

Southern Baptist Church History

A Brief History of the Southern Baptist Denomination

The roots of the Southern Baptist denomination go back to the Reformation in England in the sixteenth century. Reformists of the time called for a return to the New Testament Christian example of purity. Likewise, they called for strict accountability in their covenant with God. One prominent reformer in the early seventeenth century, John Smyth, was a strong promoter of adult baptism. In 1609 he re-baptized himself and others. Smyth's reforms birthed the first English Baptist church. Smyth also held to the Arminian view that God's saving grace is for everyone and not just predestined individuals.

By 1644, due to the efforts of Thomas Helwys and John Smyth, 50 Baptist churches were already established in England. Like many others, Roger Williams came to America to escape religious persecution, and in 1638 he established the First Baptist Church in America in Providence, Rhode Island. Because of their radical ideas about adult baptism, even in the New World they suffered religious persecution.

By the mid eighteenth century the number of Baptists increased greatly as a result of the Great Awakening pioneered by Jonathan Edwards. In 1755 Shubael Stearns began to spread his Baptist belief in North Carolina, leading to the establishment of 42 churches in the North Carolina area. He and his followers believed in emotional conversion, membership in a community, accountability and adult baptism by immersion. They North Carolina Baptists or Shubael followers were referred to as Separate Baptists. The Regular Baptists resided primarily in the north.

In the late 1700's and early 1800's as Baptists began to organize and expand, they formed missionary societies to spread the Christian lifestyle to others.

These mission societies eventually led to other organizational structures that would define and make a denomination of Southern Baptists. By the 1830's tension began to mount between the Northern and Southern Baptists. One issue that severely divided the Baptists was slavery. Northern Baptists believed God would not condone treating one race as superior to another while Southerners said that God intended for races to be separate.

Southern state Baptists began complaining that they weren't receiving money for mission work. The Home Mission Society declared that a person could not be a missionary and wish to keep his slaves as property. As a result of this division, Baptists in the south met in May of 1845 and organized the Southern Baptist Convention.