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**The Development of
Denominational Consciousness in
Baptist Historical Writings:
1738-1886**

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF DENOMINATIONAL
CONSCIOUSNESS IN BAPTIST HISTORICAL WRITINGS:

1738-1886

By: Frank Thomas

Twenty years ago at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, I became interested in Baptist historiography. In particular, I discovered that there was little if any contemporary work on the earliest Baptist historical writings. As I began to read some of these works in a graduate seminar, I realized that they reflected an earlier period in Baptist life. They also reflected what it meant to an early Baptist to be a Baptist.

As partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree of Doctor of Philosophy, I wrote a dissertation on the early Baptist historical writings and the emerging sense of what it meant to be a Baptist, as reflected in these writings. After completing this degree, I put the dissertation on the shelf and have neglected it these years.

Ironically during these same twenty years, the Southern Baptist Convention has been embroiled in an increasingly divisive and bitter controversy over control of the Convention, but I would maintain that it also has been a controversy over the definition of who is a Baptist. Today a new understanding of a Baptist believer is emerging. Some of its characteristics may be similar to the old, but many of them are departures from the old identity. Some would say that this change was inevitable and is an indication of progress in the Baptist self-understanding. Others would disagree and see the directions taken by the emerging self-understanding of today as a betrayal of the former understanding of being a Baptist.

In this setting of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, I thought that a look at the older identity of Baptists would be instructive. Emerging concepts and trends sometimes need a correction in mid-course. The central concept of this work is the development of “denominational” consciousness in the writings of the early Baptist historians. I use the word denomination in quotes to indicate that I am aware of its being a technical term. The Baptists probably were not a denomination, in the fullest sense of the word, in the early days. To use another term, they may have been sectarian group. I chose to use the term denomination because of the fact that a sense of the denomination did emerge and has been with us since that time.

The primary sources for this study were the writings of the early Baptist historians in England and in America. Many of these early historians were preachers and pastors with a sense of and interest in history. None of them were professionally trained as I am or as professional historians are today. They wrote history because of the fact that they loved it. They believed that there was a story well worth preserving and passing on to future generations. They also believed that there was value in having an appreciation of the people of whom they were a part.

In the seventeenth century, several English Baptists collected historical materials and wrote Baptist history in order to deny errors attributed to them and to be sure that their audience in England was aware of their true beliefs. Some of these early English Baptist writers were genuinely interested in history. For example, Hanserd Knollys, English Baptist minister who lived from 1598-1691, wrote an autobiography in 1672, “An Account of his own Life.”

A number of English Baptists of the seventeenth century displayed their historical interest by collecting, preserving, and assembling records of churches, associations, and individuals. One of the

famous compilations of records came from the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey congregation. Another compilation came from William Kiffin, Richard Adams, Joseph Stennett, and Benjamin Stinton.

These and other collections were a prelude to the first history of Baptists, which was written in the period 1738-1740 by Thomas Crosby. Beginning with Crosby, English Baptist historians wrote to present the Baptist story, to defend Baptists, and to point out lessons of Baptist history for the denomination. Crosby, a teacher of mathematics, began to collect historical materials, but he did not write for several years. Instead, he turned over his materials to Daniel Neal, a Puritan, who subsequently published History of the Puritans. Crosby was so disgusted with Neal's treatment of the Baptists, that he decided to write his own history of the Baptists.

Two other English Baptists, Joshua Thomas and Robert Robinson, made notable efforts at writing Baptist history during the eighteenth century. Thomas was the early Baptist historian of Wales, and Robinson was the scholarly pastor of the Baptist congregation at Cambridge. Robinson collected a large quantity of materials which were published posthumously in two volumes: History of Baptism and Ecclesiastical Researches.

The historical research of John Rippon, which he published in his periodical, the Baptist Register, was another important historical resource for early English Baptists. The work of Rippon plus the works of the earlier historians and preachers who wrote history stimulated the production of new historical writing in the nineteenth century.

Important among these works, in the nineteenth century were those of Joseph Ivimey, a businessman who became a pastor and later secretary of the Baptist Union and secretary of the Baptist Irish Mission. He republished the autobiography of William Kiffin and a biography of John Milton. The best known historical work by Ivimey was his A History of the English Baptists, published in four volumes from 1811 to 1830.

Next Adam Taylor wrote a two volume history of General Baptists. He wrote the work at the urging of General Baptists who deplored the fact that Crosby had confused General and Particular Baptists in his work. He also wrote to distinguish the original General Baptists, who had become Unitarian in theology, from the New Connexion of General Baptists (of which Taylor was a part), who upheld the original General Baptist doctrines.

Other histories were written by J.H. Wood in 1847, by G.H Orchard in 1838, Francis A. Cox in 1842, John H. Hinton in 1849, by George Gould in 1860, Benjamin Evans in 1871. As the nineteenth century progressed, the Baptists became more interested in their history and were concerned to do a better job collecting and preserving historical materials. They also tended to lean toward the employment of historical methodology in doing their work. A notable exception would have been the work of Orchard, who wrote to prove that the Baptist denomination could be traced back to the New Testament times.

In America the Baptists displayed many similarities to the Baptists in England. This was to be expected inasmuch as the Baptists in America had come from England. Early Baptists in America suffered some of the same trials and tribulations as the Baptists in England. They had the same desire to tell their story, defend their beliefs and practices, and make sure that their people upheld the proper beliefs.

II

In the seventeenth century, most of the historical work done by Baptists in America was that of keeping records. Thomas Gould of Boston was one such collector. In the eighteenth century these collections continued to increase. Some Baptists began to emerge who intended to write documents about the history of Baptists. John Comer was one who compiled a diary which became a valuable historical

document. John Callender prepared an historical address on the civil and religious affairs of Rhode Island, which he delivered in 1738. Benjamin Griffith, John Stanford, and John Asplund also collected materials for the writing of history.

The first history of Baptists in America was produced by Morgan Edwards, a preacher/historian who worked in the Philadelphia Association. Edwards projected a twelve-volume Series of materials toward a history of Baptists in America. Edwards collected a vast amount of materials from extensive researches throughout the colonies in those early days.

Isaac Backus was the first American Baptist to write Baptist history. An active participant in the Baptist denomination as a pastor and an active participant in the political process as well, Backus wrote A History of New England with Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians Called Baptists, which was published in three volumes from 1777-1796. For Backus a history was a means to defend and propagate Baptist principles, especially liberty of conscience and Baptist ecclesiology.

In the nineteenth century, Baptist history became a more popular subject of writing among Baptists in America. Generally these histories, secessionist histories, and general histories. The local histories were histories of local churches or associations or other institutions. The secessionist histories emphasized the continuity of Baptists to the New Testament days through a string of unbroken sects and groups. The general histories attempted to cover the broader scope of history for the Baptists of America, but even these histories tended to be secessionist in nature.

Names of persons who wrote Baptist history in the nineteenth century include Robert Semple, who wrote about Baptists in Virginia; James B. Taylor, who wrote about Virginia Baptist ministers; R.B.C. Howell, who wrote about Baptists in Virginia; David Spencer, who wrote about Baptists in Philadelphia; Henry M. King, who wrote about Baptists in Kentucky; James R. Graves, Samuel H.L. Ford, T.G. Jones, and D.B. Ray wrote secessionist histories; and David Benedict, Richard Knight, John Davis, and William Cathcart, Richard B. Cook, and Thomas Armitage, who wrote general histories of the Baptist denomination.

From these English and American Baptist historians and their works, we can glean several factors in a developing consciousness which Baptists, and especially Baptist historians, had of themselves. Among these are views of Baptist origins, conceptions of church order, theological concerns, and the missionary enterprise.

III

To a certain extent Baptist identity came to be understood as having much to do with Baptist origins. Baptist historians both in England and America made much over Baptist doctrine and practices as being a recovery of pure New Testament faith and practice. Most often references were made to the Baptist practice of the ordinances, worship, polity, and religious freedom.

Even a cursory reading of Baptist history written during the period under examination will reveal a heavy emphasis upon believer's baptism by immersion. This was viewed as the practice of the New Testament. Baptists were named for their views and practices of believer's baptism. The other denominations had other baptismal practices. Believer's baptism by immersion distinguished the Baptists.

Baptist denominational consciousness was often viewed in contrast to other denominations during this period of examination. Baptist historians compared and contrasted the Baptists to Roman Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and others who had their own distinguishing characteristics. The Baptists had believer's baptism by immersion.

Baptist historians were also proud to state that the Baptists traced their origins through the crucible of religious liberty. Both in England and in America, the Baptists had their share of persecution and misunderstanding from other denominations and from authorities in government. Because of the fact that Baptists espoused religious liberty, they were set apart from everyone else.

The successionist point of view also bolstered the Baptist denominational consciousness. Again in comparison with and in contrast to other denominations, Baptists claimed their origin in the pages of the New Testament with the baptism of John the Baptizer. The successionist historical point of view held that this practice of believer's baptism by immersion—could be traced from the pages of the New Testament through and unbroken line of dissenting sects and groups to the present day. No other denomination could do that.

The Baptist historians also enjoyed identifying Baptists with religious giants of much earlier Christian history. One example frequently cited was the North African Church Father Tertullian. Several Baptist historians during this period referred to Tertullian as a Baptist. Other historical figures included in this designation were Peter Waldo, John Hus, John Wycliffe, Walter Lollard, Menno Simons, and Thomas Muenzer.

Generally the Baptist historians enjoyed claiming identity with dissenters throughout the scope of Christian history. To be a dissenter was, in their view, to be a Baptist. Particularly, to be a dissenter against the Magisterial Reformation—Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican—was considered to be critical to the identity of a Baptist.

Although professional Baptist historians of the later period, beginning with William H. Whitsitt and continuing down to the present day, have discredited the claims of successionist historians with regard to Baptist origins, the successionist view continues in some circles. It still forms a part of the Baptist consciousness. Much more reliable, indicators of denominational consciousness, however, are the emphases upon believer's baptism by immersion, religious liberty, and the battles fought against state churches, governments, and denominations who opposed Baptists in their early years.

IV

A second factor related to denominational consciousness among Baptists is conceptions of church order. The Baptist historians saw Baptist people as distinctive because of their theology of the church. They gave much space in their histories to a careful explanation of theology of the true church.

Most of them, English and American, agreed that the Baptists maintained the doctrine of the true or scriptural church. This was the local church. The pages of the New Testament spoke of local churches, in the thought of Baptist historians. These local churches were composed of persons who had experienced spiritual rebirth. They were to be contrasted with other denominations who baptized infants and made members of infants. Baptist historians insisted that the true New Testament church received as members only those who had been reborn spiritually. Those who were members pledged or covenanted together to walk in holiness.

Church authority was an enormous issue for the Baptist historians. They believed that Baptists were distinctive because of their belief and practice that Christ was the head of the church. They believed that He had mediated his authority to the local churches through the scriptures. This view was contrasted with the beliefs and practices of other denominations who were more authoritarian and hierarchical in nature.

Because of scripturally mediated authority, local churches were entitled to choose their own officers, wrote the historians. The scriptures listed these officers as apostles, prophets, pastors, evangelists, and teachers. The two officers most prominent in the General, Particular, and American Baptist churches, according to the historians, were the pastor or elder and the deacon. These officers were chosen by the church from the ranks of the laity. Baptists did not have an official clergy at that time. Their earliest preachers and pastors were laymen who had been chosen out or called out by the churches to serve in this fashion.

Not only were the preachers called out from the membership by the churches, but they were ordained, trained, and supported by the churches as well. This pattern added to the contrasting picture with other denominations who had an entire class of official clergy who did not necessarily come from the ranks of laity of the local churches. The primary function of the pastors was to lead services of public worship in which they were expected to divide rightly the word of truth. Other functions, such as conducting the ordinances, governing the church, admitting members, casting out members, retaining and loosing sin, admonishment, burial of the dead, performing marriages, catechizing, blessing infants, defending the faith, and assisting at meetings of the association were added later.

Deacons were to assist the churches in temporal matters over and above the duties of the pastor. They were to superintend the collection and distribution of monies by the churches. They were to set up the bread and the wine for the Lord's Supper. They were to attend to the needs of the pastors. They were to guard against covetousness and prodigality in the churches. They were to encourage the rich to be liberal; they were to set good moral standards; and they were to practice impartiality toward all church members.

In addition to worship, fellowship and discipline were two other functions cherished and guarded by the churches, according to the historians. Their fellowship followed the precedents found in the book of Acts. Their discipline was a somewhat touchy controversial area. Local Baptist churches generally followed the pattern of discipline outlined in Matthew 18:15-17. Both officers and members were subject to this discipline.

Worship patterns were governed by local churches as well. A controversy over singing broke out among Particular Baptists in England at the end of the seventeenth century. Some churches believed that singing should not be allowed; others believed that it should be allowed. The historians were quick to point out that the local churches made the decisions whether to sing or not to sing. They did not have some super denominational body to govern them in these ways.

The ordinances were strictly governed by the local churches. Primarily these were baptism and the Lord's Supper. With regard to these two ordinances, Baptists experienced a number of controversies and differing opinions. Generally all of the churches agreed that believer's baptism by immersion was a prerequisite for church membership. When they came to the Lord's Supper, or communion as many of them called it, there were differences. Some churches practiced closed communion, meaning that communion was limited to the members of the local church only. Other churches practiced more open kinds of communion, which might include members of other Baptist churches or on rare occasions, Christians from other denominations. The influence of James R. Graves and other Landmark Baptist historians and writers strongly emphasized the closed communion for Baptist churches. That view is still held by many Baptist churches.

Baptist conceptions of church order, according to the Baptist historians, was incomplete without going a step beyond the centrality and the authority of the local church. The step beyond may be called churches in association. When the churches began to associate together, they became even more aware of one another than before. The historians found greater identity among the Baptists as they associated together. Their manner of associating together was a major factor in the emerging Baptist denominational

consciousness. This was the manner of autonomous congregations voluntarily associating together. The Baptist association was the instrument of their voluntarily associating together.

In England and in America, according to the historians, the earliest associations were informal gatherings in the seventeenth century. Baptist church representatives gathered together to discuss methods of mutual assistance and propagation of the gospel. Sometimes the Baptist associations grew out of meetings of mother churches with their daughter churches. Historian Morgan Edwards described the meetings of the old Pennepek Baptist Church and her daughter churches as the beginning of the significant Philadelphia Association.

One of the most distinctive features of the association was its authority. In structures of other denominations, authority was vested in the denominational structures over the churches. The Baptist historians were quick to point out that from the earliest association, the independence of the churches in matters of faith and practice was guarded. As time passed and the associations grew, they had the authority to govern their own activities, but they never exercised authority over the member churches. In fact, the authority of the Philadelphia Association was described by Morgan Edwards and David Spencer as only advisory. Edwards recognized a scriptural precedent in Acts 15 for associations. He went on to write that associations existed to provide fellowship and communion, maintenance of a common faith, order and discipline, counsel in cases of doubt, and assistance in wants.

Isaac Backus, American Baptist historian, was wary of the authority of associations. He agreed that the association could control itself by having membership requirements of the churches. The decisions of the association were not binding, however, until the churches approved them. Basically associations were voluntary Baptist denominational organizations. Other Baptist historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth century in America were wary of associations which might overstep their bounds by becoming too authoritarian.

The Baptist historians pointed out that these distinctive Baptist denominational organizations had characteristic functions. These included communication among the churches. A good bit of associational correspondence may be found in the early historians. Another function was consultation on matter of church discipline, doctrine, and church practices. No attempt was to be made to interfere in the life of a church, but a church was expected to heed the advice of its sister churches in association.

Other functions of the association included fellowship among the churches. Ordination was an associational function first in England and then in America. Ordination was understood as being carried through by an individual church with assistance from other Baptist churches to examine the candidates and to take part in the service and in the laying on of hands.

Associations occasionally came up with statements of faith. These statements were drawn up voluntarily to give expression to the faith of the participating churches. Education of ministerial students was another function which began in a small way and expanded in importance as Baptists grew. Individual preachers taught students, and some preachers and churches started academies for preachers, such as the Bristol Academy begun by the Broadmead Church in Bristol, England. The desire of the Baptist brethren was to raise the level of education of their ministers. They utilized the association to accomplish this purpose especially in the nineteenth century. Yet another function of the association was to provide assistance to ministers in weak and struggling churches.

The Baptist historians made a solid contribution to the developing denominational consciousness of Baptists by pointing to a bi-polar understanding of church order. The first part of the church order was the strong, independent, autonomous local church. The second part of the church order was voluntary associations of churches. In this voluntary arrangement, the associations were able to function in ways

which benefitted the churches and Baptist Christians in carrying out their ministries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

V

One might say that conceptions of church order and theory of origins distinguished Baptists from other denominations in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, but there was yet another set of theological concerns which came to be identified as Baptist theological concerns. These concerns appeared prominently in the writings of the English and American Baptist historians.

The first of these concerns was what has been called soul competency or “theological individualism.” In matters of faith and practice, the individual was considered to be free from any ecclesiastical or civil authority. Specifically, in the life of Baptists, this theological concern led to the rejection of infant baptism, insistence on religious liberty, and support of the separation of church and state. Another commentator has said that the characteristic Baptist theological tenet was free access of the individual conscience to God through Jesus Christ. Related doctrines include regenerate church membership, freedom of the individual to interpret Scripture, and religious liberty.

A number of contemporary Baptist writers have concurred that the Baptist theology of freedom of the individual was a result of soul competency, or the individual in personal relationship to and especially in obedience to Jesus Christ. Stemming from this central theological tenet were believer baptism, regenerate church membership, and separation of church and state. This doctrine has been called “incipient denominational consciousness.”

The Baptist historians made much of conversion and subsequently of a theology of conversion. It was only after an experience of conversion and confession of faith that an individual was considered a proper candidate for believer’s baptism by immersion. Baptism was proper for only those who had made this adult decision; few children were baptized. No infants were baptized by the Baptists.

The Baptists found that their emphasis on experiential or experimental religious faith was similar to the emphasis of the Wesleyan revivals in England in the eighteenth century. In fact, this author believes that the history of Baptists and Methodists shows a great many similarities in the early years. These similarities include a shared concern for conversion, for regenerate church membership, and for holy living which could become a basis for good relations between the two denominations today.

According to the historians, the Baptists did not have to travel far from the theology of conversion and regenerate church membership to reach their conviction about religious liberty. In the seventeenth century Baptist treatises and petitions on religious liberty were extant and influential. In England, Baptist labor for religious toleration began actively during the Puritan period, 1645-1660, and continued into the eighteenth century after the Glorious Revolution and the coming to power of the House of Orange. During this period the Baptists found themselves the object of scorn and ridicule from Catholics, Anglicans, Puritans and Presbyterians in England. The period of Anglican restoration, 1661-1687, was difficult for the Baptists, but they realized relief when the Glorious Revolution was accomplished in 1688.

Baptists in America also emphasized religious liberty as a corollary of theological individualism. Isaac Backus was a champion of religious liberty, being convinced that one’s conversion to faith in Jesus Christ led to full religious liberty—not religious toleration. He labored a lifetime for religious liberty, even going before the Continental Congress once to make an impassioned plea for religious liberty.

Before the American Revolution, religion in the American Colonies resembled religion in England in that both had established churches. The largest one of these in the colonies was the Church of England, although the Congregational Church was established in New England. A litany of Baptist

preachers and lay persons throughout the colonies worked in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries for the establishment of the established churches and for the enactment of full religious liberty in America. The story is a worthy one which all Baptists should know and in which all Baptists should take great pride.

During this period of establishment in America, the first and second Great Awakenings occurred in the colonies. Baptists were vitally affected by the Great Awakenings. The Great Awakenings and struggle for religious liberty for Baptists seemed in many ways to parallel the American struggle for freedom from England. The other churches were simply a little slower to catch up to the Baptists, who embodied the full letter and spirit of the American Revolution in their theological individualism and in their insistence on full religious liberty and its close corollary, separation of church and state.

After the Revolutionary War, the outlook for Baptists to achieve full religious liberty and separation of church and state was not good. The newly independent nation seemed content to maintain its established churches as they had always been. The adoption of the new Constitution provided the opportunity for Baptists to make their point that all churches should be disestablished. The Baptists historians told often and well the story of Baptists in Massachusetts under the leadership of Isaac Backus and Baptists in Virginia under the leadership of John Leland and others, who essentially supported the Constitution but who wanted a guarantee of religious liberty.

Baptists found a champion for their cause in James Madison. In return for Baptists votes to become a representative to the Congress, Madison promised to introduce legislation which would help Baptists and others achieve full religious liberty. The first Amendment to the Constitution was the result. Along with the passage of the First Amendment, Baptists were able to secure in Virginia and in other colonies, lastly in Massachusetts after the turn of the nineteenth century, the disestablishment of all state supported churches. When there were no more established churches, the Baptists could look with pride upon a major contribution to the life of the new nations—full religious liberty, no established churches, and separation of church and state. This meant that the state would no longer interfere in the establishment of or in hindering the free exercise of religious faith.

VI

The historians of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries demonstrated in their works that Baptists were a people who viewed themselves as distinctive in origin and in conceptions of church order. Theologically they were distinctive in their sense of individualism, which eventually caused them to stand tall for the right of all people to practice their faith according to conscience. The disestablishment of state supported churches and passage of the First Amendment to the Constitution were cornerstones in their Baptist contribution to American life.

Developing denominational consciousness among Baptists needed only some organizational expression to make its presence full blown among other denominations. The churches in association made a beginning at denominational organization, but not until the Baptists missions burst on the scene did this denominational organization come to be. Baptists had been evangelistic and missionary in their zeal to start new churches and associations for years. Further efforts in denominational life, namely societies, state conventions, and national societies and conventions came into being to push Baptist missions further and wider.

The historians pointed out that earliest Baptists in England and in America were evangelistic in nature. Some churches sent out from their membership missionaries who started new work in areas where there was no Baptist witness. A number of Baptist churches in England and in America distinguished

themselves as evangelistic, missionary congregation. New congregations which were formed as a result of these evangelistic, missionary endeavors established relationships with their mother churches and with other churches of like faith and order. This was the spirit and practice of association.

The churches also had benevolent functions which they carried out. Baptist historians included these as further indications of the warm, evangelistic, missionary spirit of Baptists. An example of this was the willingness of Baptists in London to share their church facilities with other denominational groups whose buildings had burned in the great fire in London in 1666. Baptist historians understood Baptist people to be generous.

The Evangelical Awakenings in England and in America in the eighteenth century did much to stimulate the evangelistic, missionary spirit among Baptists. In fact, these awakenings helped to arrest serious decline among Baptists. English Particular Baptists responded to the challenges of Andrew Fuller and William Carey by establishing a society for the propagation of the Gospel in foreign lands. With the establishment of this denominational organization, the Baptists had begun to identify denominationally as a people of missionary spirit.

In America the great awakening led to the rise of Separate Baptists, who set the colonies afire with evangelism. Separate Baptist expansion was greatest in the South, primarily through its evangelistic center at Sandy Creek, North Carolina.

Pastor-evangelists started new churches all throughout the colonies. Toward the end of the century, as the work of Baptists continued to grow, new structures were needed to guide the new denominations onward and to continue its expansion.

Baptist historians in England emphasized a social dimension in the work of evangelism and mission by English Baptists. This included work among former slaves, setting up schools, and aiding the poor. Home mission work was extended to all parts of Britain, and Baptist work reached into Ireland. In 1813 the Baptist Union was organized as the first national Baptist denominational expression. Its primary purpose was to continue the missionary enterprise, but it also took unto itself the cause of academic institutions, the widows' fund, the Society for Itinerant Preaching, and gradually other causes.

Baptists in America received a boost from Carey and the Serampore mission. The example of their English brothers struck Adoniram Judson, Luther Rice, and others who became Baptists and pioneered the first national denomination of Baptists in America. This was the Triennial Convention, established in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1814. It was conceived as an instrument to continue and aid the growth and expansion of Baptist work overseas. It sent the first Baptist missionaries from America to Burma. The denomination reflected a growing social consciousness in America as in England. This social consciousness was reflected in Baptist attitudes toward slavery, temperance, and benevolence. Concern over the evils of slavery was viewed as consistent with Baptist emphasis on religious liberty.

The historians made brief mention of the establishment of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845. Though it was born out of the crucible of slavery and sectionalism, the Southern Baptist Convention burst on the scene with great missionary enthusiasm and denominational consciousness. These in fact were the primary purposes of the Convention.

VII

This project has provided a look at the developing denominational consciousness among the people called Baptist as provided by their historians. To review these factors in the development of denominational consciousness today is to invite comparison and contrast with the contemporary Baptist scene. What is the denominational consciousness of Baptists today?

Since 1979 that consciousness has been changing among Southern Baptists during the period of their Controversy. Little argument exists about the view of Baptist origins. Though some still support the successionist viewpoint, a large number of Baptists long since have accepted the views of Whitsett, Patterson, and others who maintain a seventeenth century origin for the Baptists.

Some observers would question whether or not Baptist conceptions of church order are changing in practice if not in theory. With the takeover of the denomination proceeding from the top down, a hierarchical denominational structure has emerged which is even now seeking to take over state conventions and other local Baptist institutions. Efforts have been made and are being made today to extend the influence of the current ruling group to the local churches, who are being encouraged to fall in step with the leadership of the national denomination.

In the theological concerns one sees the greatest change among Baptists. From the individualism of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Southern Baptists have taken a new direction in the latter years of the twentieth century with their emphasis on inerrancy of scriptures and its corollaries. There appears to be lukewarm enthusiasm at best for religious liberty, and one wonders if Southern Baptists have not become hostile to their precious legacy of separation of church and state.

The denominational organization, which has proliferated over the years, is still seen as a main engine in Baptists missionary expansion, but in recent years, it has been more an instrument of political power, control and influence. The unrest in the Convention has been such that a significant minority of Southern Baptists has decided to establish new ties and structures to accomplish their work without the political interferences and opposition of those who control the Southern Baptist Convention.

One might well ask whether the Convention reflects a change in the thought process or the identification of Baptist people. Who is a Baptist? It is an appropriate question. Its answer may lie in line with the so-called conservative resurgence in the United States during the last two decades. If this be true, then the denomination may be expected to change even more than it already has.

Perhaps change was needed. Perhaps the corrections which have been brought into Southern Baptist life will be in the long run beneficial and helpful. The lessons of history do caution Southern Baptist, however, against a radical discarding of an old identity in favor of a new identity. The irony is that those who push for the new identity claim to be the conservatives while accusing as liberals those who wish to maintain the older Baptist identity. The caution of this research would ask, who are the true conservatives and who are the real radicals? Who is a true Baptist? If we as a people are to be conservative, we would be well advised to be careful lest we stray too far from the denominational consciousness which grew up among us and has brought us to this hour?