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Baptists in Florida during World War II

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Baptists in Florida during World War II¹

During World War II, Baptists were at work around the world in ways that met human and spiritual needs. Much of this ministry was behind the scenes. It consisted of doing what needed to be done but doing it for Christ.

Sunday, December 7, 1941, marked the symbolic and official beginning of the Florida tourist season. The early-morning, December 7 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor changed dramatically the nature of the tourists who came to Florida for the next several tourist seasons. Navy blue, olive drab, and khaki military uniforms replaced the beach resort wear of the era as 2,122,100 servicemen and women trained in Florida. One-fourth of all Army Air Corps officers and one-fifth of all Army Air Corps enlisted men received training in Florida. The state became an armed fortress as the United States established 172 military installations in it. Military personnel in Florida experienced the unique privilege of housing in the great beach resort hotels.²

World War II produced dramatic economic, demographic, and cultural shifts in Florida. Laborers earned three and four times their prewar wages. The state built up a surplus of cash reserves that lasted until the next decade. During the 1940s, the population of the state increased 46.1 percent, far exceeding the 15 percent growth of the U.S. population.

Florida Baptists, unfortunately, lacked the vision, leadership, and means to capitalize on these sociological developments. At the beginning of World War II, Baptists were the largest denomination in Florida as a percentage of population.³ In northern Florida, Baptists exercised a religious hegemony. Because of the explosive population growth of the war years, Baptist church membership declined as a percentage of state population from 8.55 percent in 1940 to 8.28 percent in 1946. The economic prosperity engendered by the war produced statistics that are more impressive: total gifts to Baptist churches increased from \$1.5 million in 1940 to \$5.4 million in 1946, a 71 percent increase.⁴ Yet, most of Florida Baptist churches remained rural and small. In 1945, out of 835 churches, 176 were half-tithe and 220 were quarter-time.⁵

Florida Baptist Attitudes Toward War Prior to World War II

No strong pacifist tradition developed in Florida Baptist life before American involvement in World War II.⁶ Beginning in 1937, however, reports from the Social Service Committee repeatedly condemned war as evil and non-Christian. According to the committee, the moral chaos America experienced from 1920 to 1935 resulted from America's involvement in the First World War.⁷ Florida Baptists condemned Franco's disregard of human rights, Mussolini's butchering of Ethiopia, the Japanese assault on China, Russia's invasion of Finland, Hitler's aggression against smaller nations, and the United States' selling war materials to Japan.⁸ Florida Baptists expressed alarm at the battle between democracy and concomitant religious liberty and the totalitarian states. Unlike the neighboring Baptist conventions in Georgia and Alabama, Florida Baptists failed to condemn Hitler for his treatment of Jews.⁹

C. M. Brittain, corresponding secretary-treasurer of the Florida Baptist State Convention, traveled to Berlin for the 1934 Baptist World Alliance. Brittain thought Hitler gave evidence of being a Christian believer and expressed praise for the "Führer" (which name Brittain interpreted as "guide") because of his abstinence from alcohol and tobacco, clean living, and his successful fight against Communism.¹⁰

Charles A. Powers provided the strangest interpretation of prewar world events. Powers interpreted the events associated with Hitler's rise to power as a time of displacement. According to Powers, the events of 1934 signaled the end of the times for the people of Judah and a shift to the times of Israel. Israel would now come to the position of world leadership; however, he defined Israel as the Celto-Anglo people.¹¹

FLORIDA BAPTISTS AND THE WAR

Florida Baptist State Convention

The Florida Baptist Convention met in Panama City thirty-eight days after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The convention expressed four statements regarding America's involvement in the war. First, the convention prayed for our nation. The State Board of Missions report applied a temperance prayer to the crisis facing the nation, "Oh God, help us to live like Jesus and fight like the devil." Second, the convention sent a resolution encouraging President Roosevelt to use his emergency powers to establish a national prohibition. Throughout the war, the Social Service Commission repeatedly decried the availability of alcoholic beverages to American service personnel. Third, Baptists expressed a willingness to make any sacrifice to win the war. Fourth, messengers sent a resolution to governmental leaders asking for a religious-workers exemption for gas and tire rationing. Sacrifice does have limits!

The Florida Baptist State Convention experienced transitional leadership during the crisis years of the war. C. M. Brittain resigned in 1941 after serving a total of twenty-one years as associate secretary and executive secretary. C. M. Bolton served three years as executive secretary-treasurer. For seven months Homer Lindsay Sr. served as acting executive secretary-treasurer as well as pastor of First Baptist Church, Jacksonville. John Maguire came to the position near the end of the war and served twenty-three years, longer than any other executive secretary.

During the war, Bolton concentrated on stewardship leadership. Florida Baptists became debt free for the first time in a decade and a half. Bolton led the convention to establish a reserve fund which he invested in government bonds; by the end of the war the reserve fund totaled almost \$100,000. Baptists attempted to raise one million dollars for Stetson University. Finally, in an era when Florida Baptists dissolved the evangelism department because of budget constraints, Bolton established a stewardship department in which R. G. LeTourneau shared equally in providing salary and department expenses.

The Florida Woman's Missionary Union became the first in the Southern Baptist Convention to reach its goal in the campaign to relieve the SBC of debt. Two major efforts of the WMU during the course of the war involved the raising of funds for a boy's school in Nigeria and a memorial church named for Frank Fowler, Florida's first missionary, in Mendoza, Argentina.

Baptist Associations

As a whole, Florida Baptist associations acted as if the world was not at war. Most associations, for example, did little more than pass resolutions addressing the war.

The activities of the Florida Baptist Association during the war years are typical. The association decried women working in factories and attributed the shocking increase in juvenile delinquency

to women working outside the home. In response to a Tallahassee race riot in August 1944, the association condemned mob violence and supported the governor and police for quick action in suppressing the violence. At the conclusion of the war, the Florida Association resolved to make America a purer and godlier land for our boys returning home.¹²

The Miami Baptist Association exhibited greater progressive leadership than other Florida Baptist associations. As early as 1941, C. Roy Angell spoke of the need for exercising love for our enemies.¹³ After the war, the Miami Association denounced the atom bomb as a menace to society and encouraged Baptists to pray continually for divine guidance of government leaders in finding a positive use of atomic potentialities.¹⁴ The Miami Association sought peaceful resolution to community tensions after the war by passing a resolution deploring the housing conditions of African-Americans. The association sent the resolution to government leaders and bought a paid advertisement in the Miami Herald expressing the sentiments of the association.¹⁵

Local Baptist Churches

Several common themes unite the ministries of local Baptist churches throughout Florida. Numerous churches became debt-free because of wartime prosperity. Because of the perceived threat due to German saboteurs and the sinking of merchant marine ships within the territorial waters of Florida, many churches purchased bomb insurance. Churches provided transportation for service personnel and operated servicemen centers. Churches normally conducted fellowships for service personnel every Sunday night, an activity that demanded creativity among church members in the use of ration coupons. Churches devised "honor roll scrolls" or service flags as a reminder of members serving in the armed services. Pockets of Florida Baptists historically supported J. R. Graves's Landmarkism; however, in the context of world crisis, Florida Baptists overcame landmark tendencies and eagerly joined in ecumenical prayer meetings and supported relief ministries of interdenominational organizations.

Central Baptist Church in Miami developed unique ministries in the context of war. The church's pastor, C. Roy Angell, sent his sermons by wire services to service personnel overseas. Angell reached out to international military trainees; he baptized thirteen Chinese naval trainees.¹⁶

Florida Baptists and Postwar Peace

E. D. Solomon, editor of the *Florida Baptist Witness*, rarely editorialized about the war; in fact, apart from a regular column entitled "This Changing World" by Georgia's Louie D. Newton, the *Witness* lacked information about the war. As the war neared conclusion, Solomon featured numerous articles highlighting the path of peace. Solomon supported Rufus Weaver's interpretation of the war as a spiritual battle for the principle of religious freedom.¹⁷ Solomon reprinted an article by L. L. Gwaltney affirming religious liberty as the only basis for a just and durable peace.¹⁸ The editor highlighted recommendations for peace drafted by a committee appointed by the SBC Executive Committee which called for an international organization that attempted to restrain aggression by economic sanctions and police action; condemned racial prejudices; opposed ecclesiastical involvement at the peace table; supported economic development of weaker nations; and contended that lasting peace was built on the principle of religious liberty.¹⁹

Thomas V. McCaul, pastor of the First Baptist Church, Gainesville, Florida, called for one united appeal for postwar needs in a plan he called "The Southern Baptist Centennial Current and

Postwar Cooperative Program."²⁰ While Southern Baptists did not adopt McCaul's vision, Florida Baptists enthusiastically contributed over \$300,000 for World Relief and Rehabilitation Program, easily surpassing their goal of \$155,000. Florida Baptists, however, fell short of their Centennial Crusade goal of 40,000 baptisms.

Conclusion

World War II forever changed Florida. While the war precipitated advances in stewardship, Florida Baptists lacked stable leadership to capitalize on the opportunities associated with the explosive population growth resulting from the war effort.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Because of space limitations, this study is limited to Southern Baptist churches, associations, and the body officially known as the Florida Baptist State Convention. This limitation does not deny the importance of additional research into the relationship between other Baptist bodies and World War II, such as African-American Baptists and Primitive Baptists.

² For a helpful brief survey of Florida history during World War II, see Gary R. Mormino, "World War II," in *The New History of Florida*, ed. Michael Cannon (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 1996), 323-43.

³ Florida Baptists claimed to "outstrip all other denominations in the State of Florida in wealth and numbers." "Report of the Committee on State Missions," *Annual*, Florida Baptist Convention, 1920, 13.

⁴ Statistics computed from the statistical tables in Appendix VI in Edward Earl Joiner, *A History of Florida Baptists* (Jacksonville, Fla.: Convention Press, 1972), 310.

⁵ Comments of John Maguire, *Florida Baptist Witness* (February 1, 1945): 8.

⁶ Jack P. Dalton, "A History of Florida Baptists" (Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 1952), 600.

⁷ "Report of the Social Service Committee of the Florida Baptist Convention," *Annual*, Florida Baptist Convention, 1935, 129.

⁸ "Report of the Social Service Commission," *Annual*, Florida Baptist Convention 1939, 127-28; Resolution against Russia and Japan, 32.

⁹ E. Earl Joiner, "Baptists and the Holocaust." Research paper presented at the International Conference on "Remembering the Future," July 10-14, 1988, 8. As early as 1934, E. D. Solomon offered his opinion that under Hitler the Jews reaped what they had sown. Solomon thought that Hitler rendered a service to German Jews by unintentionally converting many Jews to Zionists. "Hitler and the Jews," *Florida Baptist Witness* (January 11, 1934): 11.

¹⁰ C. M. Brittain, "Kingdom Affairs in Florida," *Florida Baptist Witness* (September 6, 1934): 2.

¹¹ "Kingdom Affairs in Florida," *Florida Baptist Witness* (August 9, 1934): 2.

¹² *Minutes*, Florida Baptist Association, 1944, 13; *ibid.*, 1945, 27.

¹³ *Minutes*, Miami Baptist Association 1941, 21.

¹⁴ *Minutes*, Miami Baptist Association 1945, 33.

¹⁵ *Minutes*, Miami Baptist Association 1946, 35.

¹⁶ Martha L. Reiner, *Belief in the City: A History of Central Baptist Church 1896-1996* (Miami: Centennial Press, 1996), 63-64.

¹⁷ Solomon editorial, *Florida Baptist Witness* (August 17, 1944): 8.

¹⁸ L. L. Gwaltney, "Religious Liberty: The Only Basis for a Just and Durable Peace." *Florida Baptist Witness* (January 6, 1944, 2): 14.

¹⁹ J. M. Dawson, "Baptists and World Peace," *Florida Baptist Witness* (June 29, 1944): 2.

²⁰ Thomas V. McCaul, "A Suggested Post-War Program for Southern Baptists," *Florida Baptist Witness* (March 16, 1944): 2.