

AN EXCLUSIVIST VIEW OF HISTORY WHICH DENIES THE BAPTIST CHURCH CAME OUT OF THE REFORMATION: A LANDMARK RECITAL OF CHURCH HISTORY¹

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ABSTRACT

The pages of church history reveal that the great variety of Protestant denominations today had their genesis in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. However, there is a certain strain of Baptist belief, which had its origin in the Southern Baptist Convention in the United States of America in the nineteenth century, which asserts that Baptists did not spring from the Reformation. This view contends that Baptist churches and only Baptist churches have always existed in an unbroken chain of varying names from the first century

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- 1 This paper is based on the DTh thesis: 'The origin, theology, transmission and recurrent impact of Landmarkism in the Southern Baptist Convention (1850-2012)' submitted at the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History, and Missiology, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria in 2014 under the promotorship of Prof. M.H. Mogashoa.

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to the present time. This view is known as Landmarkism. Landmark adherents reject other denominations as true churches, reject the actions of their ministers, and attach to them designations such as societies and organisations rather than churches. Baptist historians today do not espouse such views, however, a surprising number of church members, even among millennials, still hold to such views. This article surveys the origin and spread of such views and provides scholars the means to assess the impact and continuation of Landmark beliefs.

Keywords: Landmarkism; Landmark; Landmarker; church history; Southern Baptist Convention; Reformation; exclusivist; church

INTRODUCTION

James Robinson Graves, the father of the Landmark movement, was largely self-educated and mastered several languages through self-study. In 1845 he accepted a job in Nashville, Tennessee and in July of that year joined the first Baptist Church of that city, whose pastor was R.B.C. Howell,² an influential leader in the Southern Baptist Convention and editor of *The Baptist*.³ Graves, soon after, became the editor of *The Baptist* (later known as *The Tennessee Baptist*) and used this paper to set forth his Landmark principles.

Like all people Graves was to some extent a product of his environment; and the religious environment on the frontier and in the new settlements of what was then called the southwest, was of a very competitive nature. The religious, secular and cultural thought of the day was shaped by a rugged individualism and the pioneer spirit of those who had gone into the wilderness and carved out a life. This individualism marked political, secular and religious ideas of the day. On the religious front the Second Great Awakening had produced great revivals of religion, particularly in Kentucky. This was a time of schism and conflict among the mainline denominations, and fragmentation of denominations into new denominations, all of which led to a competition for the hearts, minds and membership of those in the frontier states. Much of this activity was centred in Kentucky and Tennessee and Graves, who found himself in the middle of this environment, sought to take his place as the champion of the Baptists. This highly sectarian, competitive environment, fed by the new revivalism, camp meetings, and a shortage of trained ministers, produced an environment wherein controversies flourished and the older orthodoxy fell victim to new measures. These influences undoubtedly shaped Graves to be the competitive,

2 J.J. Burnett, *Sketches of Tennessee's pioneer Baptist preachers* (Nashville, TN: Press of Marshall and Bruce Co., 1919), 184-200.

3 *The Baptist*, edited by R.B.C. Howell, was the original name of *The Tennessee Baptist* which was later taken over by J.R. Graves. *The Baptist* was a weekly newspaper published in Nashville, TN by the Baptist General Association of Tennessee. The name was changed to *The Tennessee Baptist* in 1847.

sectarian, combative, and yet in some ways winsome defender of what he believed to be Baptist (and thus, in his view, true) orthodoxy.

Central to the Landmarkers' doctrine of Baptist Church exclusivism was the formulation of an unbroken line of Baptist Church succession from the time of Christ to the present. Although Patterson attributes to Graves 'more than any other individual...the wide acceptance of Baptist succession as orthodoxy among Southern Baptists',⁴ it must be said that Carroll's *The trail of blood*⁵ has had a more far-reaching and lasting influence and remains the most widely circulated piece of literature espousing the view of an unbroken succession of Baptist churches. Graves regarded the persecution of believers by the established church as the sure sign by which to identify Baptists down through the ages. In the introductory essay to Orchard's *History of foreign Baptists*, Graves said 'the clearest and most satisfactory proof [that]...successions of Baptist communities have come down to us from the apostles, [is that they are] all striped and scarred and blood covered'.⁶ He later used the phrase, which was adopted by Carroll, 'trail of blood'.⁷ It is in Carroll's work by that name that the line of Baptist Church succession primarily set forth by Orchard's *History of foreign Baptists*, and spread through Graves's republication of that work in 1855, has been disseminated far beyond the several thousand copies of Orchard's work which Graves printed. Over two million four hundred thousand copies of *The trail of blood* have been published and distributed⁸ and it remains the most widely circulated writing on Baptist Church succession.

Graves held that the doctrine of an unbroken succession of Baptist churches was necessary in order to identify the true church. He said that 'genuine Baptists in all ages re-baptised all they received into their membership and fellowship, from Rome or from any of her numerous daughters...they are all organisations, set up in opposition to the kingdom of Christ. I can't receive their acts'.⁹ Graves in the same article affirms that Baptists were known down through the centuries

4 W. Morgan Patterson, *Baptist Successionism: A critical view* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 26.

5 J.M. Carroll, *The trail of blood*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, KY: Ashland Avenue Baptist Church, 1931)

6 G.H. Orchard, *A concise history of foreign Baptists: Taken from the New Testament, the first fathers, early writers, and historians of all ages: Chronologically arranged: Exhibiting their distinct communities, with their orders in various kingdoms, under several discriminative appellations from the establishment of Christianity to the present age: With correlative information, supporting the early and only practice of believers' immersion: Also observations and notes on the abuse of the ordinance, and the rise of minor and infant Baptism*, with an introductory essay by J.R. Graves (Nashville, TN: Graves, Marks, and Rutland, agents of Tennessee Publication Society, Sheldon Lamport and Co., 1855), xviii.

7 J.R. Graves, *The tri-lemma, or, Death by three horns* (Nashville, TN: Southwest Publishing House, 1860), 119.

8 Source Ashland Avenue Baptist Church, publisher (2,404,730 books published through March 26, 2010).

9 *The Tennessee Baptist* (Nashville, TN) 16 November 1848.

as: Novatians, Donatists, Phrygians, Galatians, Armenians, Paulicians, Paterines, Vaudois, Albigenses, Lollards, Waldenses, and Ana-baptists [*sic*]. The conclusion Graves draws from a very long article is that as these ‘Baptists’ followed the rule (quoting Bullinger) that ‘they who by baptism are received into their churches ought not to have any communion with those called evangelical or any other whatsoever; for that our reformed churches are not true churches, no more than the churches of the Papists’.¹⁰ This thought was central to the Landmark ecclesiology. Baptist succession finds continuity not in a chain of apostolic succession but in a continuity of organisation. In the words of Graves: ‘Christ, in the very “days of John the Baptist”, did establish a visible kingdom on earth...if his *kingdom* has stood unchanged, and will to the end, he must always have had true and uncorrupted churches, since his kingdom cannot exist without true churches.’¹¹ Of course, for Graves the definition of true churches was Baptist churches and his mission was to establish the ‘Old Landmarks’ which he interpreted to mean ‘those principles which all true Baptists, in all ages, have professed to believe’.¹²

A LANDMARK DEFINITION OF ‘CHURCH’ AND ‘TRUE CHURCHES’

The Landmark position toward other denominations was clearly articulated by Graves: ‘No organization on earth [as] unscriptural...as every Baptist believes Campbellite and PedoBaptist societies to be...should be regarded as a church of Christ.’¹³ ‘They are all organizations, set up in opposition to the kingdom of Christ.’¹⁴ Landmarkers considered Baptist churches to be the only true churches. This high-church mentality, as Tull¹⁵ called it, was reflective of other traditions. The Roman Catholic Church claimed to be the only true church and held there was no salvation outside that church. Landmarkism arose in the mid-nineteenth century, a time that was marked by a number of high-church movements. Many other denominations made claims to be the true church because of apostolic origins, restoration of the true gospel, or restoration of the true pattern of New Testament church polity and practice. Landmarkism sought to destroy the claims of the other denominations. The Landmarkers insisted that a chain of Baptist churches in unbroken succession could be traced back to apostolic times, indeed to the first church in Jerusalem, which they said was a Baptist church. Also, by asserting that all the various groups in the chain

10 *The Tennessee Baptist* (Nashville, TN) 7 December 1848.

11 J.R. Graves, *Old Landmarkism: What is it?* (Memphis, TN: Baptist Book House; Graves, Mahaffey & Co., 1880), 122-12. [emphasis in original]

12 *Ibid*, xiv.

13 *Ibid*, 151.

14 *The Tennessee Baptist* (Nashville, TN) 16 November 1848.

15 James E. Tull, *High-Church Baptists in the South: The origin, nature, and influence of Landmarkism* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000).

of succession held all the fundamental doctrines and practices of the first church in Jerusalem, they sought to establish a high-church that was unchallengeable and unassailable by the claims of other denominations.

ATTACKS UPON OTHER DENOMINATIONS

Graves thrived on conflict and his attacks on other denominations and their claims endeared him to many Baptists. The appeal of the Landmark system was its embrace and defence of traditional Baptist principles. Graves's attitude toward other Protestant churches was summed up in his famous debate with Jacob Ditzler, that 'no Protestant body claims an existence prior to the year 1500, except as they existed in the fruitful womb of the mother of Harlots [the Roman Catholic Church]'.¹⁶ 'If Christ has had witnessing Churches during all these ages, as he declared he would have, then Baptist Churches are those bodies.'¹⁷ This was the basis for the Landmark rejection of the validity of other non-Baptist churches. Graves saw himself as the defender of the true faith, the lone Elijah on Mt Carmel against all the false prophets. He wrote: 'The valley of the Mississippi is destined to be the great battle ground... that a general conflict is to take place here, we have for the past five years predicted. In the Valley of the Mississippi, the lines are *now drawing* for a deadly conflict between true Christianity, and antichristian Popery.'¹⁸ What he meant by Popery is clear. In the same article he states that 'the principles of Romanism are incorporated into the creeds of the different sects, which are only extrescences [sic] [extensions] of the Roman apostacy [sic], and that to be consistent, these sects must of necessity go back to the bosom of their mother'.¹⁹ For Graves, his task was clear and he rallied a great number of Southern Baptists and enlisted them in this great struggle.

The attacks by the Landmarkers upon other denominations teach us one thing and explain much of their view of history. The Landmark champion, Graves, believed he had constructed an argument from which none of the other competing denominations could extricate themselves. He asserted that other denominations were in no sense true churches because they either had come out of the Roman Catholic Church or had been founded by someone whose ordination and/or baptism was received in that church, thus they were not true ministers. The result of that was that all their acts were invalid and their organisations, to use the words of Graves, not 'true churches but only societies'.

16 J.R. Graves, *The Graves-Ditzler or Great Carrollton debate on the mode of baptism, infant baptism, Church of Christ, the Lord's Supper, believers' baptism, final perseverance of the Saints between J.R. Graves, LL. D., and Jacob Ditzler, D.D.* (Memphis, TN: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1876), 1051.

17 *Ibid.*, 1055.

18 *The Tennessee Baptist* (Nashville, TN) 25 February 1854. [emphasis in original]

19 *Ibid.*

It is here that we find the absolute necessity of the Landmark view of history and Baptist church succession. If the Baptist church could not trace its way back across the centuries, if it was formed by some separatist group which pulled away from some 'Pedobaptist society', the Baptists would be caught in the same dilemma (or as Graves styled it, a tri-lemma) in which the competing denominations were caught. In order for their claim to be the only true church to stand, in order to say that they were the only church that has always been true to the apostolic teaching, they must maintain a separate and unique heritage from other Protestants and particularly any Pedobaptists. When one entangles his opponent in a dilemma, one must be sure that the propositions of the case do not apply to them, lest they find themselves hoisted on their own petard.

ATTACKS UPON CHURCH HISTORIANS

John A. Broadus was president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. After his death in 1895, W.H. Whitsitt was chosen by the trustees to be the next president of the Seminary.²⁰ He continued as president and professor of Church History until his resignation. In 1895 Whitsitt wrote an article for *Johnson's Universal Cyclopaedia*²¹ in which he put forth the belief that a group of English Anabaptists had adopted immersion as the correct form of baptism in 1641 and had thus become Baptists. This denied the theory of Baptist Successionism and an unbroken line of Baptist churches, even if known by a name other than Baptist, back to John the Baptist. Later, Whitsitt acknowledged that he had written two unsigned articles with the same premise which had been published in the *Independent* in New York some 15 years earlier.²² Shurden said that these writings 'created one of the most bitter and divisive controversies in all of Southern Baptist history'.²³ Given the history of the nineteenth century among Southern Baptists, that is saying quite a lot.

Whitsitt's thesis which created the furore was a direct contradiction of the Baptist succession theory, which at this point might as well have been called Baptist doctrine, and which Graves and the Landmarkers had published, taught, and defended throughout the preceding five decades. Carver, a faculty member at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and one who studied under Whitsitt said: 'The election of Whitsitt as president of the Seminary was the occasion for the most extensive, the bitterest, and in the issue, the most decisive conflict ever to disturb the Baptists of

20 Albert W. Wardin, Jr., *Tennessee Baptists* (Brentwood, TN: Executive Board of the Tennessee Baptist Convention, 1999), 383-384.

21 *Johnson's Universal Cyclopaedia: A new edition, prepared by a corps of thirty-six editors, assisted by eminent European and American specialists, under the direction of Charles Kendall Adams*, 8 Vols. (New York, NY: D. Appleton, A. J. Johnson, 1893-1897).

22 Tull, 2000. *High-Church Baptists in the South*, 138.

23 Walter B. Shurden, *Not a silent people: Controversies that have shaped Southern Baptists* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1972), 22.

America.²⁴ It should be noted that it was not Whitsitt's election as president but the articles and the book he had written which created the conflict.

The Whitsitt case was quite literally a matter of life and death for Landmark theology because the breaking of the succession of Baptist churches, baptism, and the proper administrators of baptism would destroy the whole Landmark system. As Tull remarked: 'Many had regarded Landmarkism as an alien infection in the Baptist body; the Whitsitt Controversy clearly demonstrated that Landmarkism was a constituent and decisive element in almost every phase of Baptist life.'²⁵

Whitsitt said of his research: 'This is purely a question of modern historical research. It does not affect any items of Baptist principle or practice.'²⁶ Typical of Whitsitt's findings that aroused the ire of the Landmark faction, among others, were that 'none of the Anabaptists of Holland or of the adjacent sections of Germany were immersionists...in fact, few Anabaptists anywhere were immersionists'.²⁷ In another place quoting from *Geschichte der Wiedertaenfer* (1836) he wrote that '300 persons were baptized by [Melchior] Hoffman out of a large bucket on this occasion. The act of baptism could not have been immersion, in this case'.²⁸ This type of historical research was branded as heresy by the Landmarkers. Sampey made this observation near the beginning of the controversy:

Already the approach to the question of the truth or falsity of Dr. Whitsitt's thesis, that immersion was re-introduced in England in 1641, had become doctrinal rather than historical. The debate was thus open to all lovers of orthodoxy and did not call for any special knowledge of English Baptist history.²⁹

Many other Landmarkers joined in demanding Whitsitt's resignation. Hearne was the author of a letter published in the *Baptist and Reflector* in which he outlined Whitsitt's mistakes, which had been previously spelled out, but he added the damage which these mistakes had done to the Baptist cause.

He believed that Whitsitt 'ought to be removed' for the following reasons:

Because he does not seem to know what a Baptist is. He says Baptists practiced sprinkling and pouring for baptism...There is not a Baptist church, Association, or Convention in the South, if in the wide world, that would recognize such a body as a Baptist church. Because he has published to the world that all Baptists practiced sprinkling and pouring as the true mode of baptism until 1641, and that his reading has not furnished him with anything like an

24 W.O. Carver, 'William Heth Whitsitt: The Seminary's Martyr,' *The Review and Expositor* (October 1954), 70.

25 Tull, 2000. *High-Church Baptists in the South*, 149.

26 William Heth Whitsitt, *A question in Baptist history: Whether the Anabaptists in England practiced immersion before the year 1641? With an appendix on the baptism of Roger Williams at Providence, Rhode Island in 1639* (Louisville, KY: C.T. Dearing, 1896), 5.

27 Ibid, 35.

28 Ibid, 42.

29 John R. Sampey, *Memoirs of John R. Sampey* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1947), 82.

authenticated instance of immersion earlier than the year 1644. If these statements are true it follows that there were no Baptist churches [as we now define the term] in the days of the apostles and they have no divine authority for existence today. Because he says in Johnson's Cyclopaedia that the earliest Baptist church belongs to the year 1610 or 1611. If so, then Christ did not build his church, or Baptist churches have no valid claim to be called churches of Christ or any part of the kingdom...³⁰

These objections are thoroughly Landmark in their ecclesiology and their view of Church History. Hearne's conclusions are based on the inevitable result that would ensue, in his view, if there were not an unbroken line of churches that practised the proper mode of baptism. If such a continuity were broken, as suggested by Whitsitt's work, he concludes that the error he sees would be nothing less than the destruction of the validity and authority of the Baptist church.

In the weeks following the Southern Baptist Convention in May 1898 editorials still clamoured for Whitsitt's removal. Little more than a month after the 1898 Convention, the Kentucky Association by an overwhelming vote of 198 to 26 passed a resolution 'to withdraw moral and financial support from the Seminary as long as Dr. Whitsitt retain[ed] his connection with it'.³¹ This intensified calls for Whitsitt to resign. Many said the matter had gone far enough; 'the confidence which has been lost in Whitsitt as a leader can never be restored'.³²

The comment that summarised the new opposition to Whitsitt is quite telling: 'If we thought that Dr. Whitsitt [was] standing for a great principle, if his resignation would mean the establishment of an historical test of orthodoxy, or the substitution of tradition for the Bible, or that theological professors [would] not be allowed to think or have freedom of research, then as a Baptist we should say for him to remain.'³³ Those conclusions were precisely what the other professors at the Seminary assessed the resignation of Whitsitt to mean.

Whitsitt resigned in a telegram sent to the president of the Board of Trustees on 13 July 1898. McGlothlin, a professor at the Seminary, probably spoke for the overwhelming majority of the faculty. 'One woe is past; behold a greater cometh I fear. There is before us another most trying year's work. Feverish uncertainty and restless resentments are going to make the best work impossible and good work difficult.'³⁴

The fears of the Seminary faculty seemed to have been well-founded. Jarrel, a committed Landmarker, included in the 'Texas Notes' feature of the *Baptist and*

30 *Baptist and Reflector* (Nashville, TN) 23 September 1897, 4.

31 *Baptist and Reflector* (Nashville, TN) 30 June 1898, 2.

32 Ibid

33 Ibid

34 W.J. McGlothlin to E.C. Dargan, 15 July 1898, transcript in hand of Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

Reflector in September the following analysis of the situation at the Seminary after Whitsitt's resignation:

As the other professors of the Seminary took part with Dr. Whitsitt, and seemed to agree with his position, it is feared by many Baptists that his resignation does not much relieve the Seminary matter, unless Whitsitt's successor is a **straightout Landmarker, secession** [sic] **Baptist**. By the way, as the Seminary is for all the Baptists of the South, can anyone tell why the trustees should not give the Landmarkers a representation in the Seminary by putting one in as Dr. Whitsitt's successor?³⁵

This chorus of opposition was made up of the great number who had idolised Graves and had accepted as Baptist doctrine his view of church succession. Whitsitt's work destroyed the entire premise that Baptists had existed in an unbroken chain since the days of the first church in Jerusalem. Whitsitt's work destroyed the Landmark ecclesiology and sectarian, high-church claims to be the only true church.

Whitsitt got in one final word. It would, though, not be the last word as the Landmark theology continued to play a part in Southern Baptist life, but it was a parting salvo from Whitsitt. From his final address at the commencement exercises on 1 June 1899 we find these words: 'I solicit them [all who ever studied with me in the Seminary] to maintain and industriously proclaim the fundamental Baptist doctrine of the universal spiritual church...the only church that has received and enjoyed the promise of unbroken succession.'³⁶

CONTINUED PROPAGATION OF LANDMARK VIEWS OF CHURCH HISTORY

As the twentieth century moved on, the name of Landmarkism and Graves et al. were seen and referenced less and less, but the Landmark doctrines were promoted and fostered by many Southern Baptists in positions of influence. A look at *A history of the Baptists, together with some account of their principles and practices* by Christian³⁷ (a work commissioned by the Southern Baptist Convention) will give some insight into one of the ways in which this was affected. A survey of other writings and religious periodicals will also shed light on the spread of Landmark principles throughout the Southern Baptist Convention.

35 Baptist and Reflector (Nashville, TN) 1 September 1898, 4. [emphasis added] Jarrel would write in 1894, *Baptist Church Perpetuity: or, The continuous existence of Baptist Churches from the Apostolic to the present day demonstrated by the Bible and by history* (Dallas, TX: published by the author, 1894; Fulton, KY: National Baptist Publishing House, 1904). The book was a defence of the Landmark doctrine of church succession and was dedicated to J.R. Graves, among others.

36 Ibid, 100 [emphasis added].

37 John T. Christian, *A history of the Baptists, together with some account of their principles and practices* (Nashville, TN: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1922).

A brief review of Christian's *History* shows how the ideas of Graves and the continuation of the position against Whitsitt's views were propagated. Christian devotes 17 chapters to the tracing of the heritage of the Anabaptists and a defence of the antiquity and perpetuation of baptism of believers by immersion. Five of those chapters are devoted to ancient and medieval Baptist churches. He speaks approvingly of the Novatians and quotes Robinson (*Ecclesiastical researches*) as tracing 'a continuation of them up to the reformation and the rise of the Anabaptist movement...all over the Empire Puritan churches were constituted and flourished through two hundred succeeding years'.³⁸ He treats the Cathari similarly, and 'called [them] Anabaptists'.³⁹

The Albigenses he called, quoting approvingly from Robinson, 'Trinitarian Baptists', and noted: 'They held to the independence of the churches.'⁴⁰ In discussing the Donatists, he quoted David Benedict and noted that 'he...classes them as Baptists...the Donatists rejected infant baptism and were congregational in their form of government'.⁴¹ That is, as Christian knows, a very loose and far-reaching definition of a Baptist. He also quotes approvingly from Osiander: 'Our modern Anabaptists are the same as the Donatists of old.'⁴²

Christian says of the Paulicians: 'The Paulician churches were of apostolic origin.'⁴³ He acknowledges that the Paulicians were considered by many to be Manichæans but he comes to their defence and says: 'They held to the orthodox view of the Trinity; and to the human nature and substantial sufferings of the Son of God.' He added quite boldly: 'Baptist views prevailed among the Paulicians... they baptized and rebaptized by immersion.'⁴⁴ Once again there is a very minimalist view of what constitutes a Baptist. He defends the Montanists because 'they insisted that those who had "lapsed" from the true faith be rebaptized...on this account they were termed "Anabaptists", and some of their principles', he affirms, 'reappeared in Anabaptism'.⁴⁵

In regard to the Reformation and the Anabaptists, Christian portrays the Anabaptists as the one branch of the Reformation who revived the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. He writes: 'The Reformers aimed to reform the Roman Catholic Church by the Bible; the Baptists went directly to the apostolic age and accepted the Bible alone as their rule of faith and practice...They were orthodox in

38 Ibid, 44. He quotes from Robinson, *Ecclesiastical researches* (Cambridge, England: Francis Hudson Printer, 1792).

39 Ibid, 45.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid. He quotes from Benedict, *History of the Donatists* (Pawtucket, RI: Nickerson, Shelby and Company, 1875).

42 Ibid, 46.

43 Ibid, 49.

44 Ibid, 55.

45 Ibid, 43.

the articles of the Christian faith.⁴⁶ In contrast with the ‘*solus*’ of the Reformation (*sola fide, sola gratia, sola Scriptura*), Christian held, ‘the nature of a church was the fundamental contention of the Baptist movement of the Reformation’.⁴⁷ The nature of the church is the *sine qua non* of the Landmark movement and by Christian’s judgment, what it means to be a Baptist.

The Baptist newspapers and other periodicals were key in originally shaping and propagating Landmark doctrines. In the papers of Weaver⁴⁸ an undated rough manuscript (the date is circa 1928 as he refers to the Whitsitt affair as being ‘thirty years ago’) makes the point that: ‘The important factor in the moulding of public opinion among Baptists have been and are the Baptist papers.’⁴⁹ He discusses the impact of the various newspapers in the Whitsitt controversy but he adds interestingly: ‘The episode [the Whitsitt controversy] will never have a place in any standard Baptist history.’⁵⁰ What would exclude the Whitsitt controversy from any Baptist history? Weaver is not clear but the treatment Whitsitt received at the hands of the Landmarkers and the influence of the Baptist papers in moulding public opinion, may have led him to conclude the details of Whitsitt’s case would remain buried. Continued work among church historians, however, has essentially exonerated Whitsitt’s research and rejected the Landmark view of history. Such work did not stop the spread of Landmark recitals of Church History tailored to their specific goals.

LANDMARK INFLUENCE IN DENOMINATIONAL PAPERS AND MATERIALS

Control of the denominational papers in Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Texas and parts of Alabama remained for the most part firmly in the hands of Landmarkers or those with Landmark leanings into the early twentieth century. A prime example was E.E. Folk who was the owner and editor of the *Baptist and Reflector* from 1888-1917. Graves maintained his own column in the paper until his death. Folk was in

46 Ibid, 103.

47 Ibid.

48 Rufus W. Weaver was an influential Baptist who held a variety of positions within the Southern Baptist Convention and pastored several different Baptist churches. In 1919 he was the president of the Education Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention. He served from 1917-1920 as president of the Education Board of the Tennessee Baptist Convention and from 1918-1927 as president of Mercer University. From 1927-1928 he was Corresponding Secretary of the Education Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. (Source: ‘Introduction to Rufus W. Weaver Papers,’ compiled by M.M. Keagan, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, TN., 3 August 1962.)

49 Rufus W. Weaver, ‘An Episode in Baptist history,’ unpublished manuscript circa 1928, original in hand of Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

50 Ibid. Weaver was the last student to receive a degree under the supervision of Whitsitt.

agreement with Landmark principles, although he worked to unify Baptists and did not attack those with differing opinions as Graves had done.

Folk leaned toward a more moderate view that a strict succession of Baptist churches could not be maintained, but nonetheless he affirmed that Baptists had existed in every time since the founding of the church in Jerusalem. Folk wrote: ‘You cannot put your finger upon any year this side of the Apostles and say that the Baptists originated then. The only place to look for their origin is in the New Testament.’⁵¹

In spite of admitted meagre historical evidence, Folk writes that down through the ages there have been people holding to essential Baptist principles. Among those people he lists the ‘Novatianists [sic], Donatists, Cathari, Paulicians, Vaudois, Petrobrusians, Henricians, Albigenses, Waldenses, Anabaptists, and Mennonites’. He adds: ‘It is not claimed that all of these sects held all Baptist principles, but that all of them held some Baptist principle – some essential Baptist principle – so as to differentiate them from other denominations besides Baptists and classify them more or less distinctly as Baptists.’⁵² The implications of this line of thinking are all too obvious. A group may have beliefs and practices which differ significantly from historic Christianity but practise baptism by immersion and thus be essentially Baptist. Folk ends his remarks thus: ‘While we may not be able to trace a succession of Baptist churches all down the line of history, we can, as we have seen, trace a succession of essential Baptist principles. The existence of the principles would indicate the existence of the churches.’⁵³ Such were the views of the editor of the Baptist paper published in the city where the office of the Southern Baptist Convention made its home. Such were the views of the paper which Weaver said was instrumental in moulding the views of Baptists.

As the Southern Baptist Convention moved into the second quarter of the twentieth century, the terms Landmark and Landmarkism were seen and heard even less than in the preceding quarter century. However, Landmark doctrine was very visible. These doctrines were not identified as Landmark doctrines but were nonetheless set forth in journals, periodicals, speeches and instructional materials as Baptist doctrine, i.e., Southern Baptist doctrine. Tully, pastor of the Wylam Baptist Church, Wylam (Birmingham), Alabama was at the time of his death the longest serving pastor in the Birmingham Baptist Association. He was a graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, and professor of Greek at Southeastern Bible College for 13 years. Tully wrote: ‘According to the Scriptures, scholarship and history, Baptists alone have the authority to administer the ordinances of baptism and the supper.’ He carries this to the extreme as he adds:

51 E.E. Folk, unpublished notes of speech, transcript in hand of Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, TN, n.d.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

‘The supper is not a Christian but a church ordinance. It is not for all Christians. The apostles were alone members of [Christ’s] church during His earthly ministry, and they alone ate with Him.’⁵⁴ The claim of course is that different denominations may not partake of the Lord’s Supper together. Tully amplifies that with the following explanation:

It is commonly believed that one denomination has as much scriptural authority for its existence as another. This is untrue. Only one has authority. The question is which one? Christ founded His Church while upon earth and said that churches like it would continue until His return...All denominations that have come into existence since the days of Christ do not have Scriptural authority to baptize...New Testament Churches were Baptist Churches... Baptists alone have continued from days of Christ, and consequently alone have authority to baptize.⁵⁵

As has been pointed out, the success of Graves in promoting and furthering Landmark doctrine and beliefs was due in large part to his vast publishing empire which provided much of the material for Sunday school instruction, Bible study helps, and the weekly denominational periodicals. The influence of the denominational periodicals has been highlighted and some of the key editorial figures surveyed have been unabashedly Landmark in their views. This not so subtle and constant reinforcement of these views has proved to have a lasting impact. For nearly 150 years these materials were the primary source of information, teaching and instruction for the average Southern Baptist. When that is coupled with the preaching of many pastors, one sees a powerful influence on the minds of church members. This continues to some extent through denominational periodicals, but the accessibility of the blogosphere, the ease of setting forth such views on the internet, familial traditions, and the instructional influence of the local church, may prove to be the defining influence for succeeding generations.

TESTIMONY TO THE LONGEVITY AND INFLUENCE OF LANDMARK VIEWS OF CHURCH HISTORY

The propagation of this view through more than a century of Landmark champions, from preachers to convention officials, has proven to have remarkable staying power. Midway through the twentieth century an 18-year old student wrote an essay published in the *Baptist and Reflector* in which she said: ‘The Baptist Church was established by Christ during his own personal ministry.’⁵⁶ She went on to affirm that: ‘The Baptist is the only church that has the same doctrines that are obtained in the New Testament

54 Hugh L. Tully, *A brief history of the Baptists with chapters on baptism, Lord’s Supper, etc.* (Ensley, AL: Jefferson Printing Co., 1938), 38.

55 Ibid, 36.

56 Roberta Laverne Mackay. ‘History of the Baptist Church,’ *Baptist and Reflector*; Vol. 114(26) 24 June 1948, 7.

Church...The reason we do not observe the Lord's Supper with other denominations is that they do not follow the teachings of Jesus...The [Great] Commission was given to none except Baptists.⁵⁷ The fact that this essay was published (chosen from multiple submissions) in the leading denominational periodical of the time, gives a clear indication of the sentiments of those who controlled that periodical. This essay, written nearly a half century after Landmarkism had faded from the minds of most Southern Baptists, demonstrates the remarkable staying power of Landmark doctrine, and the hold it has on many laypersons in the Southern Baptist Convention.

In order to assess what this means for the next generation of Southern Baptists and what influence Landmarkism has had in shaping their beliefs, the author undertook to survey students at three predominantly Baptist colleges in Tennessee and Alabama. The results were quite revealing. Students in Church History and Religion courses at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee; Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tennessee; and Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama were surveyed in the fall of 2010 and the spring of 2011.⁵⁸ The survey consisted of questionnaires which addressed specific doctrines. Of the Southern Baptist students surveyed, over 39 per cent said that Baptists could be traced as a denomination from John the Baptist to the present day Baptist churches. Sixty-two per cent said that although Baptists could not be traced as a succession of churches back to the first century, Baptist churches can be traced through groups of various names back to the first church in Jerusalem.

Perhaps the most revealing statistic, given the large percentage of students holding to some Landmark principles, was the result which showed over 98 per cent of those surveyed could not identify Landmarkism from a list of multiple choice answers. Eighty-four per cent chose the answer which said: 'Landmarkism is a term with which I am not familiar.' This indicates the extent to which Landmark doctrine has been absorbed into the fabric of Southern Baptist life.

CONCLUSION

The Landmark movement in the Southern Baptist Convention popularised and codified a view of Church history, and particularly the history of churches which came out of the Reformation, which is at odds with the facts of history and indeed the historical origins of the Baptist Church. This view was justified by revising the history of and ignoring certain beliefs and practices of dissident groups from around 250 AD through the Reformation period. The purpose behind this account of history was to establish the Baptist Church as the only true church in a period marked by high-church sectarianism. Unfortunately, these views have persisted as accepted fact in some of the churches and among some of the members of the Southern Baptist

57 Ibid, 7-8.

58 The methodology and statistical data from the survey is available in the thesis from which this article is taken. See footnote 1

Convention. To the dispassionate church historian this recital of history, which has as its intent the exaltation of one denomination over all others accomplished by the manipulation of the facts of history; a view that interprets history based on the desired outcome rather than qualitative research, is wholly unsatisfactory. The challenge for scholars going forward is the large number of current Southern Baptist Church members who hold to some of these views and are not even vaguely familiar with the origin of these beliefs and their unjustifiable position in light of the history of the Church.

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