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**Baptist Heritage and
Higher Education**

By
Arthur L. Walker, Jr.
Executive Director
Of The Education Commission
Of The Southern Baptist Commission

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BAPTIST HERITAGE AND HIGHER EDUCATION

By

Arthur L. Walker, Jr.

The love-hate tie between Baptists and education is closely related to the origin of English Baptists and their attempts to separate themselves from the established church. In the mind of the early dissenters, education was seen as a characteristic of the aristocracy. The educated ministry was identified with the sacramentalism of the ecclesiastic establishment and with the persecution of Baptists by the powers of the government.

The feelings were easily transported to America as the persecution of Baptists by the aristocracy was also experienced on this continent. Added to these reactions was the response of the average Baptist who was often a part of the toiling majority who resented “the educated ministry of the Establishment who lived in homes of comfort and ease, arrayed . . . in broadcloth, riding out daily in their coaches, with an icy indifference of the toiling men and women on their stumpy fields . . .” (Benjamin F. Riley, “Baptists and Education in the South,” *Baptist Education Bulletin*, Vol. 1, Nos. 4 and 5, November, 1919, p. 15.)

Deprivation and spirituality often have been seen as coexisting characteristics in the faithful so it was easy to believe that those were most spiritual who had none of the trappings of privilege. Lack of education thus came to be viewed as an obvious indication of greater spirituality.

A greater responsiveness to the leading of the Holy Spirit was claimed by the uneducated minister of the era. This minister knew only the motivations of evangelism. The nurturing role of the pastor was little known and the major concern as described by Riley was “to root out from the thought of the masses that baptism in infancy was a seal of salvation . . .” (*op. cit.*)

The history of the beginning of denominational education among Southern Baptists is well known. As early as 1754, Oliver Hart, pastor of the Baptist Church in Charleston, S. C., was committed to the absolute necessity of a trained ministry. When he was forced to leave Charleston because of his involvement in the activities of the American Revolution, the interest in education also ceased for a time. With the arrival of Richard Furman as the pastor of the Charleston Baptist Church, a renewed interest developed in the educational enterprise. Furman was committed to an educational emphasis both for the ministers and for the lay church member though he had little formal schooling himself and had been largely tutored by his father.

The organization of the South Carolina Baptist State Convention was primarily a manner by which this educational interest could be expressed. Furman found a very strong ally in Henry Holcombe of Savannah, Georgia. Holcombe established one of the first religious periodicals on the continent and also founded the Mt. Enon Academy, one of the first Baptist schools in the South. When Holcombe moved to Philadelphia to assume a pastorate there, he was succeeded in the educational leadership in Georgia by Jesse Mercer. Mercer himself had been influenced by both his father, Silas Mercer, and by Richard Furman.

Silas Mercer had been convinced of the necessity of education by Furman. In fact, Silas Mercer was another example of one who had previously not seen the value of an educated ministry but had been convinced by Furman of the importance of such a concern.

Furman not only recognized the need of education but devised the means and developed a plan whereby Baptist ministers were to be educated. He was literally the father of the educational interest and the educational institutions of Southern Baptists.

The initiatory efforts on behalf of education resulted in the founding of some of the basic Southern Baptist education institutions. Furman University first opened in 1825. Mississippi College was founded in 1826 and Georgetown College in 1829. The following decade saw the opening of what was to become the University of Richmond in 1832; Mercer University, 1833; Wake Forest University, 1834; and Judson College, Marion, Alabama, in 1838. This formative period of Baptist education in the South

saw a major emphasis upon the idea of providing a better equipped ministry. However, among the earliest schools founded was The Judson in Marion, Alabama, to be followed in the next decade by what would become the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, 1845, and Tift College in 1849. Judson was founded originally as a private proprietary school but soon was offered to the Baptist Convention in Alabama. The fact that among the earlier schools founded were institutions for the education of the daughters of the Southern Baptist churches was in itself a most significant fact. Almost from the beginning Christian higher education was seen as more than preparation for the ministry.

The movement which developed across the Southeast and came to be identified with Thomas Campbell and his son, Alexander, had many results in the life of Southern Baptists. There were two major effects on education. Alexander Campbell opposed missionary societies, Bible societies, Sunday School and tract societies. He was outspoken in opposition to ministerial education and the paying of a salary to ministers which generally was associated with an educated ministry. The fact that Campbellism did sweep away many Southern Baptists who were opposed to an educated ministry and a salaried minister gave some strength to those who believed in such who remained within Southern Baptist circles. At least by the identification with Campbell, these forces no longer identified themselves with the Baptists and gave the basis for distinctives to those who had an interest in a different spirit. The condemnation of the teachings of Campbell and the clear recognition of those associations which officially advocated separation from his movement gave some sense of identity to those who remained in Southern Baptist life who had a concern for the education of their leadership. Riley contended that the Campbell movement convinced others of the necessity for a better trained ministry. He wrote, "To Baptists every where was nothing now more manifest than the need of a ministry competent to meet Mr. Campbell and his lieutenants on their own ground (*op. cit.*, p. 12.)."

Unfortunately, not all who opposed education, missions and a recognized ministry withdrew into the Campbell movement and the efforts for education among Southern Baptists were forced to struggle for some years. Yet in the decade of the 1840s five (5) institutions were founded. What was to be known as Samford University was founded in 1841; Baylor University, 1845; Chowan College, 1848; William Jewell in 1849; and an institution in Tennessee, Southwestern Baptist University would be founded though it would not continue its existence to the present time. The next decade saw the founding of four other institutions, Carson and Newman College, 1851; Mars Hill College, 1856; Hannibal-LaGrange College, 1859; and Averett College in 1859.

The decade of the 60s, of course, was the time of the great Civil War. This would be one of the two decades in the first fifteen of the existence of educational institutions in which no college would be founded. Though in the 1860s there was no school begun, it was not until the Great Depression of the 1930s that there was another decade in which not a single Baptist college opened. Only in those two decades would Southern Baptists not attempt to begin any of the educational institutions which are known today.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Southern Baptists would begin a whole new group of institutions. Fifteen of these institutions would exist to the present time. It was within this period that there was a great interest in the development of junior colleges. President Harper of the University of Chicago is credited with the originating of the idea of the junior college. It was his contention that the freshman and sophomore years were only a continuation of the academy or of high school work. As a consequence, he felt that these two years of college work should be done closer to home. Hundreds of junior colleges were established, denominational and public, in every section of the country.

By the end of the nineteenth century, there were in existence thirty-two Baptist institutions which continue to identify themselves with various Baptist state conventions today. Among these was our host for today, Stetson University which has this year reached its one hundredth anniversary.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the first move in the direction of bringing into existence an organized educational movement among Southern Baptists to oversee the denominational emphasis on education was begun soon after the turn of the century. The first effort in this regard was made at the Southern Baptist Convention in 1906. At that time a committee was called for which would be instructed to gather statistics and other information on the educational activities of the denomination. Beginning in

1908, reports were made from time to time to the Convention and by 1915 a report from the "Education Commission" appeared in the minutes of the Southern Baptist Convention. Those who have studied the work of education in Southern Baptist life at an earlier time were convinced that it was the original intention of the Convention to establish an Education Board on a par with other boards of the Convention. However, the new title, "Commission," came to be used and it was not until some years later that an Education Board was actually appointed.

From the beginning of the attempt to coordinate the work of educational institutions, there has been a very real problem in how to carry out this work since the various colleges were owned and/or financed through the state conventions and not through the Southern Baptist Convention itself. In 1919, the Education Board was brought into existence and its headquarters was located in Birmingham, Alabama. James E. Dillard, pastor of the Southside Baptist Church in Birmingham, agreed to serve as secretary until a permanent employee could be found.

The Education Board existed for nine years, from 1919 through 1928. Originally, the Education Board had as a major task the raising of fifteen million dollars for the various educational institutions. This particular movement was ultimately merged with the Seventy-five Million Campaign. Perhaps most significant of all was that the Southern Baptist Convention was now ready to participate in a cooperative movement to endow Baptist colleges and to assist them in a sorely needed building program. The only problem with the particular concern was that the campaign did not measure up to its first evidences of success and the colleges which had based their building programs and debt-paying plans on the proposed income found themselves deeper in debt and with insufficient endowment. Building programs had to be discontinued or if they were carried to completion caused the institutions to have heavy additional indebtedness. But only this week I received an offer for the purchase of mineral rights owned by the Education Board. Unfortunately the Education commission is not seen as the successor of the Board.

The number of institutions continued to grow appreciably, as indicated in the reports which are found for the early period of the Education Board. The first reporting method used by the Board indicates that the number of senior colleges reached thirty-two and that there were thirty junior colleges, while the greatest number of academies reached fifty-seven. There were, of course, two theological seminaries and the Baptist Bible Institute in New Orleans. Colleges were found in sixteen states of the Southern Baptist Convention. Later, this would be the same number of states that would continue to foster colleges but in the earlier period, Montezuma College was sponsored by the New Mexico State Convention and Ewing College was sponsored by the Illinois Association.

Of those schools reported in the earlier 20s, twenty-three no longer exist.

The current reporting system for the educational institutions of the Southern Baptist Convention was begun with the year 1950-51. In that first report, there were 30 senior colleges, 22 junior colleges, 7 academies and Clear Creek Preachers' School, and 5 seminaries. Of the institutions which existed in 1950, only 7 no longer exist as Southern Baptist institutions. These are the University of Corpus Christi, Texas; Cumberland University, Tennessee; Limestone College, North Carolina; Bethel College, Kentucky; Norman College, Georgia; Stephens College, Missouri; and Magoffin Institute. Two of these, Cumberland University and Stephens College have continued without Baptist ties.

Following World War II eleven colleges would be founded by various state conventions. Truett-McConnell College, Georgia, 1946; Grand Canyon College, Arizona, 1949; California Baptist College, California, 1950; Belmont College, Tennessee, 1951; Houston Baptist University, Texas, 1960; Mobile College, Alabama, 1961; Kentucky Southern College, Kentucky, 1962; Missouri Baptist College, Missouri, 1963; Baptist College at Charleston, South Carolina, 1964; Palm Beach Atlantic College, Florida, 1966; and Atlanta Baptist College, Georgia, 1968. Of the eleven, only two were fated not to survive. Kentucky Southern lasted only through the academic year 1966-67 and the Atlanta Baptist College in 1971-72 became a part of Mercer University.

By far, the most significant structural change among Southern Baptist institutions in the last thirty-three years has been the shift from junior college status to four-year programs. In 1950-51, there were 22 junior colleges reporting. Bethel College in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and Norman College in

North Park, Georgia, closed their doors and Stephens College would develop a non-Baptist alignment. Twelve others became four year colleges and two of these currently use the name “university.”

The period since 1951 has seen another major emphasis in the life of the educational institutions. In February, 1951, R. Orin Cornett, who at the time was the executive vice president of Oklahoma Baptist University, became the first full-time staff member for the Education Commission. In thirty years the Commission would see four executive secretaries or executive directors. Cornett was followed in 1959 by Rabun L. Brantley, who had been president at Virginia Intermont. He was succeeded in 1970 by Ben C. Fisher who had been executive secretary of the North Carolina Education Commission. In 1978, I moved from the administrative staff of Southern Seminary to the post.

The thirty years in which the Education Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention has had an executive secretary-director has seen two major developments in the life of the educational enterprises of the state conventions. Throughout the first twenty years of the work of the Commission with a full-time staff, a major emphasis was on bringing all of the educational institutions to regional accreditation. This goal was accomplished in 1972-73 when the last of the institutions to be founded was accepted as an accredited institution by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Palm Beach Atlantic College, which had only been founded in 1966, was accredited in the academic year, 1972-73, and for the first time all Southern Baptist colleges had such acceptance.

Regional accreditation had been a major goal during the first twenty years of the existence of the Education Commission. The leadership of the commission had previously given time and energy in consultation to lead the institutions to such accreditation. Little did I know when I accepted the position on the visitation team of the Southern Association to look at the program of Palm Beach Atlantic College that I would find so much Baptist interest in the results of that study and the recommendation to the Southern Association of College and Schools.

As more and more of the colleges were able to achieve regional accreditation, it became increasingly obvious that other matters would be among the major concerns of the educational institutions. When I began college teaching in 1956, the executive secretary of the Education Commission had been in his full-time post for only five years. I remember that I was singularly impressed that as Southern Baptists sponsored higher education, they were not especially concerned to see that faculty members at the institutions were themselves Baptists. Neither was there an interest in the purpose and the potentiality of these institutions. Like many another young Baptist faculty member, I sought an area of research which would provide the beginning of a publishing career. I turned to the Education Commission and asked for cooperation in doing some research on the number of Baptists involved in the teaching at Southern Baptist institutions. I also sought for some of the statistics which would provide me with some “great” insight into the reasons why there were no greater numbers of Southern Baptist faculty members. One of the reasons I sought to do some research in this area was the impression which I received that there was no great encouragement on the part of many Southern Baptist administrators in reinforcing the heritage of Southern Baptist institutions. As a result of that study, I found that 75 percent of the faculty members at the time were Baptists. (*The Southern Baptist Educator*, Vol. XXIII, No. 3; Dec. 1958, p. 9.) In the article published by this writer then, it was said, “Denominational colleges must be more than institutions with church ties. They must go further than permitting departments of Bible and Religious Education. To the degree that these schools become places of service for those who have been called of God to teach, they can perform the task of Christian education (*op. cit.* p. 12.)”

Twenty-five years would pass in the life of the Education Commission before the emphasis upon Baptist heritage began to bear its fruition. These years would see the establishment of the placement registry for Baptist faculty by the first executive secretary, along with in-depth surveys and studies of the various schools and their supporting conventions. There was also the major study of education by the Southern Baptist convention which was called the Baptist Educational Study Task, BEST for short. The BEST study gave Southern Baptists one of their first in-depth understandings of the commitment of the conventions to education. This study, organized and directed by the then executive director, Rabun L. Brantley, gave Southern Baptists the full picture of their educational enterprise. This two-year study also caused Baptists to begin to have pride in what they are attempting to do through their educational

institutions. In a sense this study would reach its completion in National Colloquium on Christian Higher Education which was held at Williamsburg in 1976 under the leadership of Ben C. Fisher as executive director.

The historical development which actually arose in an approximate ten-year period brought Southern Baptists to the point where there was a real pride in the denominational institutions. It also brought the institutions to the place where they seriously sought to enunciate educational and denominational purposes for the institutions themselves.

Thirty years ago at the beginning of the Education Commission many of the state Baptist colleges knew little more about why they existed than the vaguely stated purposes which alluded to quality education and preparing an educated ministry. In the intervening thirty years a major development has been that these same educational institutions not only could express with some definiteness but with pride that they were seriously involved in Christian higher education, seeking to make some type of emphasis upon the ultimate compatibility of faith and reason. The North Carolina Baptist Convention Education Commission last year in its culminating study brought to focus the statement that Baptist colleges, like churches and even state conventions, are guided by basic historic principles. As enunciated by the North Carolina committee, these principles are: (1) the authority of the Scriptures and the lordship of Christ; (2) the competence of the individual and the priesthood of believers; (3) the autonomy of the local church and cooperation in Christian service; and (4) freedom of religion and a free church in a free society.

The North Carolina study made a major contribution in providing a definition for Christian higher education.

The study committee pointed out that the role of the Christian college emphasizes a balanced approach to the truth that the God who is present in creation is also active in redemption. The committee acknowledged that it is the task of the Christian college to examine both the influence of God in the created order as well as to examine the result of God's redemptive activity.

The definition of Christian higher education grows out of the basic idea that man's ability to reason and his gift of salvation come from the same source. As so adequately pointed out in the conclusions of the North Carolina study, "Since creation and redemption have the same source, it follows that they have an ultimate compatibility although not necessarily an apparent compatibility." The task of the Christian college, therefore, is to examine and seek to make applications of the recognition of the "the ultimate compatibility." All education, and, in fact, all of the Christian life is a pilgrimage toward the understanding of what constitutes this compatibility.

The task of the Christian college is therefore similar to the quest of the individual Christian. The college, recognizing its commitment to reason and the claims of piety, must constantly be involved in the search for the ultimate compatibility between the two. Achieving this is never openly apparent nor easy to comprehend. As defined by the writers of the North Carolina report, "it is akin to walking by faith. Life for the institution, then, becomes a quest for exactly what that compatibility is. It cannot be defined ahead of time. It is only necessary to be committed to the quest of find-out what it is."

The church-related college, therefore, is involved in the constant experience of defining reason, given by God through creation, and the personal experience which one can have with God, given by God in redemption. The church-related college offers its students an opportunity to participate in the quest for the ultimate compatibility between reason and piety. "The student is invited to be on pilgrimage within and as part of an institution that assumes an ultimate compatibility between faith and reason, and is committed to discovering it." In a very real sense, therefore, the church-related college and the local church are involved in the same kind of pilgrimage.

Within the last thirty years Southern Baptist education finally had overcome its sense of inferiority and its embarrassment over its existence. The maturity had its beginning with the BEST study and continued the emphasis at the National Colloquium in Williamsburg in 1976. It has finally offset the kind of "excuse-making" that Southern Baptists had begun when they first overcame their antipathy to education in general and began to bring greater numbers of educational institutions into existence. Hopefully, it will not take an additional 150 years for Southern Baptists to really become committed to the educational enterprise. The embarrassment has caused several state conventions to swing from

support, to lack of support, to embarrassed support. Perhaps a real awareness that education is a part of the mission of the church will bring those conventions to acceptance of the responsibility for witnessing through an effort to bring Baptist young people to the finest educational level possible.