

A Passion for the Gospel

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The earliest Baptists did not send out official missionaries, but they understood themselves to be on mission. They insisted that all believers were witnesses to the grace of God and that church membership was extended only to those who could testify to a work of grace in their hearts. Some seventeenth-century Baptists actually practiced the laying on of hands at baptism as a sign that all believers were ordained to take the gospel to their particular part of the community. Thus, for Baptists, the concept of missions exists within the concept of the church's mission.

When the church teaches, preaches, baptizes, celebrates the Supper, or serves the faithful and the unfaithful, it carries out the mission of Christ. Jesus reminded his earliest followers that when they cared for “one of the least of these,” they had offered care to Christ himself (see Matthew 25). The church’s calling is to be on mission in all it says and does.

A Theology for Missions

The mission of the church is to make known the good news of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and teaching in the world. This mission is inseparable from evangelism and the need for a regenerate (converted) church membership.

Early Baptists told the Jesus story unashamedly, calling persons to saving faith. The mission of Baptists in the 1600s seems to have been to call people to faith, and to encourage them to see Baptist views as the most biblical way of understanding Christian life and practice. They founded churches, urged sinners to experience God’s grace in Jesus Christ, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and celebrated worship—all as part of their missionary imperative. Yet, that mission also made them forceful advocates for religious liberty and the concept of a believers’ church.

Many, though not all, Baptists participate in the church’s mission because they believe that:

- It is central to the teachings of the New Testament.
- All Christians are called to participate in the church’s mission, wherever they may be.
- The calling to make disciples is essential to the gospel message.
- The church’s mission is a response to the whole person, offering the word of salvation and liberation and tangible responses to human suffering and need.

The first Baptists were convinced that all Christians were missionaries, sent out to speak and live the words and deeds of Christian ministry in the world around them. Long before Baptists sent missionaries to foreign lands, they understood that all baptized believers were to live as witnesses to the faith and compassion of Christ. At their best, Baptists have understood the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 as a mandate to make disciples wherever they might be found.

Religious Liberty

One of the earliest missions undertaken by Baptists involved the quest for complete religious liberty. The first Baptists in Amsterdam and London made no secret of their determination to secure religious freedom both for themselves and for all persons, Christian and non-Christian alike.

Indeed, Thomas Helwys' famous treatise, *The Mystery of Iniquity*, published in the early 1600s, was the first work in English to call for religious freedom for both believer and non-believer. Helwys insisted that God alone was judge of conscience and the state could not judge the heretic or the atheist. All persons were answerable to God alone for the faith they did or did not have.

Helwys and other British Baptists addressed their writings on liberty to the monarch, encouraging the "powers of the world" to recognize the right of humans to stand before God alone on the basis of their response to God's good grace. The call for radical religious liberty may have been one of the earliest expressions of Baptist missions to the powers that be. This mission produced extensive persecution against Baptists and other dissenters in England and in America, but ultimately the Baptist vision of freedom prevailed.

The call for liberty of conscience and freedom of worship was a consistent mission of Baptists in the 1600s and 1700s. That grand missionary effort should not be ignored in our attempt to understand the missionary identity of the people called Baptists.

Arminians and Calvinists

Baptists often disagreed among themselves about the nature of the Christian mission and the divine plan for converting sinners. General and Particular Baptists took different approaches.

General Baptists, who began in Holland in 1609, were Arminians in theology, supporting the views of Jacob Arminius, the Dutch reformer. They believed that Christ died for all persons and that all who came to God by repentance and faith would be saved.

Particular Baptists, who began in England in the

1630s, were Calvinists who subscribed to the teaching of the Genevan reformer John Calvin. They believed that all persons were totally depraved and had no ability to move toward God until God had "infused" the grace to believe. Though all were depraved, God in mercy had "elected" some persons for salvation before the foundation of the world. Those persons would ultimately be drawn to salvation by the irresistible grace of God. All others would follow their destiny of depravity to reprobation and damnation. That God should choose any was an overwhelming gift of grace.

Yet, Calvinist Baptists were divided over the question of human participation in the divine mission. Some insisted that God would save the elect without the help of humans. Thus, since God would ultimately save those who were elected to salvation, the church was not called to send out missionaries. Indeed, attempts through "human endeavors" to bring sinners to salvation actually represented a form of "works righteousness" outside the divine plan.

Other Calvinist Baptists thought that the church was called to proclaim the gospel as a means of awakening the elect to faith. Preaching to sinners and going out to the ends of the earth were part of the calling of all Christians. Preaching would awaken the hearts of the elect, a community of faith known only to God. These evangelical Calvinist Baptists thus preached as if everyone could be saved, knowing that God would use their preaching of the gospel to awaken the elect. They were among the first Baptists who actually sent out missionaries from western Europe to other regions of the globe.

Early in their history, Baptists disagreed over both the need and method of sending out missionaries in Christ's name. These differences have shaped Baptist attitudes toward missions throughout their history.

Early Baptist Missions

Some of the first Baptist missionary activity occurred in the 1630s and 1640s in the New World as Baptists founded churches and carried out ministries to European immigrants and Native Americans. Roger Williams, an occasional Baptist and the founder of Rhode Island, worked with the Narragansett Indians, even

producing *A Key to Language of America*, a lexicon of their language to aid in communication. Such endeavors with Native Americans often were short-lived, however, frustrated by disease, misunderstanding, and warfare. Baptist activities with the settlers also met with persecution from religious establishments in New England and Virginia.

Baptists in those regions were jailed, exiled, beaten, and otherwise harassed by religious establishments that sought to protect citizens from what they felt were the heretical views of the Baptists. Roger Williams was exiled to Rhode Island, where he founded the first Baptist church in America around 1638/39. Rhode Island provided for complete religious liberty and became its own kind of missionary community, receiving those who had been exiled or persecuted by the Puritan Establishment of New England.

The First Great Awakening of the 1740s created missionary enthusiasm among evangelicals throughout the colonies, including the fledgling Baptist churches. Pro-revival or Separate Baptists demonstrated both evangelical and missionary zeal in efforts to proclaim the faith in new regions of the American land. Shubal Stearns, Daniel Marshal, and their families left New England for the new American frontier, founding churches in North Carolina and preaching the gospel to all who would listen.

Separate Baptists were evangelical Calvinists, “hot gospellers,” who preached enthusiastic sermons, calling sinners to repentance, with energy and emotional zeal. They established churches across North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Indiana—an impressive missionary network that helped make Baptists one of America’s largest denominations by the 1830s.

These Baptists also began to found colleges as part of their missionary efforts to provide Christian education in a new nation. Soon, Baptist schools sprang up throughout the country.

The Development of Mission Societies

The formation of Baptist denominational organizations originated as a way of enabling individuals and congregations to carry out their missionary imperative in

broader ways. The modern missions movement among Baptists began in the 1790s in Britain with the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society and the decision to send William Carey and other individuals to India. Carey, although a Calvinist, believed that the New Testament required Christians to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

In the United States, Baptists formed the Triennial Convention in 1814 for the purpose of funding the work of Adoniram and Ann Judson, Congregational missionaries who had become Baptists on their way to Burma. These organizations were followed by other agencies that promoted the publication of Christian literature, Christian education, social ministries, and other resources for Christian nurture. These nineteenth-century Baptists sent missionaries to work at home and abroad, but they also founded schools, published books and pamphlets, and carried out benevolent work with those in need. All of this was part of their sense of mission.

The denomination was a means of uniting Baptist churches in mission projects they could not accomplish alone. Indeed, the official missionaries who were sent out not only founded churches and preached the gospel, but they also established schools, translated the Bible, and offered food and medical care. The early Baptist missionaries were an amazing group of individuals, convinced that God had called them to travel to new lands or regions in spite of terrible dangers. Most had little training before they departed their native lands, and many died almost immediately after arrival, worn out by travel and susceptible to diseases for which they had no immunity.

The women seemed particularly courageous and vulnerable, often losing infants in childbirth. Many died themselves. Sarah Hall Judson (d. 1845), the second wife of Adoniram Judson, gave birth to seven children in less than eight years, dying with the birth of her last child. Even when children survived, they were often lost at sea on their way to and from the mission field. Most missionaries seemed well aware of the dangers. Charlotte White, the first unmarried woman to apply for appointment by the Triennial Convention in 1815, wrote of her calling: “Having found no period

of life exempt from trials, I do not expect to leave them on leaving my native land, but rather to add to their weight and number.”¹

The Baptist women missionaries were often unsung, but amazing in the depth and breadth of their work and witness. Eliza Grew Jones accompanied her husband to Burma in 1830 where she produced both a Siamese-English dictionary and an Anglicized version of the Siamese language. Harriet Newell, American Baptist missionary to India, wrote: “Yes, I am positively unwilling to return to America, unless I am confident that God has no work for me to do here.”²

Baptist women also encouraged missionary support among those who remained at home. Mary Webb (1779–1861), a Baptist woman who had significant physical disabilities and a strong concern for the missionary enterprise, led in founding the Boston Female Missionary Society in 1800. A joint venture between Baptist and Congregational women. The society was composed of women who were willing “to contribute their mite toward so noble a design as diffusion of the gospel light among the shades of darkness and superstition.”³

In 1802, Webb helped to organize the Female Baptist Missionary Society. She experienced much criticism for stepping outside the province of women. She wrote: “We are aware, that by thus coming out, we lay ourselves open to the remarks of the enemies of religion; but believing the path of duty to be guarded on the right hand and on the left, we feel safe.”⁴

Faith was not always easy for Baptist missionaries. Sallie Peck, home missionary with her husband John, in the American West, often wrestled with her faith. Arriving in St. Louis in 1817, she observed: “I am now seven months pregnant, and I am apprehensive about the arrival of another child as medical services are mostly unknown here on the frontier.”⁵

Baptists began missions to the Cherokee Indians in the 1820s when Thomas Roberts and Evan Jones initiated work in Georgia. Cherokee leaders responded favorably, with particular concern for education. One Native American told the Baptists: “We want our children to learn English so the white man cannot cheat us.”⁶

Organizing for Missions

Mission societies and boards were one way that Baptists sought to organize for service. In many ways, these agencies grew out of the realities of church size and economics. In both England and America, the early Baptists were not numerous enough, and their churches were not large enough, to fund missionary endeavors. Thus, they pooled their resources to provide adequate funding.

Societies were the earliest organizations with money subscribed by individuals, associations, and churches. Societies were autonomous, providing support for specific efforts of home or foreign missions. The Triennial Convention of 1814 was such a society. When the Southern Baptist Convention was founded over the slavery controversy in 1845, it developed a connectional system in which mission boards and other denominational agencies were linked through the denominational network.

Antimission Baptists opposed any type of missionary effort, insisting that God alone was the author of salvation and would bring redemption to the elect without human intervention. These views are evident today in the beliefs of the Primitive Baptists and the Old Regular Baptists. They reject missionary activity, viewing it as an interference in the divine plan and activity.

Other independent and Landmark Baptist churches rejected the use of mission societies or boards as unbiblical, preferring, instead, to send out missionaries under the direct support of specific congregations. Debates over mission methodology raged throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Baptist churches and denominations alike. Those who claim that all Baptists have always been a missionary people need to look more closely at the diversity of Baptist opinion on the matter.

In spite of these divisions, missionary-minded Baptists have long stressed the importance of that activity in Baptist life. In 1824, Baptist leader Francis Wayland (1796–1865) addressed the importance of Baptist unity in the missionary effort, writing: “It is the duty of each of us as individuals, to do all in our power to promote the interests of the Redeemer’s kingdom...”

We do not want to abridge the liberties of any individual church. These we hold sacred, and we always shall hold them so; but we want them to assist us, and want to assist them, in all the plans that they or we may devise for promoting the salvation of our fellow men. We have one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Why should we not unite all efforts together, and thus do our utmost to promote the cause of Christ in the United States, and throughout the world?”⁷

By the late nineteenth century, African-American Baptists had formed their own denominations with a significant emphasis on missionary activity. Lott Carey and George Lisle were among the first African-American missionaries to be sent out. Carey went to Africa; Lisle was sent to the Caribbean.

Transitions, schisms, and other changes in contemporary Baptist life have compelled many churches and denominations to reevaluate their response to the theology and practice of the Christian mission. Baptist denominations continue to send out vocational missionaries, those who have committed themselves to full-time, perhaps even lifetime, participation in the missionary enterprise at home and abroad.

Other missionary experiences, many short-term, are also available to laity and clergy through Baptist church life. Indeed, it appears that a growing number of Baptist churches are using mission funds to send their own members on short-term missionary excursions far and near. These activities have expanded the experience and the numbers of persons on mission as perhaps never before in the history of the church.

Likewise, denominational missionary agencies have become, for many congregations, one of multiple options for carrying out the calling to mission. Many churches now fund and participate in denominational programs and also in a variety of other community, parachurch, or independent missionary actions. Habitat for Humanity, for example, is one of the nonsectarian, humanitarian programs that has drawn persons inside and outside Baptist churches to a particular type of hands-on missionary experience.

While the Southern Baptist Convention continues to maintain one of the largest missionary task forces in American Protestantism, newer Baptist groups such

as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists also conduct varying forms of missionary organization and activity. Some of these groups are working with the American Baptist Churches USA and the Progressive National Baptist Convention.

Mission Practice/Mission Theology

All this illustrates the need for and presence of a variety of new missionary networks springing up inside and alongside certain traditional denominational programs. It also indicates that Baptists may well need to reflect anew on the theology and practice of missions even as they reaffirm their commitment to the church’s missionary calling. Why is such a re-examination necessary?

First, globalism—an interconnectedness of communications, nations, and peoples—means that countries or distance can no longer define missions. One need not go to distant climes to encounter Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists. They may well live across the street. In certain geographic areas, the Christian and Baptist presence may well be more energized than in the United States. Persons in countries to which Baptists in the U.S. and Europe once sent missionaries now come as missionaries to the West.

Second, the ever-expanding numbers of interfaith marriages now bring many Baptist families into direct contact with religious traditions that once seemed foreign. These changing family dynamics mean that religious diversity can become very personal very quickly in ways that affect the missionary response of local congregations.

Third, a renewed response to the church’s mission means that Christians at home and abroad must learn more about other world religions before they can adequately speak about their own faith. I have known undergraduates who have renewed their interest in their Christian roots and beliefs because their college roommates were Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus. As one student told me: “My roommate knew what it meant to be a Muslim. I decided I needed to know—really know—what it means to be a Christian.” The student became more serious about his own Christianity through the impact of his Muslim roommate.

Sometimes, the renewal of a missionary commitment begins in the strangest places!

Finally, Baptists are always learning that God is on mission in the world and that Christians must look and listen for those places where God may be at work, inside and outside the church. Jesus continually reminded the faithful of his day that they needed “eyes to see and ears to hear” in order to discern the movement of God in the world. Many Baptists have learned that lesson the hard way. White Baptists in the American South generally were insensitive to God’s activity in the abolition of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. So today, Baptists must watch and work for the mission of God breaking forth in the church and in the world. God’s mission must be ours. Let’s get to it!



Notes & Questions for Discussion

Notes

1. H. Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 211.
2. *Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine* (March 1813), 300.
3. Helen Emery Falls, “Baptist Women in Missions Support in the Nineteenth Century,” *Baptist History and Heritage* (January 1977): 26.
4. McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, 205.
5. R. Virgil Santee, “Sallie Paine Peck,” *American Baptist Quarterly* (September 1984): 226.
6. William McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries, 1789–1839* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 155.
7. McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, 205.

Questions for Discussion

1. How would you distinguish between the church’s mission and the church’s missions?
2. What do you think motivated some Baptists to begin concerted efforts at missionary activity?
3. Why do you think Baptists divided over whether to send missionaries?
4. What new challenges confront the church in its effort to fulfill a missionary imperative?
5. What areas of the church’s mission do you think we often overlook?

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