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“THERE IS A GNAWING WORM UNDER THE BARK OF OUR
TREE OF LIBERTY”:

ANTI-MISSION BAPTISTS, RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, AND LOCAL
CHURCH AUTONOMY

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfilment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of History
University of Mississippi

by

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ABSTRACT

The schism between American missionary and anti-mission Baptists of the 1820s and 1830s stemmed from an ideological disagreement about how Baptists should interact with the rest of society. While anti-mission Baptists maintained their distance from “worldly” non-Baptist society, missionary Baptists attempted to convert and transform “the world.” Anti-mission Baptists feared that large-scale missionary and benevolent societies would slowly accumulate money and influence, and that they would use that influence to infringe on the autonomy of local congregations and the religious liberty of the nation. While histories of this topic often portray anti-mission Baptists as obscure and paranoid of an imagined “law religion,” I argue that they were not paranoid. Rather, their observation of missionary Baptists’ efficient, outward-looking world view, embodied in the novel benevolent societies, helped them foresee the gradual growth of evangelical influence in society. While most Baptists did not shift their attention towards legislating their own moral values on society through secular law until the late nineteenth century, the roots for this shift were in the business-minded benevolent societies of the early nineteenth century. Far from being an obscure offshoot of the past, anti-mission Baptists represented—and represent—an alternative to the active involvement of conservative evangelicals in politics. Much like their dissenting American Baptist ancestors of the colonial era, they carried on the legacy of religious liberty and local church autonomy despite the radical changes of the early nineteenth century.

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INTRODUCTION

Southern Baptists presently compose the largest single Protestant denomination in the United States. Many scholars of religion regard anti-mission Baptists, or Primitive Baptists as they are more commonly known today, as a tiny and irrelevant sect, especially when compared to the numerically dominant Southern Baptists.¹ In the early nineteenth century, however, Baptists engaged in a heated debate regarding church involvement in new large-scale centralized missionary societies and conventions. In their relation to American society, Baptists were at an ideological crossroads, and the outcome of the mission debate was not predetermined. Yet histories of American Baptists often depict the anti-mission side as an obscure backwards-looking sect which the uncontrollable currents of historical change quickly swept aside. Historians have addressed the Baptist missions schism in terms of theology, politics, economics, and even changes in the role

¹ Many historians use the names “Primitive,” “Old School,” and “anti-mission” Baptists interchangeably. See Gordon A. Cotton, *Of Primitive Faith and Order: A History of the Mississippi Primitive Baptist Church, 1780-1974* (Raymond, Miss.: Keith Press, 1974), 2; James L. Peacock and Ruel W. Tyson, Jr., *Pilgrims of Paradox: Calvinism and Experience among the Primitive Baptists of the Blue Ridge* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), xv. According to Peacock and Tyson, the Baptists they studied preferred the designation “Primitive Baptists.” Also, see John G. Crowley, *Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South, 1815 to the Present* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 75. The term “anti-mission” lacks the temporal baggage of “Primitive” and “Old School,” but it also can be slightly incorrect since Primitive Baptists did not oppose missions per se but only mission societies. I have found that the term anti-mission Baptists best defines them in their opposition to modern mission societies, but I will use the terms interchangeably depending on the particular historical actors of discussion.

of women in the church. Where these historical accounts agree, however, is important: the opposition of anti-mission Baptists to the growth of benevolent societies was irrational and paranoid.² It is my contention, however, that historians have not taken seriously the anti-missionary sentiment as a rational response to the growing influence of large-scale benevolent societies. Anti-mission Baptists repeatedly warned of a loss of religious liberty and the growth of a supposedly unscriptural centralized authority over local religious matters. This thesis asks why anti-mission Baptists opposed large-scale missionary and other benevolent societies and whether that opposition was warranted based on their religious history and ideology of local church autonomy.

At the core of this argument is the relationship between the growing influence of benevolent societies and the law, both local and federal. In his study of the simultaneously voluntaristic, democratic, and authoritarian tendencies of nineteenth-century Baptist churches, Gregory Wills has argued that the shift away from church discipline in local congregations occurred mostly in the late nineteenth century. The primary cause for this shift was a progressive, business-like efficiency unheard of among American Baptists of the colonial era. As Baptists spent more time and energy in monthly meetings discussing church funds, salaries, and donations for missions, they de-emphasized the importance of a tightly-knit community with strict moral standards. To put it bluntly, Baptists could not discipline members if they were to maintain church funds.³ Instead, as Baptists and other evangelical Christians grew to a majority in parts

²For the most concise example which portrays anti-mission Baptists as paranoid, see Jeffrey W. Taylor, "‘These Worms Will Cut the Root of Our Independence’: Fears of a State Church among the Anti-mission Baptists of the Nineteenth Century," in *Fear Itself: Enemies Real and Imagined in American Culture*, ed. Nancy Lusignan Schultz (West Lafayette, Ind: Purdue University Press, 1999).

³Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 131-138. For southern evangelicals as progressive

of the country, they turned to the state to legislate and enforce their particular moral guidelines.

While Wills's argument is enlightening, it is relatively deterministic. The growing Baptist denomination would flex its muscles in the broader society, but the shift from using local church discipline to state enforcement was not inevitable. Anti-mission Baptists opposed the business-minded efficiency that was the result of large-scale benevolent societies' influence on churches. In short, the debate at the time of the missionary and anti-mission schism was about money and the law. Long before mainline Baptist churches underwent a transformation from local church control, anti-mission Baptists foresaw the consequences of centralized Baptist bureaucracies dependent on monetary funds.

Early histories of the anti-mission Baptists have usually been polemical accounts written by Baptists with a strong opinion favoring one side over the other. Missionary Baptists normally mention the mission debate as a brief bump on the road to contemporary evangelical progress, while anti-mission Baptists stress the Calvinistic and predestinarian roots of the English and American Baptists, all with a direct line of religious dissenters dating back to Christ's apostles.⁴ An early scholar of anti-mission Baptists, Byron Cecil Lambert has written an intellectual history of anti-mission Baptists,

builders of institutional religion, see Beth Barton Schweiger, *The Gospel Working Up: Progress and the Pulpit in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴ For anti-mission Baptist accounts, see Cushing Biggs Hassell and Sylvester Hassell, *History of the Church of God, From the Creation to A.D. 1885; Including Especially the History of the Kehukee Primitive Baptist Association* (Middletown, N.Y.: Gilbert Beebe, 1886) and Cotton, *Of Primitive Faith and Order*. For missionary Baptist accounts, see B.H. Carroll, Jr., *The Genesis of American Anti-Missionism* (Louisville, Kentucky: Baptist Book Concern, 1902); Robert Baylor Semple, *History of the Baptists in Virginia* (1810; repr., Lafayette, Tennessee: Church History Research and Archives, 1976); Jesse H. Campbell, *Georgia Baptists: Historical and Biographical* (Richmond: H.K. Ellyson, 1847); David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World* (New York: Lewis Colby and Co., 1848).

recording the sentiments of the major leaders.⁵ Bertram Wyatt-Brown's influential article, "The Antimission Movement in the Jacksonian South," identifies the Jacksonian rhetoric of anti-mission Baptists and attributes their opposition to missions as a reflection of their political outlook. For Wyatt-Brown, the real source of anti-missionary sentiment was rural, agrarian Jacksonians' fears of an urban, wealthy merchant elite.⁶ T. Scott Miyakawa and William W. Sweet propose similarly materialistic arguments with their claims that anti-mission Baptists opposed missionary societies on economic grounds and only later created a theological and moral rationale for their opposition.⁷ Only recently have historians seriously examined the ideas of anti-mission Baptists as the central point of contention. While John G. Crowley's history of anti-mission Baptists in the Wiregrass South draws clear connections between anti-missionism and "the forces of the Jacksonian era," he and James R. Mathis ultimately place greater emphasis on the irreconcilable theological divisions between anti-mission and missionary Baptists.⁸

Two of the most recent works have even more fully addressed the intellectual disputes between anti-mission and missionary Baptists. Jeffrey Wayne Taylor's *The Formation of the Primitive Baptist Movement* ascribes the schism to anti-mission Baptists' historical maintenance of Calvinism and their opposition to religious change from the apostolic church. Taylor explores the social implications of their beliefs in a

⁵ Byron Cecil Lambert, *The Rise of the Anti-Mission Baptists: Sources and Leaders, 1800-1848* (New York: Arno Press, 1980).

⁶ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Antimission Movement in the Jacksonian South: A Study in Regional Folk Culture," *Journal of Southern History* 36 (1970): 501-529.

⁷ T. Scott Miyakawa, *Protestants and Pioneers: Individualism and Conformity on the American Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964); William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier: The Baptists, 1783-1830* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1931).

⁸ Crowley, xii; James R. Mathis, *The Making of the Primitive Baptists: A Cultural and Intellectual History of the Antimission Movement, 1800-1840* (New York: Routledge, 2004). For an interpretation of Primitive Baptists based on gender, see Sandra D. Hayslette, "Missions, Markets, and Men: A Baptist Contest of Values in Tarboro, North Carolina, 1800-1835" (master's thesis, University of North Carolina, 1995).

fully sovereign God and predestination better than any previous historian. Yet in his brief essay in the volume *Fear Itself: Enemies Real and Imagined in American Culture*, Taylor portrays anti-mission Baptists as paranoid of an imagined “law religion.”⁹

A recent dissertation by Joshua Aaron Guthman takes the most methodologically sophisticated approach yet in his study of anti-mission Baptist theology and personal narratives. His understanding of the paradox of primitivist theology, their anti-evangelicalism made possible by the evangelical movement, and their penchant for intellectual debate while opposing centrally-organized seminaries, reveals how, in Guthman’s words, “Primitive Baptists straddle, if not dissolve, the scholarly categories we use to make sense of the early republic’s social life.”¹⁰ Guthman and Taylor take the intellectual debate between missionary and anti-mission Baptists seriously, but neither has drawn the direct connection between the growth of benevolent Baptist societies and the shift away from church discipline to legislated discipline.

Over the past few decades, the scholarship on evangelicalism has become prominent in American religious history. With their religious emphasis on a conversion experience, or “repentance and rebirth” as Christine Heyrman writes, evangelicals slowly transformed themselves from a counter-cultural religious movement to the dominant culture of the American South.¹¹ Heyrman’s narrative of the rise of southern evangelicals, predominantly Baptists and Methodists, is a story of radical social

⁹ Jeffrey Wayne Taylor, *The Formation of the Primitive Baptist Movement* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2004); Taylor, “These Worms Will Cut the Root of Our Independence,” 87.

¹⁰ Joshua Aaron Guthman, “What I Am ‘Tis Hard To Know’: Primitive Baptists, the Protestant Self, and the American Religious Imagination” (PhD dissertation, University of North Carolina, 2008), 6. Guthman’s recognition of the paradox of anti-mission Baptists draws on Peacock and Tyson’s *Pilgrims of Paradox*.

¹¹ Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 4. Also, see Robert M. Calhoun, *Evangelicals and Conservatives in the Early South, 1740-1861* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988) and Anne C. Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980).

transformation. For Heyrman, early evangelicals were egalitarian, anti-slavery, and relatively inclusive of women, but by the mid-nineteenth century, they had become so entrenched in southern patriarchal culture that they no longer reflected those values.¹² While the debate between anti-mission and missionary Baptists does not address some of these issues, the narrative trajectory of this thesis parallels Heyrman's work. Yet the transformation that I have observed was not one from anti-slavery to pro-slavery, and certainly not inclusiveness to exclusiveness of women—quite the opposite—but it was a transformation of ideological orientation. Rather than relish in their separation from the rest of society, or “the world,” Baptists slowly became entrenched in the dominant southern culture while attempting to change society to reflect their moral values.

In addition to the historiography on evangelicalism, this thesis addresses the historical scholarship on religious liberty in America. The dominant works attribute the rise of American religious liberty to the intellectual tradition of the Enlightenment, but some recent scholars have examined the religious contributions to the separation of church and state in America. The tradition of dissenting Protestants and their active push for church-state disestablishment were the popular forces which helped religious conservatives identify with religious liberty.¹³ While Nicholas P. Miller's *The Religious Roots of the First Amendment*, in particular, has contributed much to our historical understanding of American religious liberty, the historiography has neglected the

¹² Heyrman, 26.

¹³ Nicholas P. Miller, *The Religious Roots of the First Amendment: Dissenting Protestants and the Separation of Church and State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Chris Beneke, *Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). For historians who focus on American religious liberty's connection with the Enlightenment, see Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1992) and Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1967). For an older narrative of the role of religion in disestablishment, see Anson Phelps Stokes, *Church and State in the United States* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950).

nineteenth century and skipped straight to the twentieth century. One exception to this neglect is Steven K. Green's *The Second Disestablishment*, a legal history of church-state relations in the nineteenth century.¹⁴ This thesis is, in part, one facet of that active debate on church-state relations that continued to unfold in the nineteenth century.

The following work covers a broad geographical area and is organized chronologically. Although local studies have contributed greatly to the historiography of the Baptist mission debate, they miss the broader intellectual and theological debate which transcended state boundaries. Surely anti-mission Baptists in North Carolina were different from those in Mississippi, and they were different from anti-mission Baptists in southern Georgia. Yet the dominant participants in this debate were from all over the country, north and south, cities and countryside. Their published tracts circulated in Baptist social circles, and Baptists from all over the country responded to one another, sometimes explicitly. In narrative form, I have presented the most widely read and discussed sources which, when taken together, were part of a gradual process towards the Baptist schism over benevolent societies. The creation of distinct ideological camps—anti-mission versus missionary—took place over time. For that reason, I avoid a thematic organization and use narrative form to demonstrate that historians can more fully understand this debate as a sequence of public events—actions, opposition, and rebuttals to that opposition.

The first chapter introduces the history of Baptists in America with a particular focus on their conscious status as a persecuted religious minority subordinated by state-established churches. Besides the ample secondary sources for this chapter, the writings

¹⁴ Steven K. Green, *The Second Disestablishment: Church and State in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

of John Leland and Isaac Backus, two early influential Baptist leaders, reveal a nearly-obsessive striving for religious liberty in America. The second chapter composes the bulk of the thesis: the growth in Baptist popularity, the expansion of missionary societies, and the significant opposition to those societies by many Baptists. As opposed to previous historians such as Sweet and Wyatt-Brown, I take the arguments of both sides of the debate seriously instead of speculating on their sincerity. The third chapter examines the confluence of missionary Baptist conventions, the rise in progressive efficiency, and the law. Contrary to previous historians' assumptions, anti-mission Baptists' fears of state-sanctioned morality were well-founded. Additionally, periodicals such as the *Primitive Baptist* and the *Signs of the Times* provide a window into how anti-mission Baptists who were not national leaders felt about benevolent societies. These periodicals demonstrate that neither the leaders of this religious movement nor the readers who wrote to the journal were anti-intellectuals in the sense that historians have generally assumed.¹⁵ They actively engaged in religious and intellectual debates with “an authoritative command of the King James Bible,” as Guthman points out.¹⁶

Anti-mission Baptists were not anti-intellectuals per se, but they opposed the creation of centralized seminaries. They were not opposed to evangelization of the gospel, but they were opposed to the use of unified missionary organizations which depended on monetary funds. They believed that Baptist benevolent societies were collecting money under the guise of religion and dispensing it in ways that could, at some future time, undermine the autonomy of local churches. Most significantly, the fierce debate between the anti-mission and missionary Baptists reveals the contingency of

¹⁵ The position that anti-mission Baptists were anti-intellectuals is articulated most fiercely in Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 104-106.

¹⁶ Guthman, 6.

history, that evangelicals were not bound to exert their particular moral beliefs through the force of the state. Many Baptist intellectuals offered up an alternative to what became evangelicals' *modus operandi*. Instead of sacrificing local church discipline to state authority, anti-mission Baptists, a denomination often regarded as an irrelevant offshoot of the past, believed that they should protect their historical principles of religious liberty and local church autonomy above all else.

1: BAPTIST NARRATIVES OF DISSENT

We must speak also of the earthly city, which, though it be mistress of the nations, is itself ruled by its lust of rule.

St. Augustine, *City of God*

If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

John 15:19

Since their early history to the present, Baptists have told creation myths of their own origins. The origin stories Baptists tell about themselves to themselves reflect their world view and identity as a denomination. Some Baptists trace their origins through a series of sects that the Roman Catholic Church deemed heretical.¹ Others look to the Separate Baptists of England, while still others to Roger Williams and the founding of the Rhode Island colony. Regardless of

¹ In Gordon A. Cotton, *Of Primitive Faith and Order: A History of the Mississippi Primitive Baptist Church, 1780-1974* (Raymond, Miss.: Keith Press, 1974), 4, Cotton traces a direct line through a series of “dissenter groups.” “What each of them had in common,” he writes, “was the doctrine of election and free grace. They have been known as Novationists, Donatists, Paulicians, Paternines [sic], Lollards, and Waldensians.” The most fascinating part of this narrative of dissent is its conscious neglect of the major differences between these groups.

the details, all of these narratives share the common trope of dissent from society, supposedly worldly ways, and the civil state. Hardwired in their cultural and ideological identities was a deep suspicion of hierarchy and centralized authority. In this chapter, I will discuss why American Baptists from the colonial era to the early nineteenth century viewed themselves as separatists from society while still remaining in society. This world view will help to contextualize the widespread American Baptist opposition to religious benevolent societies in the early nineteenth century.

In James L. Peacock and Ruel W. Tyson, Jr.'s ethnographic study of anti-mission Baptists of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Elder Danny Parker visited Chapel Hill, North Carolina to speak to the authors and their students about Calvinists and anti-mission Baptists. Significantly, Parker maintained a strict separation between Calvinism and anti-mission or Primitive Baptist theology. In the experience of Peacock and Tyson, anti-missions or "Primitives cannot align themselves with any historical group that has come into existence after the events recounted in sacred scripture."² Many anti-mission Baptists today have intentionally designated themselves *Primitive* Baptists to denote their connection to the apostolic church "uncorrupted by the vicissitudes of history."³ In this world view, any deviation from the apostolic church as they understand it is heresy. Additionally, secular time is the enemy.⁴ Two thousand years separate Primitive Baptists from the Gospels, and yet somehow they must mirror the original church as closely as possible. This does not stop them, however, from recognizing the passage of time in

² James L. Peacock and Ruel W. Tyson, Jr., *Pilgrims of Paradox: Calvinism and Experience among the Primitive Baptists of the Blue Ridge* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 90.

³ *Ibid*, xv.

⁴ See J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 7-8. According to Pocock, the Christian notion of secular time, that is, linear time from beginning to end, was a constant state of movement away from God. Reminiscent of Primitive Baptist theology, Pocock writes, "Movement in fallen man, if effected by his own depraved will and intelligence, was movement away from God and toward further damnation, away from meaning and toward deepening meaninglessness" (7).

this world, from understanding that they live “within a life history, their own, as well as within collective histories of churches and regions.”⁵ The paradox of the passage of time with the attempt to stamp out its deleterious effects is one of the many mysteries in restorationist denominations like the anti-mission Baptists.⁶

Despite their efforts to maintain a separation from the corruption of history and the world, anti-mission Baptists seem drawn to retelling and debating their origins. Roger Williams is a popular point of narrative departure. Elder Monzingo, in *Pilgrims of Paradox*, personally denied that Williams was a Baptist, but he noted that many Baptists like to trace their American origins to the famous religious dissenter. Anti-mission Baptists, in particular, applaud his opposition to the Massachusetts Bay Colony theocracy and his early vision of a complete separation of church and state.⁷ They admire his disgust with identifying “any group, region, city, nation, continent, or civilization as selected by divine favor and set on a course of manifest destiny.”⁸ Richard Aubrey McLemore’s *History of Mississippi Baptists* begins, “Roger Williams was the founder of the Baptist faith in North America.” Williams went into “exile,” “a period of hardship” with “no food and no weapons with which to take game animals.”⁹ McLemore gives Williams an ascetic saintly persona who, through divine miracles, withstood “resistance and persecution in New England,” and whose “community gained in strength and numbers as the faith became firmly established.”¹⁰ The eighteenth-century Baptist Isaac Backus described

⁵ Peacock and Tyson, xv.

⁶ In Richard T. Hughes, “The Meaning of the Restorationist Vision,” in *The Primitive Church in the Modern World*, ed. Richard T. Hughes (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), x, Hughes defines restorationism as “the attempt to recover some important belief or practice from the time of pure beginnings that believers are convinced has been lost, defiled, or corrupted.”

⁷ Peacock and Tyson, 44.

⁸ *Ibid*, 92.

⁹ Richard Aubrey McLemore, *A History of Mississippi Baptists, 1780-1970* (Jackson: Mississippi Baptist Convention Board, 1971), 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

Williams in similarly hagiographic terms. Regarding Williams's death in 1683, Backus wrote, "Thus lived and thus died the first Baptist minister in New England, and the first founder and supporter of any truly free civil government upon earth, since the rise of the anti-christ."¹¹

While some American Baptists claim their origins in the eighteenth-century English Separatists rather than Roger Williams, the common obsession with Williams is due to one underlying factor: dissent. Williams foreshadows the radical anti-establishment sentiments of Baptists. In the collection of missionary and anti-mission Baptist creation narratives, their theme of dissent opposes, by divine ordination, hierarchy, human tradition, and oppression. Isaac Backus's three-volume history of Baptists in New England has provided an encyclopedia of information on early American Baptists. In it, he outlines quite clearly his "great design of the ensuing work": rather than repeat "the acts of oppression and intolerance of which all sects have been guilty," religious dissenters must expose them and, if possible, "prevent [religious oppression] wholly."¹² Yet this theme extended further, as the conversion experience of Baptists emphasized complete dissent from the world, human history, and secular time. Colonial Virginian converts to Baptist churches were forced to give up any trappings of worldly wealth, prestige, or respectability. The "Progressive" sect of present-day Primitive Baptists who now admit the use of Sunday Schools and musical instruments are, as one elder has remarked, "no longer strangers and pilgrims, they are at home in the world."¹³ To be a true Christian of the apostolic church is to dissent from "the world" and historical change.¹⁴

¹¹ Isaac Backus, *A History of New England with Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians called Baptists* (1777; repr., Newton, Mass.: Backus Historical Society, 1871), 1: 414.

¹² Backus, 1: viii.

¹³ Peacock and Tyson, 120.

¹⁴ Anne C. Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 91-94; Beth Barton Schweiger, *The Gospel Working Up: Progress and the Pulpit in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 27-28.

Yet the history of dissent among Baptists, the time Baptists can no longer be labeled dissenters, and what that loss of identity means exactly, has been contested. The scholar of Baptist thought, William H. Brackney, discusses the history of religious liberty among Baptist intellectuals. After official religious disestablishment in the early nineteenth century, a long process which he quickly glosses over, Brackney suddenly claims that “religious liberty was accomplished.”¹⁵ For mainstream Baptist historians, the history of dissent involves removing the stale remnants of established colonial churches, the destruction of which seems inevitable in their narratives.¹⁶ For many Baptists, however, the debate about religious liberty, the law, and the relationship between ecclesiastical and civil governance raged through the nineteenth century.

Not until the revivals of the mid-eighteenth century did religious dissenters in America seriously begin to challenge the existing state-church establishments. After Isaac Backus, a Congregationalist raised in Connecticut, slowly converted to antipedobaptist views in the 1750s, he established the First Baptist Church of Middleborough, Massachusetts under strict Calvinist principles.¹⁷ Over the course of the next several decades, Backus and other dissenters protested against the colonial laws which inhibited their freedom of conscience. For instance, Massachusetts required that any minister must either have a certified “accademical degree, or a testimonial in his favor from a majority of the ministers in the county where the parish lies.”¹⁸ Not only were informally educated ministers forced to rely on the consent of nearby ministers of

¹⁵ William Henry Brackney, *The Baptists* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 100.

¹⁶ McLemore, 19. The transition of Mississippi from Spain to the United States in 1798 is the last mention of religious liberty in McLemore’s narrative. Also, Bernard Bailyn’s notion of “the contagion of liberty” gives the impression that religious liberty was an automatic outgrowth of the Revolution. See Bailyn, 246-272.

¹⁷ Stokes, 1:306.

¹⁸ Isaac Backus, *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty, Against the Oppressions of the Present Day* (Boston: Printed by John Boyle, 1773), 18.

the Congregationalist religious establishment in order to preach without legal repercussions, but they were “subject to the court...*in the king’s name.*”¹⁹

One of the most onerous legal restrictions on Baptists in New England was the religious tax. Since 1691, all men in Massachusetts were required to pay an annual tax of five pounds to the Standing Order Congregationalist churches which funded the salaries of established ministers. After the 1728 Exemption Act, three kinds of officially-recognized dissenters, “Anabaptists,” “Quakers,” and “Churchmen,” could receive certificates of exemption if they proved to the local authorities that they regularly attended one of the dissenting churches and paid their tax to that church.²⁰ Receiving the certificates of exemption depended on the leniency of the local authorities, as Backus made clear. When the Attorney General of Massachusetts defended the use of certificates, he claimed that they “were not tokens of subordination of one sect to another, but of subordination to the government.” The appellant who had challenged the law replied to the Attorney General in the otherworldly language characteristic of dissenting Baptists: “RELIGION was prior to all states and kingdoms in the world, and therefore could not in its nature be subject to human laws.”²¹ Sometimes dissenters simply refused to obtain the certificates or pay any religious tax, as did Backus’s mother and brother, both of whom spent time in prison in Norwich, Connecticut for their crimes.²²

Backus clarified the distinction that the dissenting appellant made between religion and the state, or between civil and ecclesiastical government as he called them:

¹⁹ Ibid, 19-20.

²⁰ William G. McLoughlin, “Isaac Backus and the Separation of Church and State in America,” *American Historical Review* 73, no. 5 (June 1968): 1394.

²¹ Isaac Backus, *A Door Opened for Equal Christian Liberty, and No Man Can Shut It. This Proved by Plain Facts* (Boston: Philip Freeman, 1783), 4-5.

²² McLoughlin, “Isaac Backus,” 1396.

The church is armed with light and truth, to pull down the strong holds of iniquity, and to gain souls to Christ, and into his church, and to be governed by his rules therein: and again to exclude such from their communion, who will not be so governed; while the state is armed with the sword to guard the peace, and the civil rights of all persons and societies, and to punish those who violate the same.²³

These two forms of government, one which is divine and the other human, natural, and therefore fallible, must not interfere with one another. For he wondered, “how came the kingdom of *this world*,” that is, this fallen and depraved world, “to have a right to govern in Christ’s kingdom which is *not of this world!*”²⁴

In his 1810 *History of the Baptists in Virginia*, Robert Baylor Semple uses the same motifs of oppression and dissent to form the foundation of Baptist identity in early America. Virginia Baptists withstood a series of persecutions in the 1760s and 1770s, according to Semple. Local magistrates arrested preachers on multiple occasions for disturbing the peace. When three magistrates in Spotsylvania County seized the Baptists John Waller, Lewis Craig, and James Child, they explained to the court that the Baptists “cannot meet a man upon the road, but they must ram a text of Scripture down his throat.” After refusing to agree to a deal with the court that prohibited their ever preaching in the county for the next year, the men spent forty-three days in prison, preaching to the other prisoners. As these kinds of incidences continued, “the persecutors found that the imprisonment of the preachers tended rather to the furtherance of the Gospel.” Semple continued his narrative with language reminiscent of accounts of the early Christian church in Acts: After “having sung the praises of that Redeemer whose cross they bore

²³Backus, *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty*, 13.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 14.

and from whose hands they expected a crown in the end...they preached regularly in prison; crowds attended; the preaching seemed to have double weight when coming from the jail.”²⁵

The Baptist John Williams recorded one memorable account of a Brother Waller who in 1771 “Introduced the Worship of God by Singing...While he was singing the Parson of the Parish [who had ridden up with his clerk, the sheriff, and some others] would Keep Running the End of his Horsewhip in [Waller’s] Mouth, Laying his Whip across the Hym Book, &c. When done singing [Waller] proceeded to Prayer.” As the account continues in its brutal detail of the numerous lashes with the whip and beatings that Waller received, Williams confirms that Waller “Went Back Singing praise to God, Mounted the Stage & preached with a Great Deal of Liberty.”²⁶ In his attempt to understand the mentality of Waller and other dissenting Baptists of colonial Virginia, the historian Rhys Isaac asks, “What manner of movement, was it that found liberty in endurance under the lash?”²⁷ Using the terms of a creation narrative, Semple explains, “From the beginning, the Baptists were unremitting in their exertions to obtain liberty of conscience; they contended that they could not be imprisoned by any existing law.”²⁸ Even further, Isaac notes the existence of two “contrasted postures” in colonial Virginia: “on the one hand there was forceful, indeed brutal, response to the implicit challenge of religious dissidence; while on the other hand can be seen an acceptance of suffering sustained by shared emotions that gave release—‘liberty.’”²⁹ The tropes of liberty of conscience, a crusade for righteousness in emulation of the apostolic church, and a complete dissent from worldly desires and authority fill the origin narratives of American Baptists.

²⁵ Semple, 29-35.

²⁶ John Williams, Journal, May 10, 1771, quoted in Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 162-163.

²⁷ Isaac, 163.

²⁸ Semple, 41.

²⁹ Isaac, 163.

These tropes are common for good reason. In 1760, the Baptists of Virginia were the first denomination to appeal to the House of Burgesses for greater religious freedom. They particularly asked that the legislative body repeal the prohibition on ministers preaching in unlicensed meeting-houses.³⁰ As religious and political tensions heated to a boil in the colonies, the House of Burgesses appointed a Committee for Religion in 1769 to draw up new regulations for toleration. Instead of liberalizing their laws, however, the Committee proposed that religious dissenters only be allowed to meet during daylight hours and in licensed meetinghouses with unlocked doors. Baptizing or preaching to slaves was prohibited. The colony prohibited anyone but the established Anglican clergy from performing the rites of matrimony.³¹ Additionally, colonial officials could force any dissenter suspected of disloyalty to take a test oath and swear allegiance to the articles of the Anglican Church.³²

While popular attitudes toward the Anglican Church shifted during the Revolution, many of these laws continued in Virginia. Baptists were famously some of the most ardent supporters of American independence, but neither did they desire to continue their lives as second-class citizens due to their religion. Backus made clear the hypocrisy of American colonists who opposed British taxation while imposing taxes on a dissenting religious group for the established churches of the colonies. “Here note,” he wrote in 1773, “the inhabitants of our mother-country are not more of a party concerned, in imposing taxes upon us without our consent, than they have been in this land who have made and executed laws, to tax us to uphold their worship.”³³

³⁰ Stokes, 1:369.

³¹ Semple, 53, 371.

³² Bailyn, 258.

³³ Backus, *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty*, 32-33.

Despite the appeals of religious dissenters, Virginia continued to imprison men for preaching without a license after the Revolution was over.³⁴ Article 16 in the Virginia Declaration of Rights, which was passed in 1776, stipulated that all Virginians enjoy the “fullest toleration in the exercise of religion,” but the Virginia House of Delegates continued to pay the salaries of Episcopal ministers through the 1770s. Thomas Jefferson introduced a bill to completely disestablish any church from the state in 1779, but the House rejected the proposal. By 1784, Patrick Henry, with the support of George Washington and Richard Henry Lee, proposed a “general assessment” which would include as part of the religious establishment any denomination deemed peaceful, but dissenters in the state burst in an uproar of opposition.³⁵ “New Testament Churches,” a group of Virginia Baptists wrote in 1786, “we humbly conceive, are, or should be, established by the Legislature of Heaven, and not earthly power; by the Law of God and not the Law of the State; by the acts of the Apostles, and not by the Acts of an Assembly.”³⁶ In response to the demands of their vocal constituency, the Virginia Assembly finally passed Jefferson’s act for disestablishment in 1786.³⁷

Soon after the time of disestablishment in Virginia, but in the midst of similar debates across the colonies, a young Baptist preacher, John Leland, wrote in his appeal for complete religious freedom, “The notion of a Christian commonwealth, should be exploded forever, without there was a commonwealth of real Christians. Not only so, but if all the souls in a government, were saints of God, should they be formed into a society by law, that society could

³⁴ Stokes, 1:369.

³⁵ Isaac, 278-285.

³⁶ Ibid, 1:374.

³⁷ Ibid, 284. See also Thomas E. Buckley, S.J., *Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia, 1776-1787* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977) and Stokes, 366-404.

not be a Gospel Church, but a creature of state.”³⁸ For Leland, a united church and state meant that there are “censures given at the whipping-post, and excommunication at the gallows.”³⁹ Born in 1754 in the town of Grafton, Massachusetts forty miles west of Boston, John Leland received a divine conversion experience at the age of eighteen. “You are not about the work which you have got to do,” he heard from the skies one evening.⁴⁰ Through a slow agonizing process—a familiar narrative to historians of evangelicalism—admitting his own fallen nature and necessity for grace, believing in Christ’s salvation, then doubting his own belief, Leland began to take a minor leadership position in the evangelical meetings of Grafton. In 1774, Leland started preaching regularly, and by 1775 he had already begun what would become a lengthy series of missionary travels through Virginia and the Carolinas, baptizing about 400 people between 1787 and 1789.⁴¹

In his short autobiography, Leland devotes an entire page to a dream that a young fellow convert had related to Leland. In the dream, Leland is riding in a horse-cart in a procession headed for the town gallows to be hanged for heresy. He looks heavenward, says, “Lord Jesus, for thy cause I am brought to this end,” the horse and cart start, and Leland is left hanging.⁴² For Leland in his short spiritual autobiography, this friend’s dream was a formidable part of his religious identity as one who would go on “preaching heresy” according to the state. In the succeeding years of his life, he would preach, travel, and write on the subject of religion and religious liberty. While Leland adopted some of the ideas of Backus in his arguments for religious liberty, Leland took religious liberty to its logical extreme. Backus, a New Englander

³⁸ John Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland Including Some Events in his Life, Written by Himself, With Additional Sketches, &c.*, ed. L.F. Greene (New York: G.W. Wood, 1845), 107.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 16-19; Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 231.

⁴² Leland, 15.

who grew up primarily in the colonial era, maintained a more modest stance on religious liberty which assumed that the new independent America would remain a Protestant Christian nation.⁴³ Leland, on the other hand, explicitly stated on multiple occasions that the state should favor no religious group over another.⁴⁴ In regards to holding public office, he took a radical stand, stating, “If a man merits the confidence of his neighbours, in Virginia—let him worship one God, twenty God’s, or no God—be he Jew, Turk, Pagan, or Infidel, he is eligible to any office in the state.”⁴⁵ The bulk of his life, from the 1770s onward, became devoted to the complete disestablishment of church and state in America and the preservation of the apostolic church in the Baptist faith.

The debates over church-state relations continued well into the nineteenth century, especially in the stubbornly established states of Connecticut and Massachusetts. The “Standing Order,” as the Congregationalist clergy was known in Connecticut, “virtually controlled public policy.” The Reverend Timothy Dwight, president of Yale College from 1795 to 1817, was often referred to as “the Connecticut pope.” The Congregational ministers controlled the taxpayer-funded schools and preached to the legislature. One observer’s scene exemplifies the harmonious relations between the state and established church authorities until 1818. During the traditional election-day dinner at the capital, “the governor and Council members sat at the first table; the Congregational clergy, often a hundred being present, sat at the second table; and the representatives in the General Assembly at the third table!”⁴⁶ In response to this relationship, religious dissenters demanded the abolition of the tax for Congregationalist churches in addition to the entire separation of church and state. By 1818, the legislature had finally acceded to their

⁴³ McLoughlin, “Isaac Backus,” 1410-1411.

⁴⁴ Leland, 22, 191, 458, 562.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 106.

⁴⁶ Stokes, 408-409.

demands. Lyman Beecher, part of the old establishment, lamented the loss of order and morality in this new society. In his “dejection,” he imagined “the good old ship CONNECTICUT,” who “with the exception of some few of her old officers...was commanded by midshipmen and common sailors, cooks and cabin-boys, and navigated by raw hands.” No longer did “talent and virtue” guide her, but instead, “her sails were tattered, and she was only moving under the influence of former gales.”⁴⁷

Like Connecticut, Massachusetts had a firmly entrenched clergy established by the state legislature. Under Massachusetts’s 1780 Constitution, the people of the commonwealth had “a right” to “enjoin upon all the subjects an attendance” at Protestant worship services and “the exclusive right of electing their public teachers,” paid for by tax dollars. The legislature had the power to require that towns collect taxes to provide public worship led by “Protestant teachers of piety, religion, and morality.”⁴⁸ Leland traced this tyranny of “Lord Majority” in Massachusetts back to “Priest Cotton,” a sharp jab at the majority Congregationalist establishment’s resemblance to their Catholic adversaries.⁴⁹ In 1811 Leland shouted to the Massachusetts House of Representatives,

We should imagine that laudable pride would prevent any one religious society from forcing another to pay her laborers, and that the same principle would not admit a public teacher to take money, collected by distraint, from those who did not hear him; but in this particular, we find that religion is made a covert, to do that which *common honesty blushes at!*⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography* (London: Samson Low, Son, and Marston, 1863), 1:359 quoted in Stokes, 417.

⁴⁸ Stokes, 424.

⁴⁹ Leland, 487.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 355.

Yet the majority of voting citizens in Massachusetts still viewed legally established Protestant Christianity as the backbone of society and the state. When delegates of the 1820 state constitutional convention brought forward the issue of legal religious establishment, Daniel Webster held firm to the conservative stance of the state. “I am clearly of opinion that we should not strike out of the Constitution all recognition of the Christian religion. I am desirous,” he continued, “in so solemn a transaction as the establishment of a Constitution, that we should keep in it an expression of our respect and attachment to Christianity.” When the convention submitted the proposals to disestablish the Congregationalist Church from state aid, the voting citizens struck down disestablishment by a nearly two to one margin.⁵¹ As one of the primary leaders of the religious dissenters in Massachusetts, Leland decried the excuse that morality in society would evaporate without a state religion. Far from aiding society, the joining of civil and ecclesiastical government was “disrobing Christianity of her virgin beauty—turning the churches of Christ into creatures of state—and metamorphosing gospel ambassadors to state pensioners.”⁵² Not until 1831 did the state legislature pass a constitutional amendment disestablishing church and state, and in 1833 the voting public overwhelmingly ratified the amendment.⁵³

Throughout this period, from the colonial era to the early nineteenth century, the Baptist denomination grew immensely. Numbering about sixty churches in 1740, 472 in 1776, and 1,152 churches in 1795, Baptists expanded their influence, especially throughout the South and West.⁵⁴ As many Baptist churches grew in numbers and influence, however, their traditional identity as dissenters grew less pronounced. To streamline the process of evangelization at home

⁵¹ Stokes, 425-426.

⁵² Leland, 355-356.

⁵³ Stokes, 426.

⁵⁴ Torbet, 243.

and abroad, Andrew Fuller and other English Baptists formed the Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel amongst the Heathen in 1792.⁵⁵ At the same time that other American denominations began to form centralized missionary organizations, Baptists throughout the country formed their own. Baptist leaders in Massachusetts and Maine launched missionary journals and created the Massachusetts Domestic Missionary Society in 1802. Baptists in states across the country created their own centralized institutions to evangelize, finally culminating in the creation of a national missionary organization, the Triennial Convention, in 1814. In an attempt to keep up with new trends in Christianity, Baptists were updating and modernizing their traditionally local churches. By 1828, evangelicals of all denominations, Baptists included, had formed the American Education Society, the American Bible Society, the Sunday School Union, the American Tract Society, the American Society for Promoting Temperance, the American Home Missionary Society, and the American Peace Society. In short, Baptists were becoming respectable, modern members of society much like the other more hierarchical denominations.⁵⁶

It must not be forgotten that the immense growth in the denomination, the creation of centralized Baptist and ecumenical Protestant societies, and the push for denominational respectability came at the same time that Connecticut Baptists were just removing themselves from under an established church. Massachusetts Baptists still had years to go before they would be free from supporting a church that was not their own, while the new separation of church and state in the other states was tentative at best. Many states still had specifically religious laws that, for instance, only allowed Protestant Christians to hold office.⁵⁷ Most importantly, the

⁵⁵ Cushing Biggs Hassell and Sylvester Hassell, *History of the Church of God, From the Creation to A.D. 1885; Including Especially the History of the Kehukee Primitive Baptist Association* (Middletown, N.Y.: Gilbert Beebe, 1886), 539.

⁵⁶ Torbet, 246, 251.

⁵⁷ Stokes, 402.

heated debates about the future of the established Congregationalists in Connecticut and Massachusetts did not occur in a vacuum. Baptists in other areas of the country were aware of Lyman Beecher's intense desire for an established church and Daniel Webster's hesitancy to abandon ties between church and state. The specter of state-established religion still loomed over the minds of these Protestants rooted in an identity based on dissent. Meanwhile, members of their own denomination were beginning to cooperate to a greater extent with non-Baptists, forming organizations that mirrored those of their former persecutors. To many Baptists, the creators of these organizations did not fit into the narratives of how Baptists understood themselves. These bureaucrats were not dissenters from the world but were all too worldly.

Upon the creation of the multitude of missionary and other benevolent societies, John Leland, the old evangelist of the Baptist faith and the protector of religious liberty, expressed skepticism:

The missionary plan, formed with great ingenuity, is now in operation, and will soon test its own merit. Like the great Amazon, it receives its tributary streams of thousands of auxiliary societies, and draws revenue from every spring. Whether this great exertion is the travail of Zion, to be delivered from Babylon, and usher in the latter-day glory, or whether it is only a piece of ostentatious pomposity, and will finally burst like a bubble, as the crusade and armada did, is yet uncertain. To me it appears more like religious parade than humble piety. The predominant spirit seems to speak, "come, see my zeal for the Lord of Hosts." It opens a door for writers to paint fables and exaggerate facts. It is a lucrative business for printers, and a large field for preachers, who cannot find employment at home.⁵⁸

For Leland who straddled two eras in Baptist history, the small-scale dissenting origins and the modern bureaucratization of the denomination, the new benevolent societies wholly departed

⁵⁸ Leland, 495.

from their simpler origins. While not yet having a solid opinion concerning the societies, Leland's critique would eventually be just one area of conflict between Baptists who supported and those who opposed mission organizations.

2: MISSIONS, MONEY, AND LOCAL CHURCH AUTONOMY

I do not wish to be the bigoted old man, who always finds fault with new customs, though ever so great improvements; but when I see the same measures pursued that were in the third century, I am afraid the same effects will follow.

John Leland, from a letter to Rev. John Taylor of Kentucky, dated Dec. 10, 1830¹

And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, and said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.

Matthew 21:12-13

The growing number of American Baptists and Baptist churches in the early nineteenth century transformed the country. Accompanying their increase in membership and respectability, Baptists focused greater attention on benevolent societies designed to efficiently carry on God's work. Yet around the country, east and west, in cities and countryside, Baptists were unsure of these new developments. When a religious group whose members defined

¹ John Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland Including Some Events in his Life, Written by Himself, With Additional Sketches, &c.*, ed. L.F. Greene (New York: G.W. Wood, 1845), 602.

themselves so firmly in terms of dissent from the world, when a counter-culture suddenly became a dominant culture, they were compelled to reassess their position in society. The debate among American Baptists over missionary and benevolent societies grew to a fever pitch in the 1820s and 1830s as those opposed to missions refused to fellowship—come together in churches or associations—with Baptists who were members of large-scale benevolent societies. While historians have attributed this debate to a variety of factors, some of which would have baffled the Baptists themselves, the disagreement among Baptists ultimately was about authority and liberty, particularly the threat that large-scale benevolent societies posed to the traditional authority of the local Baptist church. The vitriolic schism between missionary and anti-mission Baptists and the results of that schism shaped the course of American Baptist history and the history of American religion as a whole.

In 1812, two Congregationalist ministers educated in Massachusetts sailed for India to spread the Gospel. Adoniram Judson, graduate of the prestigious Andover Seminary, and Luther Rice, later called “The Orator,” received funds from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to evangelize on the other side of the world.² During the course of their voyage, Rice and Judson studied the Baptist position on adult baptism so that when they arrived in India, they would “be able to defend [their] sentiments,” according to Judson’s wife.³ Instead of strengthening their own “sentiments,” however, these Congregationalists quickly convinced themselves “that the immersion of a professing believer is the only Christian baptism.”⁴ Just over six months after their departure from America, Judson and Rice wrote letters of resignation

² James L. Hill, *The Immortal Seven: Dr. and Mrs. Adoniram Judson, Samuel Newell, Harriet Newell, Gordon Hall, Samuel Nott, Luther Rice* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1913), 45.

³ Francis Wayland, *A Memoir of the Life and Labors of the Rev. Adoniram Judson, D.D.* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Co., 1853), 1:107.

⁴ Wayland, *A Memoir of the Life and Labors of the Rev. Adoniram Judson, D.D.*, 1:109.

to the Congregationalist American Board. Without funds to continue their mission, Rice decided to return to the United States and request funds from Baptists for large-scale foreign missions.

Conveniently for Rice and Judson, the Baptist denomination had undergone significant growth in the previous decades. From 1790 to 1814, the number of Baptist churches increased from 422 to 837 while total Baptists more than doubled from 36,100 to 75,666.⁵ In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Baptists north of Philadelphia had organized over 65 small-scale societies dedicated to missionary enterprises.⁶ Such growth and shift in popular sentiment among northern urban Baptists facilitated the rise of large-scale denominational societies. With the organizational methods of the Congregationalist American Board in mind, the newly-converted Rice pleaded with American Baptists to organize a large-scale Baptist society for foreign missions.

In May, 1814, thirty-three Baptist delegates—seventeen of whom were from the Philadelphia Association—agreed to convene in Philadelphia for the Triennial Convention, the first supposedly national Baptist convention.⁷ While those who attended the convention supported its existence, they disagreed regarding its authority and its relationship with local Baptist churches. What would this convention be, how should it be organized, and what kind of role should it play in Baptist religious life? Some delegates supported an associational method of organization in which Baptist associations would elect delegates to the state conventions, from which delegates would then elect representatives to the National Convention. Others supported the society method in which anyone could become a member simply by buying a seat in the

⁵ Robert A. Baker, *The Southern Baptist Convention and Its People, 1607-1972* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1974), 76.

⁶ Baker, 100.

⁷ Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1950), 250.

convention. In the society method, the national society operated independently of local churches.⁸ While delegates were divided at the initial meeting, they agreed that the convention should “direct the energies of the whole denomination in one sacred effort.”⁹ This kind of language was a novel transition in the history of Baptists from their virulent insistence on congregational autonomy to their creation of the National Convention which led the lesser churches.

Francis Wayland, who later became the longstanding president of Brown University and ardent missionary supporter, pushed for the associational method. Despite his initial desire for this method, however, Wayland wrote years later, “I now rejoice exceedingly that the [associational method] failed.” The local churches were “unwilling” to cooperate with the larger conventions, yet the members of the convention considered themselves to be part of a “General Assembly, to which all [Baptist denominational] affairs were brought for decision.” With this perception of power came great ambition. Wayland recalled the convention becoming deeply embroiled in national political matters such as a resolution of approval for General Andrew Jackson’s Indian conflicts. “Though missions were the ostensible object for which we assembled,” he continued, “missions were frequently the last thing thought of.” Delegates railed about “this matter or that, totally unconnected with missions,” all while evoking the interests of their “constituents.” In fact, “when any of these exciting questions were discussed, the house would be filled to overflowing; but when *nothing but missions* was under consideration, there was room enough, and to spare.” Wayland was no opponent of large-scale missionary organizations, for his experience in the following decades led him to support the society method,

⁸ Baker, 99.

⁹ “Constitution,” *Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*, September 1814.

a more “permanent” group of convention members who would be members for life after contributing 100 dollars to the society.¹⁰

The anti-mission movement that is the subject of this thesis did not appear out of nowhere. New converts, unfamiliar with Baptist history, identity, and theology, began to fill Baptist churches. Men like Rice and Judson, suddenly opposed to infant baptism, precipitated the creation of the Triennial Convention made up mostly of delegates from a single Baptist association in Philadelphia. According to the missionary apologist Wayland, the Triennial Convention was a hectic bunch of delegates with interests in evangelization, politics, and regional competition; and all of this to “direct...the whole denomination in one sacred effort.” As the convention attempted to spread out from the Northeast and ask for financial assistance, convention supporters were surprised to find such ardent opponents of their benevolent society. It was in this context that the anti-mission movement arose.

One of the first people to directly criticize the actions of the Triennial Convention was John Taylor, a Baptist preacher and planter in Kentucky. Taylor was baptized as a young man at a Baptist Church near the Shenandoah River in Virginia, and soon began preaching at public meetings. In 1782, at the age of thirty, he married Elizabeth Kavanaugh, inherited property worth three thousand dollars from his uncle, and moved with his new wife across the mountains to scarcely populated country in Kentucky. From that time on, Taylor moved from town to town, church to church, making friends and enemies along the way with his reputedly strict standards of church discipline. And as he continued to move around the new state of Kentucky in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, he slowly accumulated property, three

¹⁰ Francis Wayland, *The Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* (London: J. Heaton & Son, 1861), 145-148.

thousand acres along the Ohio River by 1795.¹¹ By 1819, Taylor was an aging successful planter and a strict Calvinist. He had also become intimately acquainted with Luther Rice and other missionaries for the Triennial Convention, all of whom he mistrusted.¹²

Luther Rice, “the New England Rat,” Taylor wrote in his *Thoughts on Missions*, was “the life and soul of the American Missionary operations.” When Judson and Rice returned to the United States from India, “they were the great machine, which by [Rice] as their agent, was soon brought into action all over the United States.” The purpose of this “great machine,” according to Taylor, was to extract money from Baptists around the country and turn the exalted callings of the ministry into what he called priest-craft. For Taylor, the act of canvassing the country for donations to a distant religious organization reeked of the Catholic practice of selling indulgences, a lingering Protestant obsession since the Reformation. Catholic priests were “to get money by the sale of indulgences for the use of the pope and Church,” he wrote. “Luther’s [Rice] motive was thro’ sophistry and Yankee art, to get money for the Mission, of which himself was to have a part.” Taylor’s critique reflects two themes that would be common as the anti-mission movement gained steam: drawing similarities between missionary Baptists and Catholics, and using the rhetoric of region and class to evoke the established churches of New England.¹³

Taylor continued with an anecdote designed to demonstrate Rice’s greed. Robert Semple, Baptist leader and historian in Virginia, appointed Rice to preach at the Dover Association meeting in Virginia. When the association denied Semple’s request that a collection

¹¹ James E. Welch, “John Taylor, 1772-1833,” in *Annals of the American Baptist Pulpit*, ed. William B. Sprague (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1860), 155.

¹² Welch, 152-159; John Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions* (Franklin County, Kentucky, 1819).

¹³ Taylor, 3-6.

for the Triennial Convention be taken up after Rice's sermon, Rice refused to preach. Semple proposed that Rice simply preach on a subject other than missions, but Rice refused that as well. "Rather than quarrel," Semple and other church leaders "bore their own hats through the congregation, making the collection, to please his Lordship." Taylor made sure to emphasize that "this was several years after Luther had been collecting thousands upon thousands, and his fame was very great."¹⁴

Of even greater concern than money and corruption, however, was Taylor's fear for a loss of local church autonomy due to centralized denominational influence. The national leaders of the Baptist denomination were "verging close on an aristocracy, with an object to sap the foundation of Baptist republican government." He defended the traditional Baptist emphasis on the independence of the local church, "the highest court Christ has fixed on earth," while condemning the missionary supporters who "would fondly make their advisory counsel a great court of appeals to the society."¹⁵ Coincidentally this description of the Triennial Convention matches the language that the Convention used in its own Constitution of 1814. Not only did the convention speak about leading American Baptists, but they also acted to shape the denomination in their own image. Rice cultivated deals with Secretary of War William H. Crawford to secure government grants to evangelize domestically and among Native Americans for the purposes of defense and assimilation.¹⁶ He and the Baptist missionary Humphrey Posey also secured government funds for missions through the federal government's Education Fund.¹⁷ Based on the long-standing Baptist penchant for a separation of church and state, the reactions of

¹⁴ Ibid, 6-7.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ William H. Brackney, "The General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination, 1814-1845: An American Metaphor," *Baptist History and Heritage* 24 (July 1989): 16.

¹⁷ William G. McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries, 1789-1839* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 154.

Taylor and other Baptists aware of the convention's actions appear quite rational. After discussing the recent removal of the governor of Kentucky from the position of president of the state missionary society for disagreements in state politics, Taylor summed up his criticism: "What can a serious spectator think of all his political juggling in religious matters?....For what communion hath light with darkness, or what concord hath Christ with Belial?"¹⁸

One year after Taylor's publication of his *Thoughts on Missions*, Daniel Parker published a scathing dismissal of mission societies. Parker was a man of contradictions. While in some respects the stereotypical image of nineteenth-century anti-mission Baptists, he was also a rare and peculiar man. Born not far from John Taylor just east of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia, Parker lived most of his life up to 1820 in the backwoods of Georgia, Tennessee, and Illinois. He underwent a conversion experience in 1802 and soon preached, publicly debating itinerant Methodists. Parker fit the mold for how urban society wanted to see most Baptists: poor, uneducated, and zealous in his theology.¹⁹ Yet he abhorred slavery. He was disgusted with authority and governments but was elected to the Illinois State Senate in 1822. Most peculiar of all, Parker developed a doctrine in the 1820s known as the Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit, a modification of the Calvinist belief in the elect, which declared the elect to be God's children while the damned were the children of Satan. With his reputation tarnished due to this doctrine and he and his followers increasingly persecuted by their frontier neighbors, Parker and his

¹⁸ Taylor, 14.

¹⁹ For "heretical" Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit doctrine, see Daniel Parker, *Views on the Two Seeds* (Vandalia, Illinois: Robert Blackwell, 1826).

church moved further west in 1834 to Mexican Texas in a religious migration strikingly similar to Brigham Young's twelve years later.²⁰

Despite the difficulties in categorizing Parker, he was most consistent in his opposition to large-scale benevolent societies. Much like Taylor, he primarily critiqued the close connection between various mission societies and money, and he lamented the loss of local church authority. Parker complained that a person does not need faith or even need to act within the bounds of Baptist morality to be a member of the Triennial Convention. "Various persons, believing and supporting a multitude of doctrines" could become members simply by paying one hundred dollars to the society. Baptists were "mingling with the wicked of the world" in these new societies by allowing money to be the "cause of...fellowship." Ever mindful of the tradition of local church autonomy, Parker wrote, "If the authority of government is in the church, and the mission society act without it, then they are evidently in disorder and consequently their work is in disorder." While Francis Wayland had commended the separation of church and mission society, Parker railed against any organization calling itself a Baptist body and acting outside of the confines of local churches. Regardless, the Triennial Convention and other mission bodies were not acting independently of local churches, but they often competed with local Baptist churches. The convention was "setting up schools and raising family funds and stocks, flocks and herds, of various kinds, all belonging to the mission system," and all "on our own frontiers where preachers are perhaps as plentiful as among ourselves."²¹

²⁰ Donald F. Tingley, "Illinois Days of Daniel Parker, Texas Colonizer," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 51 (Winter 1958): 388-402; Jo Ella Powell Exley, *Frontier Blood: The Saga of the Parker Family* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 35-36.

²¹ Daniel Parker, *A Public Address to the Baptist Society* (Clark County, Illinois, 1820).

One pocket of resistance to the Triennial Convention was the Kehukee Association in eastern North Carolina. The fourth Baptist association to form in America, the Kehukee Association adopted in 1765 the Philadelphia Confession of Faith, a Calvinist confession which affirmed the complete sovereignty of God, a belief in the predestined elect, and opposition to infant baptism. Major Baptist leaders such as John Leland and Isaac Backus attended their annual meetings in the 1780s to encourage them to maintain their unity with one another and their opposition to any connection with the state. By 1803, the establishment of a missionary organization had become a topic of discussion, indicated by Kehukee member Martin Ross's query as to whether the association should unite with its "numerous and respectable friends...amongst the different denominations." Debate ensued, but the association reached no conclusion for another two decades. While the association received annual reports from the Triennial Convention, the level of support or opposition for the convention remained unclear. This détente collapsed with the 1825 publication of a pamphlet by Joshua Lawrence, a young leader of the Kehukee Association, in opposition to benevolent societies.²²

Unlike John Taylor and Daniel Parker, Joshua Lawrence was not a migrating frontier Baptist but a young Baptist leader who had grown up in eastern North Carolina and who had extensive experience with the local church in Tarboro, North Carolina from a young age.²³ His critique of large-scale missionary enterprises mirrored that of Taylor and Parker, but his virulent rhetoric which he used to describe missionary Baptists forced the issue of missions to the forefront of the Kehukee Association. The problem with the mission societies, according to Lawrence, was that they attempted to "do the work with money, which none but God can do by

²² Hassell, 663, 704, 707, 721.

²³ See Joshua Lawrence, *Reminiscences*, 1812, in Joshua Lawrence Papers at Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

his grace and Spirit.”²⁴ While Lawrence warned of a departure from the doctrines on which Baptists were founded, his primary argument was that Baptists were attempting to become powerful and respectable in the eyes of society, yet by doing so, they would destroy their own religious liberty. “Like Israel without a king,” Baptists began to desire for a ruling leadership which would centralize their power and make them like the other denominations.²⁵ The benevolent societies, he said, wanted “to build a sort of National Church, and let them come into it for pay; having a fixed price for members, directors, and presidents for life; and so they make a sort of half-brothers of the governors and rich men of this world.”²⁶ Baptists were turning outwards, forgetting their roots in a more separatist, counter-cultural faith, and they were using a wealthy clergy class to slowly undermine the authority of local churches. Although the connection between each of these parts of his argument did not always cohere, the argument’s rhetorical strength drew strict lines between those who supported and those who opposed benevolent societies.

At the Kehukee Association the following year, Lawrence presented his Declaration of the Reformed Baptist Churches in the State of North Carolina in an attempt to unite the association in opposition to benevolent societies. The declaration, which would later be known as the Kehukee Declaration, outlined a similar argument as his pamphlet from the previous year. This time, however, the language and intention were clear. Those who agreed with Lawrence would no longer commune in the same churches as those who supported missionary societies, tract societies, Sunday Schools, or seminaries. In addition to these societies, Lawrence added a prohibition on communion with Masons, a prohibition to which the Kehukee Association

²⁴ Joshua Lawrence, *The American Telescope by a Clodhopper of North Carolina* (Philadelphia, 1825), 4.

²⁵ Lawrence, *American Telescope*, 18.

²⁶ Lawrence, *American Telescope*, 13-14.

previously agreed in 1786.²⁷ Lawrence's declaration in 1826 was bold and divisive, and members of the association evaded a decision of approval for the declaration until the following year.²⁸

Although some historians have felt Lawrence's article on Masons was an aberration from the rest of the declaration, this article was consistent with his ideal for local church autonomy.²⁹ In 1786, the Kehukee Baptists banned membership in the Masons because of the Masons' secrecy. Members of autonomous local churches who saw themselves primarily as citizens of a local Baptist community could not brook secrecy within the community. Mutual trust among members was paramount for this ideal local community to work. When church members had a property dispute, disagreement about a business deal, or a concern about a member's unchristian behavior, the members did not go to court but to the church. The democratic vote of church members judged on the issues that many today would assume should be brought before legal authorities. For many Baptists, in fact, it was a sin to bring a dispute to court first as it was acting contrary to scriptural demands.³⁰ The concepts of local church autonomy and church discipline operating as its own judicial system are not new for historians, but it is important to keep these concepts in mind to understand Lawrence's vigorous opposition to Baptist church members joining separate organizations. For a Baptist to join a benevolent society or the Masons was comparable to a person attempting to attain citizenship in two countries. Their loyalty

²⁷ Hassell, 706.

²⁸ For Lawrence's Declaration, see *Primitive Baptist*, May 14, 1842.

²⁹ See Taylor, *The Formation of the Primitive Baptist Movement*, 143 for an example of the "unusual" mention of the Masons.

³⁰ 1 Cor. 6:1-7; Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 20-25.

would have to reside with one of the two groups above all, and, for Lawrence, the ideal of the church organized on scriptural grounds trumped any civil or outside voluntary body.³¹

When the Kehukee Association met in 1827, they continued their debate on Lawrence's hotly contested declaration. Mark Bennett, an early supporter of Lawrence who, years later, switched ideological sides, recalled that a majority of the churches approved Lawrence's declaration against mission societies. The Speaker of the association, in apocalyptic terms, cried, "Brethren, I have now brought you to the threshold of deliverance; and if you will not be free, it is your own fault." This excited the passions of the association. Soon the moderator, "who was a friend to missions," according to Bennet, stood from his seat and announced his equal opposition to "speculation upon the Gospel, as brother Lawrence or any one else." Others cheered in approval of the moderator's statement, and Lawrence replied to the moderator and the rest of the delegation, "If you say so, I am satisfied." The members of the Kehukee Association then embraced one another in relief that the division over mission societies had finished, while Lawrence and the moderator "were folded in each other's arms, weeping." The members appeared to have settled the issue.³²

Yet the division persisted. Reports that the Kehukee Association in North Carolina had renounced any fellowship with members of benevolent societies reverberated among Baptist communities. The next year, 1828, twenty-two churches arrived in Beaufort County, North Carolina for the association meeting, while thirteen churches did not attend. Although the

³¹ Monica Najar shows how early American Baptist churches offered their own version of citizenship and oversaw traditionally civil issues such as contract disputes, debt repayments, and equity in trade disputes. See Monica Najar, *Evangelizing the South: A Social History of Church and State in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7-11.

³² Mark Bennett, *Review of the History of the Kehukee Baptist Association: To Which are Added the Comparative Claims of Missionary Baptists and Anti-Missionary Baptists to Scriptural and Unaltered Religious Usages* (Raleigh: Biblical Recorder Office, 1854), 17-18; Hassell, 737.

attending churches stood by their support for Lawrence's declaration, now known as the Kehukee Declaration, some claimed that they had misunderstood what happened and that they never gave their support to the declaration.³³ Regardless of what actually occurred at the 1827 Kehukee Association meeting, the reports of an entire association, an old, revered one at that, rejecting any fellowship with benevolent societies, sparked a large-scale debate among American Baptists.³⁴ Concerning their relation to the non-Baptist society, Baptists were at an ideological crossroads.

One notable Baptist who would enter the fray on the side of the missionary supporters was a New York missionary preaching in Savannah, Georgia named Adiel Sherwood. Born in 1791 into a slave-owning farming family along the Hudson River in Upstate New York, Sherwood grew up in an environment of evangelical fervor. While attending Middlebury College in Vermont to study for a career in law, he met Luther Rice just after Rice had returned from India. Sherwood then studied for one year at Andover Seminary, one of the state establishment Congregationalist seminaries. Excitement about large-scale foreign and domestic mission societies was at its height in New England, and Sherwood's environment fostered his zeal for spreading the Gospel to the irreligious and supposedly uncivilized. Weighing his options, he decided to head for Georgia.³⁵

As the virtual founder of the Georgia State Baptist Convention in 1822 and of a local temperance society in Eatonton, Georgia, Sherwood did not receive news of the Kehukee Declaration with joy. As a strident supporter of benevolent societies in Baptist life, Sherwood

³³ Hassell, 740-741; Bennett, 20-21.

³⁴ See John G. Crowley, *Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South: 1815 to the Present* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 62 for the impact of the Kehukee Declaration on Baptists in the Wiregrass South.

³⁵ Jarrett Burch, *Adiel Sherwood: Baptist Antebellum Pioneer in Georgia* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2003), 6-9.

penned a harsh response to Lawrence and the Kehukee Association. Under the pseudonym “Nehemiah,” Sherwood responded to the Kehukee Declaration piece by piece. He replied that no officer in the Georgia State Convention received a penny. Devout Christians freely gave hundreds or thousands of dollars to the mission cause, and they expected nothing in return. He added that the Apostle Paul received some kind of support from the church in Philippi based on Scripture.³⁶

In regards to the Kehukee Association’s opposition to seminaries, Sherwood supported both the requirement of a minister’s education at seminaries and that ministers “have the approbation of neighboring churches and community.” He acknowledged with pride that the “rules were stricter” to become a Baptist minister in Georgia than in the Kehukee Association. “A Seminary tends to produce that *urbanity of manners*,” he claimed, “so desirable in a minister...and many people have construed this into pride and pomposity.” Continuing his regional theme, he pointed out that seminary-educated ministers at least “are not *clownish* like the rusticks of the country.”³⁷

Sherwood’s comment was not the last time that the Baptist debate over benevolent societies contained the rhetoric of region and class. Many historians have claimed that the origins of anti-mission Baptists go back, not to theology or ideology, but to class and politics. Bertram Wyatt-Brown has written one of the more authoritative versions of this school of thought. For Wyatt-Brown, Baptist opposition to mission societies reflected a southern Jacksonian contempt for centralized institutions. This interpretation assumes that the argument over missions was really about party politics. Jacksonians were suspicious of bankers and

³⁶ Nehemiah [Adiel Sherwood], *Strictures on the Sentiments of the Kehukee Association* (Milledgeville, Georgia: Camak and Ragland, 1829), 11.

³⁷ Nehemiah, 15.

speculators, and they represented the common working and farming man. For Wyatt-Brown, politics bled into religion.³⁸ Yet other studies that have measured samples of Baptists have found no correlation between politics, region, or class and their support for benevolent societies. James Mathis's recent monograph has found that both anti-mission and missionary Baptists were "predominately yeoman farmers who were loosely tied to the marketplace."³⁹ Another older study which focuses on North Carolina, by Keith R. Burich, found that more anti-mission Baptists than missionary Baptists were slaveholders. Most North Carolina anti-mission Baptists, including the Kehukee Association, were located in the eastern North Carolina coastal country, not the western upcountry which tended to be more Democratic. Additionally, the leadership of both anti-mission and missionary Baptists in North Carolina was composed of mostly Whigs in the early nineteenth century. While Burich may have come to a spurious conclusion—that the schism was not based on ideology or theology but rather was a generational conflict—the data itself contradicts Wyatt-Brown and other historians' narrative of backwoods, rural Jacksonian farmers suspicious of the Whiggish benevolent societies.⁴⁰

While Burich seems to have oversimplified the Baptist conflict over benevolent societies to claim that the disagreement "was an empty façade for the Primitives' real ambitions" of control, he and Mathis agree that anti-mission Baptists tended to be older than missionary

³⁸ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Antimission Movement in the Jacksonian South: A Study in Regional Folk Culture," *Journal of Southern History* 36 (1970): 510-511.

³⁹ James R. Mathis, *The Making of the Primitive Baptists: A Cultural and Intellectual History of the Antimission Movement, 1800-1840* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 121-125. Mathis's statistics which show higher representation of women in Primitive Baptist churches than in missionary Baptist churches conflicts with Sandra D. Hayslette's argument that opposition to missions was based on patriarchal authority. See Sandra D. Hayslette, "Missions, Markets, and Men: A Baptist Contest of Values in Tarboro, North Carolina, 1800-1835" (master's thesis, University of North Carolina, 1995).

⁴⁰ Keith R. Burich, "The Primitive Baptist Schism in North Carolina: A Study of the Professionalization of the Baptist Ministry" (Ph.D dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1973), 101-120. Joshua Lawrence is a pertinent example of the use of class rhetoric to define the movement. Despite calling himself a "country rustick," he owned two farms and twenty slaves at the time of his death. See Joshua Lawrence, *The North-Carolina Whig's Apology, for the Kehukee Association* (Tarborough, North Carolina: North-Carolina Free Press, 1830), 20; Hayslette, 3.

Baptists. Age does not encompass the ideological dispute between the two sects, but the pattern is not devoid of meaning. In his account of the Kehukee Association, C.B. Hassell reveals his ambivalence towards the major Baptist revivals of the early nineteenth century. Baptists began to experiment with mission societies, Hassell writes, because “the zeal and credulity of many hundreds of new converts were at their height [at that time]. This was one drawback to the great revival which had just occurred within the bounds of the Association.”⁴¹ As Baptist churches sprang up around the country, especially in the South and West, people unacquainted with Baptist history and theology, or even worse, people who were once members of state-established churches, began to shape the denomination into what they felt was a respectable church structure. It should not be a surprise that Luther Rice and Adoniram Judson, the two men most responsible for creating a nation-wide Baptist organization, had not been Baptists for even a year before they were creating a centralized infrastructure to guide the rest of the churches. New converts, especially young ones, were taking over the once counter-cultural other-worldly denomination, thus Burich and Mathis’s statistical findings regarding age.

Adiel Sherwood, a life-long Baptist, yet one who had allied himself closely with the New England Congregationalist establishment, defended this melding of the worldly and other-worldly in his attack on Lawrence and the Kehukee Declaration. He admitted that not all officers of the Bible societies were church members, but “the majority of officers are church members, and though some ‘worldlings’ are received into membership of the Society, (not ‘into half-brotherhood with the church’) will this blunt the edge of the sword which the Bible carries?”⁴² Sherwood’s reply became the standard position for supporters of benevolent societies. Why should Baptists care about who runs the organization or how they obtain their

⁴¹ Hassell, 721.

⁴² Nehemiah, 18.

funds as long as the end goal is a valuable one? Lawrence and the growing anti-mission Baptist sect were “ignorant,” he claimed, and “cannot endure the thought that the benevolent societies of the age shall make others more enlightened and of consequence more useful and respected.”⁴³ In the coming years, missionary Baptists would increasingly stress the utility and respectability which benevolent societies brought. Their assertion that a centralized convention could more efficiently direct funds to accomplish large-scale goals was correct. If, however, Baptist churches separated on major doctrinal or practical issues, a centralized institution would be in a position to push aside the complaints of the minority of churches. By 1829, the debate was already between efficiency and local autonomy.

The debate continued when Lawrence replied to “Nehemiah”—Adiel Sherwood—the following year in his pamphlet *The North Carolina Whig’s Apology for the Kehukee Association* and his Fourth of July sermon at the Baptist Church in Tarboro. In these, he re-emphasized the solidarity of local Baptist churches and the need for them to disassociate themselves from other societies for the sake of church discipline. Most important in *The North Carolina Whig’s Apology*, though, was Lawrence’s continued harping on new terms such as “money religion,” “begging religion,” and “law religion.” 1830 marks the year when Lawrence enunciated the sequence of events, from money religion to law religion, most clearly. “Compare your plan of missions,” he retorted to Sherwood, “who have their hundreds on starting, and promises from boards of directors for hundreds more, with the . . . directions of Jesus Christ to his apostles” to take no “scrip, bread, coats, or shoes, and see how it agrees.”⁴⁴ It was not the act of evangelization that Lawrence opposed, rather the method which large-scale organizations took to evangelize. “Suppose Peter had said, brethren I can’t go to this heathen man, unless you will

⁴³ Ibid, 24.

⁴⁴ Lawrence, *The North-Carolina Whig’s Apology*, 16; Matt. 10: 9-10; Mark 6: 8-9; Luke 9: 3.

form societies, beg for money, or sell membership into societies, and get money enough to bear my expenses while I am going and when I get there.”⁴⁵

Not only was Lawrence concerned about Baptist societies’ accumulation of wealth, he was concerned with how they accumulated it, what he called “begging.” Up to this time—and even well after it—most Baptist churches would not pay their preachers a salary, or at least pay them enough on which to support a family. The issue of “salaried ministers” was a divisive one which led to charges of “priest-craft” and preaching becoming just another trade. For a Baptist minister or missionary to preach specifically for donations was scandalous for the denomination at the time.⁴⁶ Lawrence claimed that this type of behavior resembled that of Catholic and Anglican priests, the epitome, for Lawrence, of tyrannical religion. It is ironic to point out that the Sisters of Charity, a parallel Catholic religious organization in the nineteenth century that raised funds to support the poor in Paris, prohibited its members from “direct fund-raising” from wealthy Parisians due to the “potential worldly corruption” involved in the practice.⁴⁷ The concern for how churches or religious organizations raised money, especially the melding of the “worldly” and the otherworldly, was not particular to Baptists but included at least French Catholics.

Yet the concerns did not stop with money religion. Lawrence continued by connecting money religion to law religion. The accumulation of money was one issue, but his primary concern was that, as religious leaders in history have gained wealth, they have naturally

⁴⁵ Lawrence, *The North-Carolina Whig’s Apology*, 17. Ten years earlier, John Leland made a similar argument in his satire of the Galileans on modern mission societies, Leland, 472.

⁴⁶ Anne C. Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 60-61; Beth Barton Schweiger, *The Gospel Working Up: Progress and the Pulpit in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 20.

⁴⁷ Sarah A. Curtis, “Charitable Ladies: Gender, Class and Religion in Mid Nineteenth-Century Paris,” *Past and Present* 177 (Nov. 2002): 148.

attempted to use their wealth and influence to control the rest of society. “Americans,” he exhorted, “See a certain sect as teachers and preachers biasing the minds of our youth almost in every town and village, and like the Jesuits,” pushing “politicians to bow to their intrigues.” He explained, “When the missionary Jesuits thought they had got money, the influence of the rich and great on their side, it made them ambitious—they wanted to give laws” to whom they had evangelized, “thus meddling and grasping after unwritten, unholy, and unscriptural power.”⁴⁸

The concern for Lawrence, then, was not just a major organization bearing the name of Baptist which operated like a business enterprise. Instead, it was that these religious organizations, whether Baptist or not, would slowly stretch their influence into the legal and political realm. “If any State of the United States should at any time arm this begging religion with law,” Lawrence warned, “then it will be like the popish and the high church of England.”⁴⁹ Regardless of whether they were officially established churches, religious organizations would extend their reach to the law, much like an established church.

In his Fourth of July address in Tarboro, titled *A Patriotic Discourse*, Lawrence repeated even more clearly his solidified stance against benevolent societies and how they could slowly erode Americans’ religious liberty. Any religion in which ministers or priests attempted to gain money, that is to make preaching a trade or profession instead of a divine calling, was “priest craft,” according to Lawrence. The North Carolina Baptist Society for foreign and domestic missions paid their agents \$540 per year, something unfathomable to the members of the Kehukee Association. Continuing his scathing review, he asked his audience what the Board had done with the thousands of dollars they received. They used \$600 to “buy western country land” while “the rest it is supposed has taken French leave.” In addition to laying charges of

⁴⁸ Lawrence, *The North-Carolina Whig’s Apology*, 46-47.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 27.

corruption and mishandling of funds, he inquired, “What has become of the \$25,000 begged out of Congress for the ministerial factory—to give away which Congress has no right, for it was the nation’s money,” not to be used for “sectarian individual benefit.”⁵⁰ Congress paid various religious organizations money to carry out acts that they considered to be for the public good, but Baptists had traditionally despised any connection with or dependence on temporal government. For Lawrence, the increasing size of religious organizations, in which people—not church members—bought their power, and the alarming activity and cooperation between these organizations and any secular government was a shot to the fragile religious independence that Baptists had gained over the years. In detailed and startling imagery, Lawrence expressed his ultimate fear:

It appears to me very plainly, that the present movements of the priests are like a man breaking a yoke of oxen—first to coax them gently—then the rope—then coax, rub, feed, and stroke—then the yoke—then gently the cart—then a light load—then as much as they can bear—then more, galled necks or not, go they must, or the whip they must have, without mercy or compassion. Just so are the priests doing. Oh ye sons of liberty; ye children of wild oxen independence, to rove where you please, and graze on pastures of happiness according to your own liking, they are coaxing, persuading, begging, and putting on the yoke and cart, by large sums of money, theological and Sunday schools, combined with the press and priestly influence—and I tell you, these worms will cut the root of our independence, and if they get law on their side, they will load the cart with tithes, to the galling of your hearts, and you must go, or pop goes the whip.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Joshua Lawrence, *A Patriotic Discourse; Delivered by the late Elder Joshua Lawrence at the Old Church in Tarborough, North Carolina, on Sunday the 4th of July, 1830*, 18.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 12.

To sum up Lawrence—the dominant voice of anti-mission Baptists by 1830—Baptists must “keep Congress to the text book of the Constitution, and the church of God to the letter of the New Testament.”⁵²

It is worth noting a couple of the particular issues that Lawrence picked out which he viewed as missionary Baptists overstepping their bounds. First, he consistently railed against Sabbath legislation—attempts to prohibit mail delivery on Sundays and other prohibitions against supposedly immoral activities on Sundays. Like much of Lawrence’s ideological and theological positions, he followed John Leland’s lead. Years before, Leland protested against any laws prohibiting otherwise legal activity on Sundays. For Leland and Lawrence, this was an unholy alliance between state and religion and an issue best left to individual churches, not a secular government.⁵³ Lawrence also opposed temperance societies, not just for the more common reasons of opposing any presumably religious society other than the church, but also because, by 1830, they held their members to the standard of total abstinence from alcohol. He argued, “The scripture is not against drinking, but against drinking too much, or drunkenness....I shall then take my grog, wine, or what not, when I please, nor will I debar myself the privilege and pleasure of asking my friends or enemies to do so.”⁵⁴ Temperance societies had become unscriptural “Abstinence Societies,” and soon enough he predicted they would use their influence to shape the morality of the rest of society to their standards.⁵⁵

By 1836, when Hosea Holcombe of Alabama, writing as “A Servant of the Gospel,” penned a rebuttal to Lawrence, the divisions between missionary and anti-mission Baptists had

⁵² Ibid, 29.

⁵³ Leland, 118-119, 695-696; Lawrence, *A Patriotic Discourse*, 8. Leland even questions whether Sunday ought to be the Christian Sabbath, and even whether Christians are obligated to observe the Sabbath. See Leland, 688-696.

⁵⁴ Lawrence, *A Patriotic Discourse*, 20-21.

⁵⁵ See Wayne E. Fuller, *Morality and the Mail in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 22-23 for the common fears of a Christian political party.

hardened. The terms of the debate were set, and particular leaders began to dominate its discourse. Holcombe was born in South Carolina in 1780, and already by the age of twenty-two his local church licensed him to preach. In 1816 he met Luther Rice as Rice was touring the South to raise funds for the Triennial Convention. At this meeting, Rice convinced Holcombe to join the growing evangelistic and progressive Baptist leadership.⁵⁶ Holcombe moved to Jefferson County, Alabama in 1821 to preach, and he later led the Alabama State Convention for six years.⁵⁷ As the most vocal supporter of missions among Alabama Baptists, Holcombe published a response to Lawrence in the increasingly nation-wide debate over benevolent societies.

Holcombe was most effective among mission supporters for pointing out the hypocrisy of Lawrence. Anti-mission Baptists were so worried about money religion and the publication of religious tracts for a profit, yet by 1836, Lawrence and his fellow North Carolinian Mark Bennett were publishing and selling the *Primitive Baptist* from Tarboro, North Carolina. He exclaimed, “We are *surprized* at Rev. Mark Bennet, or any other gentleman, to publish, or sell tracts” for Lawrence “after his denouncing *all* dealers in tracts.” Lawrence condemned the sale of religious tracts, but, though “they are worth *nothing*...we assure the reader that those tracts are sold.” Lawrence, Holcombe claimed, was one of those “men trading and trafficking in religious matters” whom he so harshly disapproved. Holcombe repeated Lawrence’s words right back to him: “It smells to us rank of priestcraft.”⁵⁸ Anti-mission Baptists forbade their members from

⁵⁶ F. Wilbur Helmbold, “Biographical Preface,” in Hosea Holcombe, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Alabama* (1840, repr., West Jefferson County Historical Society, 1974).

⁵⁷ Ibid; William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopaedia: A Dictionary of the Doctrine, Ordinances, Usages, Confessions of Faith, Sufferings, Labors, and Successes, and of the General History of the Baptist Denomination in All Lands: With Numerous Biographical Sketches of Distinguished American and Foreign Baptists, and a Supplement* (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1883), 532.

⁵⁸ A Servant of the Gospel [Hosea Holcombe], *Refutation of Reverend Joshua Lawrence’s Patriotic Discourse, or Anti-Mission Principles, Exposed* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The Intelligencer Office, 1836), 13-14.

joining missionary societies, thus stifling the free exchange of ideas, according to Holcombe. He concluded that if anyone was acting like an autocratic priest, it was Lawrence.

Most of Holcombe's rebuttal concerned the scriptural interpretation of the early Christian missionary journeys. He denounced Lawrence's claim that the early Church did not operate like a missionary society. Paul and Barnabas received financial support from the church in Philippi, he claimed. Throughout their journeys, they were "sustained by the sympathies, the prayers and *the contributions* of the Churches." Holcombe considered that the Apostles "were the *Board of managers*. And one of them might have been a *President*, another *Vice President*, and a third, a *Treasurer*."⁵⁹ While the terms used to designate leadership positions were anachronistic, Holcombe attempted to show continuity between early Christian evangelization and the new Baptist missionary societies. Lawrence may have countered, however, that those who supported the early missionaries were individual churches, the only rightful autonomous actors regarding religion, according to Baptist theology.

Strangely absent from Holcombe's *Refutation of Reverend Joshua Lawrence's Patriotic Discourse* was any discussion of Lawrence's "law religion." In Lawrence's argument, the growth of centralized Baptist organizations was of only secondary importance to the potential influence that those organizations could have over society. Holcombe looked to Scripture to defend the use of mission societies and paid missionaries, but he seemed to either have disregarded Lawrence's fears of state-church cooperation as erroneous or to have embraced the idea of a Baptist body which can influence lawmakers. Based on some of Holcombe's remarks, it seems that the latter is most likely. He explicitly denounced the anti-mission position because, he claimed, nine-tenths of "men throughout all the departments of the Federal Government, and

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 21; 23.

of the State Governments....are favorable to the benevolent institutions of the day.” Holcombe felt that it was proper for the federal and state governments to aid Baptist missionary societies with funds. To anyone who opposed this use of government funds, Holcombe cried, “Inveigh against religion—teach your pupils to do the same—to stigmatize and slander the righteous—to curse the institutions of the day.”⁶⁰ A hymn which accompanies Holcombe’s tract may be telling of his political and religious ideology:

Ye Missionaries all rejoice;
While haughty men blaspheme:
Fear not the Anti’s thundering voice,
The glorious God will change the scene.
The Kings and Queens shall then bow down,
And wicked tyrants lick the dust.
Th’ unrighteous then shall know their doom;
The righteous Lord will crown the just.
Hail, Zion’s daughters, firmly stand
Clad with truth, you’re now awake;
Virtuous fair, the shield of man,
The ornament of Church and State.⁶¹

For Holcombe and other missionary Baptists, Christianity was not to be separated from civil power but joined with it as the crowning symbol of the state.

Joshua Lawrence, Mark Bennet, and the Kehukee Association were some of the primary leaders of a coalescing anti-mission ideology based on local church autonomy and adherence to old Baptist confessions of faith. Yet there were other major voices outside of the South who contributed to the debate with a similar perspective but a different audience. In 1832, several members of the Baltimore Baptist Association in Maryland called for a meeting of all area “Old School” Baptists, a term they appropriated as their own after missionary Baptists had used it as an epithet. This meeting of twenty anti-mission Old School Baptists in Maryland in September

⁶⁰ Ibid, 18.

⁶¹ Ibid, 5.

1832 produced some of the same shock waves as the Kehukee Declaration when they agreed to sharply oppose any fellowship with benevolent societies. The Black Rock Address—as it was known due to the meeting’s location in the Black Rock Meeting House—outlined most of the same points of contention as the Kehukee Declaration. It entreated missionary Baptists, “Pause, and consider how far they have departed from the ancient principles of the Baptists.” The members of the meeting outlined what was becoming a common line of opposition to any connection with benevolent societies, including communion with the Sunday School Union, a group of “giddy, unregenerated, young persons who know no better, than to build [children] up in the belief that they are learning the religion of Christ.” The Black Rock Address also expressed its concern of the “vast combination of worldly power and influence” which could undermine the liberties of other Baptists. They asked missionary Baptists to meet in churches, “the order of Christ’s house,” and associations with no other purpose than “keeping up a brotherly correspondence.” Instead, missionary Baptists had turned the association “into a kind of legislative *body*, formed for the purpose of contriving plans...and for imposing those contrivances as burdens upon the churches, by *resolutions*, &c.” The Kehukee Declaration set the terms of debate for the anti-mission Baptist movement, but the Black Rock Address—which was published two months later in the first large-scale weekly anti-mission Baptist publication—made this debate even more public.⁶²

In addition to Holcombe’s pamphlet in 1836 and the Black Rock Address in 1832, two major anti-mission Baptist periodicals began publication in the 1830s. The *Signs of the Times*—which published the Black Rock Address in its first issue—began publication in 1832 in New Vernon, New York. Its readership lived in the northern and northwestern United States,

⁶² *Signs of the Times*, Nov. 28, 1832.

primarily New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Kentucky.⁶³ In 1836, Gilbert Beebe and Joshua Lawrence began publishing the *Primitive Baptist* based in Tarboro, North Carolina. This paper was distributed throughout the South, mostly North Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee.⁶⁴ These publications not only published Baptist opposition to benevolent societies, they also served as forums for anti-mission Baptists around the country to discuss and debate the same issues. Debates about the autonomy of the local church, the role of centralized benevolent societies, and various theological debates were not just a power struggle between two elite groups separated from the common population, as some have suggested.⁶⁵ Rather, anti-mission Baptists were a well-educated—if only self-educated—community with a relatively cogent theology and ideology of church governance.

Contributors to these periodicals discussed a broad array of topics, but a brief selection of their primary topics may help illustrate how dependent these papers were on reader participation with letters to the editor. One common topic of discussion was how benevolent societies often undermined the authority of local churches. A reader with the pseudonym, “A Waldensis,” claimed that temperance societies were replacing the church’s decision whether to discipline or exclude a member for drunkenness. In some parts of the country, a Baptist who did not join a temperance society was assumed to be a drunkard.⁶⁶ The *Signs of the Times* also published an article by Adoniram Judson on his idea to form “plain dress societies” under the command, “Unite Christian Sisters of all Denominations.” For the northern anti-mission Baptist readers, Judson’s proposal was an unscriptural usurpation of local church autonomy.⁶⁷ The *Primitive*

⁶³ Ibid, January 1, 1836.

⁶⁴ *Primitive Baptist*, May 13, 1837.

⁶⁵ See Burich, 101-120.

⁶⁶ *Signs of the Times*, January 16, 1833.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Baptist similarly opposed temperance societies due to their refusal to allow members to drink any alcohol at all.⁶⁸ Another contributor, Thomas Paxton of Illinois, exhorted his fellow Primitive Baptists to “be certain, and *cautious*” how they drink alcohol so as not to become drunkards.⁶⁹ For Paxton and other anti-mission Baptists, temperance societies were only a usurpation of a local congregation’s authority to judge what is permissible regarding alcohol use.

Readers in both papers commonly repeated some of the same refrains of the main anti-mission leaders, particularly the marriage of religion and money and the tyrannical power that could be the result of such a union. One reader, Lebbeus L. Vail of Goshen, New York, decried the American Tract Society’s latest report which desperately called for more donations to compete with Catholic missions in the Mississippi Valley. The society asked for more money to “convert the heathen” and “replenish the treasury of the Lord,” thus maintaining “the blessings of a free Government.” For Vail, however, this tact of donations put the American Tract Society on the same level as the Catholic missionaries and far from Baptist tradition.⁷⁰ The *Signs of the Times* published an excerpt from a newspaper in Pennsylvania which lamented the growing wealth of centralized religious organizations, all of which attempted to “gain exclusive privileges” and use “every exertion to make impressions in their favor, on the general government.”⁷¹ James Alderman of Gadsden County, Florida wrote in the *Primitive Baptist* that the object of benevolent societies was to reform local Baptist churches and thus take away “our church liberty.” They would justify their actions with “the majority of votes” in their societies.⁷²

⁶⁸ *Primitive Baptist*, February 25, 1837.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, May 23, 1840.

⁷⁰ *Signs of the Times*, February 27, 1835.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, June 19, 1833.

⁷² *Primitive Baptist*, April 11, 1840.

Thus Baptists' fears of centralized power in religious bodies separated from local congregations were not fabrications of a ministerial elite. This fear was a common reaction to a changing religious and social environment. Baptists were looking outward to society and the world, and they were dreaming of large millennial transformations in humanity. If millennialist missionary Baptists were to accomplish their goal of global evangelization and transformation, they would have to take steps which were not traditionally Baptist, in particular, to use political influence to their advantage.

3: THE BAPTIST ESTABLISHMENT

Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah, and said unto him, Behold thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.

1 Samuel 8:4-5

Whether anti-mission Baptists were Jacksonians, yeoman backwoodsmen, anxious patriarchs, hyper-Calvinists, or proponents of religious liberty and local church autonomy, historians have agreed on one thing: their fears of benevolent societies were irrational. Scholarly works on anti-mission Baptists, however, have failed to study the short-term and long-term effects of benevolent societies on the Baptist denomination and the changes in how Baptists viewed themselves in relation to the rest of society. In the short-term, early Baptist benevolent societies mirrored the rhetoric and actions of businesses and governments. The minutes of Baptist conventions were filled with records of expenditures, receipts, number of tracts sold, number of sermons preached, and how to carry out the goals of the convention efficiently. Prominent Baptists began to lobby the federal and state governments for help to carry out their moral mission of reforming the rest of society through law. While historians have rightly claimed that the brunt of Baptists' progressive shift to the state occurred later in the century than

the missionary society controversy, the roots for such a shift were in the benevolent societies of the 1810s and 1820s.

At the center of this transformation to a business-like efficiency was Luther Rice. Rice's national Baptist university, Columbian College, was located in the nation's capital to influence the federal government. Envisioned to be a Baptist university, seminary, law school, and medical school, Columbian College was an impressive endeavor. To finance the school, in addition to the missionary work that Rice and the Triennial Convention were planning, Rice worked with legislators and executive officials to receive government funds. Baptists who remembered their history of a dissenting, persecuted past were naturally averse to Rice's attempts at direct political lobbying and large-scale fund-raising. Yet Rice did not have those memories of a persecuted past, for he converted to the Baptist faith while serving as a Congregationalist missionary. Compared to his experiences with religion, especially the New England Congregationalists, Baptists seemed overly provincial and anti-modern. With the support of a few like-minded Baptists, Rice discarded the traditional Baptist belief in local church autonomy and attempted to create a modern, efficient, bureaucratic denominational structure.¹

While Rice was one of the primary figures in the early missionary movement, by 1826 other members of the Triennial Convention suspected him of financial mismanagement. The convention assessed that Rice had dealt with over \$20,000 from the convention's treasury. A delegation from New York and New England clamped down on Rice and claimed that he had "been too loose in all his dealings." Rice seemed "to have followed too much his own

¹ William H. Brackney, "The General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination, 1814-1845: An American Metaphor," *Baptist History and Heritage* 24 (July 1989): 15, 17-18.

plans...thus abusing [the convention board's] high confidence in him."² The convention found in that year that they were about \$60,000 in debt in addition to almost \$32,000 that they owed the federal government. Delegates believed that Rice had transferred funds from the Baptist Board for missions to Columbian College.³ It is unclear how responsible Rice was for the alleged financial mismanagement, but his deals with federal officials and his notoriety around the country for skillfully extracting funds for missions seem to corroborate the convention board's decision to censure Rice. Most importantly, these allegations confirmed many Baptists' suspicion of the Triennial Convention.

The convention briefly rebounded from its debt after the Luther Rice scandal, but by the 1830s they were again in serious financial straits. Despite the lack of receipts to cover the annual expenditures in 1835, the convention decided to increase the number of missionaries. They optimistically claimed that they could raise \$100,000 over the next year to cover the new debts they would incur. By 1838, however, expenditures exceeded revenues by over \$43,000. In an attempt to regain solvency, the convention board hired a financial secretary Howard Malcom. Malcom reported that the convention must downsize its operations and establish a more regular source of income. In the 1840 annual meeting of the Baptist Convention Board, the board exhorted all local pastors to be agents for the convention. The board pressured local pastors to convince their congregants of the importance of the national convention's evangelizing mission.⁴ Four years later, a report by the Committee on Finances exemplified the drastic shift towards a business mentality. "Great pains should be taken to invite wealthy individuals," wrote the

² Raymond Hargus Taylor, "The Triennial Convention, 1814-1845: A Study in Baptist Co-Operation and Conflict" (PhD dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1960), 105, 107-108.

³ *Ibid*, 112.

⁴ *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 20 (June 1840): 123-124.

Finance Committee, “to assume the expense of supporting missionaries and native preachers.”

The committee report continued:

The time has now come when the interests of missions imperatively demand of pastors, that they become the financial agents of the Convention to their respective congregations. It is not enough that pastors, from time to time, explain the missionary undertaking, and the duties and obligations of Christians. They must do more. They must devise means for raising funds; and having devised them, so as to reach every member of their respective congregations, they must keep them steadily, from year to year, before the people.⁵

The 1840s Baptist conventions did not regard pastors primarily as those who were “called to preach” but as “financial agents.” The image of the Baptist pastor who “devise[d] means for raising funds” was similar to the dystopian warnings of Lawrence, Taylor, and Parker. Just as Lawrence used the analogy of the yoke slowly placed on the ox to represent the gradual loss of Baptists’ freedom, the convention charged that congregants “must be *habituated* to labor, to give, and to pray.”⁶

The National Baptist Convention increasingly became a business organization concerned with expenditures, receipts, number of sermons preached, and number of tracts sold. Yet this trend towards business efficiency was not unusual. In the same period of the 1820s and 1830s, the North Carolina Baptist State Convention, a society made up of paying board directors, solicited \$2,000 from North Carolina Baptists to purchase a plantation for the establishment of a seminary. They then asked Baptists around the state for \$13,000 to create Wake Forest College. While raising money from churches and individuals, the state convention decided which

⁵ *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 24 (July 1844): 168.

⁶ *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 21 (June 1841): 163-164.

churches should receive funds from the convention. For instance, the convention appropriated \$100 to the Baptist church in Wilmington “on condition that they secure a [minister] who will be acceptable to the Convention.” In 1838, the state convention accused one agent, R. McNabb, of collecting more funds than he was allotted without sending those funds to the convention board. While the convention minutes did not elaborate any further on the issue, it seems that the common accusation of missionaries preaching for money had some basis in reality. While the size of the state convention’s financial assets was considerably less than the national convention, the same trend toward business efficiency accompanied with financial scandals occurred throughout the country with Baptist conventions.⁷

It should not be a surprise to find out that the North Carolina State Convention reported an increasing “apathy” and animosity among the state’s Baptists in the following years. To raise money for theological education in the state, the convention board appointed a committee “to take immediate measures to secure the amount of \$17,000.” Yet that same year Francis Hawley, a Home Missions agent, reported, “It is a painful fact that almost general apathy prevails among the churches where I have traveled relative to the interest of the Redeemer’s Kingdom.” In a reversal of rhetoric concerning “the world,” Hawley claimed that anti-mission Baptists had “evidently drunk deep into a worldly spirit....There can be but little doubt that the Sabbath School and temperance cause are on the retrograde; many who once put their hands to the plow have looked back.”⁸ For Hawley and the missionary Baptist leaders of North Carolina, Baptists were not supporting the convention—that is, the “Redeemer’s Kingdom”—because of greed and “a worldly spirit.” Anti-mission Baptists had claimed that missionary Baptists interpreted the

⁷ Livingston Johnson, *History of the North Carolina Baptist State Convention* (Raleigh, N.C.: Edwards and Broughton Printing Co., 1908), 16-30.

⁸ Johnson, 26-28.

opposition to state conventions or benevolent societies as greedy and unchristian behavior.⁹ In 1836 North Carolina, anti-mission Baptists were certainly correct in their interpretation.

Anti-mission Baptists of the 1830s denounced the missionary rhetoric of efficiency and finances as truly “worldly” and an aberration from previous Baptist behavior. The *Signs of the Times* called the benevolent societies the “factory” of missions. In a satire on missionary Baptists, they claimed that Christians “must be made expeditiously, for you know there is great danger: they may die before they are manufactured.” Fortunately for the denomination, “the price for making Christians had fallen from \$17.50 per head, to \$3.50; this great difference is thought to be owing to the systematic application of the means of grace to the hearts of sinners, and the blessed effects of sunday-schools, the distribution of pious tracts, and temperance societies.”¹⁰ Although the *Signs of the Times* contributors exaggerated, the minutes of Baptist conventions in the 1830s were filled with charts recording donations, expenses, new converts, and new churches. The conventions advertised their progress in evangelizing to the world, but they also emphasized that if they did not gain more donations every year, unbelieving souls would be lost. The supposed decreasing price of converting Christians due to more efficient means was only slightly hyperbolic. Instead of purity and dissent, efficiency and progress became the new ideals of missionary Baptists.¹¹

In his book *Democratic Religion*, Gregory A. Wills has noted the same kind of rhetorical shift towards efficiency and progress among nineteenth-century Baptists. Wills claims that

⁹ While mission Baptists perceived opposition to conventions as greedy, mission Baptists often accused Baptists who refused to join temperance societies as “fatally wedded to their bottles.” In response to this accusation, one anti-mission Baptist claimed that “every religious society is a temperance society” and that it was “rather degrading to a Baptist to join himself to a society of this kind.” *Columbian Star*, July 11, 1829.

¹⁰ *Signs of the Times*, November 11, 1835.

¹¹ For example, see *A Republication of the Minutes of the Mississippi Baptist Association, from its organization in 1806 to the Present Time* (New Orleans: Hinton, 1849). By the 1840s, the Mississippi Baptist Association devoted increasingly more space and time to the financial committee reports.

Baptist churches were moving towards an ideal of efficiency in the 1840s, but by the 1870s they completed their transformation. Missionary Baptists had not yet given up on church discipline, but conventions pressured pastors to gain new members and attract wealthy individuals to give to the missions cause. As churches felt the need to expand, congregations could no longer be as tightly knit or disciplined as before. Pastors attempted to be efficient managers of pious workers. Churches graded the “spiritual power” of their pastors based on “improvement of the church property, increased effort in the benevolent enterprises of the church, [and] larger attendance upon public worship.” If Baptists clung to these measures as the standard for a good church, then church discipline would slowly fall by the wayside.¹²

To take the place of church discipline, Baptists felt compelled to maintain some degree of control over their congregations and the rest of society. The most efficient method of control for an increasingly popular church was through law. While Baptists enacted laws based on their own moral beliefs most successfully in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were already making significant attempts to do so by the 1830s and 1840s. The Georgia Temperance Society, founded by the missionary Baptist Adiel Sherwood, became an organization of total abstinence from alcohol in 1832, but only six years later the society was already lobbying the Georgia state legislature to prohibit all alcohol sales. In his tract supporting the complete prohibition of alcohol, Sherwood claimed, “The authority to retail intoxicating liquors...is a fearful and dangerous power to put into the hands of any individual whatsoever.”¹³ The Little Rock Temperance Society in Arkansas also announced its intention to prohibit the sale

¹² Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 131-134.

¹³ Melancthon [Adiel Sherwood], *An Essay on the Defects of the License Law, as Now Existing in Georgia* (Penfield, Georgia: Benjamin Brantly, 1845), 4.

of alcohol in 1842 to preserve what they felt was “our natural rights as citizens.”¹⁴ While the morality of drinking alcohol was still an open issue among Baptists, many missionary Baptist leaders attempted to prohibit anyone, Baptist or not, from selling alcohol.

In Mississippi, a state which many easterners regarded as untamable frontier territory, missionary Baptists used the power of the state and federal government to help carry out their social goals. The Mississippi Baptist Convention supported that “energetic measures...be devised” to remove alcohol “from every grade of society.” After the legislature of Maine prohibited alcohol in 1851, the Mississippi Baptist Convention announced its full support for a complete prohibition of alcohol by law.¹⁵ Long before the 1850s, however, Mississippians had used the law to prohibit alcohol by county. In Lafayette County, local religious leaders, including Baptists, prohibited the sale of alcohol from the county’s creation in 1836.¹⁶ Regarding evangelization and Indian affairs, the Mississippi Baptist Convention resolved in 1853 “to urge the government of the United States to set apart two or more other Territories...and concentrate tribes and remnant of tribes as fast as practicable upon said Territories.” Blending secular and divine goals, they claimed, “We believe it would be to the interest of the Government, the Indians and the cause of our Redeemer.”¹⁷ The Mississippi State Convention, the virtual voice of the state’s Baptists, decided that they could best accomplish the divine purpose of evangelization by requesting military force to concentrate Indians into more manageable territories.

¹⁴ Ben F. Johnson III, *John Barleycorn Must Die: The War Against Drink in Arkansas* (Fayetteville: University Press of Arkansas, 2005), 12.

¹⁵ Richard Aubrey McLemore, *A History of Mississippi Baptists, 1780-1970* (Jackson: Mississippi Baptist Convention Board, 1971), 158-159.

¹⁶ T.J. Bailey, *Prohibition in Mississippi; or, Anti-Liquor Legislation from Territorial Days, with its Results in the Counties* (Jackson, Miss.: Hederman Bros., 1917), 186.

¹⁷ McLemore, 149.

The new breed of Baptists, intent on appealing to civil authorities to legislate moral issues, looked upon the state of society with dismay. Thomas Meredith, a Baptist leader in North Carolina, exemplified a growing concern for social unrest. Like other prominent missionary Baptists, Meredith was born in the Northeast. While receiving a classical education at the University of Pennsylvania, he converted to the Baptist faith. After one year of theological training in 1816, the newly-baptized Meredith went to New Bern, North Carolina as a missionary where he would be one of the primary founders of the North Carolina Baptist State Convention.¹⁸

In 1839, Meredith published an article in the *Southern Baptist Pulpit* which addressed what he thought were the primary social problems and threats to order. After expressing concern with the growing number of Catholics, or the “Man of Sin,” as well as “various forms of infidelity,” Meredith denounced what he called “popular excitement.”¹⁹ “The majesty of the law has been trampled under foot,” he wrote. Society seemed too independent, unchristian, and unwieldy for Meredith. Furthermore, the traditionally decentralized polity of Baptist churches was not beneficial for social order. He wondered “by what means [the Bible] can be brought to exert its full force on the popular mass.” The answer, for Meredith, was public education. While “common school education” was “more properly the work of our philosophers and statesmen,” he asserted that “the influence of the Scriptures on the popular mind, might be vastly increased” through “the employment of the Bible as a school book.”²⁰ Meredith’s conservative social values bled into the progressive notion of increasing access to state-funded public schools.

¹⁸ Mary Lynch Johnson, “Meredith, Thomas,” in *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, ed. William S. Powell (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 256-257; Bernard H. Cochran, “Meredith, Thomas,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*, ed. Sameul S. Hill (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1984), 466.

¹⁹ Thomas Meredith, “The Moral Power of the Sacred Scriptures,” *Southern Baptist Pulpit* 1 (November 1839): 9-12.

²⁰ Meredith, 15.

Baptists and Christians of like-minded denominations could use public schools to achieve greater social order, evangelize young children who were ignorant of Christianity, and create a homogenous ecumenical Christianity led by the state's leading clergy members.

As Baptist leaders gradually took control of social and political issues, anti-mission Baptists continued to voice their displeasure at these political measures. The *Primitive Baptist* published numerous letters from readers opposing the influence of temperance societies on politics. One reader decried the attempts of temperance societies to enact legislation to prohibit alcohol, "thus trying to cramp the conscience of their fellow men, and make laws to deprive them of liberty of conscience, and then cry at every corner liberty of conscience." The reader finished his argument by arguing, "Drunkenness is an evil, but no man has a right to make a law to keep his fellow man from it."²¹ Regarding Sabbath laws, Mark Bennett of the *Primitive Baptist* wrote, "We do not believe there...ever ought to be a statute or State law to compel people to observe actively any religious rite or ceremony." Consistent with anti-mission Baptists' strict adherence to Baptist principles regarding the Sabbath, however, they urged others to "try to persuade [those who break the Sabbath], without attempting to pull down civil institutions and privileges."²²

Yet, despite the ardent and quite popular opposition to using the state for religious motives, much of the scholarly discussion on early religious benevolent societies either glosses over religious opposition to reforms or disregards it based on its "curious compound of sincerity and hypocrisy," in the words of one temperance historian.²³ Consequently, few historians have taken seriously the anti-mission Baptists' genuine opposition to laws pertaining to religion on the grounds of individual liberty and local church autonomy. Given the vast chasm between civil

²¹ *Primitive Baptist*, January 27, 1838.

²² *Ibid*, April 15, 1837.

²³ John Allen Krout, *The Origins of Prohibition* (1925; repr., New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), 123.

governments and God's law, according to the anti-mission Baptist, Gilbert Beebe, it was exceedingly presumptuous for "human legislatures which God shall obliterate...to point out the course in which God requires his children to move."²⁴

As the nineteenth century continued, Baptists did not create a direct state church establishment, but the influence of missionary Baptists, especially in the South, grew to such an extent that political leaders could not ignore their demands. While they would continue to evangelize and use moral suasion to spread their beliefs, the temptation to use the coercive power of the state was too great. Early Baptists saw themselves as dissenters from the rest of society and the state, but the new generation of progressive Baptists grew out of the increased influence of the denomination in centralized conventions and societies. After the vital role of Baptists as paragons of religious liberty in the eighteenth century, missionary Baptists became what their intellectual ancestors despised: a religious establishment.

²⁴ *Signs of the Times*, November 1, 1845.

CONCLUSION

It cannot be concealed that there is a gnawing worm under the bark of our tree of liberty, that seeks to sap our civil and religious rights. Mean suspicion is ridiculous; but manly jealousy is noble. Words are flexible things; it is principles and measures that characterize the man.

John Leland, at Cheshire, Massachusetts in 1830¹

The idea that religion and politics don't mix was invented by the Devil to keep Christians from running their own country. If [there is] any place in the world we need Christianity, it's in Washington. And that's why preachers long since need to get over that intimidation forced upon us by liberals, that if we mention anything about politics, we are degrading our ministry.

Jerry Falwell, Sermon in Lynchburg, Virginia, July 4, 1976²

Anti-mission Baptists today do not often intervene in politics. Neither could they do so if they wanted to, given their gradual decline in numbers.³ The anti-mission Baptists depicted in

¹ John Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland Including Some Events in his Life, Written by Himself, With Additional Sketches, &c.*, ed. L.F. Greene (New York: G.W. Wood, 1845), 573.

² William R. Goodman Jr. and James J. H. Price, *Jerry Falwell: An Unauthorized Profile* (Lynchburg, VA: Paris & Associates, 1981), 91.

³ In Frank S. Mead and Samuel S. Hill, eds., *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, 10th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 72-73, the authors estimate that there are 72,000 "Primitive Baptists" in the United States, but since there is not a central denominational structure, these numbers are not definitive. Also, the issue of what a church believes and how it identifies itself complicates any exact calculation.

Pilgrims of Paradox were fiercely opinionated about theological issues, but they seemed aloof to the world outside of the Appalachians. These Baptists stood in sharp contrast to the emerging evangelical movement of the Moral Majority, led by another Appalachian Baptist, Jerry Falwell. Instead of praising the growing influence of evangelicals in the nation's capital, anti-mission Baptists continued to deride any direct religious influence on politics, as was their tradition. Reflecting on the past, a Missouri anti-mission Baptist wrote in the 1970s praising the Kehukee Association's opposition to "the passage of any laws in this State favoring societies or churches of any cast or denomination." On contemporary issues, he asserted, "The battle [over church and state] now seems to lie centering around the field of education.... Many arguments are put forth as to why they are 'entitled' to tax support for parochial schools.... But no one can deny the fact that tax-aid to religious and church-related schools is aid to that particular church."⁴ As yet another popular evangelical movement swept the country in reaction to the perceived secularization of society, anti-mission Baptists only entered into political discourse to denounce the influence of religion on politics. While mainstream Baptists and other evangelicals engaged with the "world," anti-mission Baptists kept their distance.⁵

The growth of benevolent societies and Baptist conventions did not inevitably lead to increased Baptist activity in secular politics. It was possible for Baptist missionary societies to remain separate from politics. Some early missionary Baptists may have even intended that. The Georgia missionary Baptist leader Jesse Mercer is a telling example. Mercer was a strict Calvinist who nevertheless supported mission societies, and he never flagged from his support

⁴ Floyd F. Gross, "Religious Liberty," *Banner of Love*, March 1972.

⁵ Ruth Murray Brown, *For a "Christian America": A History of the Religious Right* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), 19-25; Clyde Wilcox, *Onward Christian Soldiers?: The Religious Right in American Politics* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000), 88-96).

for active church discipline.⁶ He and other missionary Baptists may not have intended to create the kind of Baptist religious establishment that grew throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. The creation of benevolent societies, however, was the turning point for Baptists. It marked a time when they turned their gaze from within to without, from a separation from the world to a desire to transform the world. Through a gradual series of decisions with possibly unintended consequences, missionary Baptists created, not a direct state-church establishment, but an indirect establishment, a network of conservative business-minded evangelicals who attempted to wipe away any distinction between church and country.

If nothing else, this thesis should clarify that the rise of a Baptist denomination which imposed moral beliefs on others through law was not inevitable. While major Baptist leaders like Jerry Falwell rejected a separation of church and state, anti-mission Baptists—who were more theologically and morally conservative than Falwell—strongly supported a strict separation to maintain the purity of local autonomous churches. As the inheritors of the dissenting Baptist tradition, anti-mission Baptists represented—and continue to represent—an alternative to mainstream evangelicals and their intentions to create a Christian nation-state in their own image.

⁶ Anthony L. Chute, *A Piety Above the Common Standard: Jesse Mercer and the Defense of Evangelistic Calvinism* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2004), x-xiv.

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