

THE FORMATION  
OF THE  
BAPTIST WORLD ALLIANCE

BY

DR. CRAIG A. SHEROUSE

ADDRESS PRESENTED  
AT THE ANNUAL DIRECTORS MEETING  
OF THE  
FLORIDA BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

MAY, 1991

STETSON UNIVERSITY

DE LAND, FLORIDA

## PREFACE

Baptists are an incredible group, now world wide and diverse in organization and style, and some groups are linked together rather loosely. Southern Baptists, the largest group, are related to each other and to world Baptists in a variety of ways, from the local church, the association, the state convention, the Southern Baptist Convention, to the Baptist Works Alliance. Other Baptist groups have no organizational relationship to each other, though several in the U.S. have a common connection with the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. Moreover, many Baptists have little knowledge of their own history or of the inter-relationships their groups have with other Baptists around this world. This fact lead a group of Russian Baptists to remark to Dr. Bob Denny, retired Secretary General of the Baptist World Alliance, when they were visiting in America and he asked of their impressions of American Baptists, that they were “too provincial.”

Since I became curator of the Florida Baptist Historical Society several years ago, the directors and I have tried to maintain a balance in our efforts to encourage Florida Baptists in their heritage, by stressing local, state, national and international Baptist history. This year one of the speakers we invited to speak was Dr. Bob Denny. We asked him to address the subject of “Local Baptists and World Baptists.” After agreeing to come, he discovered that he had cancer and was unable. Recalling that Dr. Craig Sherouse had done his doctoral dissertation on the Baptist World Alliance, I asked him on very short notice to address the subject of how the Baptist World Alliance began. He graciously agreed to do so and this paper is the result. It is a part of Southern Baptist history that all of us need to know.

E. Earl Joiner

## “THE FORMATION OF THE BAPTIST ALLIANCE”

AN ADDRESS GIVEN TO  
THE FLORIDA BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
BY REV. CRAIG A. SHEROUSE, Ph. D.  
Lakeside Baptist Church, Lakeland, FL  
May 4, 1991

The origin of the Baptist World Alliance (hereafter “BWA”) has been the source of controversy and the subject of little good historical research. John Newton Prestridge, editor of the denominational newspaper, *The Baptist Argus*, reflected both of these problems when, while disengaging himself from a controversy over BWA origins,<sup>1</sup> he appealed: “We wish some of our historians would take this matter out of our hands.”<sup>2</sup> This address is an attempt to answer Prestridge’s plea.

### Earlier Concerns For Unity Among Baptists

Although strands of Baptist sectarianism have always existed, concerns for Christian unity have also been present. Early Baptists affirmed a doctrine of the Universal church, emphasized the importance of fellowship, and showed a willingness to cooperate with other Baptists in associations, councils and educational and missions efforts.

The first known call for a world-wide meeting of Baptists was made in 1678 by Thomas Grantham, leader of the General Baptists of England: “I could wish that all congregations . . . that are baptized according to the appointment of Christ would make one consistory, at least sometimes, to consider the matters of difference among them.”<sup>3</sup> But Grantham’s vision remained simply a dream.

The most famous early plea for Baptist unity came from a Particular Baptist, John Rippon. Rippon was a popular English preacher, the pastor of Carter Lane Particular Baptist Church in London, and the editor of *The Baptist Annual Register*, an early statistical summary of Baptist life. On the dedication page of the 1793<sup>4</sup> *Register* Rippon suggested a world-wide meeting of Baptists:

The Infant Publication/Under the Fostering Hand/Of Its Benevolent Patrons/Is Most affectionately Dedicated/To All/The Baptized Ministers and People/ . . . In Serious Expectation/That Before Many Years E lapse/ (In Imitation of Other Wise Men)/A Deputation From All These Climes/Will Meet Probably in London/To Consult/ The Ecclesiastical Good of the Whole<sup>5</sup>

This dedication was not an isolated effort by Rippon to begin a dialogue among the Baptist of the world. Before the American War of Independence, British and American Baptists corresponded frequently, but the war stopped these interchanges. Rippon attempted to renew this correspondence and achieved some success. This motivated him to include international data on Baptists in *The Baptist Annual Register*.

In 1824, a pseudonymous author, “Backus,” wrote a series of six letters to *The American Baptist Magazine and Missionary Intelligencer* which dealt with the role of the association. “Backus” was later identified as the young Francis Wayland, then a Boston pastor and later the president of Brown

University.<sup>6</sup> In the fifth of this series of letters Wayland called for associational reform which could enable the establishment of state conventions and then lead to a national general convention and a British-American union.<sup>7</sup> Isolated early Baptists such as Grantham, Rippon and Wayland foresaw the advantages of an international organization of Baptists. But it took the driving force of the nineteenth century concern for Christian unity to bring these dreams to life.

### Background In Nineteenth Century Ecumenism

The formation of the BWA must be understood as a nineteenth century ecumenical event. Although the BWA was formed in 1905, it was the result of several decades of specific efforts. The Baptist World Congress preceded the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, “the watershed between miscellaneous ecumenical stirrings and the integrating ecumenical movement of more recent times.”<sup>8</sup> The formation of the BWA is one of these significant nineteenth century “ecumenical stirrings.”

Nineteenth century Christianity was characterized by great centralizing movements. The Evangelical Awakening was the outstanding religious movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The moving force of the Evangelical Awakening was a personal experience of salvation which produced a passion for evangelism. The Missions Movement as well as numerous voluntary agencies all emerged from the evangelistic fervor generated by the Awakening. The Evangelical Alliance (1846), the first major ecumenical organization, was the most important institutional expression of the Evangelical Awakening’s ecumenical impulses.

The Christian Socialist Movement (1848-1854) started in England and was led by F. D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley. Through their efforts many English Christians rediscovered the social aspect of the Christian faith. This led to the formation of organizations and alliances which became important parts of the ecumenical movement. The prominent English Baptist and BWA founding father, John Clifford, was a Christian Socialist.

The Social Gospel Movement was distinctly American and Protestant and began in response to the urban social demands of the American industrial revolution. This movement was greatly strengthened when the Baptist theologian, Walter Rauschenbusch, developed and systematized its theology. Rauschenbusch coupled his social vision with an international vision of the church. He was also a leader in the Baptist Congress, a major forerunner of the BWA.

As the Evangelical Awakening spread, missions agencies and conferences sprang up in Europe and America. The ecumenical impact of the modern Missions Movement was tremendous. As the movement developed, concerns for Christian unity were strengthened.

William Carey, the pioneer Baptist missionary, was the first person to seriously propose an interdenominational and international missionary conference<sup>9</sup>, a dream which took one hundred and four years to be fulfilled in the 1910 Edinburgh Conference. Other Baptists shared Carey’s concern that Baptist missionary activity should be characterized by international unity. In 1843 a concerned, pseudonymous “Hanno” wrote the *Religious Herald* calling for an international Baptist association.<sup>10</sup>

One vital part of the Ecumenical Movement in the nineteenth century was the formation of seven world denominational fellowships. They represent the movement of ecumenism from a voluntary individualistic base to a denominational base. These curious alliances could appear to be anti-ecumenical

since they have highlighted denominational distinctives. However, as Robert Lee has pointed out, “advance in ecumenicity and resurgence of denominationalism seem almost to go hand in hand.”<sup>11</sup>

These denominational world fellowships were formed through a process one has called “reshuffling.”<sup>12</sup> churches with the same origins but with different geographical locations found it possible, because of the improvements in transportation and communication, to unite with one another for fellowship and various tasks. Ruth Rouse has pointed out the common characteristics among these seven nineteenth century fellowships:

All have arisen out of and are built up around a series of international conferences held at intervals varying from four to ten years; all seek to strengthen the weak churches within their confession; all endeavor to heal the divisions within their confession— theological divisions...racial divisions.<sup>13</sup>

All seven of these world-wide fellowships were organized after the Roman Catholic Vatican I Council (1859-1870). Vatican I attempted to present a united Catholicism in the face of modernism and liberalism. It also attempted to reassert the truth of Catholic dogma and to strengthen the church and the papacy. These seven world denominational fellowships shared many of these fears of modernism, but in addition they attempted to present a united Protestantism in the face of resurgent Roman Catholic dogmatism. These seven world fellowships were: the Old Catholic Congresses; the World Presbyterian Alliance; the Anglican Lambeth Conference; the Ecumenical Methodist Council; the International Congregational Council; the International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers; and the Baptist World Alliance.

The Old Catholic Churches are a group of self-governing national churches who dissented from the Roman Church for many years, the heir of the anti-papal movements within Latin Christendom. The Vatican I declaration of papal infallibility stimulated the formation of these Congresses. The first Old Catholic Congress and the first meeting of a world denominational fellowship was held in Munich in 1871.

In July, 1875, the “World Alliance of Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian System” was formed at a meeting of sixty-four delegates. This Alliance grew largely out of the influence of the Evangelical Alliance.

The Lambeth Conferences were so named because they have been held at Lambeth Palace, the London home of the Archbishop of Canterbury. They have been small, private meetings of the Anglican bishops and world leaders, and began in 1867. These Conferences have met at ten year intervals and have consistently disavowed any binding, syndical authority over their member churches.

The Ecumenical Methodist Council was formed in London in 1881 by delegates representing twenty-eight Methodist bodies in twenty countries and on every continent. Conferences have been held at ten year intervals. In 1951 the name was changed to the World Methodist Council.

The International Congregational Council formed in London in 1891 with over three hundred delegates present. The presiding officer expressed a hope that the Baptists, “the other great branch of the Congregational family,” would unite with the Council.<sup>14</sup> John Clifford, who attended the Council as a representative of the British Baptist Union, responded that one of the main organizers of the Council, who

had since died, intended for the Baptists to be involved. A motion to invite the Baptists to attend the second Council was referred to the Council's Executive Committee. Although no more was made of the suggestion to include Baptists in the Congregational Council, the idea impressed John Clifford and led him to help found the BWA. When the second International Congregational Council was held in Boston in 1899, many American Baptists were likewise influenced. The Councils continued to meet at irregular intervals of eight to twelve years until they merged with the World Presbyterian Alliance in 1970.

International Councils of liberal churches and religious bodies began to be held in 1901. Four meetings were held in 1910. The International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers was organized at the 1900 meeting of the American Unitarian Association. The first meeting was held in London with delegates attending from three types of churches; those of ancient origin within the Protestant Reformation, such as the Magyar Unitarian Church and the Remonstrant Church; those which had more recently broken with the Roman Catholic Church; and the modern Unitarian and other liberal churches.

The last of the seven world-wide denominational fellowships to be formed was the BWA. It was founded in London in 1905 out of the efforts of the three largest Baptist bodies: the American Baptists of the north, the American Southern Baptists, and the British Baptists. The BWA was formed out of much the same process and for much the same purpose as the other six fellowships. It developed not as a reaction to the growing Ecumenical Movement but as a necessary stage in the ecumenical stirrings of the nineteenth century.

### Influences By Baptists of the North

Following the American Civil War Baptists of the north expressed their concern for Baptist unity in three ways: 1) increased efforts to improve and define relationships with the Southern Baptist Convention, culminating in the Fortress Monroe Conference (1894) and the formation of the short-lived General Convention of the Baptists of North America (1905-1917); 2) efforts to establish a cohesive denominational body, resulting in the founding of the Northern Baptist Convention in 1907; and 3) the holding of the Baptist Congresses (1881-1913), the most important organizational forerunner of the BWA.

The formation of the BWA was aided by a general improvement in relations between Baptists of the North and the Southern Baptist Convention. Robert Baker traces the 1845 schism between northern and southern Baptists to the slavery issue. He maintains, though, that the "conflict of ideologies" between the societal and the convention methods was the reason that tension remained between Baptists North and South long after the slavery issue had been settled by war.<sup>15</sup> Since the southerners objected to the Home Mission Society's growing presence in the South, Baker emphasizes the year 1894 as the watershed year in northern-southern Baptist relations. After the Fortress Monroe Conference, Baptist relations North and South were characterized by continuing cooperation.

Samuel Hill and Robert Torbet offer several helpful interpretations of why there was disunity between Baptists North and South: the strong influence of Landmarkism on Baptists of the South; southern sectionalism; Southern Baptist strength; the lack of religious pluralism in the South; northern desire for regional identity in their denomination; provincialism in both regions; and the lack of unity within both households of Baptists.<sup>16</sup>

An interesting experiment in building unity between Baptists North and South was the General Convention of the Baptists of North America. This short-lived body was formed in 1905 as an effort to foster cooperation in missionary concerns between Baptists of the North and Southern Baptists. Only three conventions were held, although an Executive Committee continued to meet until 1917 and the two denominations continued to appoint representatives to this “paper committee” until 1931. The three General Conventions were mostly inspirational in nature and were well received. They attempted to increase the cooperation between the missionary agencies of the North and South by the time of the centennial anniversary of the Triennial Convention in 1914. The General Convention’s short life is partly explained by the success of the BWA, also formed in 1905, and the growth of northern denominationalism which led to the formation of the Northern Baptist Convention in 1907.

A third expression of the northern Baptists’ concern for Baptist unity was the Baptist Congress. The Baptist Congress met annually for thirty-two years (1882-1913) in twenty-two different cities. They became a forum for some of the leading Baptists of America to meet and discuss ideas. The first Congress was organized as a “forum for the discussion of current questions, religious, social, political, or philosophic.”<sup>17</sup> It was patterned after the several world congresses of other denominations and the Convention of Baptist Social Unions held in 1874 in Brooklyn, New York. A General Committee, formed in 1881, drew up a “Plan of Organization” and “Rules of Discussion” for an “Autumnal Baptist Conference” which allowed for any person on the floor to address the subject under discussion. These rules also stated that “no resolution or motion shall be entertained at the public conferences.”<sup>18</sup> This General Committee was strongly influenced by the model of the British Baptist Union which met in the autumn, transacted no business, and devoted several days solely to the discussion of pertinent topics. Discussion was the main agenda of the Baptist Congress.

Although the Baptist Congress was solely northern in origin and remained a dominantly northern organization, many Southern Baptists became involved. Many of the prominent Baptists in America participated in these Congresses, including Walter Rauschenbusch. The Congresses were well received by the participants, but received poor press coverage. Opposition to the Congresses grew stronger from conservative and Landmarkist sources after the turn of the century.

The Baptist Congress served as a forerunner of the BWA in several ways. Although it began as a northern meeting, the Congress quickly attracted Southerners, some Canadians and a few British Baptists. This modest international character prefigured the benefits of a truly international Baptist organization. The organizational structure of the BWA strongly reflected the structure of the Congresses: a broadly representative General Committee and a local Executive Committee. Virtually all of the Southern Baptists who were influential in the formation of the BWA had previously participated in the Baptist Congresses. Most southerners became less involved after the Congresses became more church unionist in their orientation. Southern Baptist dissatisfaction with the Congresses may have been a significant reason that many southerners pushed for the formation of the BWA at the same time that the Congresses were still being held.

Another way in which the Baptist Congress influenced the BWA was in its format: the Congress’ discussion format was continued in the early BWA Congresses. Also, the BWA at first reflected the Congress’ aversion to being considered a legislative body. Not until the third BWA Congress (1923) were resolutions passed.

Another important influence by the Baptist Congress on the formation of the BWA came through the ecumenical subjects which were often discussed. At the 1892 Congress in Philadelphia a discussion was held on the subject, “Is a Union of Various Baptist Bodies Feasible?” Speaking to the topic, William H. Whitsitt, President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, argued against the feasibility of organic unity and for the necessity of a “Pan-Baptist Council.”<sup>19</sup>

In 1903 the Philadelphia Congress held a similar discussion on the question, “How Can Baptists Secure for Themselves a More Practical Working Union?” This discussion revealed a growing dissatisfaction with the nature and structure of the Baptists Congress and a desire for a stronger, truly international Baptist organization. Russell Herman Conwell, President of the 1903 Congress, suggested the formation of a “National or International Baptist Association” after the model of the other world denominational fellowships.<sup>20</sup> Conwell maintained that it was the duty of the Congress to be the instigator of this new Association. A. J. Rowland, Secretary of the American Baptist Publication Society, suggested a truly “International Congress” that could gather “perhaps not every year – but after the old-time fashion of the councils of the early church — at stated intervals.”<sup>21</sup>

The success of the BWA as a truly international, well-supported and well-funded organization was a major cause of the demise of the Baptist Congress. Eight years after the BWA was formed the last Baptist Congress was held. The BWA became what many had intended for the Congress to be. However, several other factors contributed to the Congress’ death.

One factor was the Congress’ inability to gain international support. Congress leaders made efforts to involve foreign Baptists, especially British, but the Congress remained an American organization. The frequency of the meetings and the distance of travel hindered international participation. The yearly meetings also prevented many American Baptists from attending regularly. The scholarly character of the Congress did not interest many Baptists who were looking for a fellowship-oriented organization.

Financial problems plagued the Congress, especially after the death of Samuel Colgate (1897), their principal financial backer. The lack of good press coverage kept the Congresses from being as influential and as celebrated as they deserved. Many northern Baptists viewed the Northern Baptist Convention as a successor of the Congress and shifted their support from the Congress after the formation of the NBC in 1907. The Congress also was labeled as theologically “liberal” by some conservative Baptists because of the participation of such speakers as Shailer Mathews and Walter Rauschenbusch. Also, Landmarkist opposition to the Congress contributed to its demise. Landmarkists were leery of the Congress because of suspicion of denominational bodies and the Congress’ “open” views on the ordinances.

The self-inflicted death-blow came to the Congress when it became deliberately church-unionist. In the 1907 Congress discussions were held on the union of Baptists, the Disciples of Christ, and Free Baptists. The following year the Baptist Congress met jointly with the Disciples of Christ and the Free Baptists to discuss organic union. Attendance and support of the Congress declined noticeably after this meeting, especially among southerners.

### Influences By Southern Baptists.

The Baptists of the North influenced the formation of the BWA through improving relations with southerners and through the formation of the Baptist Congress. However, Southern Baptists also influenced the formation of the BWA, primarily by generating the interest of American Baptists', north and south, in such an international body.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, concern for Christian unity began to grow among some Southern Baptists. The survival of the SBC was assured. It had survived the Civil War and its resulting economic deprivation. Isaac Taylor Tichenor, Secretary of the Home Mission Board, presented a report to the 1892 Convention which assured Southern Baptists that the board would survive. The SBC had survived the threat of the Gospel Mission Movement and had avoided splitting over the issue of Landmarkism. For the first time in its history the SBC's future looked secure. During this time some Southern Baptists began to call for a broader Christian fellowship.

The General Convention of Baptists of North America was strongly supported by the Southern Press. R. H. Pitt, editor of the *Religious Herald*, suggested a 1903 joint meeting of the various northern Societies and the SBC and added to this a call for a "Pan-Baptist Conference:" "Following these great meetings we might have another, with representatives of brotherhood from every land."<sup>22</sup> Even after the 1903 meeting did not materialize; the *Religious Herald* continued to call for a joint North-South meeting and consistently connected it with the process of establishing a Pan-Baptist Conference.

Southern Baptists can be credited with providing much of the initiative and emphasis from 1895-1905 which finally resulted in the first Baptists World Congress. This Southern Baptist initiative came from, in chronological order, William Warren Landrum, R. H. Pitt, A. T. Robertson, and J. N. Prestridge. All of these efforts were made in the midst and aftermath of a very important controversy within Southern Baptist life, the Whitsitt Controversy.

W. W. Landrum, then Pastor of the Second Baptist Church in Richmond, was an early southern advocate of an international Baptist organization. Landrum had been impressed by the growing strength of the Presbyterian Alliance. He advocated a Pan-Baptist Conference in his own pulpit and also when preaching as a pulpit guest.<sup>23</sup> Landrum lived to see the establishment of the BWA, attended the London Congress and served on the American and Executive Committees.

R. H. Pitt was not only impressed by Landrum's pulpit appeal, but also by a personal suggestion. Landrum suggested that Pitt write an editorial on a "Pan-Baptist Conference."<sup>24</sup> This editorial was published April 4, 1895. Though unpretentious, it proved to be very significant: the major impetus which resulted in the 1905 Baptist World Congress can be traced to this editorial and its ensuing discussion:

Why might not we have at some early day a Pan-Baptist Council – representative gathering of Baptists from all parts of the globe for mutual acquaintance and the discussion of matters of common interest?... There is the suggestion. What do the *Examiner*, the *Watchman*, the *Standards* (Chicago and Texas) and the *Western Recorder* say? Why can't it be held?<sup>25</sup>

Pitt's initial editorial aroused some interest. *The Baptist Standard* of Texas, *The Freeman and Times* of London, and the *Standard* of Chicago all supported Pitt's idea. However, Pitt did not mention

his proposal again for over a year. While reporting the opening of the Pan-Presbyterian Council, Pitt again suggested a similar meeting for Baptists and again asked for a response.<sup>26</sup> This appeal received even less response than before, and his efforts ceased until 1900. At that time Pitt reissued his call for a Baptist World Council and suggested either a 1901 meeting in Edinburgh or a 1903 meeting in St. Louis.<sup>27</sup>

This was Pitt's last major editorial effort to establish a Pan-Baptist Conference. His appeals stopped as abruptly as they began. After 1900 he turned his editorial concerns for Baptist unity toward the General Convention. He became a staunch supporter of this organization and used it as a means of occasionally suggesting a world-wide Baptist organization. Pitt was to serve eventually on the American committee which helped to organize the first World Congress, to attend that Congress, to be elected to the first Executive Committee, and to serve as the BWA's American Secretary. However, a turn-of-the-century SBC controversy kept Pitt from pushing the idea of a Pan-Baptist Conference.

An analysis of the formation of the BWA hints at the subtle but pervasive influence of the "Whitsitt Controversy." In 1895 W. H. Whitsitt, President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, published *A Question in Baptist History* in which he maintained that believer's baptism by immersion was not recovered by English Baptists until 1641. The ensuing controversy pitted Whitsitt and his allies against T. T. Eaton, B. H. Carroll, and other Southern Baptist Landmarkists. The result was the resignation in 1899 of Whitsitt as President of Southern Seminary.

This controversy influenced the formation of the BWA in three primary ways: 1) by helping to create an atmosphere in the SBC in which Pitt's suggestions were virtually ignored; 2) by being a major cause of the formation of *The Baptist Argus* (renamed *The Baptist World* in 1908 and eventually merged with *The Western Recorder*), the denominational paper which became a major influence in the formation of the BWA; and 3) by creating among some Southern Baptist scholars a keener interest in their English forebears, an interest which fed into the dialogue which developed after the turn of the century between American and English Baptists.

R. H. Pitt was one of only four Southern Baptist editors who supported Whitsitt. In 1896, the year the Whitsitt Controversy began, Pitt quit publishing editorial appeals for a Pan-Baptist Council. He only published one more such appeal, but not until almost one year after Whitsitt resigned. In order to avoid another controversy over the nature of the Baptist denomination, Pitt may have let his suggestion die. In 1911 Pitt wrote that he dropped the Pan-Baptist Council idea at the suggestion of a close friend who argued that "interdenominational differences were so marked and important as to make such a gathering perilous to the peace of the brotherhood."<sup>28</sup> Whitsitt may very well have been this close friend who persuaded Pitt to drop the Conference idea.

On October 28, 1897, a new, progressive paper, *The Baptist Argus*, was published in Louisville, Kentucky with J. N. Prestridge as its editor. This highly influential paper was formed as a pro-Southern Seminary and pro-Whitsitt alternative to T. T. Eaton and *The Western Recorder*. A. T. Robertson, Professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1888-1934), served on the editorial staff of the *Argus*. He suggested to Prestridge that they run a "World Outlook Number" at the beginning of each year. Robertson also "ghost-wrote" a 1904 editorial which was the *Argus'* first call for a world-wide Baptist Conference.

In 1902 the *Argus* began publishing a “Baptist Outlook” edition on the first printing of the new year which contained reports of Baptist work world-wide. These reports established the *Argus* as the major source of international Baptist news and helped to develop an international Baptist consciousness. In 1904 Robertson became interested in an international meeting of Baptists as “a direct result of the ‘World Outlook’ numbers.”<sup>29</sup>

In 1904 Robertson wrote an unsigned editorial in the *Argus* calling for a world-wide Baptist organization. The impression was given that this came from the editor, Prestridge, an editorial blunder that eventually became a source of controversy for Prestridge. This editorial is often cited as the origin of the BWA:

We suggest, for what it may be worth, that next summer, say in London, the Baptists of the world send some of its mission and education leaders for a conference on Baptist world problems....If such a conference led afterwards to a Pan-Baptist Conference on a larger scale as to attendance, well and good....Why not a World’s Baptist Conference? What do the papers think?<sup>30</sup>

(In 1910 R. H. Pitt wrote an editorial in which he rightfully claimed his place in the formation of the BWA.<sup>31</sup> After this editorial Robertson admitted to some influence from Pitt.<sup>32</sup>) When it became apparent that there was not enough time to organize a 1904 meeting, Robertson pushed for a July, 1905 date. In March, 1905, Robertson and his family sailed for England where he prepared his Greek grammar, attended the first BWA Congress and served on the committee which drew up the first Constitution.

The most important Southern Baptist influence on the formation of the BWA came through the strong leadership of J. N. Prestridge, editor of *The Baptist Argus (World)* (1897-1913). Although it was Robertson, not Prestridge, who wrote the first *Argus* editorial call for a Pan-Baptist Conference, Prestridge quickly took on the idea as his own and put the full force of his influence and organizational abilities behind it. In almost every edition from 1904-05 the *Argus* printed letters and articles about the proposed meeting. Endorsements came from throughout the SBC, from northern Baptists, English, Irish, Canadian, South African and Continental Baptists, and from various mission fields. The support was astounding, with one exception: the *Religious Herald* was the only other Southern Baptist denominational newspaper to endorse the idea. By October, 1904, the Southern Baptist Convention, the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, and the British Baptist Union had endorsed it. It was also unanimously approved by the ministers’ conference of Louisville, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York City, Chicago, St. Paul, St. Louis and others. The only objections were raised by Landmarkist papers, *The Baptist Flag*, *The Western Recorder*, and the *Landmark Baptist*.

Prestridge was personally responsible for leading the 1904 SBC meeting to approve a resolution supporting the Pan-Baptist Conference.<sup>33</sup> Prestridge and Pitt were among the twenty-three who served on a “Pan-Baptist Conference Committee” of Southern Baptists. They met with a similar committee of northern Baptists to form a Joint American Committee which cooperated with the British Committee to plan the London Congress. Prestridge also served as the first American secretary of the BWA (1905-1913).

## Influences By British Baptists

British Baptists played an equally important, though quite different, role in the formation of the BWA. The British Baptists supplied the actual structure for this world-wide organization and provided a wealth of experience. They were the most ecumenically involved of the three major Baptist groups and their experience added much maturity, security and prestige to the new organization. Their willingness and ability to organize and host the first Congress in London enabled the fledgling organization to begin smoothly.

Britain birthed most of the nineteenth century ecumenical movements and agencies. All of the Protestant world denominational fellowships were formed in England and held their first congress in London. British Baptists were involved in all dimensions of British ecumenism. John Clifford, one of the founders of the BWA, was also one of the most outstanding nineteenth century British ecumenists. From 1892-1896 he was a major participant in the Grindelwald Conferences on Home Reunion, held among prominent British Free Church leaders, precipitating the formation of the Free Church Council in 1896. Clifford, along with fellow British Baptists F. B. Meyer, J. H. Shakespeare, and Alexander Maclaren, were strong supporters of this Council.

Clifford shared with other British Baptists and Non-conformists a vibrant optimism about their futures. Darwinism, liberalism, Christian Socialism, and the turn of the century all united to produce a pervasive positive attitude in England. Britain was at the height of her power. Queen Victoria's long and stable reign had increased the country's confidence. Non-conformists were gaining strides socially and politically. In 1906 the Liberal Party came to power and more Non-conformists were seated in Parliament than since the days of Oliver Cromwell. The language of the "coming of the Kingdom of God" was popping up in Non-conformist sermons and writings, and ecumenism was a vital sign of its imminent coming.

Clifford and many other Baptists shared this forthright optimism. Unity had already been achieved within British Baptist life when in 1891 the Particular Baptists and the New Connection General Baptists merged within the British Baptist Union. Unity had also grown between British Non-conformists. The next logical step was to unite with Baptists world-wide. Clifford, Shakespeare, Maclaren and Meyers all supported the establishing of the BWA.

Another aspect of this optimism was the hope for the cessation of war. Although this was a time of rampant nationalism, many churchmen believed that with the progress of the Kingdom, war would be left behind. While the nations of Europe were rapidly arming themselves, many European Christians, including John Clifford, began holding peace conferences. Clifford's peacemaking concerns also motivated him to support the BWA as an international peacemaking organization.

J. N. Prestridge made a personal appeal for support for his plan to Clifford and Shakespeare. As a result, the October, 1904 meeting of the British Baptist Union invited the Congress to meet in London. Thirty-two men were appointed as a General Committee to plan the Congress. The Executive Committee of this General Committee suggested that Alexander Maclaren preside over the first Congress meetings.

## Conclusions

The BWA evolved into existence. It began with the early Baptists' concerns for unity as expressed through associations, councils, educational enterprises, and trans-Atlantic correspondences. The heightened ecumenical awareness of the nineteenth century produced denominational fellowships, including the BWA.

The BWA represented the successful improvement in communications and relations between British and American Baptists, and between American Baptists North and South. The American Baptists of the North provided a model for the BWA in their Baptist Congress. Southern Baptists provided the motivation to overcome the latent sectarianism and anti-ecumenism which had caused the Baptists to be one of the last major denominations to organize a world-wide fellowship. The organizationally and ecumenically mature British Baptists provided the machinery for organizing the first World Congress. Each of these groups was at a strong point in its own institutional life. The northern Baptists would soon form the Northern Baptist Convention (1907). Southern Baptists had survived the post-Civil War threats and doctrinal threats. British Baptists were progressing after their 1891 merger of New Connection and Particular Baptists.

No individual can claim to be "the founder" of the BWA. Several leaders stand out: Pitt, Prestridge, Robertson, Clifford, and Shakespeare were especially influential. All of the founders were British and American. Although the BWA was called an "international" organization, its origins are distinctly western.

Diversity fed into the formation of the BWA. The history of the BWA has been characterized by tension over its precise nature, functions and goals. Much of this tension is the result of the multiple groups which came together to form the BWA. Both theological liberalism and a reaction to liberalism fed into the formation. Some of the founders were deliberately ecumenical and saw the BWA as an essential step in the progress of the Ecumenical Movement toward church-unionism. Others viewed the BWA as an end in itself and vigorously resisted the idea of further union. Some founders granted significant authority to the BWA, whereas others resisted any legislative function, even resolutions. Some of the founders saw the BWA as a missions organization, others wanted it to be a discussion forum, while others thought that its primary purpose was fellowship.

As the BWA moves toward its centennial celebration and as many Southern Baptists struggle with their institutional loyalties, reflection upon the formation of the Baptist World Alliance may be instructive. Perhaps the same kinds of dreams, drive and diversity could combine as they did a century ago to carry today's Baptists into a new century, a new millennium, and perhaps a surge for God's coming Kingdom.

1. Prestridge and Robert Healey Pitt, editor of the *Religious Herald*, disagreed over which of them should be credited with originating the idea of the BWA.

2. John Newton Prestridge, *Baptist Argus* [Louisville], August 18, 1904, p. 8.

3. Thomas Grantham, as quoted in Richard Knight, *History of the General of Six Principle Baptists in Europe* (Providence: Smith and Parmentor, 1827), pp. 120-121
4. All other secondary references to Rippon's statement use the date 1790. However, Rippon's first volume of *The Baptist Annual Register* contained the years 1790-1792 and parts of 1793. It was completed in December, 1793.
5. John Rippon, *The Baptist Annual Register*, Vol. 1 (London: [n.p.], [n.d.], dedicatory page.
6. Albert L. Vail, *Baptists Mobilized for Missions* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1911), p. 15
7. "Backus," *The American Baptist Magazine and Missionary Intelligencer*, May, 1824, p. 327.
8. Ruth Rouse in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948*, edited by Ruth Rouse and Stephen C. Neil (London: S.P.C.K., 1954), P. 217.
9. Ruth Rouse, "William Carey's 'Pleasing Dream,'" *International Review of Missions*, XXXVII (1949), p. 181
10. Blanche Sydnor White, *From London to London* (Richmond: Women's Missionary Union of Virginia, 1955). This letter could not be located in any of the 1843 editions of the *Religious Herald*.
11. Robert Lee, *The Social Sources of Church Unity* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), pp. 191-192
12. George Tavaard, *Two Centuries of Ecumenism* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Fides, 1960), p. 25.
13. Rouse, in Rouse and Neill, p. 613.
14. Albert Peel and Douglas Horton, *International Congregationalism* (London: Independent Press, 1949), p. 13.
15. Robert A. Baker, *Relations Between Northern and Southern Baptists*, second edition ([n.p.], 1954).
16. Samuel S. Hill, Jr. and Robert G. Torbet, *Baptist Relations North and South* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1964).
17. Norman Fox, "The Baptist Congress," *A Century of Baptist Achievement*, ed. by A. H. Newman (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1901), p. 288.
18. *Baptist Autumnal Conference, Second Conference Minutes*, p. 101.
19. William Heth Whitsitt, "Is A Union of Various Baptist Bodies Feasible?" *Minutes of the 1892 Baptist Congress*, p. 53.
20. Russell Herman Conwell, "How Can Baptists Secure for Themselves a More Practical Working Union?" *Minutes of the 1903 Baptist Congress*, p. 15.
21. A. J. Rowland, "How Can Baptists Secure for Themselves a More Practical Working Union?" *Minutes of the 1903 Baptist Congress*, pp. 35-36

22. *Religious Herald*, June 13, 1901, p. 1.
23. See *Religious Herald*, April 13, 1905, p. 8.
24. Pitt, "Questions and Answers," *Religious Herald*, May 26, 1910, p. 10.
25. Pitt, "A Pan-Baptist Council," *Religious Herald*, April 4, 1895, p. 2.
26. Pitt, "Why Not a Pan-Baptist Conference?" *Religious Herald*, July 30, 1896, p. 2.
27. Pitt, "Pan-Baptists – Why Not?" *Religious Herald*, December 20, 1900, p. 8.
28. Pitt, "Baptist World Alliance," *Religious Herald*, June 22, 1911, p. 10.
29. A. T. Robertson, "Memories of the Toronto Baptist World Congress," *The Watchman-Examiner*, July 19, 1928, p. 920.
30. A. T. Robertson, "Why Not a World's Baptist Conference?" *The Baptist Argus*, January 14, 1904, p. 8.
31. Pitt, "Questions and Answers," *Religious Herald*, May 26, 1910, pp. 10-11.
32. Prestridge and Robertson, "The Baptist World Alliance," *The Baptist World*, June 2, 1910, p. 17.
33. *Minuets of the 1904 Southern Baptist Convention*, p. 7.