

The Beginnings of Missouri Baptists

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The Holy Bible was written by men who were divinely inspired by God's revelation to them as men. The Bible has been the tool for spreading and teaching God's word to the world. Many people started getting Bibles in their hands due to the mass printing of them starting in 1450. People began interpreting them and creating their own beliefs based on the Bible. Martin Luther, the founder of the Lutheran Church, disagreed with the Catholic Church's belief in indulgences which is paying money to the church to obtain freedom from sin (*Luther's Concerns*, n.d.). He also disagreed with the belief that the pope made no mistakes. Martin Luther eventually broke away from the Catholic church and hammered his ninety-five thesis to the doors of the Castle Church of Wittenburg in Saxony. The one-thousand-year-old Roman Catholic Church split into two churches, one being loyal to the pope and the other protesting against the pope and soon calling themselves Protestant (Acocella, 2017).

Catholicism was the main form of Christianity in England for a long time. Some didn't agree with Catholic teachings and broke off and created the Church of England which was an Episcopalian Church. This Church was around for a few years until a few members gathered in Holland to organize the Baptist denomination. John Smyth was the leader of this congregation and Thomas Helwys founded the first Baptist church in England in 1612. They believed, as did Martin Luther, the founder of the Lutheran Church, that each person is capable of their own reading and interpretation of the Bible.

The Baptists rejected the structure of the Church of England and their belief that people were born into the Church. This belief meant that members had to make a conscious commitment of faith to Jesus. This meant that children and babies were not mentally capable of being baptized and this is the main difference between the Baptists and the practices of other Christians. Converts who had been originally baptized before were re-baptized to signify

becoming a true Baptist. The Baptists believed that baptism was only accomplished by full immersion in water and not by pouring it over the head. Baptists were often persecuted for this belief by the Church of England and Catholics. John Bunyan wrote a book called *The Pilgrim's Progress* while he was in prison for unauthorized preaching. Most writers during Bunyan's time were often rich, they could afford to write because they didn't need to make money. He was a traveling tinker like his father and he was nearly penniless before becoming England's most famous author. He was also remembered as a "common upholder of unlawful meetings and conventicles" according to Monica Furlong (*John Bunyan in Prison*, n.d.). He was imprisoned for twelve years in 1660.

Baptists were first drawn from the beliefs of Congregationalists, which was that people are responsible for their own relationship with Christ. In New England and elsewhere in America, Baptists were prosecuted throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Roger Williams was also persecuted for his anti-establishment sermons in Massachusetts. He exiled himself out of the reach of his Puritan opponents and established the colony of Rhode Island. He founded the first Baptist Church in what is now Providence, RI in 1638. Soon after Williams founded the first Baptist church, John Clarke founded the first Baptist Church in Newport, RI.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, Baptists found religious freedom that they sought in Rhode Island and Pennsylvania and then elsewhere. They also embraced the religious revival during the Second Great Awakening and found an enthusiastic mass of converts as they spread down the Appalachian Mountains and through the South and West. Baptists played a crucial role in influencing the Framers of the Constitution to ensure religious freedom in America and also ensure a "wall between the church and state" (*Milestones: 1801–1829 - Office of the Historian*, n.d.).

The Louisiana Purchase was the beginning of the westward expansion of the United States and it is the sole reason we have many of the states in the United States today. It started the westward expansion of the United States. The Louisiana Purchase was the start of the trend encouraging Americans to move west. People moved in hopes of finding something different than what they had, which for the Baptists and other religious people who weren't Catholic, was persecution for their beliefs that was different than Catholicism. The push to move was intensified by the belief in manifest destiny and economic promise. The Baptists, however, were concerned with forming their religion and promoting it to other people. A group of Baptists then headed to Missouri to start the first Baptist Church.

In 1803, the United States began growing more and more, so they needed more space for all the immigrants that would eventually come to the United States. The Louisiana Purchase was a way for the United States to create more space for immigrants. The U.S. began to spread across the Appalachian Mountains, and the Mississippi River was an important conduit in the production for America's West. France had explored the Mississippi River in the 17th century and established scattered settlements throughout the area. During the middle of the 18th century, France had control over most of the land including most modern states. They owned more land than any other European power: from New Orleans to the Great Lakes in Montana. During the French and Indian War in 1762, France handed over their territory to Spain, and in 1763, they transferred the remaining North American land to Great Britain. Spain provided little to no help in the development of Louisiana for the next thirty years due to their power slowly going away over the territory. Louisiana included 828,000 square miles, which made up all or part of fifteen modern-day states between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. The Pickney Treaty of 1795 granted American ships the right of free navigation on the Mississippi River as well as

duty-free transport through the port of New Orleans. This resolved conflicts between the United States and Spain over the right to navigate the Mississippi River and for Americans to transfer goods to the ocean.

France was slow in taking control of Louisiana, but in 1802, Spanish authorities under French control revoked the Spanish-U.S. treaty that allowed Americans to use the Mississippi River for transportation of goods. In response to this, Jefferson sent James Monroe to France to negotiate to buy Louisiana and West Florida. Negotiations moved swiftly, and at the end of April, the U.S. bought Louisiana for \$11,250,000. The treaty was dated April 30 and signed on May 2. The U.S. Senate ratified the purchase in October and France transferred ownership to the U.S. in December.

After the Louisiana Purchase, U.S. citizens began migrating to what are now known as modern-day states. What they found was an uninhabited and wild region of the U.S. Immense tracks of forest with rich undergrowth so thick that a passageway on foot was close to impossible. There were also Indians in this territory and wild animals were everywhere. Most obstacles like these would never be challenged by anyone, but the few Americans who came across them were determined to make this new place their home. A good part of these emigrants came from Baptist churches in their native states and brought their determination to serve the Lord following their convictions. These Americans united with the Baptists that were already settled in Cape Girardeau County. The Baptists faced many setbacks, but those setbacks would eventually lead to their success. When they set foot in Cape Girardeau County, they felt as though they were standing on sacred ground.

Around eight to ten Baptists lived in Tywappity Bottom, just a few miles south of Cape Girardeau. In 1805, they organized the first church west of the Mississippi River, and they called

it the Tywappity Baptist Church. There were no records kept of this church, and the faith of the members was failing. It weakened gradually and a few years later, the church eventually became extinct. An insufficient effort was made by the members in 1809 to try and revive the church, but that was temporary. On July 19, 1806, near the county seat of Cape Girardeau County, some Baptists were under the direction of Elder David Green and united in organizing the second Baptist church west of the Mississippi River. They called it Bethel Baptist Church. The 15 members built a small log house and wanted to keep a "House for the Lord". The church grew not only in size but in strength and became the mother church for southeast Missouri and northeast Arkansas.

From Bethel, sprang more churches and they united to form the first Baptist association in Missouri. Some of these churches include; Bethel, Tywappity (now resuscitated in 1809), Providence (near Fredericktown), Barren in Perry County, Belleview, St. Francois, and Dry Creek. The Bethel church soon passed out of existence. The greatest enemy to the purity of the Baptist doctrine was the Antimission heresy, which was the opposition to the Baptist teachings, and it took around one-third of the congregation. Many other dependable members either died or moved away, leaving one-third of the congregation to continue with the church. They now felt financially incompetent and decided to join other churches. The church they moved to was located in Jackson and they named it "Bethel" in honor of the original church. It kept the honor of being the first non-Catholic church west of the Mississippi.

There was a custom in these days to conduct church growth. When each church was strong enough, embarked on some home-mission work by helping believers who were not large enough to form a church of their own and joined together for worship and spiritual converse under the direction of the established church. These small groups were called "arms of the

church” and looked to the church for guidance. Sometimes the church would send out a minister to enliven the spirits of the arms. The arms frequently grew into larger groups and eventually grew large enough to form new churches. It frequently happened that they were self-sufficient churches and used their own power to support themselves.

The Bethel Church, during its active lifetime, had the opportunity of organizing nine arms. Most of them passed away as their members found their way to a different church. In addition to their influence on these arms, the Bethel Church also assisted other churches that were weaker in joining counties and they even ventured to help churches in southwestern Illinois, practicing the principle of home missions before the boards of missions had been formed. In 1814, this church had 173 members after eight years of existence and slowly drifted away after 40 years of existence. This was the effect of the Antimission tide, that was going through the Baptist churches of Kentucky and southernmost Missouri.

Until 1814, the church had associated itself with the Red River Baptist Association Kentucky and sent messengers to investigate church activity. On October 8, 1814, a committee from a few Baptist churches met to discuss forming themselves into a Missouri association. They discussed it thoroughly and delegated another committee to look into it after they had adjourned. As a result of an informal meeting, they held a formal convention and appointed a new committee called “Conventioners” to meet at Bethel church. Various meetings were held to discuss many important subjects. The second association formed was called the “Missouri Association” which included churches from Franklin County and all the way to St. Charles. The 6 churches in this association represented 142 members.

There was a third association formed which included Cooper and Howard Counties. Five churches came together for this association, 161 members, and called it “Mt. Pleasant”. This

association suffered more from the incursions of the Native Americans than the other two. This trouble, rather than driving them apart, drove them together and they had closer spiritual relationships. The internal troubles of this association were more disastrous in the years after it was formed. It seemed to become a mass of Antimission doctrines and prejudices. The greater part of the Antimission doctrines seemed to confront those who labored and sacrificed to maintain a stronghold for the church. All of these people who wanted to tear apart the Baptist church were the same across all associations.

The Bethel Church wasn't the only church starting its missions in Missouri at this time. There were many churches across the state starting at the same time as them. There were quite a few churches in St. Louis in the beginning stages. In 1817, Reverend John Peck and Reverend James Welch were appointed to the mission in Western Missouri. They packed up their things and moved their families out to St. Louis. Peck wrote in his journal, "We are now promptly on missionary ground, which from its location and destitute state, must surely be our field" (Hahn et al., 2017). They found only seven Baptists living in St. Louis at that time and in February of 1818, they rented a space for worship. In June of that same year, they started the construction of a church and school building. One aspect of this ministry was directed toward African-American slaves and free men. One of the first converts was John Berry Meachum, a former slave who bought freedom for himself and his family.

Peck and Welch traveled throughout eastern Missouri and established new churches in places that they traveled. They also established the "Female Mite Societies" to support missionary work and it was the most popular organization in churches. In 1819, Peck moved to St. Charles and worked with Rev. James Craig to establish a school for higher learning. (Hahn et al., 2017).

In 1820, the Triennial Convention suspended its missionary effort in Missouri. Peck continued his work in Illinois and still helped churches in Missouri. He became heavily involved with Baptist churches in Illinois. Welch went to Burlington, New Jersey, but eventually moved back to Missouri and bought a farm in Warren County. He spent two years preaching and improving his farm but returned to the east. For twenty years he served with the American Sunday School Union as a Sunday School Missionary and Financial Agent. In 1848, he returned to Missouri, organized and served as a pastor of Union Church.

Southwest Missouri was truly on the frontier and the Baptist movement arrived there much later than in the East. There were few prospective church members due to travel being so difficult, but it did not stop the spread of Baptist churches, it only slowed them down a bit. The first Baptist organization was assembled in 1816, three years before Missouri achieved statehood. Downtown Springfield was the site of Kickapoo and Osage Indian villages from 1812-1828. In 1827 and 1828, the pioneer preacher, William Mooney began conducting church services in the homes of settlers along the James River.

In 1852, Springfield was a thriving village with five stores, a few blacksmith shops, a bank, a courthouse, a school, and a saloon. There were two churches holding services at that time, Presbyterian and Methodist. There were two Baptist churches in the same vicinity as the other churches, Mount Pleasant and Liberty Baptist. These two churches along with several others in Greene and nearby counties, cooperated in the Liberty Baptist Association. In 1850, 112 churches were making up the association. There was little to no financial assistance to help the new churches, but there was prayer and encouragement offered from other bigger churches. At this time, Braxton McCord Roberts, the presiding elder of the Methodist church, joined the Baptist association and was immediately ordained. Springfield was constantly growing and the

churches needed work, but the Liberty Church wanted to help and they had found the man suitable for this work.

“In 1851, the members of the Liberty Church voted that “... any member of the church who wishes to join the branch at Springfield, if constituted, is at liberty to do so,” (Wade, n.d.). In the following year, the church voted that an arm of the church should be granted to organize at Springfield to answer a petition of members of the church. On the second Saturday of July 1852, Rev. McCord Roberts and a few other members organized the First Baptist Church of Springfield. The meeting place was a small brick house on Olive Street, a little north of the old Number 1 Fire Station. They assessed what they lacked in financial assets and numbers, so they met at an old schoolhouse close to Rev. Roberts’ house to discuss this matter. In 1861, their new church building was finished and they were forced out when Federal troops occupied the building in the same year. In 1866, the former members reorganized the church, and the building was destroyed. Only 18 members were brave enough to refurbish and restore the facility. In 1895, a new church building was completed on the west side of South Street, which is the present-day location. Today, you will still find a small church community. Though they are not a large church, they are very diverse with people of all ages, nationalities, and personalities. The one thing that unites them is the gospel of God, the gospel which they strive to exalt and make known to the community of Springfield.

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