

The Early Developments of the Baptist Movement

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The Baptists began in the early years of the seventeenth century as a result of the continuing desire for Reformation in England. Earlier Reformers had turned the national Church of England into a Protestant body, but it retained many features of the unreformed mediaeval church. It was still ruled by bishops, its clergy dressed in special robes to conduct worship and it tolerated images in its places of worship. There were powerful demands to cleanse the church of these apparent relics of Roman Catholic idolatry. Those who voiced these concerns in the years around 1600 were called Puritans from their desire to purify the church much more radically. Amongst them the earliest English Baptists had their formation. John Smyth, the Baptist who baptised himself by sprinkling in 1609, had studied at Cambridge under Puritan teachers, had separated from the Church of England and had travelled to the Netherlands in order to be free to worship in a way more in accordance with scripture. There his contact with the Anabaptists probably led him away from his earlier Calvinist view that Christ died only for a limited number of the elect towards the Arminian position that all human beings might believe and be saved. Yet he was still preoccupied by the Puritan questions of the proper form of organisation and the correct style of worship in the church. Smyth eventually decided that the answer to these questions meant that he should join the Anabaptists.¹ His colleague Thomas Helwys, however, returned to England as a Baptist. From him sprang the tradition of the General Baptists, acquiring that name because they believed that redemption extended to all and so was general.

¹ Jason K. Lee, *The Theology of John Smyth: Puritan, Separatist, Baptist, Mennonite* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003).

The other body of people who launched the Baptist movement, the Particular Baptists, maintained, as firm Calvinists holding that Christ died only for the elect, that redemption was particular. They were also rooted in Puritanism. Henry Jacob, a Puritan clergyman, decided that he ought to separate from the Church of England in order to conduct services more in accordance with biblical principles, and so in 1616 established a distinct church while still refusing to denounce the national church as entirely false. By the 1630s some of its members went further, rejecting baptisms performed in the Church of England, and a few formed a new church practising believer's baptism. The body once led by Jacob itself soon adopted believer's baptism. In 1642, like the General Baptists, these Particular Baptists began to perform the rite not by sprinkling but by total immersion, copying one of the strands of continental Anabaptism. By 1644, when seven Particular churches issued a confession of faith, they upheld the necessity of baptism of believers by immersion.² They had emerged because they were asking the central Reformation question: what is the true church like? The early Baptists arose because of a concern for ecclesiology.

Both branches of the movement, the Particulars and the Generals, grew during the middle years of the seventeenth century. In the Civil Wars that devastated the British Isles between 1642 and 1651, the armies on the side of parliament against the king recruited significant numbers of Baptist soldiers who carried their beliefs into far-flung regions of Scotland and Ireland. The Baptists formed associations in several parts of England to support individual congregations and discuss questions of how to conform even more thoroughly to the scriptural pattern of the church.³ Across the Atlantic in the American colonies, after Roger Williams had briefly toyed with Baptist beliefs at Providence, Rhode Island, in 1639, others became more settled Baptists. The president of Harvard University, Henry Dunster,

² Stephen Wright, *The Early English Baptists, 1603-1649* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2006).

³ Barrington R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1983).

came to Baptist views in 1654 and a number of churches were set up.⁴ A few on both sides of the Atlantic, holding that the Old Testament principles of sabbath observance had never been revoked, became Seventh Day Baptists, worshipping on Saturday.⁵ More important were the churches, such as the meeting in Bedford under John Bunyan, which treated the question of who should be baptised as an open one. These churches included Independents, who believed in self-governing congregations but accepted infant baptism, alongside Baptists as full members.⁶ The deepest division among Baptists, however, remained that between the Generals and the Particulars, who normally regarded each other as entirely separate bodies. They remained committed to their initial convictions about who might be redeemed through the work of Christ on the cross.

In 1660 the monarchy, which had been abolished at the end of the Civil Wars, was restored and the state attempted to impose uniformity of worship according to the rites of the Church of England. There followed a period when Baptists were frequently persecuted, with Bunyan, for example, being thrown into prison. But as a result of the purging of Puritan ministers from the pulpits of the Church of England in 1662, a much larger number of people began to worship as Independents or Presbyterians, those who preferred a more centrally organised form of church government. The Presbyterians, Independents and Baptists were thrown into closer fellowship by the experience of persecution and so formed a more self-conscious single body of Dissenters. Over subsequent years Baptists acted in most affairs in concert with their fellow-Dissenters. In 1689, after the expulsion of the Roman Catholic autocrat James II from the country and his replacement by the Protestant monarchs William and Mary, Dissent was given official toleration. That did not permit equal rights with adherents of the Church of England, but it did mean an end to persecution.⁷

⁴ Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists (Revised)* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1966), chap. 7.

⁵ Don A. Sanford, *A Choosing People: The History of Seventh Day Baptists*, 2nd edn (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2012).

⁶ White, *English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, pp. 8-10.

⁷ White, *English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, chap. 3.

In the opening years of the eighteenth century Baptists, like the other Dissenters, fell into a period of overall decay. It is true that there were areas such as Lancashire where growth took place, but in many places the early strong convictions of the movement gradually relaxed. Some of the most prosperous families among the Baptists found it more suitable to their rank to attend the Church of England. At the same time a number of ministers, chiefly among the General Baptists, began to take up opinions that diverged from orthodoxy. Thus James Foster, a London General Baptist minister, declared in 1720 that no doctrine could be fundamental unless ordinary Christians could never miss it in their Bibles. Because the Trinity was not such a doctrine, it could be treated as an optional belief. Even the orthodox did not necessarily teach what made for spiritual vitality. The most eminent Particular Baptist theologian of the eighteenth century, John Gill, held firm views, including double predestination, the belief that God determined that some would go to hell as well as that some would go heaven, and even eternal justification, the opinion that the justification of sinners took place in eternity, not in time, when they turned to Christ. The effect of such teachings was often (though not in Gill's case) to inhibit evangelism. If the fate of human beings was fixed in advance, God must be trusted to bring in the elect in his own ways at his own time. Effort to extend the faith could seem pointless.⁸ Hence it is not surprising that during the early eighteenth century numbers ebbed away.

During the later eighteenth century, however, most Baptists fell under the twin influences of the Evangelical Revival and the Enlightenment. The revival, with John Wesley and George Whitefield as its central figures from the end of the 1730s onwards, rediscovered the imperative to spread the gospel. The Methodists, as their followers were called, formed societies of people eager to enjoy the experience of salvation. Baptists caught the flame, often drawing their leaders from other Evangelical bodies. Between 1760 and 1820, out of a group

⁸ David W. Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), pp. 65-71.

of thirty-seven Particular Baptist ministers in London that have been investigated, as many as twenty-three came from non-Baptist backgrounds. The revival transformed the fortunes of the movement.⁹ Yet the Evangelical Revival did not operate alone. The eighteenth century was the epoch of the rise of the Enlightenment, the shift in European thought that asserted the supremacy of reason. Thinkers such as the philosopher Voltaire promoted rational ways of understanding the world and ridiculed opponents who stood for traditional ideas. In the past the Enlightenment has usually been viewed by historians as hostile to religion, especially in its more biblical forms. Reason, after all, can appear to be the opposite of revelation. It is true that in France men such as Voltaire denounced revealed religion as no better than superstition. Yet in the English-speaking world, as in Germany, reason was usually allied to religion. Recent work has demonstrated the extent of Enlightenment influence over Christian thinkers and practitioners. Thus John Wesley himself insisted on the importance of reason in religion. The rising Evangelical movement in all its dimensions was in fact bound up closely with the Enlightenment.¹⁰ The features of enlightened thinking therefore became prominent among the Baptists. It will be useful to enumerate some of the main characteristics of the Enlightenment attitudes that the Baptist mainstream displayed roughly during the century from the 1760s down to the 1860s.

In the first place there was optimism. Happiness was a typical goal of Enlightenment thinkers. Thus the American declaration of independence enshrined 'the pursuit of happiness' as a human right. Baptists thought in similar terms, but saw the gospel as the divinely appointed means to that end. Only the converted were truly happy. Again, Baptists during this period normally upheld the Evangelical equivalent of the idea of progress. Humanity, according to secular thinkers of the age, was advancing towards better times as reason was increasingly exercised. The equivalent among Evangelicals was postmillennial

⁹ Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries*, pp. 71-75.

¹⁰ David W. Bebbington, 'Revival and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England', in Andrew Walker and Kristin Aune (eds), *On Revival: A Critical Examination* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), pp. 71-85.

doctrine. The millennium, a time of the prevalence of truth, peace and prosperity on earth, was expected before the last judgement. Accordingly the second coming of Christ would take place *after* ('post') the millennium. Before that time there would be a steady spread of gospel values. Thus John Ryland, the principal of Bristol Academy, the first Baptist institution of theological education, declared in 1791 that slavery and war would cease when the whole earth became as full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.¹¹ The *General Baptist Magazine* for 1854 carried an article about the improvements that could be expected as the millennium approached. They would include, among other strides forward, the total abolition of taxes, though that would take a long time, not being anticipated until the year 2016.¹² The same postmillennialism is a driving force in William Carey's *Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* of 1792, the classic text that launched the modern overseas missionary movement. The Bible, according to Carey, predicted a 'glorious increase of the church, in the latter days'.¹³ That confidence led in the same year to the foundation of the Baptist Missionary Society. Clearly the missionary society was the fruit of the Evangelical Revival's desire to multiply the conversion of souls, but equally it was an expression of the optimism of the Enlightenment.

Empiricism, in the second place, was a mark of the times that affected Baptists. There was an eagerness in the period to test, to investigate, to experiment; and it is no accident that Evangelicalism was often called 'experimental religion'. The affinity between the Baptists and empiricism is evident in a variety of intellectual fields. In philosophy, for example, Baptist theologians generally followed the 'common sense' school of Scottish thinkers begun by Thomas Reid. This approach was based on an investigation of the properties of the human

¹¹ John Ryland, *Salvation Finished, as to its Impenetrability at the death of Christ; and with Respect to its Application to the Death of the Christian* ([London]: Matthews, [1791]), p. 21.

¹² Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries*, p. 125.

¹³ William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* [1792], introd. Ernest A. Payne (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1961), p. 68.

mind, an empirical technique. The philosophers of this school claimed that the human mind always assumes certain truths such as the existence of God. What is assumed is common sense. This was the method of Francis Wayland, the president of Brown University, the premier Baptist institution of the new world, and was widely taught in Baptist colleges.¹⁴ Another dimension of the same empiricism undergirded the rising discipline of political economy. Adam Smith, the author of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), held that, when investigated, the economy turned out to be rationally organised by a ‘hidden hand’. The result of economic enterprise was the growth of wealth for the welfare of humanity. Again Wayland wrote a text, *Elements of Political Economy* (1837), which was perhaps the most popular handbook on the subject in mid-nineteenth-century America.¹⁵ Natural science, furthermore, was seen as a proper investigation of God’s creation. The scriptures seemed to sanction scientific endeavour. ‘Though they give us no system of astronomy’, declared Andrew Fuller, an outstanding Baptist theologian of the era, ‘yet they urge us to study the works of God, and teach us to adore him upon every discovery.’¹⁶ In this period, before the publication of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859), there was little sense that science and religion were natural competitors. On the contrary, a synthesis of science with Christian faith was widely upheld as ‘natural theology’. God’s works, it was often said, confirmed God’s word. Baptists, like their other Evangelical contemporaries, saw science and religion as being in harmony. Thus empiricism reigned among Baptists in the life of the mind.

Thirdly, moderation, a typical feature of Enlightenment discourse, was a characteristic of Baptist life. Society at large valued self-restraint, decorum and straightforwardness. In manner there was a striking contrast with the seventeenth century, when opponents had been expected to engage in furious mutual denunciation. In matter there was a preference for brief

¹⁴ Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 94.

¹⁵ Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries*, p. 124.

¹⁶ Andrew Fuller, ‘The Gospel its own Witness’, in Andrew G. Fuller (ed.), *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 5 vols (London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1831), 1, p. 121.

expositions rather than turgid treatises. The aim was simplicity, the clear and distinct ideas advocated by the philosopher John Locke. In theology there was therefore a reaction in the period against past methods. Metaphysics was thought to be intrinsically obscure, so that the scholasticism typical of the Puritans was dismissed as worthless. The chief theological influence over Baptists in this era was Jonathan Edwards, the New England Congregationalist who had become president of Princeton College. Edwards's *Freedom of the Will* (1754) was valued for its distinction between natural and moral inability. The Creator, Edwards taught, did not make sinners unable by nature to accept the gospel. Instead the unconverted showed a moral inability to believe the gospel, a result of their own wickedness. Hence human beings were responsible for their own perdition. This conviction was a rejection of double predestination, as upheld by John Gill, the belief that the Almighty chooses souls for damnation. Edwards's way of putting the subject was a form of Calvinism, but it avoided the extremism of a previous generation. That more moderate stance was borrowed from Edwards by Andrew Fuller, whose standing as a Baptist theologian was second to none. Through Fuller it became the normal view of nineteenth-century Particular Baptists, in the United States as well as in Britain, for it was embodied in the New Hampshire Confession of 1833 that became the standard American statement of the Baptist faith and message.¹⁷ Fuller also professed a moderate view of the atonement. Inheriting the idea of penal substitution, he carefully investigated the evidence in the Bible and concluded that substitution was its clear teaching but that it never described Christ as suffering a penalty. That was because, Fuller, held, Christ was without sin and only the guilty could be punished.¹⁸ Fuller maintained that the Almighty was strictly just in all his doings. His theological paradigm was an expression of the moderation of the age.

¹⁷ Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries*, pp. 75-76, 104.

¹⁸ David Bebbington, 'Baptist Crucicentrism since the Late Eighteenth Century', *Baptist Quarterly* 44 (2011), pp. 227-230.

A fourth symptom of Enlightenment attitudes was pragmatism. Instead of constantly asserting principle, there was a willingness to be flexible in order to achieve goals. The position was exemplified in the secular world by the stance of Jeremy Bentham, whose utilitarianism taught that the rightness of an action depends not on anything intrinsic to it but on its consequences for everybody affected. Morality, on this view, is a matter of usefulness, the most useful action being the right one. Significantly, the highest praise for ministers in this period was that they were proving 'useful'. The pragmatic approach was recommended in a saying of Charles Simeon, the leading Evangelical Anglican at the time: 'expediency', he remarked, 'is too much decried'.¹⁹ So the period was marked by new methods. Missionary agencies like the Baptist Missionary Society were not commanded in scripture but were created by Baptists because they worked.²⁰ That was a breach of the seventeenth-century contention of Baptists that only what was found in the Bible should be acted on by Christians. Traditional principles of church order were actually downgraded. Thus the General Baptists, who had long insisted on the laying on of hands after baptism on the ground that it was taught by Hebrews chapter 6, abandoned the practice. Wayland even held that societies of Christians were free to adopt 'any form of church government which they may esteem most for their edification'. The exclusive claims of the past for the rightness of Baptist ecclesiology were dropped. The most marked change was over the communion service. Robert Hall, a leading English Baptist minister, published *On Terms of Communion* (1815). The inherited Baptist view was that only those baptised as believers should be admitted to communion. Hall contended, on the contrary, that even if Christians were not baptised, it was still expedient that they should remember Jesus at the Lord's Supper. Hall urged the admission to the table of any converted person, a policy of 'open communion'. That rapidly made headway in England, becoming official Baptist Missionary Society policy by the 1840s.

¹⁹ Bebbington, 'Revival and Enlightenment', p. 76.

²⁰ Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society, 1792-1992* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992).

In Wales and America, however, it was generally resisted as an undue compromise.²¹ Hall was an advanced thinker in the Enlightenment mould, appealing to pragmatism rather than principle.

Education was a fifth aspect of Enlightenment policies that had much influence over Baptists. Reason, it was generally believed, would be advanced by the provision of schools at all levels. Secular Enlightenment thinkers such as many of Bentham's followers saw education as a remedy for all the ills of society. Some of them were involved, for example, in the foundation in 1828 of University College, London, designed as a rival to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, both institutions then monopolised by the Church of England. Yet it is highly significant that the secretary for the initial committee of those setting up University College was a Baptist minister, Francis Cox.²² Baptists also believed in the power of education. They established a large number of colleges in this period, primarily for educating intending ministers but also for training young men for other vocations. Thus during the 1850s Regent's Park College, London, though primarily a theological college, took in students who were planning to enter the civil service or go into business.²³ The sprawling network of Baptist colleges in the United States often became more orientated towards general education than specialist theology. At a lower level the Sunday school movement, springing up from the 1780s on both sides of the Atlantic, was a recognition of the priority of education in the work of the church.²⁴ The masses of the working population deserved a Christian training even if they did not attend church. As a result, it was said, the children of south Wales, where Baptists were strong, were generally more familiar with the

²¹ Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries*, pp. 80, 186, 92-93.

²² John H. Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot, Oxfordshire: Baptist Historical Society, 1994), pp. 358-364.

²³ R. E. Cooper, *From Stepney to St Giles': The Story of Regent's Park College, 1810-1960* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1960), pp. 60-61.

²⁴ John H. Y. Briggs, 'The Baptist Contribution to the Sunday School Movement in the Nineteenth Century', in Stephen Orchard and John H. Y. Briggs (eds), *The Sunday School Movement: Studies in the Growth and Decline of Sunday Schools* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2007), chap. 4.

geography of the Holy Land than with that of their own country.²⁵ Sunday schools were a practical recognition of the need to disseminate biblical knowledge. Baptists were as keen as secular Enlightenment thinkers on the advance of reason.

There was nevertheless resistance to the trend for Baptists to assimilate the new influences of the age. Some Baptists were alarmed. When open communion was introduced, they felt that a basic Baptist principle had been abandoned. The result was splits in some congregations. When missions and colleges, both lacking precedents in the Bible, were begun, many became equally anxious. It was not just that they were being asked to pay for the new institutions, though many resented that. The fundamental problem was dismay that the early Baptist concern to ensure that the church was patterned in the right way was being modified or dropped. The critics were right that seventeenth-century Baptists would not have recognised the style of church life that had grown up under the impact of the Enlightenment. The opponents of the innovations could also point out that theology itself was being altered. The traditional doctrines surrounding predestination and the atonement had their firm defenders against the views of Andrew Fuller during the early nineteenth century. Those who refused to open the Lord's table to the unbaptised were called 'Strict'. Those who asserted older and higher forms of Calvinism kept the label 'Particular'. So in several parts of England there arose Strict and Particular Baptist associations to stand fast against Enlightenment innovations. Likewise in America there grew up an anti-missionary movement, hostile to the setting up of any extra-ecclesiastical missionary agencies because they were not mentioned in the word of God. The American traditionalists came to be known as 'Primitive' Baptists, those who preferred the earliest, or primitive, ways of the movement. The first Strict and Particular Baptist association in England was set up in 1829; the first Primitive Baptist association in America was formed in 1828. On both sides of the Atlantic

²⁵ *Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales* (London: William Clowes & Sons, 1848), p. 8.

the staunch opposition to the Enlightenment methods occasioned schism in the ranks of the denomination.²⁶ The splits were a sign of the drastic degree of change that had been introduced by the early years of the nineteenth century.

As a result of the fresh developments, however, there was growth. In England the number of churches in mainstream associations grew from 445 to 1,080 during the first half of the nineteenth century. Likewise in America membership increased from around 100,000 to 313,000 during the same period.²⁷ In the past English Baptists had often been confined to market towns, but now, like the Methodists of the era, they sent out travelling preachers to small villages to gather new congregations.²⁸ In America, especially in the South, the Baptist pioneers brought order and discipline to the frontier.²⁹ Special itinerant societies were formed for the Highlands of Scotland and the remoter parts of Ireland.³⁰ Meanwhile the Baptist Missionary Society was carrying the gospel to fresh lands – to India, where Carey set up his base at Serampore, to the West Indies and, from the 1840s, to West Africa.³¹ The American equivalent undertook work in Burma, Siam, Assam, southern India, China and Liberia.³² The organisations for foreign missions inspired greater co-ordination of Baptist life at home, with the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland commencing in 1813 and becoming a stronger institution from 1832. The American national body was actually called the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States.³³ As America moved towards division over slavery, a Southern Baptist Convention established a

²⁶ Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries*, pp. 87-91.

²⁷ Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries*, p. 84.

²⁸ Deryck W. Lovegrove, *Established Church, Sectarian People: Itinerancy and the Transformation of English Dissent, 1780-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

²⁹ William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier: The Baptists, 1783-1830* (New York: Henry Holt, 1931).

³⁰ D. E. Meek and D. B. Murray, 'The Early Nineteenth Century', in David W. Bebbington (ed.), *The Baptists in Scotland: A History* (Glasgow: Baptist Union of Scotland, 1988), pp. 35-37. *The Baptist Irish Society: Its Origin, History and Prospects* (London: Baptist Irish Society, 1845).

³¹ Stanley, *Baptist Missionary Society*. Robert G. Torbet, *Venture of Faith: The Story of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society and the Woman's American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, 1814-1854* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1955).

³² Robert G. Torbet, *Venture of Faith: The Story of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society and the Woman's American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, 1814-1954* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1955).

³³ Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries*, pp. 86-87.

separate existence in 1845. Its Foreign Mission Board initially created fields in Nigeria and China.³⁴ Baptists, fired by the spirit of the Evangelical Revival and the pragmatism of the Enlightenment, were organised for mission.

The Baptists of England and Wales, however, were still in many ways the victims of discrimination. The legislation of the seventeenth century that had imposed restrictions on the participation of Dissenters in town councils, the Test and Corporation Acts, remained on the statute book. Although annual measures were passed by parliament to exempt them from penalties under the acts, the continued existence of the acts symbolised that Dissenters were still outsiders in the political nation. In 1828, however, after a well planned campaign, the Test and Corporation Acts were repealed. Four years later the Great Reform Act swept away many of the abuses that had grown up around parliamentary elections. By that measure the number of Dissenters in the electorate greatly increased. By a further act in 1835 municipal corporations were reformed so that Dissenters found it far easier to become members.

Dissenters were becoming much more central in national affairs. The aim of many of their leaders was now to abolish the remaining disabilities. Marriages could only be celebrated in the Church of England and burials could be conducted only by Anglican clergy, so that Dissenters had to pay the parish clergyman to conduct their weddings and funerals. The arrival of children was officially registered only by the Church of England recording their baptism as infants, so that Baptists often possessed no legal document proving their date of birth. Dissenters were excluded from the University of Oxford, while the University of Cambridge, though allowing them to enter, conferred no degrees on them. And local taxes, the church rates, were imposed on all the householders of many parishes for the upkeep of the buildings of the Church of England. These were serious hardships keenly felt by Baptists. There were remedies for the problems of marriages and registration in the 1830s, but during

³⁴ William R. Estep, *Whole Gospel-Whole World: The Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1845-1995*(Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994).

the next few decades Dissenters became increasingly active politically to secure an end to their other grievances. The questions of church rates, university degrees and burials were not addressed by government until 1868, 1871 and 1880 respectively.³⁵ These issues ensured that many Baptists took a lively interest in public affairs during the middle years of the century on the reforming side.

Some of their number went even further. The Church of England remained the established church of the nation, enjoying privileges and revenues that Dissenters resented. Bishops sat in the House of Lords, the upper chamber of parliament, as of right; the monarch was the supreme governor of the Church of England. Its clergy were often idle, enjoying the income from their parishes without performing the duties of their office. In the wake of the Great Reform Act's alterations to parliament in 1832, there were widespread calls for the Church of England to undergo similar improvements. Dissenters, who were now preferring to call themselves Nonconformists, began to ask why the church should be established at all. Separation of the church from the state would mean an end to all their grievances. Accordingly a campaign for disestablishment gradually gathered support among them. A British Anti-State Church Association was set up in 1844, becoming the Society for the Liberation of Religion from State Patronage and Control nine years later. Members of parliament such as the Baptist Sir Samuel Morton Peto, an immensely prosperous building contractor, campaigned actively for major constitutional change. This cause, together with the efforts for the removal of practical grievances, ensured that Baptists were overwhelmingly supporters of the Liberal party in national elections. Liberals believed in free trade, peaceful relations with other powers and the reduction of public expenditure. Baptists normally shared these priorities. Great progress was made in all these fields during the 1850s and 1860s, but disestablishment was to be carried only for Ireland in 1869 and

³⁵ David W. Bebbington, 'The Baptist Conscience in the Nineteenth Century', *Baptist Quarterly* 34 (1991), p. 15.

never for England.³⁶ Yet Baptists had become a committed section of the progressive party in British politics.

The theological views of Baptists were also changing, but not drastically. Their Evangelicalism was virtually uniform. They were strongly attached to the Bible, made the cross their central doctrine, aimed for conversions and were dedicated to energetic gospel work. Thus they were marked by what have been seen as the four salient characteristics of the global evangelical movement: biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism and activism.³⁷ But the Calvinism of the Particulars and the Arminianism of the Generals were upheld with less tenacity than in the past. The preaching of the gospel seemed so much more important than any specific formulation of it that there was a growing sense that the other party had merits in its case. The Enlightenment view that old types of theological expression could be discarded played its part too. Accordingly members started to transfer between the two bodies without question and General Baptist ministers began to train at Particular Baptist institutions. From its refoundation in 1832 the Baptist Union, though primarily a Particular Baptist body, permitted General Baptist churches to join. Although the two denominations did not fully unite until 1891, they were steadily converging over many years before that.³⁸ Other theological change was relatively minor. Fresh cultural developments associated with the rise of Romanticism began to affect Evangelicals from the 1820s, leading to the emergence of a different form of eschatology. The Brethren (the so-called Plymouth Brethren) and growing numbers in the Church of England embraced a form of premillennialism, expecting the second coming to take place before the millennium and therefore to be imminent.³⁹ Baptists, however, were hardly affected by these new ideas in the years down to the 1860s. They remained firmly attached to their postmillennialism and

³⁶ Timothy Larsen, *Friends of Religious Equality: Nonconformist Politics in Mid-Victorian England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1999), chaps 2, 3.

³⁷ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), chap. 1.

³⁸ Briggs, *English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*, chap. 5.

³⁹ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, pp. 81-86.

therefore to the expectation that the world would improve as a result of the global preaching of the gospel.

Their views of the advance of the gospel within Europe were strongly coloured by a pervasive anti-Catholicism. Baptists never forgot that they had originated as a movement desiring to eliminate Catholic practices from church life. Furthermore they fully shared the general opinion of the people of Britain that the Roman Catholic Church was a persistent foe of the nation. The wars of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries against France, a nation proudly Catholic and then, apparently in direct reaction, militantly secular, had confirmed a hatred of the Vatican. The granting of the right of Roman Catholics to sit in parliament in 1829, though supported by some Baptists as a counterpart of their own enhanced toleration in the year before, seemed to many a dangerous concession to Rome. Then in the 1840s an army of refugees from famine in Ireland descended on British cities. Their huge boost to Catholic numbers in Britain created widespread alarm. At the same time, in 1845, John Henry Newman, a leader of the Oxford Movement within the Church of England, became a convert to the Roman Catholic Church. The English intelligentsia was being affected by the growth of Romanism. Finally in 1850 the pope restored the hierarchy of his church in England and Wales. Previously since the Reformation the Roman Catholic Church had treated the British Isles as a missionary district, but now it appeared to be claiming authority over the country. There was an immense outburst of popular anti-Catholic sentiment in which Baptists fully participated.⁴⁰ Edward Steane, secretary of the Baptist Union and of the Evangelical Alliance, gave regular publicity to cases in continental Europe where Bibles were prohibited or churches closed.⁴¹ American Baptists, who monitored all these developments closely, shared the same anxieties. Anti-Catholicism was at its peak in America as well as in Britain during the 1850s.

⁴⁰ Edward R. Norman, *Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1968).

⁴¹ Ian Randall and David Hilborn, *One Body in Christ: The History and Significance of the Evangelical Alliance* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2001), chap. 4.

The Italian Risorgimento therefore fascinated Baptists in the two countries where they were strong. It seemed to presage the ending of the temporal power of the papacy and possibly its actual downfall. The events of 1859 to 1861, with Garibaldi's triumphs and the declaration of Victor Emmanuel as King of Italy, were watched with keen attention. In America a Baptist minister in Baltimore, Franklin Wilson, was particularly drawn to Italian affairs. Wilson had given up the active pastorate in 1852 because of a weak voice, but he used his considerable private means to publish Baptist periodicals. One of them, the *Christian Review*, was the first national Baptist theological journal in the United States. Wilson had never visited Italy, but in 1845 he had travelled to England, Scotland, Ireland and France and so was more engaged with European matters than many of his contemporaries. Why, he asked, should Baptists not seize the opportunity of the Risorgimento to send a mission to the new Italy? ⁴² By the time his ideas were being formulated, however, the United States was plunging into Civil War and so any notion of organising a mission from America at that time had to be shelved. In future years his advocacy was to lead the Southern Baptist Convention to send its first agent, William Nelson Cote, to Italy in 1870; and Wilson's former Baltimore colleague George Boardman Taylor was to become Cote's successor for thirty-four years from 1873.⁴³ In the shorter term, however, Wilson's enthusiasm for an Italian mission spread to a colleague in the Baptist ministry in Baltimore, John Berg. Because he had come to America from England, Berg's thoughts turned to the possibility of somebody from Britain taking the initiative.⁴⁴ Accordingly on 21 May 1862 a letter from Berg appeared in the British Baptist weekly, the *Freeman*, urging the timeliness of

⁴² William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopaedia* (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1881), pp. 1258-1259.

⁴³ George Braxton Taylor, *Life and Letters of Rev. George Boardman Taylor* (Lynchburg, VA: J. P. Bell Company, 1908), p. 163, chaps 6-10.

⁴⁴ Cathcart, *Baptist Encyclopaedia*, p. 1259.

a Baptist mission to Italy.⁴⁵ The idea therefore came to the attention of James Wall, the Baptist minister at Calne in Wiltshire.

James Wall was in his mid-twenties, having been born in about 1837. He had looked after the small Baptist church at Ledbury in Herefordshire while still without any training, but in 1858 entered Bristol Baptist College to prepare for further ministry. The theological teaching of the principal, Thomas Crisp, was uninspiring, but Crisp had been baptised as a believer when already serving in the Independent ministry and so is likely to have communicated strong Baptist convictions. Crisp's colleague, Frederick Gotch, was an altogether more stimulating tutor, but we have no record of his influence over the new entrant to the college. Wall's doctrinal views are suggested by the first book he borrowed from the college library, Thomas Chalmers's *Institutes*. Chalmers, a celebrated Scottish Presbyterian theologian, concurred almost entirely with Andrew Fuller's moderate Calvinism. Wall's handwriting in the library catalogue is bold and forward-leaning, implying a strong and confident personality. In February of the following year he borrowed a copy of an American periodical, the *Bibliotheca Sacra*.⁴⁶ If the copy was, as is likely, the July 1858 issue, Wall would have seen an article with the title, 'Was Peter in Rome, and Bishop of the Church at Rome?' The answer on both points was firmly negative, so undermining papal claims.⁴⁷ Wall's handwriting had, however, become much smaller by this point, and it is likely that he was finding the academic curriculum unhelpful. He obtained permission to leave the college after only a single year, and, following a brief spell at Redruth in Cornwall, became minister at Calne.⁴⁸ When he saw the letter in the *Freeman*, he was willing to respond. His arrival in Bologna in 1863 marked the beginning of Baptist life in Italy.

⁴⁵ John H. Y. Briggs (ed.), *A Dictionary of European Baptist Life and Thought* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2009), p. 272.

⁴⁶ Dissenting Academies Online, <http://www.english.qmul.ac.uk/drwilliams/portal.html> (accessed 15 October 2013).

⁴⁷ J. Ellendorf, 'Was Peter in Rome, and Bishop of the Church at Rome? An Historico-Critical Inquiry', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 15 (1858), pp. 569-624.

⁴⁸ Dissenting Academies Online.

Wall brought with him an extensive Baptist heritage. He was heir to the seventeenth-century Puritans who had wanted to press the Reformation further than the Church of England allowed. The Baptists had memories of persecution in the later seventeenth century and decay in the early eighteenth century, but their denomination had been most moulded by the Evangelical Revival and the Enlightenment with which it was closely bound up. The Baptists shared a high degree of optimism based on a postmillennial worldview. They valued empiricism, seeing modern knowledge as being entirely congruent with the gospel. The theology of those in the Particular Baptist tradition was the moderate form of Calvinism expounded by Andrew Fuller. Most Baptists were pragmatic in their policies, not insisting on all the finer points of church order. A further characteristic was a strong belief in education. The formula proved successful for church growth, in America as well as in Britain. The Baptists of England were still subject to discrimination, but in the nineteenth century they were able to take steps towards eliminating it and even obtaining disestablishment through the Liberal party. Their firm Evangelicalism made them want to carry the gospel to new lands and their stern anti-Catholicism made Italy a likely target. An American circle had the original idea, but it was James Wall who had the honour of inaugurating the Italian Baptist witness. When Wall arrived in 1863, he was opening a new and distinguished chapter in Baptist history.