagerly and still others wait on the dock, rub their chins and say, "She'll never make it". Most on board know the vessel is sound, the doctrinal hull is solid and the sails themselves are the expectations of, we the crew. The rudder, so essential, is the gospel that guides us.

All things stand ready, what we need is spiritual minded men to take the helm of prayer. September 11, 2001, the sails have been hoisted, the crew stands ready and now we must wait on the Lord to provide the wind! Together we cry, 'Come, O East wind of love and blow upon our great need, without thee we dare not move!

Come, O North wind of humility and search out our arrogance and selfishness, empty us of ourselves that we might be filled with Thee! Come, O West wind of unity and blow the sweet ointment of divine grace upon your waiting, longing servants!

Come, O South wind of hope and bring with Thee the true revival, we need and long for, dissipate our doubt and unbelief, eradicate our murmuring and complaints and cleanse us. Grant us Thy joy that is unspeakable and Thy peace that passes understanding and get glory for Thyself through this Fellowship. Amen

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¹ Sewall S. Cutting, *The Christian Review* - pp. 139-140

² Thomas Armitage, *History of the Baptists* - pp. 716, 717.

³ Stephen Wright, *History of the Shaftsbury Baptist Association*. P. 332.

⁴ James L. Clark, *To Set Them In Order* - p. 139

⁵ William Cathcart, *Baptist Encyclopedia* - p. 917.

⁶ *The New York Baptist Annual 1921* - p. 73.

⁷ *Ibid*

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ Sewall Cutting, *Historical Vindications* - p. 105.

¹¹ Cathcart, *Baptist Encyclopedia* - p. 268.