

**William B. Johnson's Address on the Origin
of the Southern Baptist Convention**

William B. Johnson

Augusta, Georgia 1845

THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION,

To the Brethren in the United States; to the congregations connected with the respective Churches; and to all candid men.

A painful division has taken place in the missionary operations of the American Baptists. We would explain the origin, the principles and the objects of that division, or the peculiar circumstances in which the organization of the Southern Baptist Convention became necessary.

Let not the extent of this disunion be exaggerated. At the present time it involves only the Foreign and Domestic Missions of the denomination. Northern and Southern Baptists are still brethren. They differ in no article of the faith. They are guided by the same principles of gospel order. Fanatical attempts have indeed been made, in some quarters, to exclude us of the South from christian fellowship. We do not retort these attempts; and believe their extent to be comparatively limited. Our christian fellowship is not, as we feel, a matter to be obtruded on any one. We abide by that of our God, his dear Son, and all his baptized followers. The few ultra Northern brethren to whom we allude, must take what course they please. *Their* conduct has not influenced us in this movement. We do not regard the rupture as extending to foundation principles, nor can we think that the great body of our Northern brethren will so regard it. Disunion has proceeded, however, deplorably far. The first part of our duty is to show that its entire *origin* is with others. This is its history.

I. The General Convention of the Baptist denomination of the United States *was* composed of brethren from every part of the American Republic. Its Constitution knows no difference between slaveholders and non-slaveholders. Nor during the period of its existence, for the last thirty years, has it, in practice, known anything of this distinction. Both parties have contributed steadily and largely (if never adequately) to those funds which are the basis of its constituency; both have yielded its office-bearers of all grades; its missionaries and translators of God's word; its men of toils many, and of prayers not unavailing, abroad and at home. The honored dead of both these classes have walked in closest sympathy with each other; anticipating in the Board-room and in the Monthly Concert, that higher, but not holier union now in their case consummated. Throughout the entire management of its early affairs, the whole struggle with its early difficulties, there was no breath of discord between them. Its Richard Furman and its Wm. Staughton, its Jesse Mercer and its Thomas Baldwin, led on the sacramental host shoulder to shoulder, and heart to heart. Their rivalry being only in earnest efforts for a common cause, their entire aversions and enmities were directed with all the strength of their souls, against the common foe. And to the last, did they not cherish the strong belief that they left no other enmities or aversions; no other rivalry to their successors?

In particular, a special rule of the Constitution defines *who* may be missionaries, viz: "Such persons only as are in full communion with some church in our denomination; and who furnish satisfactory evidence of genuine piety, good talents, and fervent zeal for the Redeemer's cause." Now, while under this rule the slaveholder has been, in his turn, employed as a missionary, it is not alleged that any other persons than those above described, have been appointed. Moreover, the important post of a superintendent of the education of native missionaries, has been assigned, with universal approbation, to the pastor of one of our largest slaveholding churches.

But an evil hour arrived. Even our humble efforts in the conquest of the world to God, excited the accuser of our brethren to cast discord among us; and in the last two Triennial Conventions, slavery and anti-slavery men began to draw off on different sides. How did the

nobler spirits on each side endeavor to meet this? They proposed and carried almost unanimously, the following explicit resolution:

“Resolved, That in co-operating together, as members of this Convention, in the work of foreign missions, we disclaim all sanction, either expressed or implied, whether of slavery or anti-slavery; but as individuals, we are free to express and to promote, elsewhere, our views on these subjects, in a christian manner and spirit.”

Our successors will find it difficult to believe that so important and plain a declaration had become, before the close of the first year of the triennial period, a perfect nullity. In December last, the acting Board of the Convention, at Boston, adopted a new qualification for missionaries, a new special rule, viz: that “If any one who shall offer himself for missionary, having slaves, should insist on retaining them as his property, they could not appoint him.” “One thing is certain,” they continue, “we could never be a party to any arrangement which implies approbation of slavery.”

We pray our brethren and all candid men to mark the date of this novel rule—the close of the first six months of their three years’ power, a date at which the compromise resolution could scarcely have reached our remoter mission stations. If usurpation had been intended, could it have been more fitly timed? An usurpation of ecclesiastical power quite foreign to our polity. Such power was assumed at a period when the aggrieved “thousands of Israel” had, as it now appears, no practical remedy. Its obvious tendency was, either our final subjugation to that power, or a serious interruption of the flow of Southern benevolence. The latter was the far more probable evil; and the Boston Board knew this well. They were from various quarters apprised of it. We, on the other hand, did not move in the matter of a new organization until three liberal States had refused to send northward any more contributions. Our leaders had chosen new rules. Thus came war within our gates: while the means of war on the common enemy were daily diminishing.

By this decision, the Board had placed itself in direct opposition to the Constitution of the Convention. The only reason given for this extraordinary and unconstitutional dictum being—that “The appointing power for wise and good purposes, is confided to the acting Board.” On such a slight show of authority, this Board undertook to declare *that* to be a disqualification in one who should offer himself for a missionary, which the Convention had said shall *not* be a disqualification. It had also expressly given its sanction to antislavery opinions, and impliedly fixed its condemnation on slavery, although the Convention had said that “neither” should be done. And further, it forbade those who shall apply for a missionary appointment, to “express and promote elsewhere” their views on the subject of slavery in a right “manner and spirit,” when the Convention declared they “were free” to do so. These brethren, thus acted upon a sentiment they have failed to prove—That slavery is, in all circumstances, sinful. Whereas their own solemn resolution in the last Convention, (their’s as much as our’s) left us free to promote slavery. Was not this leaving us free, and “*in a christian spirit and manner*” to promote that which in their hearts, and according to the present shewing of their conduct, they regard as a sin?

Enough, perhaps, has been said of the origin of this movement. Were we asked to characterize the conduct of our Northern brethren in one short phase, we should adopt that of the Apostle. It was “FORBIDDING US *to speak* UNTO THE GENTILES.” Did this deny us no privilege? Did it not obstruct us, lay a kind of Ronish interdict upon us in the discharge of an imperative duty; a duty to which the church has been, after the lapse of ages, awakened universally and successfully; a duty the very object, and only object, of our long cherished connection and confederation?

And this would seem the place to state, that our Northern brethren were dealt with as brethren to the last moment. Several of our churches cherished the hope that by means of remonstrance and exhortation, through the last Annual Meeting of the Board of Managers, at Providence, the Acting Board might be brought to feel the grievous wrong they had inflicted. The Managing Board was therefore affectionately and respectfully addressed on the subject, and was entreated to revise and reverse the obnoxious interdict. Alas! the results were – contemptuous silence as to the application made; and a deliberate resolve, expressing sympathy with the Acting Board, and a determination to sustain them.

II. The PRINCIPLES of the Southern Baptist Convention, it remains then to be stated, are conservative; while they are also, as we trust, equitable and liberal. They propose to do the Lord's work in the way our fathers did it. Its title designates at once its origin, and the simple, firm abiding of the South on the ground from which it has been so unconstitutionally and unjustly attempted to eject us. We have but enquired for "the old paths" of missionary operations; "asked" for, and attempted to restore the practically "good way." The Constitution we adopt is precisely that of the original union; that in connection with which, throughout his missionary life, Adoriram Judson has lived, and under which Ann Judson and Boardman have died. We recede from it no single step. We have constructed for our basis no new creed; acting in this matter upon a Baptist aversion for all creeds but the Bible. We use the very terms, as we uphold the true spirit and great object of the late "General Convention of the Baptist denomination of the United States." It is they who wrong us that have receded. We have receded neither from the Constitution nor from any part of the original ground on which we met them in this work, And if, we ask in parting, the original and broad Bible ground of confederation were *not* equitable, how came it so nobly and so long to be acted upon? If equitable, why depart from it?

We claim to have acted in the premises, with liberality towards our Northern brethren. Thrust from the common platform of equal rights, between the Northern and Southern churches, we have but reconstructed that platform. Content with it, we adhere to it, and reproduce it, as broad enough for us and for them. Have they thrust us off? We retain but one feeling in the case. *That we will not practically leave it on any account:* much less in obedience to such usurped authority, or in deference to such a manifest breach of trust as is here involved. A breach of covenant that looks various ways—heavenward and earthward. For we repeat, **THEY WOULD FORBID US TO *speak unto* THE GENTILES.** The Jerusalem church, then, must be regathered at the suspected Samaria, or at some new centre of operations, like Antioch. "One thing is certain"—We must go every where preaching the word.—"We can never be a party to any arrangement" for monopolizing the Gospel: any arrangement which like that of the Autocratical Interdict of the North, would first drive us from our beloved colored people, of whom they prove that they know nothing comparatively, and from the much-wronged Aborigines of the country; and then cut us off from the whitening fields of the heathen harvest-labor; to which by cogent appeals and solemn prayers, they have so often protested that, without us, they were inadequate.

III. Our objects, then, are the extension of the Messiah's kingdom, and the glory of our God. Not disunion with any of his people; not the upholding of any form of human policy, or civil rights; but God's glory, and Messiah's increasing reign; in the promotion of which, we find

no necessity for relinquishing any of our civil rights. We will never interfere with *what is Caesar's*.¹ We will not compromit what is God's.

These objects will appear in detail on the face of our Constitution, and in the proceedings, which accompany this address. They are distributed, at present, between two acting Boards for Foreign and Domestic Missions, having their respective seats at Richmond, Va., and Marion, Ala. We sympathise with the Macedonian cry from every part of the heathen world,—and with low moan, for spiritual aid, of the four millions of half stifled Red Men, our neighbors; with the sons of Ethiopia among us, stretching forth their hands of supplication for the gospel, to God and all his people,—and we have shaken ourselves from the night mare of a six years' "strife about words to *no* profit," for the profit of these poor, perishing and precious souls. Our language to all America, and to all christendom, they will hear us, is "come over," and for *these* objects, as ye love souls, and the divine behavior of souls, *help us*." We ask help at this juncture for nothing else. We have had more talk than work about these objects too long. We have waited quite too long for the more learned and gifted, and opulent, and worthy, to lead our way toward these objects; and we have shortened debate upon them to get to business. Our eyes and hearts are turned with feelings of parental fondness to Burmah and the Karens; with a zeal in which we are willing to be counselled by God and all considerate men, (but by none else,) to the continent of Africa, and *her* pernicious fountains of idolatry, oppression and blood; but yet more, with unutterable hope and thankfulness, to China and her providentially opened ports, and teeming thirsty millions. Among us, in the South, we have property, which we will offer to the Lord and his cause, in these channels—some prudence with which we would have our best wisdom (Prov. 8:12) to dwell; and professions of a piety which we seek to have increased and purified, like that of the first Baptist churches, when they had "rest; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied."

In parting with beloved brethren and old co-adjutors in this cause, we could weep, and have wept, for ourselves and for them; but the season, as well of weeping as of vain jangling, is, we are constrained to believe, just now past. For years the pressure of men's hands has been upon us far too heavily. Our brethren have pressed upon every inch of our privileges and our sacred rights—but this shall only urge our gushing souls to yield proportionately of their renewed efforts to the Lord, to the church universal, and to a dying world; even as water pressed from without rises but the more within. Above all, the mountain pressure of our obligations to God, even our own God; to Christ and to Him crucified; and to the personal and social blessings of the Holy Spirit and his influences, shall urge our little streams of the water of life to flow forth; until every wilderness and desolate place within our reach (and what extent of the world's wilderness wisely considered is not within our reach?) "shall be glad"—even at this passing calamity of division; and the deserts of unconverted human nature "rejoice and blossom as the rose."

WILLIAM B. JOHNSON, D.D

By order of the Convention.
Augusta, Ga., 12th May, 1845

¹ It was not dwelt upon at the Augusta Convention—we do not recollect its being named, but it is too stringent a tenet (?) in the case to be here omitted,—that one of the missionaries, with whom the Acting Board, and the Board of Managers can sympathise, we presume, and whom they sustain, (we hope, however, not in this particular act, but they have in no way openly protested against it)—Brother Mason has actually remitted money to the United States to aid in assisting the slaves to "run away from their masters," a felony by the Statute Law of several States.