

A Sketch of Baptist History in Virginia

From the website of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society

In January 1699, a Baptist preacher named Thomas Bonger preached at Yorktown. It was the beginning of three centuries of a Baptist presence in Virginia. Bonger was a General Baptist.

Two other streams of Baptist thought in the period were the Separates and the Regulars. The Separates, or New Lights, who emerged from the New England Congregationalists soon required personal faith prior to baptism and hence, they became Separate Baptists.

After a brief sojourn in Virginia, two Separate Baptist preachers - Shubal Stearns and Daniel Marshall - settled in 1755 at Sandy Creek in Guilford County, North Carolina; and from that strategic location, the preachers and their followers began to spread Baptist views into Southside and Central Virginia.

In the time of a state religion in colonial Virginia, sometimes the Baptists were tolerated and sometimes they were persecuted. From 1768-78, some 40 Baptists were imprisoned or otherwise violently persecuted for their faith; most were ministers who were arrested for "unlawful preaching." Many laypersons faced social ridicule for failing to attend the Anglican Church.

By enduring persecution, through petitioning the civil authorities, and from influencing the Founding Fathers, Virginia Baptists helped secure religious liberty into the documents of Virginia and the United States.

It was the concern over religious liberty, which ultimately helped unite the Baptists in Virginia. While it is difficult to generalize - especially about Baptists - the Separates were enthusiastic in their display of religion. Their preachers depended more upon inspiration than study. They were fiercely independent and suspicious of written confessions of faith. The Regulars were the better-educated town folk who preferred order in worship and adopted the Philadelphia Baptist Confession of Faith.

Several times the two streams sought to merge, but their differences were too strong. Finally, in 1787 at Dover Baptist Church in Goochland, the two groups came together, adopting the Philadelphia Confession while insisting that "we do not mean that every person is bound to the strict observance of everything therein contained." The proviso was to prevent any written confession of faith from becoming "a tyrannical power over the conscience of any." They did hold "that the doctrine of salvation by Christ and free, unmerited grace ought to be believed by every Christian."

At the time of the union the two groups agreed that the old party labels "be buried in oblivion" and that they be known as the United Baptist Churches of Christ in Virginia. Actually, an original document from the period goes even further with "in the United States."

Truly, the party labels were forgotten. In 1810, when the first history of Virginia Baptists was published, the author, Robert Baylor Semple, declared that most Baptists "manifested a total

unacquaintance with the terms Regular and Separate." Semple took this to mean that "all party spirit is laid aside" and that "it was a union of hearts as well as parties."

Generally, the Baptists could be characterized as a people who held that only believers were candidates for baptism and hence no infant baptism; the churches were composed of "regenerated" or "born-again" persons; that churches were free, independent and autonomous; that churches governed themselves with congregational democracy; that each individual has essential worth and importance; that the New Testament, and not creeds, is the rule book for churches.

In time issues developed that gave rise to divisions among Baptists. The very cause of missions became a division and Baptist churches opposing auxiliaries to the church - including mission boards, Sunday schools and seminaries - were known as Primitive Baptists. Among other concerns, slavery was at the root of division, which split national Baptists in 1845 and produced the large stream known as Southern Baptists.

Post-Civil War developments opened opportunities for blacks to constitute separate churches and, in 1868, a state convention. In many ways it was patterned after the Baptist General Association of Virginia, which was founded in 1823. And there were others, which carried the Baptist name including Freewill Baptists, German Baptists (or Dunkards) and Independent Baptists, to name several.

By whatever name, Baptists became a significant religious group in the Commonwealth. When necessary they reminded the government of the separation of church and state. They maintained within their respective communities a moral influence and an active social ministry. They established schools, colleges and seminaries. They began benevolent institutions, including orphanages, a hospital and homes for the aged. They contributed leadership for numerous community, state and national organizations.

Baptist General Association of Virginia...

The great fault evident from the beginning of the General Meeting of Correspondence (1800) was the severe limitation placed on its activities by its constitution. Its function was practically limited to the promotion of an annual fellowship gathering, the exchange of information, and the publication of useful material.

The General Meeting generated little enthusiasm by 1820, and few delegates attended its sessions. In 1821, only three delegates were present. No officers appeared and no business was carried on.

[One of the delegates was Edward Baptist and another was James Fife] and as [they] left together, they agreed that a new type of organization was needed which would coordinate the resources of the churches for the evangelization of Virginia.

At home again, Baptist wrote a constitution for the new organization and had it ready when the General Meeting assembled in Richmond in June, 1822. He proposed to call it the "General

Association of Baptists in Virginia" - avoiding the term "Convention" against which there was prejudice.

The first meeting of the General Association was held in the Second Baptist Church of Richmond on June 7, 1823. Seven district associations were represented. The purpose stated in the constitution was: "It shall be the entire object of this General Association, to propagate the Gospel and advance the Redeemer's Kingdom throughout the State, by supplying vacant Churches with the preached word, and by sending preachers into destitute regions within the limits of the State."

The General Association grew dramatically over the 180 years since its founding in 1823. The Association, through the staff of its Virginia Baptist Mission Board, developed ministry assistance in many diverse ways. Today the BGAV lists about 1500 member churches representing about 600,000 individuals. The BGAV relates to several social services and educational institutions.