

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES, USA and THE
AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES OF NEW JERSEY

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The identity of ABCNJ is best understood in conversation with the wider denominational heritage of the American Baptist Churches, USA, and the broader history of Baptists. It is necessary to engage briefly the broader history of Baptists to extract the particular history of the American Baptist Churches, USA (ABCUSA), and then to engage briefly the history of ABCUSA in order for a fair reading of the history of ABCNJ to be possible.

Baptists and the American Baptist Churches, USA - Identity and Witness Some Important Considerations

The historian Carl Becker once said that if we are to have a good understanding of the inner spirit of any age, we should look for “certain unobtrusive words” of that age or era.¹ Arguably, one of the “unobtrusive” words in Baptist life is “Autonomy.” It is, however, disingenuous in the least to pretend that any reflection on the meaning of Autonomy can legitimately begin solely on the terrain of Baptist life. Baptists did not invent the ideal of Autonomy. The term “Autonomy” comes from the Greek word *autos* (“self”) and *nomos* (“law”). And so in its neutral linguistic context, the term is generally understood as that faculty which human reason and the human will possess of *being their own lawgiver*.²

Just as important, it is essential to note that the ideal of Autonomy is directly linked to a monolithic shift in the self-understanding of human beings and their place in the universe, a decisive intellectual passage from the medieval world into modern civilization that ushered a radically new worldview. As far back in time as Confucius, Mencius, and Lao Tzu in the East; and Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in the West, we already find the inseparable link between virtue on the one hand; and, on the other hand, the rational, thinking individual as an “autonomous moral agent.”

One can argue, then, that the way Baptists have grown to understand the principle of Autonomy has been profoundly influenced by the legacy of the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason. With the historical roots of the Baptist movement found on the soil of continental Europe, this may well be so. The historical strand of the Autonomy principle, therefore, that formed Baptist life and thought was the strand that took form as a revolt against authoritarianism. Nevertheless, this “revolt against authority” – this “awakening” - heralded the dawning of a new day, birthing innumerable expressions of individual human freedom.

And so the idea and meaning of Autonomy extends much farther historically from our Baptist location. While it is not the purpose of this particular work to focus thoroughly on this aspect of the subject, it is important to have an honest acknowledgement of this reality. We do have

¹ James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1971), pp. 2-3.

² William H. Gentz, ed., *The Dictionary of Bible and Religion*, (Abingdon: Nashville, 1986), pp. 103-106. See also, Livingston, p. 3.

enormous resources to draw from - both in Western and Eastern philosophy and history - should we need to examine the notion in its proper historical depth, and how it evolved and took its place in the history of Christian thought.

Lastly, it is not possible for any honest reflection on contemporary reality to not come to terms with its historical antecedent. We cannot, for example, give an adequate reflection on postmodernity without coming to terms with the lessons we have learned from our confrontation with modernity. In the same token, we cannot reflect fairly on the history of American Baptists without reentering the broader matrix of Baptist history.

A Brief Acknowledgement of History

The Baptist movement came into being in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. Out of that era sprung forth “Separatist” congregations that sought purity of the faith, hence the label, “Puritans.” John Smyth (1554-1612), an English Puritan preacher who first served an Anglican church, then a Separatist congregation in Gainsborough, became the first English Baptist. Because of persecution, Smyth and a group of his followers fled to Amsterdam. In Amsterdam, Smyth encountered the Mennonites, descendants of Anabaptists, and became heavily influenced by their radical commitment to religious freedom and the baptism only of believers. Smyth reorganized his Separatist congregation which later on became the first English Baptist congregation in 1609.³

It is important to note at this point for the purpose of this essay that even within Puritanism there already was diversity in theology. The group that emerged from John Smyth’s leadership was later on known as “General Baptists” that subscribed to Arminianism’s belief that the atonement of Christ was not limited to a predestined elect, but is open to all. Another band of Puritans who separated themselves from the Church of England founded a congregation in England in 1633 which later on gave birth to the Baptist group identified as “Particular Baptists.” This group held to a radical Calvinistic belief that only the elect were to be baptized.⁴

The proper historical roots, therefore, of contemporary Baptists is found in Europe. Baptists, as we can imagine, made a profound impact on the religious landscape of Europe, and continue to do so today. But it was in the so-called “New World”, America, where the Baptist movement exploded and became the largest strand of American Protestantism. The English Baptist, Roger Williams, came to Massachusetts in 1632. But not long after that, the “New World Puritans” that became the dominant religious establishment of “New England” forced him out of their colonies. Roger Williams fled to neighboring Rhode Island where he formed the first Baptist church in America in 1639.⁵

The years after that saw the growth of Baptist congregations. But the majority of the early New England Baptists were too few and too widely scattered across the emerging colonies. But as

³ Norman H. Maring and Winthrop Hudson, *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1963), p. 11. See also, Gentz, pp. 103-106.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13 ff.

early as 1670 - while very incipient and “primitive” - General Baptists in America, on the one hand, had already reached out to each other to form associations, or assemblies. On the other hand, the Particular Baptists in the middle colonies especially, started meeting informally with each other. In 1707, five Particular Baptist congregations – three from New Jersey and two from Philadelphia - came together to form the Philadelphia Baptist Association.

This association was the first Baptist association that showed a formal structure and demonstrated a self-sustaining associational life. It became the “template” of associational life as other Baptist bodies that were formed after it followed the organizational pattern of the PBA.⁶

The next 200 years saw formative shifts in the life of Baptists in America. The growth of Baptists in the North was not as marked as that of their counterparts in the South. Yet the impetus for community continued to find expression amongst Baptists. The American Baptist Foreign Mission Society was formed in 1814; the Publication Society in 1824, and the Home Mission Society in 1832. Politics and religion go hand in hand, inspite of claims to the contrary of one or the other. So when one looks at the history of religious movements in a particular place and time, one also invariably sees the history of politics of that period. The American Civil War drove a deep fissure in the life of Baptists in America and unleashed a schism in 1845, primarily over the issue of slavery and slave ownership not only amongst church members, but among missionaries themselves. The Baptists in the south seceded from the main body of Baptists at that time to form the Southern Baptist Convention.⁷

Theological diversity continued to evolve amongst the Baptist churches in the North and the West that are now associated with ABC. The remaining churches of the North, up until 1950, were called the Northern Baptist Convention. The years leading up to that time saw more divisions as Baptists were carried up themselves in the vortex of the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversies of the period between 1920 thru the late 1940’s, and caused the secession of other groups from the Northern Baptist Convention (the Conservative Baptist Association of America, and the General Association of Regular Baptists).⁸

In 1950 – primarily to come to terms with the changes in traditional geographical boundaries - the Northern Baptist Convention changed its name to the American Baptist Convention. And in 1972, the “Convention” evolved deeper in its understanding of its commitment to the notion of the local church as the “fundamental unit of mission” and changed its name to what now is called the American Baptist Churches, USA.

The Baptist family has many “offspring” and, therefore, many expressions. And so the question, ‘Why I am an American Baptist?’ is best answered with the prior understanding that ‘Baptist’ and ‘American Baptist’ identities are not necessarily one and the same. It has been said that American Baptists have never been *one* thing, but *many*; and therein lies much of our distinctiveness. At the heart of the American Baptist self-consciousness are *history* and *mission*.

⁶ Ibid., p. 150 ff.

⁷ Gentz, p. 104

⁸ Gentz, pp. 103-106.

Who American Baptists are today is, therefore, only the contemporary expression of a long history of particular persons who have responded to Christ's call in the world in peculiar ways. And so for a vast number of American Baptists, their identity is not rooted only in organizational structure, or confessional and propositional statements – these are all vital elements of the ABCUSA identity. But just as vital is the consciousness that American Baptist identity is grounded in the lives and ministry of particular people who have responded to God's call in a particular way.

And so as we gaze out to the horizon of that Baptist history we see, for example, Obadiah Holmes, Roger Williams, Benjamin Randall, Mary Webb, John Mason Peck, Lott Cary, Luther Rice, Charles Journeycake, Joanna Moore, Dong Gong, Adoniram & Ann Judson – to name a few pioneers who represent our wider American Baptist ancestry. In more modern memory more saints crystallize this identity for us: Walter Rauschenbusch, James and Charma Covell, Helen Barrett Montgomery, Martin Luther King, Jr., Orlando Costas, Jitsuo Morikawa, Howard Thurman, Margaret Prine, George Peck, Prathia Wynn – to name a few, yet saints and all!

The Contemporary Scene

Baptists in general around the world share some fundamental convictions. Perhaps one of the most defining of these – and formative to its very identity - is *Religious Freedom* or, as it is sometimes known, *Soul Liberty*. It can be argued that most of these fundamental convictions (local church autonomy, church-state separation, believer's baptism, the gathered/regenerate church) find their roots in this core conviction. In addressing the State Convention in 1907, W. G. Fennell, of South Church in Newark, outlined his views on Baptist distinctives, asked the rhetorical question, "What is the truth behind all our teachings, which...makes it our contribution to history?" To which he enjoined, "We believe it to be the Freedom and Authority of Divine Life in the Soul of Man."⁹

Throughout history, the foundational belief that God has given every person the dignity and the gift of freedom has permitted Baptists of every persuasion to respond freely to the world around them and appropriate their faith in light of their own understanding of Scriptures. It is this bedrock 'Baptistic' belief that has given rise to the variety of Baptist traditions today. Yet Baptists have also sought out to be in fellowship with one another, primarily driven by an abiding call to the "Body of Christ." Just as abiding as its value on the independence of the local church is its commitment to not obscure the unity of the church. Some live with this "ambiguity" better than others.

The Baptist World Alliance (BWA) – of which the ABCUSA is a part - is an international fellowship of 211 Baptist unions and conventions in 120 countries. In the United States alone, there are more than 21 Baptist denominations/alliances/fellowships. The ABCUSA is composed of 34 autonomous but interrelated judicatory "Regions." The "Regions" are analogous to the "Dioceses" or "Synods" of more hierarchical communions. In and through these regional expressions is where the ABCUSA seeks to live out what it means to strive for "unity in the

⁹ Norman H. Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1964) p. 283, quoting Fennell from the 1907 Annual Report of the NJBC, p. 63.

midst of diversity.” The “Regions” are the visible means by which ABCUSA express its commitment to mutual respect and interdependence and, above all, its commitment to the “Body of Christ.” It is fair to say that one of the energies that animate the denomination – constructively and destructively – is the perennial striving to live in the crucible of the loving tension between autonomy and interdependence.

*The American Baptist Churches of New Jersey
A Brief Microscopic Retrospect*

The American Baptist Churches of New Jersey is one of the 34 autonomous but interrelated regions of ABCUSA. The story of its origin is as fascinating and complex as that of the many stories of Baptist association beginnings all across colonial America.

As was the case in the early colonial days all across the colonies, individual Baptist congregations formed where there were Baptist settlers and these were scattered all across the eastern seaboard states. Each constituted church helped to organize other churches as they were formed across the state. The desire to bring together meager resources in the harsh new world - and the realization that objectives in ministry were better realized in partnership with others than by one standing alone – gave birth to an impetus for the formation of “associations.” As the desire for fellowship and mutual support amongst individual congregations grew, “Associations” of Baptist churches were forged. And, later on, associations came together to form “Societies”, as mentioned earlier.

Associations were forged and formalized along different timelines. As was cited above, the formally organized association was constituted by 5 churches from the Middle Colonies – 3 were from New Jersey, and two from Philadelphia – and named the Philadelphia Baptist Association. The nomenclature tended to be misleading because it overlooked the fact that from the early beginning of Baptist churches in the colonies up to the end of the 18th century, there were more Baptist congregations in New Jersey than there were in Pennsylvania. The unusual geographic location of New Jersey contributed to this and a similar phenomenon took place in the northern part of the state as churches in that area were associated with the New York Baptist Association – a phenomenon that lent to the reputation that New Jersey was a state that was like a “keg tapped at both ends.”¹⁰

This mode of fellowship became the pattern for New Jersey Baptists for over a century. After the Revolutionary War, changing times and spirit unleashed phenomenal growth in Baptist life. The years following 1790 saw Baptist churches in New Jersey slowly claiming their own identity, weaning themselves away from the Philadelphia Baptist Association and the New York Baptist Association. In 1811, the New Jersey Baptist Association was finally formed.¹¹

The New Jersey Baptist “Association” evolved into many permutations, brought in many generations of leaders, each casting their own vision for their time. It is now called the American

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 32.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 96.

Baptist Churches of New Jersey, one of the largest of the 35 judicatory regions of the American Baptist Churches, USA.

The Current ABCNJ Reality and Demographic Landscape

The state of New Jersey is the 3rd smallest state in the nation but has the 8th largest GDP. In a 2010 study from the Immigration Policy Center in Washington, DC, It is reported that immigrants, Latinos, and Asians account for the large and growing shares of the economy and electorate in New Jersey. Immigrants (the foreign-born) make up roughly the 20% of the state’s population, and half of them are naturalized US citizens who are eligible to vote. “New Americans” – immigrants and the children of immigrants – account for 15.1% of all registered voters in the state.

Moreover, Latinos and Asians (both foreign-born and native-born) wield roughly \$68 billion in consumer purchasing power, and the businesses they own had sales and receipts of \$25.7 billion and employed more than 125,000 people at last count. Immigrant workers contributed at last \$47 billion to the state economy in 2006.

In terms of ethnic demography, New Jersey breaks down as follows, with the U.S. national figures for each category in the right hand column:¹²

	NJ	USA
White persons, percent, 2009 (a)	75.8%	79.6%
Black persons, percent, 2009 (a)	14.5%	12.9%
American Indian and Alaska Native persons, percent, 2009 (a)	0.4%	1.0%
Asian persons, percent, 2009 (a)	7.8%	4.6%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, percent, 2009 (a)	0.1%	0.2%
Persons reporting two or more races, percent, 2009	1.4%	1.7%
Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin, percent, 2009 (b)	16.7%	15.8%
White persons, not Hispanic, percent, 2009	61.1%	65.1%

- a) Includes persons reporting only one race.
- b) Hispanics may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories.

The region of ABCNJ is currently constituted of about 285 member churches, comprising over 70,000 members. The ethnic demography of the region closely mimics that of the state’s as a whole. For example, approximately one third of ABCNJ’s membership and churches is African-American. There are currently 40 churches that are Latino (six of which are Portuguese-speaking Brazilian), 15 Haitian, six Asian, and a number of congregations that are multi-cultural congregations. In the past 10 years ABCNJ has planted, supported, and incorporated 30 new

¹² U.S. Census Bureau, “State and County Quickfacts”, <http://quickfacts.census.gov> (7 March 2011).

congregations – 96% of them are Brazilian and Latino. The remaining 3% are African, Haitian, and Asian.¹³

Another demographic summary produced by National Ministries of ABCUSA (its program board for U.S. mission and ministry) in 2004 that looked at the Northeast region (Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont) by County gives another perspective of the cultural metropolis that is New Jersey. For example, looking at the 2000 census which tracked immigrant population based on number of foreign-born residents, 6 New Jersey counties occupy slots in the top 20, 3 of those in the top 10.¹⁴

The region is organizationally constituted by 8 associations (or, as it was called in the past, “clusters”), as follows:

1. Capital Association
2. Essex Association
3. Greater Delaware Valley Association
4. North New Jersey Association
5. North Shore Association
6. Raritan Association
7. Watchung Association
8. West New Jersey Association

The region is schematically viewed as *North Area, Central Area, and South Area*. Each area is comprised of 3 associations, except the North Area, which has only two of the largest associations in the region.

END

¹³ American Baptist Churches of New Jersey, *2004 Statistics and 2005-2006 Directory: Thirty-Fifth Annual Session*, (New Jersey). All demographic data that follows in this section about region structure, constituency, and organization, is taken from this publication.

¹⁴ National Ministries Research: June 2004, *Demographic Summary by County: Northeast Census Region*, pp. 1-2.