

**Coming Together for the Gospel:  
The Birth of the Missouri Baptist Convention**

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The Missouri Baptist Convention has played a pivotal role in the development and expansion of the religious, educational, and social landscape of Missouri Baptists since its founding in 1835. Emerging in response to the need for unity among Baptist churches in the recently founded twenty-fourth state, the Missouri Baptist Convention has been instrumental in uniting autonomous churches and associations across the state to maximize the impact of Baptists in Missouri and the western United States. Throughout its history, the Missouri Baptist Convention has navigated significant challenges, including doctrinal debates, legal disputes, and cultural shifts within the state and nation. Nevertheless, the Convention has remained steadfast in its commitment to biblical principles and the development and growth of the local church. The Missouri Baptist Convention has played a pivotal role in the development, expansion, and endurance of Missouri Baptists, shaping their theological foundation, fostering cooperative missions, and ensuring a lasting legacy of ministry and education.

The Missouri Baptist Convention was born out of the expansive and organizational movements of Eastern Protestants in the United States in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As these Protestants entered Missouri—specifically St. Louis—they were repulsed by the conditions that they encountered. The lack of Protestant churches and unpleasant culture that existed in St. Louis attracted the attention of numerous missionaries east of the Mississippi. The Catholic churches that already existed in Missouri did little to influence the culture, with Douglass writing,

All evidence regarding the religious conditions of these settlements, whether Catholic or non-Catholic concurs that the conditions were very deplorable. The French people, supposed to be Catholics, were, for the most part, not really devoted to the church. Many of them were outspoken infidels in actual opposition to religion and many others were merely indifferent to the church of their fathers (Douglass 12).

In addition to the Catholics that ruled within St. Louis, the American settlers that entered into the

region had little-to-no knowledge of the teachings of Scripture. This lack of Biblical literacy, combined with outright hostility toward religion made what Kingsley called the “key to America’s western kingdom” seem dim. Rather than the expected utopia of Protestant worship and holiness, Missouri was seen as a cesspool of debauchery, irreverence, and sin. Pedro Joseph Piernas reported to Governor Alejandro O’Reilly in 1769 on the conditions in Ste. Genevieve, saying, “License, laxity of conduct and vice are characteristic of its inhabitants... Religion is given but scant respect, or to speak more clearly, is totally neglected” (Piernas xviii). In reference to St. Louis, Piernas writes, “Trade, looseness of conduct, the abandonment of life, dissoluteness, and license are the same in all those as Missera (Ste. Genevieve) without any difference at all” (Piernas xviii). Consequently, this immoral culture birthed the Protestant sentiment to envelop the area in missions—Baptists in particular answered this call. In 1798, John Clark began crossing the Mississippi River from Illinois into Missouri, preaching in what is now St. Louis County. His preaching was in defiance of Spanish law. John Mason Peck wrote about the bravery and perseverance of Clark in his work, *Father Clark*:

Of course with Father Clark, it was a subject of daily prayer that God would direct him to that field of labor He [God] desired him to occupy. He expected and received satisfactory impressions, or a full conviction of mind, after much prayer, examination of the field in Illinois and the Spanish country so far as he could obtain information, and watching the leadings of providence. The pathway of duty became plain, and to that country he must go, and see what the Lord would have him do there. We never knew a man who consulted his personal convenience less, and the entire will of God more (Peck).

This ‘Spanish country’ that went beyond Illinois was what would soon become the state of Missouri. Clark’s conviction from God is what drove him to go against Spanish law, enter the foreign land of Missouri, and perform missions, which would lay the foundation for Baptists in the city of St. Louis.

Following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the United States commissioned Meriwether

Lewis and William Clark to explore the newly acquired western territory. In 1804, this land was officially designated as the Territory of Missouri. Therefore, per the Missouri Secretary of State office's timeline, Indiana governor William Henry Harrison placed the Territory of Missouri under United States government rule after signing the Treaty of St. Louis (Missouri Secretary of State Office). With this transition, the region became subject to the laws protecting freedom of religion, thereby giving Baptists the ability to officially organize, promote, and expand without government hindrance. Protestants became increasingly excited to enter the unfamiliar territory previously controlled by Catholicism, with Baptists from Kentucky, Tennessee, and Illinois pushing the movement west, proclaiming, "Missouri and its marvelous river [were] the key to America's western kingdom" (Kingsley 49). With this mindset in place, Missouri became the staging ground for massive Baptist expansion in the United States. As a result, organization and unity became essential. This organization and unity began with small steps—the first being churches.

The first Baptist church within the Missouri Territory was formed in Tywappity Bottom.

Robert Duncan writes about Tywappity Bottom, saying,

As there has been some doubt about the date of this church, and as the honor being the first has been claimed for another, we give the testimony entire, on which this statement is made... In this vicinity the first Baptist church, called Tywappity, was organized in 1805, of some 8 to 10 members. This was the first religious congregation, other than Roman Catholics, that was gathered west of the 'Great River.' The next year (1806), the second, called Bethel, was gathered... (Duncan 37).

Bethel church is often called the first Baptist church in Missouri, but there are numerous sources which cite that Tywappity Bottom began a year earlier. However, Tywappity Bottom was defunct shortly after forming and was disbanded, giving Bethel church a better claim as being the first permanent church organized in Missouri. Nevertheless, Bethel church formed with a clear mission statement and direction for Baptists that looked to expand west. The Bethel Church

Constitution reads: “We the members of the Baptist church having been a long time destitute of having the privilege of being in any Church order, do feel it our duty to embody ourselves together in the fear of God as a church, hoping that God will bless us in so good an undertaking with the teaching of his holy spirit and enable us through grace to live in the declarative glory of Him, and the praise of his Gospel” (Perkins). The creation of this statement marked a turning point for Baptists in Missouri; the land west of the Mississippi River would be declared ripe for religious freedom and exercise. On the heels of this excitement, less than three months after its inception, Bethel Church voted to construct a meeting house, which would be the first non-Catholic house of worship built west of the Mississippi River. All of the corresponding churches in the area sprang from Bethel church, whether directly or indirectly. This included the formation of Fee Fee Baptist Church in 1807, which is the longest continuously operating Baptist church west of the Mississippi River. Bethel Baptist church is credited with the planting of numerous churches including Saline Church, St. Francois Church, Turtle Creek Church, Apple Creek Church, Ebenezer Church, Hebron Church, and Jackson Church just to name a few (Douglass 26-27). All of these churches were planted by members of Bethel Church who were sent out to grow the Christian faith. Therefore, with the continued and ever-expanding growth of churches in the area, further organization and unity was essential, spurring the next step forward: associations.

The need to organize Baptists grew as more and more began to move to Missouri and the missionary efforts of early settlers made new converts. Discussions concerning a Baptist Association began in June of 1816, with the largest area of interest being uniformity of the Gospel message and the combination of resources to produce the maximum impact possible. These meetings led to the formation of the first Baptist association in Missouri in September of

1816. The first meeting took place in Bethel Church, giving the association the title “Bethel Association.” Seven churches with four ministers and 220 members represented made up the first association (Kingsley 31). The churches that were represented included Bethel Church, Tywappity Church, Providence Church, Barren Church, Bellview Church, St Francois Church, and Dry Creek Church (Duncan 58). Associations were not like synods or dioceses; they held no power over the autonomous churches, rather they only held influence over the direction of churches through general consensus. Generally, an association would meet quarterly—sometimes annually—and they would gather for two to three days, listening to numerous sermons and discussing issues of importance to the church at that time. Oftentimes, revivals would break out during these meetings. Following the founding of the Bethel Association, others would begin to form and organize across the territory. The Missouri Association, later the St. Louis Association, was formed on November 7, 1817, at the home of Thomas R. Musick. The churches represented in The Missouri Association included the likes of Fee Fee Baptist Church, Cold Water Church, Boeuf Church, Upper Cuivre Church, and Femme Osage Church (Kingsley 32). Other associations continued to form and grow as Baptist life progressed, including the formation of the Mt. Pleasant Association, which was founded in the Boone’s Lick settlement of Howard County on July 25, 1818 (Douglass 60). In addition to associations being formed from geographical and doctrinal similarities, some built on social and political issues. For instance, the Baptist Indian Mission Association was created in 1846, with the goal to convert Indians in western Missouri, and the Freedom Association was organized in 1858 over the practice of slavery. These small associations would be a precursor to the formation of a general association called The Missouri Baptist Convention.

The formation of the Missouri Baptist Convention began on August 29, 1834, with a

meeting at Providence Church in Callaway County, as Baptist ministers gathered to consider the state of religious life within the new state, as well as the work that needed to be done to bring the Gospel to unreached people. At that time, there were 150 Baptist churches, 100 ministers, and 13 associations, with many parts of the state being described as destitute of the Gospel (Kingsley 34). All the while, settlers were pouring in, with new towns, territories, and ideas spreading daily. Baptists yearned for a newspaper publication, improved communication, and for a college to be formed, yet their desire to bring the Gospel to these new settlers weighed more heavily upon them. Therefore, Baptists met June 6, 1835, at Little Bonne Femme Church in Boone County to form the first state-wide association. Upon adopting a constitution, they gathered an offering of \$225.06 to fund the beginning efforts of missions within the state (Kingsley 34). At this meeting, according to J.F. Kemper, the name “Central Society” would be adopted for the association with its central goal according to article 2 of the constitution was to, “adopt means and execute plans to promote the preaching of the Gospel in the destitute churches and settlements within the bounds of the State” (Kemper). The name “Central Society” would not last long, as the name would be changed numerous times, with these changes including the “Baptist Central Society of Missouri,” the “General Association of United Baptists in Missouri,” the “Missouri Baptist General Association,” and finally the “Missouri Baptist Convention.” Initially, this formation was not supposed to influence churches and had the potential to be disbanded. The acting committee was authorized to hire preachers and send them to preach the Gospel throughout the state, for three months, allotting salaries of \$12.50 per month. The need for printed works was paramount; Baptist preachers and leaders faced many issues in attempting to spread the Gospel and share resources in remote regions of the state. The support of the Convention was essential at this time, with Dr. W. Pope Yeaman writing in *A History of the*

*Missouri Baptist General Association:*

The difficulties and privations of travel, the lack of newspaper communications, the tardiness and meagerness of the postal system, the want of church houses, and undeveloped spirit of Christian beneficence, and more than all the violent and almost vicious opposition of anti-missionary Baptists imposed trials and burdens upon our church fathers in Missouri of which we can only have a faint realization (Yeaman 74-75)

These obstacles would challenge Baptist ministers as they began to organize and grow the church within Missouri. The response to these challenges would require monumental organization and funding—something that only the convention could produce. In light of this realization, sentiment towards disbanding the Convention gave way as Baptists recognized that the convention was essential to their three central goals: publication, education, and organized missions.

Early efforts to fund, create, and distribute a newspaper for Baptists in Missouri were ambitious, but the results proved lackluster. There were numerous papers published in other states with strong Baptist support, including *Western Pioneer*, published by John Mason Peck in Rock Springs, Illinois and the *Western Pioneer and Baptist Banner*, a publication from Louisville, Kentucky (Kingsley 41). Nevertheless, Missouri Baptists attempted to create their own publication solely for the state of Missouri, such as *The Missouri Baptist*, which was published by I.T. Hinton and R.S. Thomas in 1842 but would be defunct within a short year (Duncan 898). The *Western Watchman* was similarly established in 1845 by S.W. Lynd only to fail after another year. John Mason Peck attempted to reorganize the *Watchman* in 1849 and begin publishing once more, but the Civil War effectively stopped publication of the paper in 1861 (Douglass 472). In 1859, Baptists established the Missouri Baptist Publication Society, publishing the *Missouri Baptist* once more under the editorship of Dr. S. H. Ford. This paper would fall prey to the Civil War as well, with its ending publication in 1861 (Kingsley 41). Unfortunately, early Baptist efforts to create and maintain a published newspaper failed at the

beginning of the convention's history. However, Baptists eventually established long-running publications in the *Central Baptist* and, in the modern day, *The Pathway*. Baptist demonstrated commitment and endurance through the struggles of the Civil War combined with a lack of financial backing, eventually creating a Baptist publication for the state.

The Missouri Baptist Convention was not formed for very long before organizers were prepared to plant and found colleges across the state. Education was important to Baptists, and being able to prepare men to serve as pastors was paramount. Therefore, the Missouri Baptist Convention founded William Jewell College in 1849 to serve as the training ground. At the time of the convention's formation, St. Louis University was the only institution of higher learning that existed, and its Catholic faith meant that Protestants had nowhere to seek higher education that catered to their beliefs. Fortunately, in 1843, Dr. William Jewell donated \$10,000 to the convention to help fund the start of a college. Upon formation, William Jewell was the first men's college west of the Mississippi River (Kingsley 37-38). This college would serve as the educational hub of the state and of Baptists to receive a proper education, spurring the growth of Baptist institutions across the state. In 1872, at a general association meeting, Reverend Noah Flood stated:

I have been in Missouri forty-three years. When I first landed in the state there was not a Baptist school in it – one only under Protestant control – the Old Marion College, Presbyterian. I avowed my Baptist sentiments to one of the professors, and by so doing incurred his displeasure, and he never got over it. It is said that now the Baptists have only two schools less in the United States than the Catholics have, and that they have more in the state of Missouri than any other denomination (Duncan 846).

In the twenty-three years after the foundation of William Jewell College in 1849, Baptist education blossomed, setting the stage for a tradition of Baptist institutions in Missouri. The Missouri Baptist Convention's support of higher education continues to this day, with the convention providing large financial support to institutions such as Missouri Baptist University,

Southwest Baptist University, and Hannibal LeGrange University (Missouri Baptist Convention Staff). This enduring commitment highlights one of the Convention's foundational beliefs of faith-based education.

The Missouri Baptist Convention's support and promotion of mission efforts has remained a central tenet of its work throughout its history. The planting of churches, formation of associations, assembly of a convention, publishing of printed works, and organization of colleges added to the sum total of mission work in the state of Missouri. Organized mission work was conducted by the convention since its founding in 1834, and, as years went by, the hearts of Missouri Baptists were convicted to take the Gospel further west. In 1844, an addition to the constitution read that mission work was not just to be done in Missouri but that the convention needed to, "adopt such other measures as may be calculated to extend the kingdom of Christ in this state and throughout the world" (Kingsley 44). These 'other measures' were adopted, with the convention endorsing the new Indian Missions Society in 1847. Additionally, the Convention asked pastors to preach yearly on the topics of Foreign Missions, Home Missions, and Indian Missions. Beyond the pulpit, the Foreign Mission Society of Missouri was formed and became an integral adjunct of the convention. The Missouri Baptist Convention labored for missions in the state of Missouri as well as the western United States of America (Douglass 173-174). Facing anti-mission sentiment, harsh conditions, deplorable social conditions, and opposition from the Catholic church, Baptists in Missouri persevered and brought the Gospel to the unreached and through the work of the convention were able to garner financial support, publicity, and education.

In light of Missouri's early religious destitution, cultural hostility, and urgent need for the Gospel, the Missouri Baptist Convention emerged as a powerful entity for missions and

organization in the state of Missouri. What began as scattered efforts by individuals such as John Clark and lone churches like Bethel Church and Fee Fee Baptist would eventually develop into a strong convention that is rooted in Scripture and driven by the Great Commission. Despite these cultural challenges, failed publications, and historical hardship, Missouri Baptists united around the vision of reaching the lost and training the next generation. The legacy of the Missouri Baptist Convention is one of endurance, conviction, and faithful service, and the Convention continues to shape the spiritual, educational, and missional identity of Baptists in Missouri to this very day.

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