Calvinism Is Not New to Baptists
Grace Unleashed in the American Colonies

by

Thomas S. Kidd

Calvinists once dominated Baptist church life in America.

In a 1793 survey, early Baptist historian John Asplund estimated that there were 1,032 Baptist churches in America. Out of those, 956 were Calvinist congregations. These were "Particular Baptists," for they believed in a definite atonement (or "particular redemption"), that Christ had died to save the elect decisively. "General Baptists," who believed that Christ had died indefinitely for the sins of anyone who would choose him, accounted for a tiny fraction of the whole. Even some of those, Asplund noted, believed in certain Calvinist tenets such as "perseverance in grace."

How did this preponderance of Baptist Calvinists come about? Both Calvinist and Arminian (General) Baptists had existed in the American colonies since the early 1600s. But the Great Awakening of the 1740s, the most profound religious and cultural upheaval in colonial America, wrecked the General Baptist movement, and birthed a whole new type of Calvinist Baptist — the "Separate Baptists."

A New Kind of Calvinist

The Separate Baptists of New England were typically people who had been converted during the Great Awakening, often under the itinerant preaching of (Calvinist) George Whitefield or other zealous evangelicals. The Separate Baptists were almost uniformly Calvinist in their convictions, as were the pastors who led America's Great Awakening (like Jonathan Edwards). The converts often discovered that their own churches and pastors were not supportive of the revivals, so they started meeting in "Separate" churches.

But doing so was illegal. New England's colonial governments prohibited the creation of unauthorized congregations, and Separates fell under persecution. Some of the Separates — already among the most radical-minded evangelicals — also took a second look at the Congregationalists' stance on infant baptism, and found it lacking biblical justification.

No Turning Backus

Isaac Backus, the most influential Baptist pastor in eighteenth-century America, perfectly illustrated the journey from Great-Awakening convert to Separate Baptist.

> "In 1793, there were about 1,032 Baptist churches in America. Out of those, 956 were Calvinist." (Margin Note to article)

Backus experienced conversion in 1741, writing that "God, who caused the light to shine out of darkness, shined into my heart with such a discovery of that glorious righteousness which fully satisfies the law that I had broken . . . . [N]ow my burden (that was so dreadful heavy before) was gone." But Backus's Norwich, Connecticut church would not permit evangelical itinerants to preach there, and the pastor refused to require a conversion testimony of prospective church members. So, Backus and a dozen others started a Separate small group meeting, apart from the church. In spite of his lack of a college degree, Backus also began serving as a Separate pastor.

Backus also started to have doubts about the proper mode of baptism. Like virtually all churched colonial Americans, he was baptized as an infant. But in 1751, after a season of prayer, fasting, and Bible study, Backus became convinced that baptism was for adult converts only. A visiting Baptist minister soon baptized Backus by immersion. Thousands of colonial Americans would go through a similar sequence of conversion and acceptance of Baptist principles.

Because the move to Baptist convictions happened under the canopy of the Calvinist-dominated Great Awakening, Backus and most of these new Baptists were Calvinists, too. Only some of the "Particular" or "Regular" Baptists associated with the Philadelphia Association of Baptists (formed decades before the Great Awakening) supported the revivals. The General Baptists of New England, wary of interdenominational cooperation, mostly opposed the new revivalism. Doing so nearly ended the Arminian (free will) Baptist influence in America for about three decades. Their numbers dwindled and some Arminians joined Separate or other Calvinist Baptist congregations.

Mission to the South

The Separate Baptists emerged in New England, but they immediately began sending missionaries to other parts of the colonies, most notably the South. Unlike today's "Bible Belt," the colonial South was the least churched part of America.

Connecticut evangelist Shubal Stearns experienced conversion, became involved in a Separate congregation, and received believer's baptism at almost exactly the same time as Backus. In the mid-1750s, Stearns and his family moved to North Carolina, where they founded the Sandy Creek Baptist Church. It grew like wildfire, from a tiny membership comprised mostly of Stearns's family, to more than six hundred baptized converts in its early years. It also relentlessly planted new congregations across the region. Both the Sandy Creek and the Philadelphia-affiliated Charleston (S.C.) Baptist associations of churches would affirm eternal election in their respective confessions of faith.

One of the Separate Baptists' most intriguing converts was the South Carolina slave David George, who went on to pastor the Silver Bluff Church (founded around 1773) — the first enduring African-American church of any kind. George evacuated South Carolina with the British army in the early 1780s. He helped to found new Baptist churches in Nova Scotia before ultimately going to Sierra Leone in 1792 and becoming a key defender of Calvinism there. John Asplund's survey, reflecting racial conventions of the time, had listed the small numbers of Native American- and African American-majority Baptist churches under their own separate (and non-theological) category, but most of them were likely Calvinist.

Decline, Then Reinvigoration

How did Calvinism lose its dominant position among Baptists? The American Revolution, with its focus on liberty, gave new life to "free will" theology in traditionally Calvinist denominations. But Calvinism remained ascendant among Baptists well into the nineteenth century. As Baptist churches spread into America's frontier, they took Calvinist commitments with them. The newly formed Elkhorn Baptist Association of Kentucky, for example, decided in 1785 to require assent to the Philadelphia Baptist confession of faith, which closely followed the 1689 London Baptist confession.

> "As Baptist churches spread into America's frontier, they took Calvinist commitments with them." (Margin Note to article)

Among other points, the Elkhorn Association affirmed that "by the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are pre-destinated, or fore-ordained to eternal life, through Jesus Christ, to the praise of his glorious grace; others being left to act in their sin to their just condemnation, to the praise of his glorious justice."

Beginning in the late 1700s, many Baptist churches adopted a tempered (more biblical) form of Calvinism, like that espoused by English Baptist Andrew Fuller. Fuller's Calvinism affirmed election but steered clear of hyper-Calvinist sentiment that downplayed evangelism and missions. A new controversy over missionary agencies in the 1820s drove a wedge between missionary Baptists and anti-missionary, or "Primitive," Baptists. Many of the latter were hyper-Calvinist, and attacked leaders of the new parachurch societies as unbiblical interlopers who harmed the interests of the church. An impression grew that the Primitive Baptists, always a smaller presence among Baptists in America, were the true defenders of Calvinism. Missionary Baptists generally adhered to the New Hampshire Confession of Faith (1833), which was less explicitly Calvinist than the Philadelphia confession had been.

By the 1830s, the stage was set for the slow weakening of Calvinism among mainstream Baptists. But Arminian theology would never become as dominant among Baptists as Calvinism once was. When groups such as Desiring God and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary began to reinvigorate Calvinist theology for Baptists and other evangelicals in the late twentieth century, some Arminian Baptists insisted that free will and general atonement were the "traditional" Baptist positions on those issues. A deeper historical look, however, reveals the overwhelmingly Calvinist convictions of early America's Baptists.

Author

Thomas S. Kidd (@ThomasSKidd) is research professor of church history at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and the author of books including Thomas Jefferson: A Biography of Spirit and Flesh (Yale University Press, 2022).

This article appears on Desiringgod.org.