

BAPTISTS AROUND THE WORLD

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A LOOK AT BAPTISTS AROUND THE WORLD

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I have just completed editing a book, Baptists Around the World: A comprehensive Handbook published only a couple of weeks ago by Broadman and Holman. I wrote three-fourths of the volume myself, but for the other fourth I had the cooperation of over 45 other contributors who provided valuable material on a number of Baptist bodies. As a volume which attempts to cover all countries in which Baptists reside and to list all Baptist groups, whether a member of the Baptist World Alliance, the book is a first. Although comprehensive Baptist histories written by Robert Torbet or Leon McBeth attempt to cover the Baptist story as a whole, they concentrate on the Anglo-American world and western Europe, sadly neglecting the Two-Thirds World—the world outside the modern industrialized West.

Baptists began in the seventeenth century as a small struggling sect on the fringe of the much larger Protestant world. At first Baptist growth was very slow. After a century and a half of existence, Baptists were still confined to the British Isles and British colonies. In 1750 Baptists in America numbered only a bit over 5,000 in 100 churches. But in the next one hundred years Baptists rapidly expanded in both Great Britain and the United States. Through William Carey, Adoniram Judson, and other missionaries, Baptists became one of the leaders in the great century of missionary expansion from 1815 and 1914 and became a world body with their establishment on the European mainland, Africa, Asia, and Australia.

Growth continues to accelerate. In 1852 there were a bit over 1,100,000 Baptists with 900,000 of them in the United States. Only 4 ½ percent of the Baptist population resided outside the British Isles and the United States. A bit over 50 years later in 1904, the Baptist population had jumped to over 6 million but still only 5 ½ percent of all Baptist resided outside these two areas. In 1995 the Baptist membership is over 37 million with over 23 percent living outside Great Britain and the United States. At present rates of growth, this percentage should soon reach 25 percent. Baptists have also become increasingly multi-racial. About 30 percent of the Baptist population are members of the Black race, while 7 ½ percent are Asiatic, and 4 ½ percent are of Latin origin.

Baptists in Florida have also shown the same trends. As you know, Baptists did not organize their first church in the state until 1821, just before the United States took possession of the territory from Spain. In 1852 Florida Baptists numbered only 2,412 members. Today Florida has over 1,600,000 Baptists in at least 27 different Baptist bodies with about one million Southern Baptists, probably over one half million National or Black Baptists, and the rest making up the remaining smaller groups. Baptists in Florida are also multi-racial with large White, Black and Hispanic constituencies.

Baptists are one of the best represented Protestant bodies in the world, found in about 180 countries and territories. In the Western Hemisphere Baptist churches stretch from Nome, Alaska to southern Chile and in Europe from Lisbon to Moscow and across Eurasia to the Kamchatka peninsula on the Pacific Ocean. In Africa there is even a Baptist church at Timbukto in Mali and in such cities in Asia as Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Vietnam; Phnom Penh, Cambodia; Ulan Bator, Mongolia; and Pokhara, Nepal.

In Europe there is a recently organized Baptist church in Tirana, Albania, and there are Baptists on St. Helena, site of Napoleon's exile and 1,200 miles off the west coast of Africa in the South Atlantic. On the other hand, not all Baptists have shown the same rate of growth everywhere and are not particularly well distributed. In some areas they have even experienced loss and in some places do not exist.

Baptists continue to be great a missionary people. In my recent survey, I discovered at least 89 foreign missions which were Baptist or had Baptist antecedents. The Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention is the leader, but since the Second World War an increasing number of mission agencies supported by separatist or fundamentalist Baptists from the U.S.A. are now working in various parts of the world.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA/CANADA

In my further discussion of Baptists, I shall first start with the United States, then move to other portions of the Western Hemisphere, and then move to Europe, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. In numbers, resources, and institutional development, the heartland of Baptists and much of its heartbeat for world missions are in American South. From Virginia to Texas Baptists collectively are the largest denominational body in each of the states, except in Louisiana, where the Roman Catholic Church outnumbers them. In addition, Baptists are also the largest body in West Virginia and District of Columbia and next to Roman Catholics are the largest Protestant body in Maine and Maryland in the Northeast; in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, and Kansas and in the Midwest; and in New Mexico, Arizona, California, Oregon, Washington, and Alaska in the west. The migration of Black Baptists into the states of the Old Northwest, i.e. Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan, significantly increased Baptist numbers in that region.

One, however, cannot very well sing the words in the third verse of "Onward, Christian Soldiers,"—"We are not divided; all one body we, one in hope and doctrine, one in charity"—if one were discussing Baptist unity. Although 15 million members, over half of all Baptists in the United States, are Southern Baptists and the addition of four other bodies, including two National Baptist bodies, the American (or former Northern) Baptists, and Baptist Bible Fellowship, brings the total to 92 percent, nevertheless the array of different bodies and ideologies boggle the mind. My work specifically lists 53 bodies, not including an additional seven independent associations. My list includes such bodies as the General Six Principle Baptists and Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Baptist—both bodies practically extinct.

Why so many different bodies? Baptist bodies are divided in theological heritage. Most possess Calvinistic antecedents while others, namely Free Will and General Baptists, trace their heritage to Arminian antecedents. Secondly, Baptists have also divided over means. Small groups, such as Primitive Baptists, taking refuge in hyper-Calvinism, rejected all missionary means. Thirdly, Baptists have also divided because of culture and ethnicity, such as the five National or Black Baptist bodies and a number of small foreign-language groups. Finally, Baptists have divided over denominational relations. Most members of the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. participate in the ecumenical movement, while

all other White Baptist groups reject such an affiliation. In addition, a number of white Baptist groups have separated from what they consider to be theological liberalism in the mother body and then in turn have divided. For them separation is redemptive. Some are moderate separatists, while others are militant fundamentalists who practice second-degree separation, i.e. even separating from fellow evangelicals, such as Billy Graham, who may have relations with non-evangelicals. Even more exclusive are Landmark Missionary Baptists and Primitive Baptists who do not fellowship with anyone outside their own ecclesiological tradition, even refusing the baptism of other Baptists.

Before one leaves Baptists in the United States, one needs to recognize two other factors which make for regional diversity. There is a tendency in Baptist bodies to become more conservative as one leaves the eastern seaboard and moves west. In fact, Lewis W. Gillenson in an article on Baptists in *Look* magazine in 1950, suggested that a spiritual boundary exists at the Mississippi River. Of course, another significant boundary is the one between Baptist groups which are Southern-oriented and those which are Northern-oriented. Southern groups became much more identified with their culture than Baptists in the North, molding the culture and being molded by it. In addition, the impact of Landmarkism, a high church movement among Baptists in the South, particularly in the Mississippi Valley, which regarded only Baptist churches as true churches and identified these churches with the Kingdom of God, greatly heightened Baptist sectarianism in the Southern states and helped to develop a more corporate consciousness. While Northern-oriented Baptists tend periodically to drop members for inactivity, Southern-oriented Baptists, on the other hand, tend to keep adding members with the result that they carry a much larger number of inactive and non-resident members on their rolls than other Baptists.

North of the border in Canada, Baptists have existed since the eighteenth century but have never had the impact in Canada as Baptists in the U.S.A. Although a mainline denomination, they almost have the status of a sect, never attaining the prominence and influence of the Roman Catholic Church, Anglican Church and United Church in that land. There are at least 14 different Baptist groups in Canada, including a small but growing Canadian Convention of Southern Baptists (1985).

LATIN AMERICA AND CARIBBEAN

In the Western Hemisphere south of the border, in Middle America, the Caribbean, and South America, the Baptist record has been uneven. In 1904 in the Caribbean there were around 42,000 Baptists but in Middle and South America only 5,500. Today the numbers have greatly increased. There are 400,000 Baptists in the Caribbean and 1,600,000 Baptists in Middle and South America.

Part of the credit for Baptist expansion in the Caribbean was due to the migration of Blacks—freed or slave—from the United States who settled in Jamaica, Turks, Caicos, Dominican Republic, Trinidad, and the Bahamas. Another factor for growth was the support of the Baptist Missionary Society from Great Britain, which helped to make Jamaica an important mission center. The largest Baptist body in the Caribbean is in Haiti with over 200,000, the largest Protestant body in the country. Baptists entered Cuba in 1886, and in 1898 Southern and Northern Baptists divided the island between them with Southern Baptists retaining the western half.

Baptists began in Mexico in 1864 and today number 120,000. The major Mexican body is the National Baptist Convention of Mexico, formed in 1903, an organization with which both Northern and Southern Baptists cooperate. Baptists in the Central American nations are comparatively small but growing in number.

In South America the crown jewel of Baptist has been Brazil. After the Civil war, Brazil became a leading foreign mission field for Southern Baptists. There are over one million Baptists in Brazil in all parts of the country and divided into at least 14 different groups. The largest body is the Brazilian Baptist Convention with which Southern Baptists and other Baptist bodies work but there is also a Pentecostal National Baptist Convention which is showing rapid growth. Baptists have not been as successful in Spanish-speaking South America or the Guyanas, but numerous Baptist agencies, including Southern Baptists and separatist/fundamentalist Baptists support growing work in this area.

EUROPE

Europe, including Russian Eurasia, has 900,000 Baptists. Baptists first appeared in Europe, first c. 1609 among English-speaking refugees in the Netherlands and then moving to England in 1612. Baptists did not establish themselves until much later on the continent—not until the early 19th century in France and not until 1834 in Germany. The father of continental European Baptists was Johann Oncken, who declared, “Every Baptist a missionary.” Because of his mission work, Baptists spread into Scandinavia, Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, Romania, Poland, and Russia proper. I am in part a product of this mission movement. My great-great-great uncle, Gottfried Alf was the first German Baptist minister in the Russian Empire and the founder of Baptist work in Poland. He also preached in the Ukraine. My maternal grandfather was born in the Ukraine and in 1893 came to the U.S.A. with his parents, who were Baptists.

With the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, there is a new Europe. But there are still two Europes, West and East, with about 450,000 Baptists in each of them. Western Europe is prosperous with strong currencies. Most of its nations are part of the European Union or former European Community, seeking increasing economic and political unity. Most of Eastern Europe, on the other hand, is trying to emerge from its communist past and attempting to become part of the western economic system with mixed results. There is much inflation and unemployment with many living below the poverty line. Old ideas are hard to discard. Even in Germany there are distinctions between the Wessies (Westerners) and the Ossies (Easterners), who are looked down upon.

In all of Europe Baptists are regarded as a sect, if not a cult. In Western Europe there is still the legacy of the state Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic churches. In Eastern Europe the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches are trying to reassert their dominance and preeminence. The greater number of Europeans would consider themselves “Christian,” having been baptized as infants, but church membership is generally nominal and church attendance very low. In addition, materialism and secularism have become increasingly dominant in the lives of many Europeans. Also free thought in France has turned many Frenchmen into agnostics, if not atheists, and

atheistic indoctrination in Eastern Europe caused many in the population, particularly in Eastern Germany and in Russia, to become completely alienated from western Christian values. Europe is therefore a great mission challenge to Baptists.

In Western Europe Baptists are holding their own in Central Europe and growing slowly, although small in number, in Latin Europe and Ireland. Unfortunately Baptists in England and Wales have experienced serious decline and in Scandinavia they are also losing ground. On the other hand, it is almost ironic that the greatest opportunities for Baptist growth today are in Eastern Europe where there had been years of persecution by communism. Baptists in this part of the world are not nearly as affluent as counterparts in the West and follow a strict Puritan code—no alcohol and tobacco and a simple lifestyle—and practice strict church discipline. Many in the West would consider them too legalistic. But with their high moral standards they cultivate a deep piety. There is nothing in Western Baptist circles comparable to a Russian Baptist worship service with its seriousness and its intensity in prayer.

With the collapse of communism, many people in the East are looking for spiritual values, thereby giving Baptists a wonderful mission opportunity. There is a strong belt of Baptist churches from Hungary (11,000), to Romania (109,000), to Moldova (17,800), to Ukraine (160,000), and to Russia proper (100,000), and growth is strong. Baptists, however, are not well distributed in the East—they are particularly weak south of the Danube and Drava Rivers. There is opportunity for mission assistance, but it should be done with care. Baptists from the West need to work in partnership, not dominance, and for the long term.

AFRICA

Africa is a vast continent with great diversity, stretching from the Mediterranean Sea across the Sahara Desert and Sudan to the southern tip of South Africa. Including adjacent islands, Africa has over fifty political entities. In spite of serious economic and political problems, the African is attempting to become part of the Western World. By becoming a Christian or Moslem, the traditional African thereby becomes a member of the Western civilized world. In 1904 there were only 10,200 Baptists in the continent; today there are over 3 million.

The first Baptists work appeared over two hundred years ago in 1792 in Sierra Leone with the settlement of David George, who had been born in Virginia, and other free Blacks from Nova Scotia. The church, established in Freetown, still exists. In 1822 under the Triennial Convention, Lott Carey and Collin Teague went as missionaries to Liberia. They with their wives, Teague's son, and another couple, however, first established the Providence Baptist Church in Richmond, which they then transplanted to Monrovia in Liberia, 4,000 miles away. Under the leadership of Alfred Saker and the assistance of Baptists from Jamaica, the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) established in 1843 a mission post on the island of Fernando Po, a work which spread two years later to Cameroon on the African mainland. In the nineteenth century Southern Baptists showed some interest in both Liberia and Sierra Leone, but after 1875 concentrated their efforts in Nigeria, a field which it entered in 1850. In 1878 the BMS began a

mission which entered both Angola and Zaire. In the same year the Livingstone Inland Mission entered Zaire, a work which the American Baptist Missionary Union took over in 1884. In 1892 the erratic Joseph Booth began a series of industrial missions in Malawi. In the meantime, Baptist emigrants left England in 1820 and settled at Grahamstown, South Africa, forming there the first Baptist chapel in the territory.

Between the First and Second World wars several small Baptist missions entered other fields, such as Baptist Mid-Missions and the Orebro Society in French Equatorial Africa, the Danish Baptist Society in Rwanda and Burundi, the Free Baptist Union from Sweden in Mozambique and Zambia, and the Evangelical Baptist Mission in the Sudan region. In addition, a native Egyptian began Baptist work in Egypt in 1931. Yoruba Baptists from Nigeria spread the Baptist faith in West Africa, settling in such areas as Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Even with these advances, much of South and East Africa remained without a Baptist witness until after the Second World War. Since then Southern Baptists have entered most countries in Eastern, Southern, and Western Africa and other Baptist missions have also entered. Today Baptist congregations may be found in practically every African nation, the notable exceptions being Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania in North Africa; Sudan, Djibouti, and Somalia in East Africa; and Gabon in Equatorial Africa. Baptists are very weak in the Moslem north of the continent, but in Africa south of the Sahara and Sudan they are experiencing rapid growth. Six of the fifteen countries with the largest Baptists populations are in Africa. In a few years, Black Africa south of the Sudan will be predominantly Christian, and a significant share of this number will be Baptist.

ASIA

Asia, the home of ancient civilizations and world religions, has long been a center of mission interests for Baptists. Some of the oldest Baptist fields are in the continent, such as India (1793), Sri Lanka (1812), Myanmar/Burma (1813), Thailand (1833), China (1836), Japan (1873). In 1842 John Lewis Shuck formed a church in the Hong Kong area, the first in the entire Pacific basin when there was not even one Baptist church yet on the Pacific coast in the U.S.A. Some of the greatest missionary heroes of the Baptist faith labored in the continent such as William Carey in India, Adoniram Judson in Burma, and Lottie Moon of Southern Baptist fame in China.

The Baptist record in Asia includes both light and shadow, victory and defeat. Some areas have been very productive, such as India. With 1,400,000 Baptists, it has more Baptists than any other country except the U.S.A.; or Myanmar with 500,000 members, or Korea and the Philippines, each with over 300,000. Let us not forget, however, that the first Baptist convert in India was not baptized until after seven years of work and in Myanmar until after six years of labor.

On the other hand, the Baptist work in Japan has been arduous and slow, as it has been with other Christian groups. Baptists with other Protestants also have very weak presence in predominantly Moslem southwest Asia, although there are small Baptist communities in the Bible lands of Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, which have been sustained primarily by Southern Baptists. Southern Baptists have a hospital in Yemen and until recent years also in Gaza and Jordan. Before the gaining of

China by the communists in 1949, China was a most important field for both Northern and Southern Baptists with the latter group at the time placing its greatest missionary investment in this country. But the new regime expelled all missionaries and in time closed all Christian churches. The victory of communism in Vietnam and Laos also closed Southern Baptist mission work in those two countries.

But in spite of retreat, the gospel is increasingly finding open doors in the continent. Because of the survival of house churches, Christianity did not die out in China and with a more open policy on the part of the authorities which has allowed churches to open Christianity is now experiencing rapid growth. The Protestant churches are in a post-denominational stage—no denominational distinctions—but many congregations are similar to Baptists except in name. None of the Protestant churches in China baptize infants and all members must be believers—baptized either by sprinkling or by immersion. A Baptist church, as already indicated, has survived in Ho Ching Minh City (Saigon) and recently Baptist work has emerged in Cambodia, Nepal, and Mongolia. In fact, the Baptist church in Mongolia is the only Protestant group recognized in the country.

OCEANIA

Oceania or the islands to the east of Asia and stretching across the Pacific has been a largely neglected area for Baptists. Baptists first began in Australia in 1831 and in New Zealand in 1851 but neglected the rest of the region until the twentieth century. General Baptists entered Guam in 1911 but there was no further expansion except for meager beginnings in Hawaii until after the beginning of the Second World War. In 1940 the Foreign Mission Board for the Southern Baptist Convention formed a mission in Hawaii. Today there is a Hawaiian Baptist Convention with 16,000 members. Among the new fields Baptists have entered in Oceania, one of the most productive has been Papua New Guinea, a work begun by Australian Baptists in 1949 which today has 35,000 members. With independent Baptist missions, there are in this country today over 38,000 Baptists.

As a missionary denomination for only two centuries, Baptists have had a notable history. Their members circle the globe and include the highly educated who serve in the upper echelons in government, business, and academia but also primitive tribes of the Two-Thirds World, including those who are only emerging from the Stone Age as in Papua New Guinea. Doors open and doors close, but today in spite of nationalism, totalitarianism, and materialism the doors are wider than ever and continue to beckon Baptists to a task which seems to have no end.