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# Honored in the Breach: Baptists and Separation of Church and State in 19th Century Arkansas

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**HONORED IN THE BREACH:  
BAPTISTS AND SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE IN 19TH CENTURY  
ARKANSAS**

by: S. Ray Granade  
9/27/2005

From the time of their origins in 17th Century England, the Baptists whose descendants entered what is now Arkansas two hundred years later have championed religious liberty and separation of church and state. H. Leon McBeth in *The Baptist Heritage* calls this innovation “the major American contribution to the science of statecraft,” and argues that “no denomination made a greater contribution to achieving religious liberty in America” than Baptists. As thoughtful historians do, McBeth agrees that no single group can claim exclusive credit for the innovation, and that both religion and irreligion contributed to American religious liberty; some advocates wanted religious freedom in order to escape religious influence over government (freedom from religion). But Baptists united behind Roger Williams’ phrase, later popularized by Thomas Jefferson, of a “wall of separation” between church and state as a means of defending toleration for all varieties of religious expression. In defending that tenet, Baptists suffered fines, whipping, and imprisonment during pre-Constitution days.

While Baptists unequivocally supported absolute religious liberty and separation of church and state, they were less clear about exactly what their duties as citizens might be. Baptists in America received a mixed inheritance on this score. Many of their General Baptist ancestors initially refused to take oaths of political loyalty, bear arms, or allow government officials to hold membership in their churches. Though General Baptists eventually eschewed these extreme views, their distrust of government remained. Particular Baptists followed their Calvinist heritage and highly valued political loyalty and patriotic participation in civil affairs. So while both groups were certain about separation of church and state, they differed in assumptions about what role individual Baptists should play in governmental affairs. This English Baptist ambivalence toward the believing individual’s role in government manifest itself among all American Baptists regardless of location, but was mutated by the nature of Baptist polity.

From the time of their origins in seventeenth-century England, Baptists have eschewed any earthly power higher than the local body of baptized believers who have comprised their churches. In an age when religious polity ran to a hierarchy which handed decisions down to powerless local congregations through a chain of command that traced its roots to New Testament times, Baptists championed a democratic approach. They stoutly maintained that the local church derived its authority from the members’ soul competency—the priesthood of each believer. As every individual could read and interpret Scripture alone with the Holy Spirit’s assistance, so the local church need recognize no higher earthly authority. Baptist ecclesiology had no place for bishops or any other individuals to instruct local congregations, which enjoyed complete autonomy—absolute self-governance.

In 1707, American Baptist churches began to join in more efficient and effective ways to spread the Gospel than a single congregation would accomplish alone, and to provide a bolstering fellowship for those engaged in the work. About a century after the emergence of Associations, larger regional groupings likewise emerged, as representatives of churches and Associations formed conventions. No congregation surrendered its autonomy by associating; the larger entities had only the power to advise. At no level could any individual or group presume to dictate to a local church.

This peculiarity of Baptist polity meant that local churches licensed, then ordained, individuals to the ministry without oversight. An individual presented himself to the church as

having God's call to preach, or the church recognized God's gifts to an individual by selecting him in an institutional call. The church then licensed him to preach the Gospel as he had opportunity. If he proved his call through faithful activity while licensed, a council of ordained men from a local church examined the individual's fitness, then voted whether or not to ordain. Once licensed or ordained, an individual maintained that status until death, unless the granting church withdrew the license or ordination. Associations might warn churches against some minister, but Baptist polity basically offered free rein to ministers, restrained only by a local church, usually through the Baptist practice of an annual rather than an indefinite call, in which each year the church decided anew who its pastor should be.

In addition to particular Baptist polity, circumstances played a part in the lack of control over the ministry. Nineteenth-century Arkansas Baptist churches were generally "quarter-time," meeting monthly rather than weekly with a pastor. Because of this feature of church life, ordained ministers went from church to church, preaching to two, three, or four different flocks in the course of the month. Though each church decided who should preach rather than having the choice imposed upon it, the outcome otherwise resembled the Methodist circuit-rider plan. As minister P.S.G. Watson wrote in 1856, the word pastor in Batesville meant "the same as...elsewhere in the State—monthly preaching."

In part, this reality of quarter-time churches was demographically imposed. The earliest Baptist witness in what is now Arkansas originated along the present northern and southern borders, quickly centered in the southwest and northeast, then the northwest. Then it followed the migration patterns and spread from those centers toward each other along rivers and trails, though many Arkansas settlers eschewed the Mississippi River delta as too flood- and disease-prone for economic or personal livelihood. For many, the state was merely a stopover on the way to elsewhere, in the restlessness that one Arkansas Baptist minister in 1852 called "the predominant trait in our character—a disposition to be ever going towards the setting sun." Even after founding, Arkansas churches for the pre-Civil War era remained small in a state generally depicted as being frontier until well after the war. Extant Associational statistics reveal churches averaging about 30 members and ranging from 5 to the 50s. That reality did not change appreciably between 1860 and 1900.

Nineteenth-century Arkansas Baptist churches were small, scattered, and poor as well. Minister Obadiah Dodson noted from Ouachita County in 1848 that "the country is new...to collect much money for any religious purpose." Robert Pulley, writing from Bradley County the next year, said that in the thinly-settled country filled with newcomers, "Each one is doing his best to open himself a farm, and it is about as much as they can do to provide the necessaries of life..." His church was small, "numbering only about 10, and all of them...in only moderate circumstances." P.S.G. Watson, writing in 1856, noted that the Batesville Baptist Church still labored under the debt incurred when they built their church in 1851: "The debt is not *so large*," he observed, "but the members are *so poor*." Of a nearby church, Watson remarked that the pastor "received no stipulated salary," only "such contributions as may from time to time be offered him," a situation "true of the great majority of our churches throughout the State."

The lack of size among churches and the general poverty of their communicants produced a predictable result. Throughout the nineteenth century, Arkansas ministers argued over reasons for the lack of congregational support for their ministers, but not the fact. The long-suffering Robert Pulley felt that his congregation's support resembled "the light and love of the widow with her two mites in Luke..." Presbyterian minister Cephas Washburn observed from Bentonville in 1846 that Baptists theologically opposed any religious undertaking "as they themselves express it, that 'moves on silver wheels.'" "An Observer," writing from Arkansas to the *Tennessee Baptist* in 1855, agreed that many Baptists feared that ministers who were concerned with money were "after the

fleece and not the flock.” Others were less charitable. M.J. Green laid the lack of support squarely on a “moral gloom” which permeated the Dardanelle area because citizens “are hard to extricate” from “their engrossing theme of money and general pursuits.” N.P. Moore complained of parishioners whose “purse-proud hearts...are so encrusted and corroded with the gold and silver of earth, that even should they in an unguarded moment, in the generous magnanimity of their souls,...make a desperate struggle to extract a half dollar from their purses, the *Eagle* would surely be choked to death before it could escape from their deathless grasp!”

Some ministers proposed solutions to Arkansas Baptists’ monetary deficiencies. In 1852, Thomas H. Compere noted that planters generally cultivated about twenty acres to the slave. Let each planter set apart one acre per slave for religious purposes “and never use that money for any thing but religion.” The yeoman farmer should call himself a hand, and “set apart his acre”; the physician, lawyer, merchant, mechanic, blacksmith, shoemaker, “carpenter, and every one; let his occupation be what it may” should set aside a twentieth of his income. The result would “not impoverish any one, but will enable every one to do great good.” P.S.G. Watson juxtaposed the lack of money with a social evil when he urged the Independence Association in 1856 to adopt his plan. “Is it religiously right,” he queried, “for Baptists to spend more every year for *Tobacco* than for the support of the gospel ministry?” Assuming a negative answer, he proposed that Association members “pay quarterly, to the Treasurer..., the same amount annually that we spend for *tobacco*.” The resolution drew several interesting speeches, Watson remembered: “The delegates professed an ardent love for the cause..., but when their eyes fell upon the working jaws of their brother delegates, their hearts appeared to fail them....” The resolution garnered only his vote. Watson wondered when the time might come “that Baptists will give to the Lord as much as they puff into the air, or squirt upon the ground?” With disgust he reported to the *Tennessee Baptist* that Arkansans were able to “masticate from \$10 to \$40 worth of tobacco every year” and that Phillips County consumed \$25,000 worth of tobacco annually—“Enough to pay the salary of the President of the United States!!”

Whether from loving poverty, theological opposition to a paid ministry, or greedy pre-occupation, Arkansas Baptists did not provide sustained and predictable support for their ministers. “An Observer” wrote in February, 1855, that while most Arkansas Baptist churches promised to sustain a Pastor, “perhaps one in ten have done so.” Pastors were “starved half to death and then finished by slander.” As a result, some Arkansas Baptist ministers left the state for “some other country where the prospect was better for a support, as they were starved out here....” Others left the pastorate. Writing from Clark County in 1857, Miles L. Langley complained that “numbers of ministers who, like the writer, desire to preach...are confined to secular pursuits” while destitute churches suffer. “If they would only call and support those ministers who have been driven by stern necessity from the work of the gospel ministry to various other callings,” he wistfully remarked. In that, Langley echoed “An Observer”’s note that a number of useful ministers are “compelled to resort to other professions and employments for a support. Some to the school-room, some to the practice of physic, some to the clerkship, and not a few to the plow, all of whom would be delighted to have their hands loose, in order to prepare for and preach the everlasting Gospel of Christ, but find it impossible to preach regularly and support their families.” As “A.L.H.” observed to the *Tennessee Baptist* in 1856, Baptist ministers can be found “in school-rooms, on their farms, or merchandising.” The result was what might be anticipated. At his Convention address on domestic missions in 1852, Samuel Stevenson stated that “complaints, objections and criticisms come thick and fast, if they are not interested and edified [sic] by monthly sermons prepared at the plow handle, in the school room, or on an ox cart.”

While some left the state or the pastorate, others found religious employment as missionaries for a national mission society, the state convention, or an Association. Between 1833

and 1848, the American Baptist Home Mission Society sponsored a dozen men: G.W. Baines, Benjamin Clark, John B. Graham, Benjamin Hawkins, W.B. Karr, William Kellett, John McCarthy, Henry McElmurry, Thomas Mercer, David Orr, William W. Settle, and John Woodrome. Most the Society sponsored for a year or two; Hawkins and McElmurry remained on the field three, McCarthy and Karr four, and Orr almost six years. Among them, the dozen missionaries reported just over thirty years of service for which they received just over \$3 per month on average—much of it collected in the field “to the Society’s credit.”

Most Arkansas Baptist ministers, like their brethren in other parts of the country, found their livelihood outside their calling to preach the gospel, earning a living in the fields or as a merchant just like their communicants. A few taught school, usually in institutions of their own. The Baptist witness in Arkansas was established just at the time that Baptists were asking themselves whether or not their clergy should be paid, and if so, in what fashion. Should church members take up a love offering for the pastor, or establish some regular method of paying the pastor? At the heart of the discussion was the question of whether a preacher’s calling and a pastor’s profession were one and the same. Arkansas Baptist preachers thus found themselves caught up in a time of vocational transition.

While it seemed the natural order of things for Baptist preachers to engage in the usual pursuits common to their communicants, custom placed certain activities beyond the pale in more settled areas. In a fledgling society, custom had yet to be established. The Arkansas of Baptist experience until 1900 was one in flux, a frontier which needed all the talents of all its inhabitants for it and they to prosper. Here preachers, if they were to partake of life as lived by their communicants, found fewer restraints on their attempts to earn a livelihood. William M. Lea, for example, agreed to undertake missionary work (according to one story) so long as he could continue horse-trading and readily acknowledged his activities as a land speculator.

Given the Baptist stand on separation of church and state, the one arena of economic endeavor which would seem closed to Baptist preachers would be that of government work. A denomination which had marked the political scene by principle, rather than by force of numbers, faced a dilemma in its Arkansas setting. Particularly adapted to frontier expansion because of its method of constituting new churches and of a church’s choosing its own preacher (and ordaining him if necessary), Baptists flourished in the new setting. Baptist ministers were, as a group, more educated than the general population. They often exhibited leadership capabilities which could be advantageously used by the community. The question, of course, was whether a Baptist minister should use his talents for community good through the government, or whether such involvement violated the denominational principle of “a wall of separation” between church and state.

A further question in this complex issue of a Baptist preacher’s government involvement was the philosophical division among Baptists between those who saw missions as the only gospel imperative and those who believed in social amelioration as well. Many Baptists averred that spreading the good news was the Christian’s only task, thought that the preacher’s sole aim should be proclaiming “Christ and him crucified,” and viewed government as an impediment to that task. Typical of those who shared this view was a Texas church leader who told prominent Baptist minister B.H. Carroll during a heated political campaign over the liquor issue: “Hell will be so full of political preachers that their arms and legs will be sticking out the windows.”

Even some who conceived of social amelioration as a Christian’s duty saw government as an impediment rather than an aid in that undertaking. Too many Baptists had personal or family memories of established churches, the last vestige of which had not been disestablished in the South generally until the Revolution (in Virginia not until 1786)—in short, barely thirty years before the first known Baptist church organized in Arkansas. New York, in which Baptists located their Home Missionary society, disestablished about the same time as the Southern states; New England

did not disestablish Congregationalism until Arkansas became a territory—a step not taken in Massachusetts (the last state to disestablish) until 1833. All in all, a large number of Baptists suspected government as an impediment to religious activities.

When the particularly Baptist concerns about government wed the frontier's typical disdain for all forms of regulation and especially government, it would seem highly unlikely that Baptist ministers would be involved in any way with governmental activities. Nothing could be farther from the truth. As Arkansans began to establish a government of their own, some Baptist ministers sought to, and did, serve as an integral part of that movement. Pragmatism overcame principle.

As "A.L.H." wrote to the *Tennessee Baptist* in 1856, Arkansas Baptists were "occupying as high position as any in the State. Do they want office, they can be elected...." This applied to ministers as well as to the laity. The evidence suggests that Arkansas Baptist ministers had no qualms about government service in the nineteenth century, whether elective or appointive, at any level. And they conceived of that service much more broadly than the legislative chaplaincy of a William Moore Lea in 1858 or a Matthew Forey in 1872. A few examples should suffice.

Silas Toncray, organizer of Little Rock's first Baptist church in 1824 and later two others—and of the region's first Association—was also noted for his political activity. Like most early Arkansas pastors, the twenty-nine-year-old Toncray was not a full-timer; unlike most, he was a tradesman—a silversmith and jeweler who later purchased a drug store. Toncray had been ordained in Kentucky in 1821 and had followed his brother-in-law, Isaac Watkins, to Little Rock three years later. There he maintained a close relationship with kinsman William Woodruff and the *Arkansas Gazette* and engaged in activities typical of enterprising politicians. Toncray tried unsuccessfully for the Conway County seat on the Legislative Council in 1827 after becoming postmaster at Marion in the same county the year before. His brother-in-law, Isaac Watkins, clerk of the Little Rock Association, likewise undertook political involvement until his untimely demise. "Too good a Baptist to be a good politician," as Josiah Shinn characterized him, he lost his bid for the territorial legislature in 1825. Even John Woodrome, an early Baptist missionary supported by the Home Missionary Society, joined Toncray as a postal employee.

Perhaps the best example of early Baptist ministers' activity in the political arena could be found in the person of David Orr. In 1828, the thirty-year-old Orr left Missouri for Arkansas at the behest of "two or three pious and cross-bearing old sisters who had never seen my face but had heard that I devoted my time principally to travelling and preaching Christ and him crucified to the destitute of Missouri...." Planning to stay five or six weeks, Orr returned to Missouri to pack up and head south again for the rest of his life. Orr served on the Legislative Council during its 1831 session, then continued both political activities and his preaching career. Even his involvement in the rancorous "Canvas Ham" scandal of the 1833 election (supporters of a questionable deal involving public lands were accused of "buying" votes with Kentucky hams and whiskey) failed to affect his preaching opportunities. In 1835, he advertised for all interested Christians to be part of a late-Spring camp meeting in Crawford County, and continued to preach regularly until his death in 1847.

The years between statehood and the Civil War did not diminish the political activity of Baptist ministers. Nor did it change the attitude of some toward their involvement in political affairs. A letter-writer to the *Arkansas Gazette* in mid-January, 1836, feared that the proposed state constitution would prohibit clergy from holding civil offices and protested against such an outrage—a clear indication that ministers engaging in political activity would not vanish with statehood's advent. Ministerial leadership capabilities were still needed to serve the public good in capacities other than solely spiritual. The *Gazette* letter-writer might easily have referred to one of several Baptist ministers. Orr, who had earned the nickname "David the High Priest" during his

legislative experience because of his height (over six feet), demeanor (serious), appearance (slender, dark-haired and -eyed), vocation, or “almost unlimited influence,” might have been a good candidate. Perhaps the writer was thinking of Mark W. Izard, the most obvious Baptist example of a clergyman holding civil office until after the Civil War.

Izard, nephew of Territorial Governor George Izard, came to Arkansas in the mid-1820s and secured the contract to build the Military Road between the St. Francis and White Rivers and settled on a large farm at what would later become Forrest City. While in Arkansas, Izard served both the St. Francis and Mt. Vernon Associations as founding moderator, played an important part in the organization and continuation of the General Association of Eastern Arkansas in 1852, pastored churches from his arrival in 1825 until his departure in 1855, and dabbled in local and state politics. His greatest success was in the state legislature, where he served in the Senate for its first three terms (the second and third as President), then as a House member in the seventh before returning to the Senate for the eighth and ninth assemblies (1850-54). Izard then served as federal marshal in Nebraska before receiving appointment as Governor there in 1855, a position he occupied for three years before returning to Arkansas.

Izard may have been the most politically active Baptist minister, but he had company at all levels of governmental service during the era. Most of the counties south and west of the Arkansas River had ministers serving in official capacities at some point during the pre-war era, and their activity was not confined to part-time offices like surveyor and coroner. Some served as county judge, clerk, treasurer, and even in one case as sheriff. For example,

John T. Craig, a native Alabamian who studied medicine for two years before coming to Dallas County in 1838 at the age of twenty-two, served as County Coroner before beginning to preach at Bluff Spring in 1846. Only three individuals served longer as State Convention trustee than Craig, one of whom was Robert M. Thrasher;

John Young Lindsey, member of a prominent political family who became a preacher in Saline County in 1836 as well as County Treasurer (1836-40) and organized several churches, including Spring Creek (later Benton) and Kentucky (which he named for his home state) was 1 of the initial 8 ABSC managers;

George Washington Baines, American Baptist Home Mission Society missionary in Carroll County, moved to Mt. Pleasant, Louisiana in 1844 before helping organize the Arkansas Baptist State Convention in 1845 and later ending his preaching career in Texas, served as Carroll County's Representative in the 4th Assembly, 1842-3; and

J.C. Brickley served as Independence County Judge from 1854-6, and Hawes H. Coleman did the same for Dallas County from 1846-8.

The political activity of Arkansas Baptist ministers did not cease with the Civil War. If anything, it increased. Ministers served the Confederacy during the war as chaplains, but often those who remained at home provided order by official duties in many counties and during and after the war they served in the state legislature as before. For example,

Miles L. Langley, Clark County pastor and frequent Convention delegate, served as a delegate to the 1868 Constitutional Conven-

tion, where he unsuccessfully championed the rights of women;

North Carolinian Peyton Randolph Smith, born in 1789, came to Monticello from western Tennessee in 1857. Immediately involved with the State Convention, he faithfully served until his return to Tennessee in 1874. Though presiding over the Ministers' Institute the Convention organized in 1870, after the War he was disheartened by "being compelled to look after a support" and being able to preach "but little." Elected Drew County Treasurer for four years in 1868, he briefly drifted into Campbellism before going back, he said, to die among relatives and friends and be buried next to the wife of his youth. After he died in his sleep, his fourth wife complied with his burial wishes before returning to Arkansas;

Hawes H. Coleman and Solomon Gardner went from county service to the state House of Representatives, and James M. King served as sheriff, then county judge for Lonoke County before moving up to service as its representative;

Isom P. Langley, a minister who also practiced criminal law and journalism, chaplained the State Agricultural Wheel; edited a Democratic newspaper at Arkadelphia in 1880, a Greenback paper in 1882, the official state paper of the Knights of Labor (which he joined in 1885), and the *National Wheel Enterprise* after becoming a Wheel member in 1886; and ran unsuccessfully as the Union Labor candidate for Secretary of State in 1888;

Tennessean Robert M. Thrasher came to a Tulip Creek (Dallas County) farm with his parents by way of Mississippi at sixteen. Seven years later, in 1850, he was licensed to preach and attended the Arkansas Military Institute. The next year he taught there and assumed responsibility for the family farm when his father died. Ordained in November, 1852, his name first appeared as a Convention attendee at the next session (1853) and remained there each year for which copies remain save one—1879. In 1862, he enlisted in the Eighteenth Arkansas Infantry, which he served as captain until becoming a prisoner of war in 1863 and languishing in Johnson Island until the war's end. In 1867, he moved to Rockport where he preached and taught (and served in the Twenty-fifth General Assembly in 1885) until his death in 1896. Convention chose him to preach the introductory sermon in 1873 and the only one minuted in 1859, as recording secretary from 1858 until his departure for the War and as Board Secretary or missionary for most of the '70s. Most importantly, delegates chose him trustee more than anyone else, and he chaired more committees than anyone other than Samuel Stevenson. And when the Convention began the *Arkansas Baptist*, delegates turned to him as one of its first publishers; and, most significantly,

James Phillip Eagle, ordained in 1869, served as a delegate to the 1874 Constitutional Convention, several terms in the state legislature, two as governor, as a delegate to the 1874 Constitutional Convention, and 25 years as president of the ABSC and three terms as SBC president.

This study of Baptist ministerial involvement in nineteenth-century Arkansas politics indicates several realities. First, despite traditional Baptist commitment to separation of church and state, many Arkansas Baptist ministers in practice ignored that tradition. Second, those who ignored the tradition were overwhelmingly “organizational men” who assumed leadership roles in the Arkansas Baptist State Convention. Their leadership abilities were recognized by both religious and secular peers. Third, while they might not represent the majority of Arkansas Baptist ministers, their religious peers certainly tacitly approved their political action by vesting them with such responsible Convention positions. They represent an excellent argument in support of John Eighmy’s *Churches in Cultural Captivity* thesis that their democratic polity made Baptist churches an apt reflection of their culture. They also represent a wonderful confirmation of Alice Felt Tyler’s assertion in *Freedom’s Ferment* that the young nation placed its faith in the union of dynamic democracy and evangelical religion. For them, unity and more extensive organization were sides of the same coin, one minted by evangelism. Fourth, their political and religious activity represent a strong bias among those who would become “organizational men” to improve their world through active social amelioration as well as through preaching the Gospel. The common cry among these like-minded men was the need for “system,” or organization.

This study has several problems which make it, in many senses, still a work in progress. Chief among them is compiling a comprehensive and accurate list of Baptist ministers. First, compiling a list entails defining the group under discussion. My study focused on those now called Southern Baptists, a name that did not exist until after 1845. Part of the problem lies in name changes and the tendency of Baptists to affiliate with different Baptists groups at different times. That is especially true after the advent of the Landmark controversy about mid-century. Second, there was no central authority to maintain such a list. Several times the Arkansas Baptist State Convention tried to compile one, but until after the Civil War it attracted only churches south and west of the Arkansas River and a few from the northwest. Indeed, it faced organized competition before the war from two conventions with similar aims on the other side of the river. Third, no complete collection of church, associational or even state convention minutes remains from which to construct one. Fourth, many areas lack courthouse records, where presumably a minister’s credentials would be on file. Finally, many surviving governmental records make no distinction among the great variety of Baptists, linking them all under the same generic title. While to the casual observer this might make no difference, the realities of theological differences would invalidate any study as surely as it does the attempt to speak for “all Baptists.”

The list from which I worked was compiled from Baptist and secular sources. It is based on extant minutes of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention and the associations affiliated with it, Baptist newspapers, and secular sources like the various Goodspeeds, *Encyclopedia of the New West*, and state newspapers. To my certain knowledge, it is still incomplete.

In order to judge political activity, I compared my list of ministers to the 1978 Secretary of State’s Historical Report list of legislative and county officeholders. Until the list of ministers is complete and verified, and enough biographical information exists on each one to ensure that the names represent the same individuals in each instance, this study will remain incomplete.

