

LANDMARKISM IN THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION: AN ECCLESIOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION

Introduction

The Southern Baptist Convention was formed in 1845 in Augusta, Georgia, in midst of controversy. The convention was formed largely over the strong disagreement between the southern and northern Baptists, who opposed missionaries owning slaves. The SBC was formed in order to separate from the “northern Baptist who felt God would not condone slavery.”¹ Like most organizations there were conflicts and controversies in the infancy of the SBC. One controversy which has affected Southern Baptist churches years gone by and even today is that of Landmarkism.

Not only was slavery a great controversy early in the life of the SBC, but Alexander Campbell, an ex-Baptist minister and writer, brought controversy over the doctrine of the church among the Baptist. Campbell was baptized as a believer and affiliated with the Baptist denomination in 1812. Campbell desired to “bring unity among all Christians and hence “restore” the true church by returning to the New Testament, which, he believed, contained

¹Mary Fairchild, *Southern Baptist Church History: A Brief History of Southern Baptist Denomination*, [on-line], accessed 19 March 2012, <http://www.christianity.about.com/od/denominations/a/baptisthistory.html>; Internet.

precise blueprint for church order and belief.”² Campbell left the Baptist denomination after seventeen years of ministry and began the “The Restoration Movement” in America. Thus, the Church of Christ denomination began.

Not only did Alexander Campbell begin controversy between the early Baptist when it came to the doctrine of soteriology (salvation), but he was calling the Churches of Christ the “true” New Testament church causing disagreement when it came to ecclesiology. The Baptist movement of Landmarkism began to become popular and widespread through America, as to defend against, Campbell’s ‘Restoration Movement.’ Timothy George states, “If Campbell’s ideal was to reestablish the true New Testament church, Landmarkism asserted that Baptist churches had maintained unbroken continuity through the ages.”³ Campbell’s restoration movement brought great controversy over the doctrine of soteriology as well as ecclesiology. Landmarkism in Baptist churches in America began with the controversy of ecclesiology.

Defining Landmarkism

The term ‘Landmarkism’ represents a number of convictions by some Baptists, mostly those located in the southern United States. They are known as Landmarkers or Baptist bride brethren. Landmarkism is based from the book of Proverbs, “Do not move the ancient landmark that your fathers have set.”⁴ Often they refer to themselves as Historical Baptists or Missionary Baptists. Landmarkers would disagree that the church is a universal and spiritual church. Those who hold to a Landmark position in ecclesiology believe the only church, which NT scriptures

² Timothy George, “Southern Baptist Ghosts,” *First Things* no.93 (MY 1999), 18-24.

³ *Ibid*, 21.

⁴ Proverbs 22:28.

contend for, is that of a local, visible church. So, Landmarkism is the belief that the NT model for the church is only the local and visible congregation.

Landmark Baptists holds to a Communion that is restricted to members of their local assembly and a scriptural baptism administered by the proper authority another sister church of like faith and practice. Probably, the greatest belief of Landmarkers is that of “church perpetuity.” That is the promise of the Lord’s church “to prevail (continue, perpetuate, succeed) even against the gates of hell.”⁵

It was during the middle of the nineteenth century that the thrust of Landmarkism exploded upon the scene. With the new movement of the Campbellite’s and those of the Reformation, who held to pedobaptism, there seemed urgency for calling Baptist back to the ‘Landmarks’ of the scripture, when it came to the New Testament and the true church. This was a call of the exclusivity of Baptist churches to be that, of only ‘true’ New Testament churches. The person who is largely responsible for the advancement of Landmarkism in the early life of the convention was James Robinson Graves.

Founders of Landmarkism

Landmarkism was a rebuttal against Pedobaptist and the Restoration Movement started by Alexander Campbell. Landmarkism’s leader and chief proponent was James Robinson Graves (1820-1893). Graves was born in northeastern part of the United States and moved to northern Ohio at the age of nineteen with his mother and sister. He moved to Kentucky to run a school and joined a Baptist church, where he was later ordained a minister to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

⁵ All scripture will be cited from the *English Standard Version* unless otherwise stated.

Graves was a great orator, debator, and a persuader to those who would listen to his arguments about Landmarkism.

It was around the time of the birth of the SBC in 1845 that Graves moved to Nashville, Tennessee and joined First Baptist Church of Nashville. It was close to 1851 when Graves was given the responsibility of editing *The Tennessee Baptist Paper*.

Graves took liberty in addressing and promoting the Landmark Movement through this newspaper. Several Baptists received and read the paper and were largely influenced by this paper as well. The Landmark movement spread among the Southern Baptist like a wild fire. During 1854-58, when Amos Cooper Dayton was corresponding secretary of the Southern Baptist Convention Bible Board (Nashville, 1851-62), Landmarkers were in control.⁶ It is no surprise that Graves prided himself on being the leader of the Landmark movement as he made this statement, “I think it is no act of presumption in me to assume to know what I meant by the Old Landmarks, since I was the first man in Tennessee, and the first editor on this continent, who publicly advocated the policy of strictly and consistently carrying out in our practice those principles which all true Baptists, in all ages, have professed to believe.”⁷ One can sense the pride in his statement on leading this exclusive movement.

Another advocate of the Landmark Movement in the SBC was James Madison Pendleton (1811-1891). Pendleton served as pastor of a number of SBC churches in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania. Pendleton played a vital role in the Landmark Movement in the SBC in the middle nineteenth century. Pendleton who was born in Virginia and later moved to Kentucky,

⁶ Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, *Biography of J.R. Graves*, www.sbhla.org/bio_graves.htm.

⁷ J.R. Graves, *Old Landmarkism What Is It?*, (Texarkana, TX: Bogard Press, 1880), 15-16.

wrote an essay to answer a question for Graves, which eventually was entitled *The Old Landmark Reset*. This treaty was an answer to how Baptists should view Pedobaptist ministers and whether they should allow them to preach in their pulpits since they have never had a scriptural baptism.

J.M. Carroll (1852-1931), was another leader in the spread of Landmarkism in the SBC. He gave a host of lectures that ended up being compiled into *The Trial of Blood: Following the Christians Down Through the Centuries*. Over 2 million copies of this little booklet had been reproduced as of 2005. His booklet states that Dr. Carroll, “was a leader not only among Texas Baptist but an outstanding figure in Southern Baptist life as well.”⁸ In his book Carroll argues that Baptist churches (although not in name), have had an unbroken succession from the very first church, which was started by Christ Himself in Jerusalem, until now.

Opposition to Landmarkism

Although there had been a great force behind the Landmark movement in the SBC, that did not stop the voices of opposition. One person in particular who was quite vocal in his opposition to the Landmark Movement in the SBC was the third President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Dr. William Whitsitt (1841-1911). Whitsitt wrote a book, *A Question In Baptist History*, sending a breath-taking blow to many of the SBC Landmarkers of the day. In his book he argues that Baptist before 1641 did not practice immersion as mode of baptism. Neither his book nor his research sat well with the strong movement of the Landmarkers. The Landmarkers were against Whitsitt claiming him to be heretical and started a revolt against Whitsitt and the seminary. The enrollment at the seminary rapidly declined and the

⁸ J.M. Carroll, *The Trail of Blood: Following Christians Down Through the Centuries*, (Ashland, KY: 1931), 1.

tension throughout the SBC was rising. In 1899, after four years of debating and defending himself, Whitsitt felt that for the well being of the seminary, he needed to remove himself from the presidency of Southern Seminary, and he resigned.

John L. Dagg was another leader within the SBC who was in clear opposition to the Movement of Landmarkism and the treatment of pedobaptist ministers. J.L. Dagg born in Virginia, wrote the *Manual of Church Order*, which he offers an entire chapter refuting the *Old Landmark Reset*, written by Pendleton. In his chapter, Dagg argues against how Pendleton and other Landmarkers viewed unbaptized ministers of the Pedobaptist belief Pendleton says,

We have maintained in chapter VIII, that ministers of the word, as such, are officers of the universal church; and that their call to the ministry by the Holy Spirit, is complete in itself, without the addition of outward ceremony. The person called fails to do his duty, if he neglects the divinely appointed method by which he should enter on the work to which he is called; and this failure tends to obscure the evidence of his divine call. But when, thought the obscurity, evidence of his call presents itself with convincing force; we act against reason and against Scripture if we reject it. The seal of divine authority is affixed to that minister who brings into his work qualifications which God only can bestow.⁹

Dagg's view of these pedobaptist ministers is that they were "officers of the universal church,"¹⁰ whom God the Holy Spirit appointed Himself. Because Dagg felt as though these men were called by God and appointed by God, he saw no need for placing an outward ceremony as a prerequisite for being viewed a minister of the gospel. Thus, his view of Pedobaptist ministers directly opposed that of the Landmarkers in the SBC. Dagg's book, primarily the tenth chapter, was very outspoken in opposition about the movement of Landmarkism.

⁹ J.L. Dagg, *Manual of Church Order*, (Harrison, VA: 1990), 292.

¹⁰ Ibid, 292.

Separation of Landmarkers

It would be nearly impossible to understand the history of Southern Baptists without understanding how Landmarkism has affected the SBC throughout its history. The spirit of men like Graves, Pendleton, and Carroll was a spirit that said “we only want to associate with our own kind.” This spirit of separatism goes directly against the SBC when it comes to cooperation with other believers for the sake of the gospel. Thus, at the beginning of the 1900s there was a separation in the SBC. Timothy George says, “Around the turn of the century, the staunchest Landmark advocates separated from the SBC to form their own denominations, which continue to this day, largely centered in Arkansas and Texas.”¹¹

Landmark Baptist through their beliefs in the succession of churches, only one baptism, and closed communion strive to be separate people, only willing to fellowship and acknowledge each other as the true churches of the New Testament. They take pride in being separate from other denominations. In their own perspective, they are the only ones with the truth when it comes to the tenants of Landmarkism. Although, there was a separation of Landmarkers from the SBC at the turn of the century, there is still a small presence in some churches today.

Landmarkism Today

Hints of Landmarkism are in SBC churches who will not accept baptism from another denomination. These churches will ask for its new prospective members to be “re-baptized.” This reflects the Landmark belief that a person has never been scripturally baptized unless baptized by a like-faith congregation, particularly a Baptist church. Other tenants of Landmarkism in the SBC include still holding to a closed communion, which only allows the

¹¹ George, 21.

members of that congregation to receive the Lord's Supper. All of these practices stem from the affects of Landmarkism upon the SBC. One sees this in Joe T. Odle's booklet, *Church Member's Handbook* when he says,

Baptist do not accept anything as baptism except immersion on profession of faith. Most Southern Baptists also believe that a Baptist church must administer this. Churches that do not invite others to partake of the Supper are thus being consistent with their convictions about baptism.¹²

Landmakers call for this type of separatism in their stance when it comes to the church, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. It is this type of separation that the Landmarkers had great success in implanting within the SBC.

As the SBC has weathered many different controversies in its young history, the convention has survived the Landmark controversy as well. As the churches of the SBC move forward with the "Conservative Movement," and the "Great Commission Resurgence," Landmarkism is nothing more than a vague spot in SBC history, in light of the future of the convention.

Sadly, most Southern Baptist know little when it comes to Landmarkism nor the battle which took place a hundred years ago in the SBC. Although, a Southern Baptist today would probably deny the tenants of Landmarksim, one would have to agree that Landmarkism has played a key role in the life and even the future of the SBC in its early years. Although, Landmarkism played a vital part of the SBC history, the churches today have a bright future moving forward with carrying the gospel to the nations for the glory of God!

¹² Joe T. Odle, *Church Member's Handbook*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1962), 22.

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