

HISTORICAL SERMON.

Delivered at Washington, D. C.,
On the Fiftieth Anniversary of The
Southern Baptist Convention.

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TEXT.—“Speak unto the children
of Israel, that they go forward.”—
Exodus 14:15.

The earliest general organization among American Baptists was the ‘general missionary convention of the Baptist denomination in the United States of America for foreign missions organized by thirty-three delegates, representing eleven states, in the city of Philadelphia, on the 18th of May, 1814. Baptist people throughout the entire country co-operated with this body for a period of thirty years.

In 1815 a division occurred between the Baptists of the North and those of the South. The Southern Baptist Convention was organized at Augusta, Georgia, on Thursday, the 8th day of May, of that year. Just fifty years have elapsed since that important event, and we have met in the capital of our country to celebrate our jubilee.

The separation that fifty years ago took place between Northern and Southern Baptists was happily circumscribed in extent. It related exclusively to the missionary operations, which had hitherto been conducted in common. The fathers of that day were solicitous that this point should be clearly understood, and that the extent of the disunion should not be exaggerated. The official address sent forth by the convention declared that ‘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. 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.’

Though the division related to nothing else than foreign and domestic missions, it was nevertheless unavoidable. One of our statesmen declared that the issues then pending between the North and the South constituted ‘an irrepressible conflict.’ History has justified the correctness of that conclusion. The best and wisest men in the North consented to a division because they regarded it as being, under the circumstances, a necessary evil; the wisest and best men in the South accepted the division as being imperatively required by the situation.

In many respects the separation has also been of signal advantage. It was of advantage to our Northern brethren, because it promoted their peace and union. They could never have been rightly at harmony among themselves as long as their Southern brethren remained in the same organization. It was of advantage to Southern Baptists in different directions, but especially because it developed their missionary

enterprise and activity. To illustrate what is here affirmed, certain statistics may be cited with relation to the American Baptist Home Mission Society which was the organ through which operations in domestic missions were prosecuted by the Baptists of the whole country from 1832 to 1845. During that period of thirteen years the entire sum of contributions from the Southern States was \$38,656.40. During a like period under the Southern Baptist convention, the contributions for domestic and Indian missions amounted to \$206,356.13. This gratifying advance was worth all the pain, and sacrifice that we had to endure in breaking up the relations that had hitherto subsisted with our Northern brethren.

It is also a matter of sincere rejoicing that the separation here described was for the most part a peaceable one. Friction was unavoidable, and it is not denied that more or less of it was developed. But public negotiations on either side were marked by the dignity and moderation that become Christian brethren. That excellent result was due, in large measure to the singularly elevated character and devout piety of the contending parties. Moreover, we cannot be too grateful that there were no questions regarding the division of a common property to excite the thoughts of men to undue asperity. It is likewise a special mercy of Providence that in all the fifty years of our history there have been no very important conflicts touching the boundaries that should exist between Northern and Southern Baptists. The evils of disunion would have been greatly enhanced if we had been forced to waste our resources and opportunities in building rival houses of worship for Northern and Southern Baptist churches in all the cities, and even towns and villages, adjacent to the border. Let us recognize our exceedingly fortunate situation and always do what lies in our power to keep the peace.

The half century of our convention's history may be divided into three separate periods, each of which has a well defined character of its own.

1. The first of these is the period in which slavery still prevailed from 1845 to 1865. It is not easy correctly to estimate the number of Baptist people within our bounds at the opening of this period. Dr. J. L. Burrows, in his excellent American Baptist Register, estimates that we had 402,068 members of our Southern churches in the year 1852. Possibly there were not more than 350,000 in the year 1845. Of these at least 100,000 were slaves who had few independent churches of their own, but almost uniformly belonged to the organizations of their masters. Subtracting these from the total, we shall have 250,000 as the approximate number of white Baptists in 1845.

The progress and development of our constituents during the greater portion of this period were rapid and

steady. It is entertaining to consider how different was the tone that was observed in the year 1846 from that which prevailed in the year 1859. The excellent corresponding secretary of the foreign mission board, Dr. James B. Taylor, gravely reminded the convention that ‘the population of the South is comparatively small. Our churches are not of easy access, their

members being often scattered over many miles of territory. * * * Our country is not filled up with towns and villages, rendering it convenient to collect the masses together, but our brethren, being principally agriculturists, must be visited upon their farms or called together at their country places of worship.’ In the year 1859, on the contrary, we had begun to speak with a degree of exultation concerning the ample resources of our Southern Baptist churches, and to rejoice that God had blessed so many of our people with large financial means. A brief indication of the advance of the cause will appear in the fact that in 1847 the contributions to the domestic mission board were \$9,591.00, while in 1859 the same board received from the churches almost three times as much—namely, \$28,487.96. In 1846 there was contributed throughout the Southern states \$11,735.22 to the foreign mission board, while \$39,824.37 was received in 1859. It is not affirmed that the number of Southern Baptists had increased threefold, in keeping with their contributions, though it must be conceded that their progress in this respect also had been highly gratifying.

The constitution adopted by our convention at its opening session in 1845 is, in some respects a highly interesting document and will repay attentive study. ‘The general missionary convention of the Baptist denomination in the United States of America for foreign missions,’ of which we had co-operated since the year 1814, was in the beginning merely a society for the promotion of foreign missions. As such, it had only one executive board. At a later period the interests of home missions and of Columbian College were likewise imposed upon the same organization. Here was a single board with three separate departments of labor. This arrangement worked very ill, and in 1826 the day of disaster appeared. In consequence of that disaster, the general missionary convention returned to its original function, and devoted itself to the prosecution of foreign missions exclusively. The work of home missions was temporarily interrupted, while Columbian College was left to her own exertions. The result of these changes was that in the northern part of our country every separate and independent enterprise was henceforth to be prosecuted by a separate and independent society. The general missionary convention took charge of the work of foreign missions; the American Baptist home mission society devoted

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itself to domestic missions: and the American Baptist Publication Society to the publication interests of that portion of our people.

When the fathers of our convention met together to consult about its constitution, they decided to go back beyond the convulsions of the year 1826, and as far as possible to adopt the principles and methods which had prevailed from the beginning in the general missionary convention. One change, however, was dictated by prudence and by an accurate knowledge of the facts. Instead of establishing a Southern Baptist convention with a single board which should have charge of several different departments of denominational exertion, it was decided to establish two co-ordinate boards, each of which should be dependent upon the body that had originated them. These co-ordinate boards, one for foreign and the other for domestic missions, were but the forerunners of other interests. In 1851 the Bible board was established at Nashville, Tennessee. In 1859 the Theological Seminary, with a certain relation of dependence upon the convention, was set in operation at Greenville, South Carolina. In 1863 a Sunday school board was also established at Greenville. In 1888 the Womans' Missionary Union was recognized and assigned to a home in Baltimore. In 1891 another Sunday school board was created and sent to Nashville; and in 1893 the Southern Baptist Educational conference began its existence in close touch with the convention.

The relations of these different bodies to the central organization may not always be uniform; and yet they are each one in its own way dependent on the convention. Historical development and the training that has been received by our people for fifty years require that every religious enterprise carried on among white Baptists within the limits of the Southern Baptist convention shall be in one or other form auxiliary to the convention. Whatever may be out of touch, and especially out of harmony, with this body, is liable to meet with more or less decided opposition and to occasion more or less of conflict. The earliest period of our history as a religious organization was closed amid the tremendous struggles and desolations of the war between the states. The Bible board at Nashville passed away and was decently interred during this troublous season. The board of foreign missions was greatly crippled in its operations but disaster was averted by the devotion and sacrifices of some of the missionaries and of excellent brethren in Maryland and Kentucky to whom we must always be under obligations. The domestic mission board devoted its attention chiefly to the soldiers in the Southern armies, where it was useful and successful.

2 Period of poverty and peril—1865—1879.

It would be difficult to overestimate the extent of the poverty and distress

that prevailed in the Southern country immediately after the war. Desolation reigned in every quarter. Almost everything was destroyed except the courage of the people. It goes without saying that our churches suffered along with other interests. The apprehensions of the people regarding the commonest necessities were so constant and so keen that there was often little time or thought for any other concern. Many houses of worship had been dismantled through military occupation or by the violence of conflict, and it was often a question whether it would ever again be possible to restore them to their original condition.

In the midst of these cares and sorrows our esteemed colored brethren retired from our churches almost to a man. The parting, though mutually painful, was accomplished by mutual good wishes. But it could not be prevented, and we were compelled to accept the inevitable.

Not long after the war came the trials and repression of the era of reconstruction. Ten years of confusion were entailed by this policy; a period in which our privations and anxieties were scarcely inferior to those we had endured during the four years of armed conflict.

To this aggregation of evils was added the remarkable financial panic that overtook the country in the autumn of 1873, whose results were keenly felt almost by every inhabitant of our section for six or seven years. The experience of those long days of torture and humiliation are still remembered and will haunt many people as an evil dream as long as they live in the world.

If the affairs of the convention were in a sorry plight, this was nothing more than might justly be said of every other business enterprise. An attempt was made at Russellville, in 1866, to revive the Bible board, and establish its home at Louisville; but the board was too dead for resurrection. If the resolution had not been faithfully embalmed in the minutes, it would not be known that any human being had been bold enough to recall the defunct institution.

The Sunday school board existed for ten short years, and in 1873 was dissolved at Mobile, its effects and its functions being committed to the care of the domestic mission board. Unfortunately, however, the situation of the latter board was by no means assured. As early as 1871, there were suggestions of merging it into the board of foreign missions. The specious plea was urged that it would be more economical if we return to the identical platform which proved so unfortunate for the general missionary convention and sustained only by a single board, which should prosecute the general work of home as well as foreign missions. These dangerous intimations were defeated, but the board was not thereby restored to its former vigor. Centrifugal forces were everywhere at work. Several of the states had organized mission boards to care for

their own territory and, honorable state conventions deliberately passed resolutions by which the domestic mission board should be excluded from their boundaries. These purposed to take charge of the entire work of home missions, allowing the convention to make no collections and to extend no assistance in any place where their authority was respected.

Still other states had entered upon terms of co operation with rival organizations situated in other sections of the country. That was notably true of the district west of the Mississippi river, which by one process or another, had all been lost to the domestic board. It had no agent, and was rendering no assistance in any portion of that wide territory. This process of disintegration was not confined to the trans-Mississippi department. In some of the states on the eastern side of the river brethren had turned away from the domestic board and were working in connection with rival societies. The outlook was as gloomy as it well could be.

In addition to the above, the seminary was all the while in grave peril. It encountered three crises of cardinal importance: one in the year 1869, at Macon; another in 1874, at Jefferson, Texas; and a third in 1879, at Atlanta, Georgia. They must have been comparatively few who had courage enough in those evil days to conceive any firm faith in the future of the institution.

Under all these circumstances it was nothing more than one might expect that questions concerning the life or death of the convention should in due time be raised. That issue was brought forward and discussed at Atlanta, Georgia, during the session of the convention in 1879. Here was indeed a "battle of the giants." No such momentous controversy has been brought before us in the entire course of our history. On the afternoon of the first day an impressive preamble and a couple of resolutions were proposed.

This document was expressed in diplomatic terms, and yet it was generally understood that it related mainly to the question of "preserving our separate organization." As in the case of all issues of first-class importance, the business was referred to a committee composed of one from each state. When it came up for discussion on the morning of Saturday, May 10, 1879, after an address by the chairman, it was moved by John A. Broadus, of Kentucky, to strike out the two resolutions, and on that proposition a debate was held which lasted throughout the day. Shortly before adjournment in the afternoon, the motion of Dr. Broadus was carried, and an amended resolution was substituted in the following terms: "The committee to whom were referred the resolutions on co-operation with our Northern brethren, have had the same under consideration, and instruct me to report the following resolution:

Resolved, That five brethren be appointed by this convention to bear to

our Baptist brethren of the Northern states, at their approaching anniversaries, expressions of our fraternal regard, and assurance that while firmly holding to the wisdom and policy of preserving our separate organizations, we are ready, as in the past, to cooperate cordially with them in promoting the cause of Christ in our own and foreign lands."

In this manner an issue was quietly closed which had threatened us with the most serious consequences, and there has never been a moment since the year 1879 when it was even remotely possible for such a question to be again discussed before the convention.

The forces that conspired together to defend the life of the convention in that dark and trying ordeal deserve respectful mention. The theological seminary, in its deep poverty and embarrassment, found in the convention an indispensable support. It required an organization to which it could declare its sorrows year by year, and from which it could obtain much needed assistance. On these grounds, as well as many others, the seminary has always vigorously advocated the continued maintenance of the convention.

But the sturdiest prop of an institution that was almost ready to fall was the board of foreign missions. They had no rivals in prosecuting the foreign mission work of Southern Baptists. On either side of the Mississippi all states and territories were open to them; their agents were kindly welcomed everywhere. By consequence it was in their power to exhibit a degree of prosperity that was unusual for that time, and to present reports that were always gratifying and often surprising. Friends of the convention could urge with entire propriety that there was no serious call to surrender as long as this creditable work remained intact.

At the close of our first fifty years of success and trial it is becoming to bestow a deserved meed of acknowledgment and gratitude upon the sturdy board of foreign missions, and upon their noble corresponding secretary, Dr. H. A. Tupper, for the splendid services it was given them to render us. They brought succor and strength and deliverance when other helpers all failed. Without their assistance we should not have been able to celebrate our jubilee today.

3. Period of prosperity 1879-1895.

Almost every interest connected with the Southern section of our country began to display marked energy after the year 1879. Our convention took a new lease of existence, and after long years of weakness experienced afresh the joys of life.

The Theological Seminary, which it was apprehended might be suspended forever at the close of its session in May, 1880, found a deliverer in the person of Governor Joseph E. Brown of Georgia. In March, 1880, he bestowed upon it a gift of \$50,000, coupled with the condition that within a specified period the amount should be raised to \$200,000, and this kept for

ever sacred as an endowment fund. Here was the beginning of progress. The fund of \$200,000 was duly completed, and proved to be only the foundation upon which in the past sixteen years a large superstructure has been reared. Our seminary is one of the most important Baptist institutions of theological learning in the country, or in the world. A certain proportion of the means that constitute this large plant was bestowed by brethren from the Northern states, and it is a sincere pleasure to recognize their generosity and give them thanks. But we have not waited for other people. We have remembered the duty of helping ourselves. The great bulk of the property belonging to the theological seminary must be considered as a monument of the rising prosperity of the Southern states and of the increasing liberality of Southern Baptists.

The receipts of the foreign mission board began to grow apace, with the year 1880. In the thirty-four years between 1845 and 1879 this board received, from all sources, \$999,377.23. In the sixteen years that have elapsed since that period it has received \$1,411,529.14. Here is no time to enter into minute details, but we cannot omit to congratulate ourselves upon the brilliant advances that have been recorded in foreign missions. The fields which up to 1879 had been cultivated in Africa, China, and Italy have been greatly reinforced and improved, while other fields have been opened and successfully cultivated in lands that were not then occupied by us. Our missions may not be all we could desire, but we are heartily proud of them, and are willing for them to be compared with the work performed by other denominations.

The Home Mission board, which had so long been in an enfeebled condition began to receive new favor after 1879. In the year 1882 it was reconstructed at Greenville, South Carolina, and, under Dr. I. T. Tichenor, started upon a career of prosperity that has been the joy and the marvel of our recent history. Experience has amply demonstrated that this agency is necessary to the prosperity and efficiency of the convention. Therefore we may well rejoice in every influence that contributes to strengthen the hands and to improve the resources of the home mission board.

Something new under the sun began to display itself at Greenville. We had long been accustomed to comparatively small assemblies and the slight attendance upon the sessions of the body. Some of us hoping to correct this evil, were striving to induce our brethren to return to the former practice of holding biennial sessions. At Greenville the magnificent crowds began to appear that have recently become such a striking feature of our convocations. There were 616 members at Baltimore in 1884; Louisville entertained 656 in 1887; and in other instances the figures have gone still higher. This remarkable change in-

dicates the fact that our Baptist people have always felt a gratifying amount of interest in our affairs. I believe we have possessed the hearts of the people in a way that can be claimed by few of the religious organizations of our country. The people would have been present in the darkest hours of our history, but poverty forbade them. As soon as it became financially possible for them to travel, they were delighted to put in their appearance. While we have a constituency of such number, character, and resources, there can be no further thought of surrender. A spirit of hopefulness and enterprise has been gaining ground for years. We feel that we can accomplish whatever is sensible and prudent for us to undertake. The time has come when, without conceit, we may consider that we are well able to possess the land in which our lot is cast.

In the gloomiest period of our suffering and privation the wise and hopeful corresponding secretary of the foreign mission board, Dr. H. A. Tupper, began to encourage and promote among our women an interest in the subject of missions. The earliest central committee was organized under his direction in the year 1876, and with persistent enthusiasm he pressed the enterprise wherever he could find an opportunity. There were many obstacles and many opponents, but in the year 1888, was finally established the Woman's Missionary Union, with its seat in Baltimore. From the outset the women have been exceedingly helpful, but since the establishment of a central board, they have become, in several important respects, the right arm of our power.

Members of the convention were greatly mortified and discouraged at the failure of the Sunday school board, in 1873. For long years it was permitted to rest in peace. We were so often reminded that such an enterprise could not succeed in the South, that we were almost afraid to touch it a second time. But finally, some of our brethren screwed up their courage to the sticking place and brought the matter to the attention of the convention at two different sessions. After a thorough discussion of the subject in the press and on the platform of the convention, in its session at Birmingham, in 1891, organized a new Sunday school board at Nashville. The result has transcended the most sanguine anticipations. The Sunday school board has proved itself a triumphant success, and has done as much as any agency in recent years to excite a sense of pride in our convention and of confidence in our capacities.

One of the best consequences of the new and firmer hold on life which we have gained in the prosperous period of our history has been the increased repose and dignity which have thereby been encouraged. Especially have our sentiments grown more kindly, and more fraternal towards our Northern

brethren. The fact that our footing has become more secure has likewise operated to increase our interest in our colored brethren, and it is possible that in coming years it may be given us to do more to "elicit, combine, and direct" their energies for their own advantage than we have ever accomplished in the past.

I have chosen as the motto of my historical discourse the word of the Lord unto Moses: "Speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward." And I must needs return to it in my closing sentences. Last year the Baptists of the Southern states contributed only eight cents per member to promote the cause of foreign missions. It is presumed that a similar or even smaller amount was contributed for home missions and other objects; but as I have not the facts at hand, it will be desirable to speak only of foreign missions. We have made great progress since the opening year of the convention. Our regular contributions have advanced something like tenfold while our membership has hardly increased above fivefold. But we are still much behind our privileges and our duty. The other great popular denomination of our section, the Southern Methodists, contributed last year the sum of eighteen cents a member for foreign missions. A comparison between them and ourselves is for several reasons more just than can be instituted between us and other religious denominations. We abide this test very ill. It seems to be the sacred duty of us all, as ministers of religion and friends of missions, to speak unto the Baptists of the South that they go forward. They are surely equal to the feat which has been accomplished by our Methodist brethren. Indeed, if they should give their minds to it, they might as easily lead as follow after the Methodists. Here is a reasonable and sober standard. Let us in coming years bestir ourselves and see that we measure up to it.

When the convention was holding its opening session at Augusta, there was a lad just turned eighteen years, resting under the quiet shades of Culpepper, in far distant Virginia. He was unknown to fame. Possibly no member of the body had ever heard his name. In due time he appeared upon the scene, and for a period of thirty years played the role of our great commoner. For thirty years he was the leading force in our counsels and history, and yet throughout that entire period he did not occupy the smallest office directly in the gift of the convention. This year of our jubilee, with all its light and gladness, has been sadly darkened by his departure. On the 17th of March devout men carried him to his burial and made great lamentation over him. The foremost leader of our history, great in the might of his gentleness, has passed away from us, but his fame and usefulness shall go and grow throughout the years and ages. When you who sit here, shall be aged and feeble men and women, little

children will gather about your knees with reverence and delight, to look upon one who has seen and heard and spoken with John A. Broadus.

Compliments of:

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