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JEFFERSON'S BAPTISTS: EVANGELICAL PARTISANSHIP IN THE EARLY AMERICAN REPUBLIC, 1800–1830

A Dissertation
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the Faculty of
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In Partial Fulfillment
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Doctor of Philosophy

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by
Casey Garrett McCall
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APPROVAL SHEET

JEFFERSON'S BAPTISTS: EVANGELICAL PARTISANSHIP
IN THE EARLY AMERICAN REPUBLIC, 1800–1830

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To my dad, Charles Edward McCall,

Thank you for teaching me hard work, sharing Ken Burns's documentaries,

taking me to Civil War battlefields, telling stories about our ancestors,

and modeling a legacy of faith in Christ.

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PREFACE

Three personal fascinations came together for me in this project: the intersection of religion and politics, Southern culture, and Baptist history. David Barrow's *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined on the Principles of Nature, Reason, Justice, Policy, and Scripture* initially piqued my interest in the Kentucky Baptist conflict over slavery. As I read other primary sources from the era, I noticed that many shared Barrow's synthesis of reason, evangelical religion, and Jeffersonianism and applied it in different ways in subsequent Baptist debates. In some ways, the ideological roots of some of our contemporary controversies can be discerned even here during this early period.

I have many people to thank for assisting me in this project. The history faculty at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary continually challenged, encouraged, and guided me over the four years of my doctoral studies. My fellow students likewise challenged me intellectually and encouraged me spiritually through fellowship and prayer. Adam Winters, Archivist at the James P. Boyce Centennial Library, went out of his way to assist me in locating hard-to-find primary sources. The Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives in Nashville provided me with a generous study grant during the early stages of my research.

From my very first seminar with John D. Wilsey, I knew I had a supervisor who would demand excellence. I am grateful for his criticisms, encouragements to press on, and example in modeling what it looks like to think historically. I am also grateful for the opportunity to serve under him in the roles of Garrett Fellow and Online Teaching Assistant. Keith Harper has taken a special interest in my project far beyond what is demanded of an "external reader." I have enjoyed our coffee meetings in Lexington, and I

am delighted to have met someone who shares my interests and yet is so far ahead of me as a Baptist historian. Eric C. Smith is who I aspire to be—a faithful pastor and a world-class historian. His comments and suggestions have made this project better. I am thankful to Dustin Bruce for agreeing to serve on this committee while also shouldering the administrative burden as Dean of Boyce College alongside teaching his courses.

I have had two mentors in my faith, and, though neither of them was directly involved in my pursuit of this degree, both deserve credit for modeling what it looks like to be a faithful pastor while seeking to cultivate the life of the mind. David Prince and Jeremy Haskins, I am eternally grateful for your investment in my life.

For nearly two decades, I have been a member of one church, and words cannot express the impact on my life of the saints of both Ashland Avenue Baptist Church in Lexington, Kentucky, and the church planted from it—the one I now have the privilege of pastoring—Ashland Community Church in La Grange, Kentucky. Pursuing a PhD while pastoring has at times stretched me thin, but I have received nothing but encouragement from my church family along the way. Thank you for being a church (now two churches) in love with Jesus. I would not be who I am in Christ today without your fellowship. To Josh Crawford, Joe Abdelghany, and Dan Kolis, my co-laborers in gospel ministry, thank you for your persistent friendship and for taking up my slack in ministry. To Logan Armstrong and Carrie Bryan, thank you for all the trips back and forth to the library on my behalf.

Finally, to my precious wife, Niki, thank you for everything. I told you years ago to never let me pursue a PhD. I'm glad you ignored that plea. The burden of this project has affected you more than anyone else, especially in your long wait for a fully renovated kitchen, yet you have only encouraged me every step of the way. I have no

more excuses on the kitchen. You are my best friend, and I praise God for you. To my five children, Josiah, Elias, Eden, Lillian, and Samuel, you have patiently endured countless annoyances as I've pursued this project. I love watching you mature in Christ and can't wait to see where our Lord leads each of you next.

Casey G. McCall

La Grange, Kentucky

December 2023

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Complexity has always characterized the relationship between politics and religion in the American republic. In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at the counterintuitive American dynamic in which Christian religion exerted extraordinary influence over the mores of society while at the same time remaining institutionally separate from political power. In fact, Tocqueville believed that the strength of religion's power in America was the result of that separation. When religion attaches itself to political power, he theorized, it binds itself to the fragile and ephemeral fortunes of political institutions. But when religion stands on its own, it operates unhindered within its own protected sphere.[1] Neither Tocqueville nor America's founders, however, understood this separation in absolute terms. America's Constitution guaranteed that government would not establish religion; it did not erect an impenetrable wall between church and state.[2] In fact, as Tocqueville himself realized, the political conditions that motivated the migration to the New World in the first place shaped the Christianity of

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[1] "As long as religion finds its strength in the sentiments, the instincts, the passions that are reproduced in the same way in all periods of history, it defies the effort of time, or at least it can be destroyed only by another religion. [Political powers can do nothing against it.] But when religion wants to rely on the interests of this world, it becomes almost as fragile as all the powers of the earth. Alone, religion can hope for immortality; tied to ephemeral powers, it follows their fortune, and often falls with passions of the day that sustain those powers." Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols., ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Carmel, IN: Liberty Fund, 2012), 1:483–84. For an abridgement to Tocqueville's work that provides a stimulating introduction to his thought, see Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: A New Abridgement for Students*, ed. John D. Wilsey (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

[2] The memorable image of a "wall of separation" is taken from a letter written by then-President Thomas Jefferson to the Danbury Baptist Association (Connecticut) in 1802. For an examination of the meaning of the letter, see Daniel L. Dreisbach, *Thomas Jefferson and the Wall of Separation between Church and State* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 241–43.

that world's inhabitants in profound ways.[3] Therefore, even in a context that eventually came to prioritize disestablishment and prize religious freedom, the study of America's religious traditions and the study of the nation's political developments overlap. Neither story can be told without reference to the other.

Shortly after America's Revolution ended, a trickle became a steady stream as migrants flooded over the Allegheny Mountains and into the bountiful lands that would become by 1792 the state of Kentucky. Baptists from Virginia made up a disproportionate number of these opportunistic settlers, and they came for several reasons.[4] Disconnected from the social mobility afforded aristocratic landowners and established Anglican clergy in Virginia, Baptists sought new beginnings in a land that honored individual conscience and rewarded hard work. Unfettered from hierarchical ecclesiastical oversight and accustomed to working the land for a living, they were ideally suited for life on the rough frontier and quickly established churches in any frontier locale where two or three Baptists were willing to gather in Jesus's name. As Baptists continued to settle in the fertile soils west of the Appalachian Mountains, however, they spread more than the gospel of Jesus Christ; they also promoted Thomas Jefferson's brand of republicanism.

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[3] "Most of English America was populated by men who, after escaping from the authority of the Pope, submitted to no religious supremacy; so they brought to the New World a Christianity that I cannot portray better than by calling it democratic and republican." Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1:467.

[4] Several illuminating histories have been written on this generation of migrating Baptists. See especially David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World* (New York: Lewis Colby, 1848); J. H. Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists, from 1769 to 1885*, 2 vols. (Cincinnati, OH: J. R. Baumes, 1885); William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier, The Baptists 1783–1830: A Collection of Source Material* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931); Frank M. Masters, *A History of Baptists in Kentucky* (Louisville: Kentucky Baptist Historical Society, no. 5, 1953); Ira (Jack) Birdwhistell, *The Baptists of the Bluegrass: A History of Elkhorn Baptist Association, 1785–1985* (Berea, KY: Berea College Press, 1985); Richard C. Traylor, *Born of Water and Spirit: The Baptist Impulse in Kentucky, 1776–1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2015); Keith Harper, *A Mere Kentucky of a Place: The Elkhorn Association and the Commonwealth's First Baptists* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2021).

Thesis

This dissertation will demonstrate how Baptists in Kentucky synthesized evangelical convictions with their own vision of Jeffersonian Republicanism between the years 1800 and 1830. This synthesis impacted both politics and religion. First, it identified Thomas Jefferson and his party as the obvious choice for Baptists in the region, intensifying partisan political debates with the rhetoric of evangelical conviction.[5] This widespread allegiance would assist in keeping Jefferson's Republican Party in power for the next quarter century. Second, this synthesis impacted local churches and associations as partisan concerns infiltrated theological decision-making. Despite Baptist rhetoric emphasizing separation, partisan interests permeated theological debates on controversial issues like slavery, missions, and creeds. In the words of Nathan O. Hatch, "The transitional period between 1780 and 1830 left as indelible an imprint upon the structures of American Christianity as it did upon those of American political life."[6] Baptists increasingly united the cause of Jeffersonian Republicanism with the cause of Christ and allowed political rhetoric to shape their understanding of central theological concepts like liberty and equality. This partisanship led Kentucky Baptists to adopt a reactive political mythology that suspected various hierarchies and authorities as tyrannical, leaving their churches and associations vulnerable to emerging populist religious movements that better embodied Jeffersonian ideals.

Jeffersonian loyalty had been secured during the fight against the Anglican establishment in Virginia in the years immediately following the Revolution, and it only grew as Republican politicians learned to self-identify as defenders of the rights of the common man. As intense nation-wide partisanship grew around the presidential election

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[5] The merging of evangelical rhetoric with partisan politics was not unique to Jeffersonians. Jonathan J. Den Hartog has shown how Federalists in New England combined religious conviction with partisan loyalty in *Patriotism and Piety: Federalist Politics and Religious Struggle in the New American Nation* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

[6] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 6.

of 1800, Baptists in the South, many of whom had personally experienced persecution at the hands of the Anglican establishment, unhesitatingly gave Jefferson their support.[7] While Federalist evangelicals derided Jefferson for his freethinking unorthodox religious views, Baptists learned to overlook these concerns and instead worked to build a coalition with Jefferson's Republican Party based on other shared goals. By the time Baptists began flooding into the Kentucky frontier in the years preceding Jefferson's presidency, the time for choosing sides in the new republic's increasingly heated partisan debates was over. These Baptists belonged to Jefferson.[8] As they fanned out into fertile lands and planted new churches west of the Appalachians, they were simultaneously establishing outposts of Jefferson's unique brand of republican government. The influence of political loyalty cut both ways. As Jefferson's party increased in popularity through its identification with a growing Baptist movement, Baptist institutions increasingly embodied the ideals of Jefferson's party.

Ideas have consequences, and political ideas often impact change far beyond the political context. This premise underlies this project. Specifically, this dissertation studies the ways in which Jeffersonian political ideology intersected with evangelical theology in a specific place among a specific people during a pivotal period in the early history of the United States. To achieve depth of insight, this study focuses specifically on Baptists in Kentucky between the years 1800 and 1830. The presidential election of 1800 featured heated partisan debates between John Adams's Federalist Party and

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[7] For a thorough examination of the contentious election of 1800, see John Ferling, *Adams Vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); For an examination of the circumstances behind the Jeffersonian-Baptist alliance, see John A. Ragosta, *Wellspring of Liberty: How Virginia's Religious Dissenters Helped Win the American Revolution and Secured Religious Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[8] While the Baptists who settled west of the Appalachians were overwhelmingly Jeffersonian, Obbie Tyler Todd has shown that there was also a strong movement of Baptist Federalism in early America, particularly in larger eastern cities. In fact, he calls Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina "the three centers for Baptist Federalism." See Todd, "Baptist Federalism: Religious Liberty and Public Virtue in the Early Republic," *Journal of Church and State* 63, no. 3 (2021): 440–60 and *Let Men Be Free: Baptist Politics in the Early United States (1776–1835)* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2022), 82–101. For a profile of one Baptist Federalist, see John B. Boles, "Henry Holcombe, A Southern Baptist Reformer in the Age of Jefferson," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (1970): 381–407.

Thomas Jefferson's Republican Party and culminated in what historians have labeled the "Revolution of 1800."[9] Kentucky Baptists enthusiastically supported Jefferson and contributed to the political mythology that pitted Jefferson as representative of America's ideals against Federalists bent on tyranny, greed, and control. This study terminates with Alexander Campbell's break with the Baptist movement in 1830. Campbell's attempt to restore "the ancient order of things" resulted in the defection of nearly one-fourth of Kentucky Baptists.[10] While these events may seem unrelated, this dissertation argues that Jeffersonian partisanship precipitated a trajectory that left Baptist institutions vulnerable to populist evangelical movements like Campbell's. In making this argument, I am not claiming Jeffersonianism was the only ideological factor or even the most impactful for Kentucky Baptists. It did, however, advance a powerful political mythology that shaped the values and priorities of these early Baptists.

Methodology

This dissertation is a study of political partisanship among Baptists settling westward in the early republic. The nature of the project, thus, poses several challenges. Disconnected from large eastern cities with flourishing publishing enterprises and mostly cut off from the trans-Atlantic intellectual world, Kentucky Baptists during this time did not produce large quantities of published works. Due to the challenge and expense of publishing, that they managed to print and distribute at all highlights the value placed on the few works that survive. Thankfully, several types of works have endured, including theological tracts, addresses, sermons, histories, personal memoirs, and republished works from other authors. Despite these contextual challenges, this period coincided with

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[9] See James Horn, Jan Ellen Lewis, and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *The Revolution of 1800: Democracy, Race, and the New Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

[10] Alexander Campbell wrote a series of thirty-two articles entitled, "A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things," in his *The Christian Baptist* from February 7, 1825, until September 7, 1829. See Alexander Campbell, ed., *The Christian Baptist* (St. Louis, MO: Christian, 1823–30), 126, 133, 139, 158, 165, 174, 180, 188, 194, 209, 222, 231, 242, 260, 282, 294, 312, 322, 335, 362, 395, 406, 428, 440, 467, 471, 485, 500, 509, 530, 549, 585.

an era that historian Daniel Walker Howe has labelled a "communications revolution."[11] Even the rural frontier benefited from these advances in communications technology.

Additionally, citizens of Kentucky profited from the publishing efforts of John Bradford and his sons who themselves settled in Kentucky from Virginia in 1780. This family set up and ran a printing operation in Lexington that published tracts, books, a newspaper, and even Baptist associational minutes.[12] Several prominent Baptist leaders took advantage of the services of Bradford and other likeminded enterprising printers to publish their concerns about a variety of important issues. Bradford's newspaper, the *Kentucky Gazette*, was published continuously from 1787 to 1848 and proved instrumental in communicating the news of the day to what was an isolated frontier demographic during those early years. The names of Baptist leaders appear frequently in *Gazette* advertisements, proving that the early Baptists relied on the Republican-leaning publication. This newspaper provides contextual clues that allows the historian to follow these Baptists beyond their church and associational minute books.

Baptist polity necessitated monthly church meetings and annual associational meetings where members would gather to make important decisions about church discipline cases and to coordinate cooperative efforts among member churches. Many of the minute book manuscripts for these significant meetings survive and offer clues about Baptist controversies and concerns. Associational minutes were usually printed for distribution among the various member churches, but local church minute books were handwritten and are sometimes illegible and incomplete. Nevertheless, these minute

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[11] Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

[12] For more on John Bradford's publishing efforts in early Kentucky, see J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *John Bradford, Esq.: Pioneer Kentucky Printer and Historian* (Lexington, KY: Winburn Press, 1950); William Henry Perrin, *The Pioneer Press of Kentucky* (Louisville: John P. Morton, 1888); Richard Miller Hadsell, "John Bradford and His Contributions to the Culture and Life of Early Lexington and Kentucky," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 62, no. 4 (1964): 265–77; Daniel A. Yanchisin, "John Bradford, Public Servant," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 68, no. 1 (1970): 60–69; Samuel M. Wilson, "The 'Kentucky Gazette' and John Bradford Its Founder," *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 31, no. 2 (1937): 102–32.

books provide an essential window into the social world of early Baptist churches. As Monica Najar has shown, Baptist churches in the South "acted as both civil and religious bodies, creating institutions that drew settlers together, galvanized their loyalties, and schooled them in the structures of community—all in a culture that deeply distrusted institutions."[13] In a social context with minimal organizing institutions, churches often filled the void. This dissertation will utilize both published minutes and handwritten meeting books to illuminate the social world of frontier Baptists, including familial relationships and the role of slaves within churches.

Significance of the Question

Spencer W. McBride writes, "The alliances American political leaders forged with politicized clergymen during the Revolution and in the early republic are misunderstood and underappreciated aspects of United States history."[14] The bulk of scholarly attention on this vital topic has trended toward major denominational leaders in more populous coastal cities, and Baptists have often been neglected.[15] However, Baptist churches multiplied in frontier border states during the Jeffersonian era, and the alliance between Baptists and Jeffersonians was instrumental in shaping the cultural values that came to dominate this region—values that persist even to the present day. This dissertation seeks to shed further light on this Jeffersonian-Baptist synthesis. Considering the recent work of historians in underlining the profound role that religion played in the building of the nation, this study flips the focus by observing the impact of politics on

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[13] Monica Najar, *Evangelizing the South: A Social History of Church and State in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

[14] Spencer W. McBride, *Pulpit and Nation: Clergymen and the Politics of Revolutionary America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 1.

[15] "For the Baptists, unfortunately, there is not yet an adequate historiography to explore how these self-created, militantly congregational, mostly antiformalist, and yet doctrinally traditional stalwarts performed their marvels in the new republic. Yet marvels they doubtless were, with a net gain in churches between 1792 and 1812 greater than the total number in any denomination existing in America on the earlier date." Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 180.

evangelicalism. Behind the rhetoric of religious freedom one can find evidence of politicized religion, and this dissertation will argue that those partisan concerns were often at the epicenter of major ecclesial controversies among Kentucky Baptists.

Since the early nineteenth century, Baptist denominational historians have faithfully recorded the histories of Baptist leaders, churches, and associations. Because these early historians often had access to living eyewitnesses and written sources that no longer survive, these works fill significant gaps in the historical narrative that would have otherwise remained open. All subsequent research on Baptists during this period must rely on these vital documents. However, early denominational historians often failed to contextualize their ecclesial subjects within the broader American culture. In other words, most early Baptist denominational history analyzes Baptist subjects, debates, and controversies theologically without taking broader political, social, and cultural phenomena into account. While this study makes a specific argument, I also hope to join more recent scholars in examining Baptist denominational history in its broader American context by focusing specifically on political partisanship.[16]

Summary of Chapters

In the second chapter, I describe the Baptist experience in colonial Virginia under establishment Anglicanism. Due to Anglicanism's dominance, Virginia Baptists were often caught in a conflict between conscience and legal demand. Several of the Baptist leaders documented in this dissertation personally experienced persecution for their theological convictions in their native land. These experiences motivated their appeal to the political arena for relief through disestablishment and the granting of religious liberty. Virginia politicians adroitly rallied undecided Baptists to the colonists' cause in the war for independence against England by promising religious liberty in the

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[16] More recent works have begun to correct this error. In the field of Kentucky Baptist scholarship, see Harper, *A Mere Kentucky of a Place*, and Traylor, *Born of Water and Spirit.*

new nation.[17] Most Baptists became lifelong Jeffersonians after Jefferson and his allies made good on their promise. This chapter will also examine partisanship within the context of Jefferson's 1800 presidential election, explain the core tenets of Jeffersonian Republicanism as Virginia Baptists understood it, and assess how these evangelicals reconciled their loyalty to Jefferson with Jefferson's own problematic religious views.[18]

Chapter 3 surveys the similarities between Jefferson's political philosophy and Baptist ecclesiology. How did Baptist church polity and practice reinforce the key tenets of Jeffersonian Republicanism? Baptist polity allowed for new churches to be started with considerable ease. Therefore, as the frontier moved ever westward under the rush of opportunistic settlers, Baptist churches multiplied. These Baptist churches and associations came to share many Jeffersonian ideals, like egalitarianism, the opportunity to break from an oppressive past, and optimism for a future in which liberty would reign and prosperity could be attained. In the words of James Madison Pendleton, a Kentucky Baptist born in 1811 who came of age during the era of Jeffersonian dominance, "Baptists glory in their form of church government—which recognizes every church as a little republic in itself."[19]

Chapter 4 examines what some historians have called "the neglected period of anti-slavery in America."[20] Like many Americans at the turn of the century, trans-Appalachian Baptists were torn over the issue of slavery. Interestingly, the debate mirrored Jefferson's own contradictory position on the issue.[21] Several Baptists made

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[17] See Ragosta, *Wellspring of Liberty*, 43–70.

[18] See McBride, *Pulpit and Nation*, 148–70.

[19] James M. Pendleton, *Church Manual, Designed for the Use of Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1867), 43.

[20] Alice Dana Adams, *The Neglected Period of Anti-Slavery in America, 1808–1831* (Williamstown, MA: Corner House, 1973).

[21] For Jefferson on slavery, see John Chester Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991); Thomas S. Kidd, *Thomas Jefferson: A Biography of Spirit and Flesh* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022); Garrett Ward Sheldon, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 129–40;

antislavery arguments rooted in Jefferson's political philosophy—particularly his Enlightenment-inspired views on natural rights—while others mimicked the politician's non-action on the issue.[22] This impasse led to a momentary division among Kentucky Baptists as more than thirty ministers formed a new association based on shared Baptist and antislavery convictions. While the movement fizzled out in Kentucky in the face of intense regional pressure to make peace with slavery, antislavery Baptists who settled further west achieved various measures of success in opposing the institution. The debate over slavery among Baptists in the early nineteenth century revealed cracks in the Jeffersonian-Baptist synthesis as Baptists struggled to consistently apply Jeffersonian and evangelical ideals.

In chapter 5, I examine the highly charged debate among Kentucky Baptists over the issue of voluntary mission societies. During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, northern evangelicals led the way in establishing hundreds of voluntary societies across America for the purpose of evangelization and societal renewal. Mark Noll has credited this season of feverish activity with "transform[ing] the shape of American religion in the half century after the Declaration of Independence."[23] Populist evangelicals in the South, however, did not look kindly on sophisticated northerners crisscrossing their native lands to drum up financial support for their mission efforts. In fact, southern evangelicals from diverse ecclesial traditions despised what they perceived as ecclesiastical tyranny and high-minded snobbery and wrote pamphlets in

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Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 144–52.

[22] "Since white Baptists did not find unanimity on emancipation, they steered clear of it in good Jeffersonian fashion," in Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 73.

[23] Noll, *America's God*, 182. For more on voluntary societies, see Den Hartog, *Patriotism and Piety*; Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 170–89; Thomas S. Kidd, *America's Religious History: Faith, Politics, and the Shaping of a Nation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 92–110. For an in-depth look at the American Bible Society, see John Fea, *The Bible Cause: A History of the American Bible Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

defense of their own biblical convictions and Jeffersonian mores. Many from this region—Jeffersonian Baptists included—believed they were doing just fine without unsolicited help from the north. This chapter will explore how political partisanship and regional pride fueled their resistance.

In the 1820s, a Scots-Irish immigrant named Alexander Campbell (1788–1866) and several followers initiated a preaching and publishing campaign in frontier lands that would eventually attract nearly twenty-five percent of Kentucky's Baptists and similar percentages from lower regions to their cause.[24] This sixth chapter explores how Campbell, a self-described "Reformer," and his followers took the familiar Jeffersonian rhetoric of liberty to new heights as they called for the abolition of all organizational restraints in the church. In summarizing Campbell's views, Hatch writes, "In short, no human organization could exist that did not spring from the uncoerced will of the individual."[25] In subjecting all ecclesiological matters to their own individualistic reading of the New Testament, the Campbellites railed against creeds, confessions, church membership, associations, and theological systems. In language that would resonate deeply with Jeffersonians of all stripes, Campbell referred to his true gospel as "the declaration of independence of the kingdom of Jesus."[26] In Alexander Campbell's "Reformation," multitudes of Jeffersonian Baptists found a more Jeffersonian option—one that would lead them to shed the label "Baptist" altogether.

In the years between the Revolution and 1830, Baptists in America grew in lockstep with the nation at large. Beginning as a despised and disparate sect, they entered the war with little social capital and poor prospects for advancement. The war and the period of Constitution-forming that followed, however, provided the incentive for

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[24] Traylor, *Born of Water and Spirit*, 100.

[25] Nathan O. Hatch, "The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People," *The Journal of American History* 67, no. 3 (1980): 556.

[26] Alexander Campbell, *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (Cincinnati, OH: Central Book Concern, 1879), 374.

Baptists in Virginia to organize and assert themselves within a religious context on the way to disestablishment. Virginia Baptists would emerge from this pivotal era as a legitimate force allied to a Jeffersonian political party also on the rise.

CHAPTER 2

JEFFERSONIAN LOYALTY SECURED: VIRGINIA BAPTISTS AND THE FIGHT FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

In 1778, David Barrow, a Baptist minister at Mill Swamp Church of the Kehukee Association in Isle of Wight County, Virginia, travelled east with fellow Baptist minister, Edward Mintz, to preach by invitation at a residence on the Nansemond River. Upon arriving, Barrow, after being warned of potential trouble, ascended a makeshift stage erected under some trees for shade and began leading the small gathering of worshipers in the singing of a hymn. Soon thereafter, a gang of twenty "well dressed men" seized the two Baptists and dragged them to the river for a faux baptism ritual.[1] According to one early Baptist historian, the two men were mockingly asked if they believed as their heads were repeatedly plunged beneath the muddy waters, to which Barrow responded, "I believe you mean to drown me."[2] Barrow and Mintz were eventually released without serious physical harm that day, but the shared experience of living with humiliation and fear as a despised minority of dissenters under the Anglican establishment would shape the political outlook of Virginia Baptists for decades to come.

Such scenes were not uncommon in Virginia before and during America's war with Britain for independence. In fact, Lewis Peyton Little documented 153 instances of persecution of seventy-nine different Baptist preachers between 1760 and 1778 in

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[1] James B. Taylor, *Lives of Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 2nd ed. (Richmond, VA: Yale & Wyatt, 1838), 157.

[2] Robert B. Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia* (Richmond, VA: John O' Lynch, 1810), 357.

Virginia.[3] He wrote, "No Baptist preacher lost his life in that memorable struggle in Virginia for religious freedom, but it did cost them much blood, many tears, and tribulations."[4] Citizens of the Virginia colony were officially members of the Church of England and legally required to support that institution. Baptists, who did not share Anglican convictions on baptism, ecclesiology, or worship practices, despised such legal requirements on theological grounds as violations of conscience. Civil authorities, however, depended on adherence to the established church for stability in a colonial context with few institutions and viewed dissenters like the Baptists as usurpers of social order. During and after the war, Baptists at last found support for religious liberty in the political philosophies of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison and formed an alliance that culminated in the passage of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom in 1786. Thereafter, the Baptist movement in the South grew in lockstep with the growth of Jefferson's party as each relied on the other for support. As a result of this alliance, many within the Baptist movement, whose political theology had developed organically from the same theological stream that included persecuted figures like Thomas Helwys (1575–1616) in England and Roger Williams (1603–83) in the New England colonies, began to synthesize Baptist theology with Jeffersonian political philosophy and to articulate their doctrine of religious liberty using increasingly political language.[5]

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[3] Lewis Peyton Little, *Imprisoned Preachers and Religious Liberty in Virginia: A Narrative Drawn Largely from the Official Records of Virginia Counties, Unpublished Manuscripts, Letters, and Other Original Sources* (Lynchburg, VA: J. P. Bell, 1938).

[4] Little, *Imprisoned Preachers and Religious Liberty in Virginia*, viii.

[5] Helwys wrote *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* in 1612, which is recognized as the first argument for the complete freedom of conscience in the English language. Williams sparred with John Cotton, the leading Puritan Congregationalist minister of Boston, over religious liberty in two works, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* (1644) and *The Bloody Tenent yet more Bloudy* (1652).

Virginia's Anglican Monopoly

When King James I issued the First Charter of Virginia in 1606 to a group of adventurous businessmen, he intended for the settlers of that colony to enjoy all the rights of English citizens just as he anticipated the land to be governed by English law. Therefore, when James decreed that "the true word, and service of God and Christian faith be preached, planted, and used," he meant the Christian faith "according to the doctrine, rights, and religion now professed and established within our realm of England." The king decreed that anyone seeking to withdraw his subjects away from the Church of England be "apprehended, arrested, and imprisoned, until he shall fully reform himself" or sent to England for punishment.[6] English authorities understood all too well the immense challenge of uniting a vast empire under one religion.

The founding of Jamestown in America by the Virginia Company coincided with a period of drastic instability in England—a time when religious policy varied according to ruler. The Protestant James had just survived the Gunpowder Plot in 1605 in which a Catholic by the name of Guy Fawkes was discovered in the cellars of Parliament presumably intending to detonate thirty-six barrels of gunpowder. In a world where many believed that stability necessitated conformity, the Scottish monarch had to navigate the threats of disaffected Catholics on one side and reform-minded Puritans on the other. As Jewel L. Spangler writes, "The charter of the Virginia Company dates from an age when most English people took it for granted that their nation must have a religious foundation to maintain social order and prosper, that England would prosper and achieve order best if unified around a single faith, and that church and state must necessarily be intertwined to achieve these goals."[7]

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[6] William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619*, vol. 1 (New York: R. & W. & G. Bartow, 1823), 68–69.

[7] Jewel L. Spangler, *Virginians Reborn: Anglican Monopoly, Evangelical Dissent, and the Rise of the Baptists in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 11.

As the seventeenth century progressed, the Virginia colony remained loyal to the king but operated increasingly as an independent government due primarily to its geographic separation by an ocean and the king's attention being diverted to more pressing matters at home. The General Assembly of Virginia was made up of the crown-appointed governor and Council (composed of heads of landed families) and the elected House of Burgesses (two members from each county). While Anglicanism in the colony operated outside of the official church hierarchy, the General Assembly relied on English law to enforce conformity to the church. Citizens faced fines for failing to attend public worship at least once every four weeks and were responsible for sharing the financial burden for both Anglican ministers and church properties. The law further required worship liturgy to conform to the *Book of Common Prayer*, divided the land into parishes, and placed citizens under the spiritual oversight of an assigned Anglican minister.[8] Church administration within parishes fell to elected committees of twelve gentlemen known as "vestries." Made up of the leading men of the parish, vestries oversaw the imposition of annual taxes on parishioners for the minister's salary and upkeep of church properties. This thankless responsibility did not typically endear vestries to the citizenship. Nevertheless, vestries also oversaw relief of the parish's poor and were thus able to lighten financial burdens according to changing life circumstances.[9] Finally, vestries were responsible for overseeing the morals of parishioners and enforcing church attendance laws.

In 1689, in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution, the English Parliament passed the Act of Toleration, granting a measure of allowance to Protestant nonconformists. Parliament allowed dissenters who were willing to swear oaths of

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[8] For a more thorough description of this system, see Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 9–42.

[9] Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 65.

allegiance freedom to worship in registered meeting houses led by licensed preachers. The Virginia General Assembly followed suit gradually, but the colonies never reached universal agreement regarding the relevancy of the Act of Toleration in the New World. In Virginia, toleration under the policy was initially more of a theory than a reality due to the small number of dissenters living there.[10] During the first decades of the eighteenth century, however, groups like the Quakers and the Presbyterians gained legitimacy and began to attract followers. Even then, these groups remained uncontroversial as long as they quietly went about their business and refrained from directly challenging local customs and institutions. In the 1740s, however, the revivals of the Great Awakening began creating commotion, setting the stage for conflict with the Anglican establishment.[11]

George Whitefield and the First Great Awakening

In 1740, Archibald Cummings, Anglican minister in Philadelphia, published *Faith Absolutely Necessary, But Not Sufficient to Salvation Without Good Works*, a tract containing two sermons preached at Christ Church, Philadelphia, with a preface identifying George Whitefield, recently arrived from England, as the occasion for the publication.[12] Cummings, aware of Whitefield running afoul of church authorities in England, advised the young evangelist to temper his enthusiasm in America—advice Whitefield ignored as he took to the streets of Philadelphia to preach the new birth and to accuse Anglican clergy of "*Hypocrisy* and *false doctrine*; of subscribing without

[10] Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 18.

[11] For a history of the Great Awakening in America, see Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007) and Frank Lambert, *Inventing the "Great Awakening"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[12] For George Whitefield's role in shaping evangelicalism in America, see Thomas S. Kidd, *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014); Frank Lambert, *"Pedlar in Divinity": George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991).

believing their *Articles*, in order to get into Preferment; and that when once possessed of their Churches, they locked the Doors and put the Keys into their Pockets."[13] Cummings wrote to guard the unity of the Anglican church from such a schismatic as Whitefield and lamented that "some have rashly deserted the Communion of the Church implicitly obeying his Schismatical Advice *viz.* That they should follow some rigid Itinerant Dissenters, whom he named, as the only Preachers of the *true Gospel* in these Parts."[14] To many Anglican clergymen in both England and the colonies, Whitefield's message was threateningly subversive. According to Cummings, the enthusiastic preacher sought to make up for his lack of reason and education by relying on "grimace, noise, and passion." Such preaching appealed only to those immature listeners who mistook the "*wild Freaks* of an over-heated Fancy, for the Suggestions of God's holy Spirit."[15]

George Whitefield arrived in Philadelphia on November 2, 1739, and, preceded by widespread media reports celebrating his prior success in England, gained celebrity-status upon arrival. The gifted orator immediately embarked on a relentless preaching tour across the colonies where multitudes gathered to hear him at every stop and countless of them converted in response to his fiery messages.[16] Whitefield did not introduce religious revival to the colonies, for such awakenings were already under way in Jonathan Edwards's Congregational outpost of Northampton, Massachusetts, as well as under the Presbyterian Gilbert Tennent in the Middle Colonies.[17] However, Whitefield's preaching in the colonies had the effect of pouring gasoline on already-flickering revival

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[13] Archibald Cummings, *Faith Absolutely Necessary, But Not Sufficient to Salvation Without Good Works, in Two Sermons, Preached at Christ-Church in Philadelphia, April 20, 1740* (Philadelphia: Andrew and William Bradford, 1740), iv.

[14] Cummings, *Faith Absolutely Necessary*, xii.

[15] Cummings, *Faith Absolutely Necessary*, xiv.

[16] Kidd claims that if crowd estimates from the time are accurate, his stop in Boston on October 12, 1740, was the "largest assembly every gathered in the history of the American colonies," in *George Whitefield*, 1.

[17] For more on Edwards and Tennent, see Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 13–39.

fires. The dramatic Whitefield preached passionately, calling his listeners to respond immediately to Christ through faith and repentance. Uniquely, he taught that the signs of conversion could be discerned in the life of the genuine believer and that the new birth wrought by the Spirit of God manifested itself tangibly. This message resonated deeply with colonists from church traditions that admitted members from birth and did not emphasize conversion. Established ministers felt threatened by his interruption of the status quo but even more so by his persistent insinuations that many of them had not personally experienced the new birth he preached. Under Whitefield, what had been isolated instances of confined revival became widespread in locales across the colonies.

Whitefield made a brief stop in Virginia in December 1739 but did not linger due to his perception of the low spiritual state of the colonists and the difficulty of drawing large crowds from among the scattered plantations.[18] The preacher's impact, however, outpaced his own personal presence. Beginning in 1743, a recently converted Anglican bricklayer named Samuel Morris began reading Whitefield's sermons to a regular gathering of sympathetic listeners in Hanover County. This group grew to the point of needing a meetinghouse built to accommodate them and eventually identified as Presbyterian after reaching out to pro-revival Presbyterians from William and Gilbert Tennent's Log College for pulpit supply. For insight into how Anglican ministers in Virginia received these "New Light" Presbyterian preachers, consider Patrick Henry's 1744 letter to William Dawson, Commissary of the Bishop of London. Henry, uncle of the more famous patriot leader of the same name, was Anglican rector of St. Paul's Parish in Hanover County. He wrote to express concern over this unsanctioned group for the way in which they "ordaind a good many young Preachers, whom they send into all parts of America to disturb the established Churches of all denominations, requiring almost no other qualification in Candidates for Orders, than, what they call experiences

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[18] Kidd, *George Whitefield*, 97.

of a work of grace in their hearts."[19] Henry laid out an abstract detailing what he considered ten of this group's problematic teachings, including the expectation that a true convert be able to narrate the precise time and manner of conversion, physically sense the Spirit of God's presence, and discern "whether a Minister be converted or not by hearing him preach or pray."[20] Henry himself had been the unfortunate victim of this last claim. Whitefield's preaching of Christ emphasized experiential union with the Holy Spirit through the new birth, and the enthusiasm that often accompanied his preaching raised alarms among established clergy, not only in Virginia, but throughout the colonies.[21]

The Emerging Baptist Movement

As George Whitefield traversed both sides of the Atlantic preaching the new birth, Baptists gave the evangelist mixed reviews. General Baptists typically despised his Calvinism, some Regular Baptists opposed his revivalism, and others resonated deeply with his emphasis on conversion.[22] Most historians trace the origin of the Baptist movement back to exiled Englishman John Smyth's decision to baptize himself and his entire congregation in the Netherlands in 1609.[23] Smyth's fellow minister, Thomas Helwys, returned around 1612 and planted what is believed to be the first General Baptist church in England. The General Baptists, known for Arminian soteriology that emphasized universal atonement and located the primary cause of faith in the will of

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[19] Patrick Henry Sr. et al., "Letters of Patrick Henry, Sr., Samuel Davies, James Maury, Edwin Conway, and George Trask," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (October 1921): 262. For a detailed account of the Anglican/Presbyterian conflict, see Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 43–75. Throughout this dissertation, I will maintain unchanged the original spelling and grammar in all quotes from primary sources.

[20] Henry, "Letters," 263.

[21] See Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 40–67.

[22] See David W. Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press), 73–75.

[23] On Baptist origins, Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries*, 25–41, and Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, 3rd ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000), 33–57.

human beings, were likely the first Baptists in Virginia but were barely in existence there by mid-century. The English Particular Baptists, distinct for Calvinistic soteriology that emphasized an atonement only for God's elect and put the onus of faith on God's sovereign decree, arose out of English Separatism and provided the theological underpinnings for two other Baptist groups in colonial Virginia.[24]

First, the Regular Baptists organized when Particular Baptists in Philadelphia sent missionaries into Virginia and North Carolina beginning in 1752 to assist a small number of struggling General Baptist churches on the condition that they renounce Arminianism and adopt the Calvinistic Philadelphia Confession of Faith.[25] Second, the Separate Baptists, pejoratively labeled "New Lights," originated out of New England Congregationalism and resonated with Whitefield's emphasis on the more experiential aspects of faith such as the new birth and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.[26] Unlike the Regular Baptists, Separates generally rejected the use of confessions of faith, allowed more spontaneous and emotional expressions of worship, and remained open to signs, wonders, and new revelations from God. Jewel L. Spangler correctly concludes that the rise of the Baptists in Virginia should not be attributed exclusively to either Regulars or Separates, for both groups evangelized fervently. Additionally, each group considered

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[24] For the history of this movement, see Stephen Wright, *The Early English Baptists, 1603–1649* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2006), 75–110.

[25] The Philadelphia Confession of Faith was formulated in 1742 by the Philadelphia Baptist Association and is identical to the Second London Confession of Faith (1689) with two added chapters specifying both the singing of praises to God and the laying on of hands upon baptized believers as "ordinances of Christ."

[26] For a detailed history of the rise of the Baptists in America, see Eric C. Smith, *Oliver Hart and the Rise of Baptist America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). On the moniker "New Lights," Virginia Baptist minister William Fristoe wrote, "We suppose what gave rise to this name, was the doctrines taught by the Baptists, viz: the necessity of regeneration—the having natural darkness, ignorance and stupidity removed from the mind, by the illumination of rich grace from the God of light, and a revelation of Christ as the only way to God, the slaying the enmity of the heart, the bringing down every exalted imagination—and leading the soul to depend on the righteousness of Christ alone for justification and acceptance before God, and a capacity given to the understanding to conceive of spiritual things," in William Fristoe, *A Concise History of the Ketocton Baptist Association* (1808; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 2002), 58.

their differences small enough to formally unite under the moniker "United Baptists" in 1787.[27]

By the middle of the eighteenth century, Baptists had played a relatively small role within the religious economy of the American colonies. This fledgling group, however, benefited greatly from the revivals' emphasis on adult conversion. In contrast to the other dominant religious players on the Virginia stage at that time—namely, Anglicans and Presbyterians—Baptists defined the church as a community of visible saints marked out by believer's baptism. The revival's emphasis on the new birth unintentionally legitimized a Baptist tradition that had always emphasized the necessity of adult conversion. Emboldened by the success of the revivals, zealous Baptist preachers, many of them former Congregationalists, crisscrossed the colony making evangelistic appeals to churched and unchurched alike. To illustrate their rapid rise, early Baptist historian David Benedict numbered but ten Baptist churches in the colony in 1768, but by 1790, he estimated that number to have grown to 210.[28]

Rhys Isaac called the Baptist confrontation with the traditional order in Virginia after 1765 the conflict's "fiercest and most bitter phase."[29] Baptist preaching resonated deeply with the poor and uneducated, including slaves and women, but with every new convert, establishment authorities grew suspicious. Unlike others sympathetic to the revivals within Anglicanism and Presbyterianism, Separate Baptists called their hearers to form a new community of the godly distinct from society through the physical and public ritual of believer's baptism. Controversially, Baptists in Virginia during this time often denied the need for ministerial training and empowered anyone who demonstrated the gift to preach. Further, entering a Baptist communion as a member

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[27] Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 83.

[28] David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America* (New York: Lewis Colby, 1848), 641.

[29] Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia*, 162.

required the candidate to relate his or her experience of the grace of God publicly before the church, granting legitimacy to the experiences of even the lowliest members of society. Even enslaved candidates for membership received the dignity of validation as church members listened to them verbalize their own testimonies of grace on their way to a diminished form of shared communion.[30]

Once admitted, members submitted to the local church as their highest spiritual authority, undermining the Anglican hierarchy and Virginia's church-state order. According to Isaac, "The cohesive brotherhood of the Baptists must be understood as an explicit rejection of the formalism of traditional community organization."[31] Baptist churches generally did not recognize societal ranks, and Baptist preachers often overturned social norms by baptizing slaves and women without the consent of masters and husbands, respectively. Anglican authorities united with Virginia's political leaders in their opposition to the Baptists and, when the law against unlicensed preaching proved insufficient, imprisoned many under the vague offense of "disturbing the peace." William Fristoe, himself a Baptist minister in pre-Revolutionary Virginia, later remembered that governing authorities used this claim to avoid being accused of persecuting religion. He wrote that Baptist preachers were charged with being "disturbers of the peace, the perverters of good order, and the calling unlawful assemblies together, taking the people from their necessary employment on their different farms and plantations, bringing the people into habits of idleness."[32] As Obbie Tyler Todd observes, "The doctrine of

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[30] For the relationship between Baptists and slaves in colonial Virginia, see Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

[31] Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia*, 166.

[32] Fristoe, *A Concise History of the Ketocton Baptist Association*, 66.

believer's baptism—and with it the concept of a believers' church—was an inescapably political idea."[33]

In the February 20, 1772 edition of the *Virginia Gazette*, an anonymous lawyer published, "An Address to the Anabaptists imprisoned in Caroline County," for the purpose of explaining the legal system under which Baptist preachers found themselves oppressed and the legal rationale behind viewing Baptists as disturbers of the public peace. The writer defended Virginia's church-state establishment on the grounds that the system promoted the overall good of society. The union of church and state was necessary, he explained, because "a State could not expect to thrive which should seem to rely on her own Strength, by providing State Regulations only, without endeavoring to conciliate the Divine Favour, by establishing Modes of Piety and Devotion." He made an important distinction between a citizen's private opinions, over which the state has no jurisdiction, and the public proclamation of errors, which "disturb the publick Peace." The Baptists, in other words, were not being prosecuted for their convictions, but for their unwillingness to be quiet about them. English common law, he noted, granted the state the right of corporal punishment. Therefore, the writer considered the twin consequence of imprisonment and fines—what the Baptists commonly faced in Virginia—lenient.

He took issue with several features of Baptist practice. First, in contrast to Anglican ministers who proved their divine call through institutional channels, Baptist preachers claimed their call to preach came directly from God. This appeal to inner experience left no external method for validation. Second, he criticized the imprisoned preachers for the "fruit" of their ministry. By calling Anglican citizens to conversion, these preachers "terrify and frighten many honest, and, I will add, pious Men, to forsake their Church and the cheerful innocent Society of their Friends and Families, and turn

[33] Obbie Tyler Todd, *Let Men Be Free: Baptist Politics in the Early United States (1776–1835)* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2022), 1.

sour, gloomy, severe, and censorious to all about them." He added, "Wives are drawn from their Husbands, Children from their Parents, and Slaves from the Obedience of their Masters. Thus the very Heartstrings of those little Societies which form the greater are torn in sunder, and all their Peace destroyed." Third, he lamented the exchange of "orderly, pure, and rational Worship" in the Anglican church for the "Noise and Confusion" in Baptist assemblies. Finally, he bemoaned the negative societal impact of their doctrine. Particularly, he claimed that their Calvinistic insistence that conversion eliminates the possibility of committing the unpardonable sin alluded to in 1 John 5:16 had the effect of loosening the morals of society. Apparently, the threat of hell was politically useful for motivating conformity to law. He closed his address by denying these Baptists exemption under the Act of Toleration, since they had not sought licensure from the government.

The newspaper letter presents the perspective of Anglican detractors of Virginia's early Baptists, but Baptists early on created their own narrative that would powerfully shape Baptist identity in early America. William Fristoe questioned the very legitimacy of one set of men asking permission from another set of men "to worship the God that made them, to publicly own the Lord Jesus that died for them; to talk and tell of his love."[34] For Baptists, to seek licensure from the state was to admit the validity of the corrupt established order, and no person had the authority to take away the freedom of conscience granted by the Creator. Fristoe added that even in those rare cases when Baptists sought licensure under the Act of Toleration, the process was almost impossibly difficult:

> From beginning to end, obstructions and difficulties lay in the way—first to get signers to a petition, second to get a certificate from two acting magistrates in the county from which the petition was sent, thirdly to find the court in such a temper and capable of exercising such generosity as to grant a license, and after all this, it was left uncertain and precarious, and depended on the will and temper of the clergy

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[34] Fristoe, *A Concise History of the Ketocton Association*, 68.

> whether we should succeed or not. Oh! How disagreeable our situation at that time, when in combination the malice of the clergy, and courts of justice were inflamed and raged to a degree of madness, while we were by the common herd spoken against everywhere.[35]

Fristoe's account portrays a fledgling group caught between the laws of earthly government and the dictates of conscience. For the Baptists, the choice was clear: they must obey God rather than men.

These tensions are illustrated well in later Baptist portrayals of persecuted heroes, one prime example being John Waller. Waller was born into an honorable Anglican family in Spotsylvania County in 1741 and began a classical education toward a career in law until funding ran out. He filled the void in his life with a gambling addiction and earned the nickname "Swearing Jack Waller" for his violent and crude lifestyle. He also hated the Baptists and persecuted them fiercely until one of them—the preacher Lewis Craig—made such an impression on him in joyfully enduring persecution that Waller, too, called on the Lord for salvation. Waller's description of his conversion illustrates well the New Light emphasis on the new birth. The necessary period of conviction of sin is present as Waller reported feeling "the greatest abhorrence" of himself to the degree that he "began almost to despair of the mercy of God." However, he determined to never rest until God either showed him mercy or cut him off. He recounted, "In an instant, I felt my heart melt, and a sweet application of the Redeemer's love, to my poor soul." Shortly thereafter, Swearing Jack Waller received baptism.[36]

By 1770, Waller was preaching with much success, raising his profile among his fellow Baptists while simultaneously marking himself as a crazed fanatic in the eyes of the Anglican authorities. During a forty-six-day prison stay in Middlesex, Waller wrote to a friend explaining the circumstances of his imprisonment for preaching the gospel. Local authorities charged him with "carrying on a mutiny against the authority of

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[35] Fristoe, *A Concise History of the Ketocton Association*, 69–70.

[36] Taylor, *Lives of Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 78–79.

the land," and after he was unable to present a license for preaching, they asked him to pay bond and give assurance that his preaching would cease.[37] Waller refused and continued preaching his new birth message from his jail cell. Taylor concluded that in thirty-five years of ministry, John Waller had "lain in four different jails one hundred and thirteen days, besides receiving reproachings, buffetings, stripes, &c." while also baptizing over two thousand converts, helping to ordain twenty-seven Baptist ministers, and participating in the constitution of eighteen Baptist churches.[38] Waller's story illustrates the growth of the Baptist movement in colonial Virginia and the corresponding tensions created by that movement's growth. In the eyes of Virginia's political and religious authorities, societal stability demanded suppression of this populist uprising. For the Baptists, conscience demanded that they continue preaching, and the New Testament helped them interpret their sufferings as the inevitable price for faithfulness to Christ.

Religious Liberty: A Baptist Impulse

Before continuing the narrative of the Baptist struggle in Virginia, Baptist political theology must be considered, for Baptist conceptions of the relationship between church and state remained remarkably consistent throughout the tradition's history on both sides of the Atlantic. Articulations of religious liberty undoubtedly predate the rise of the Baptists in early seventeenth-century England, but Baptist tradition, from its inception, has insisted on freedom of conscience in matters of religious belief as a divine right.[39] Baptists have historically believed that each individual is accountable to God alone for religious conviction, that conscience is the God-given mechanism through

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[37] Taylor, *Lives of Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 80.

[38] Taylor, *Lives of Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 84.

[39] See Robert Louis Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019). Wilken argues, against the view that it was birthed out of the seventeenth-century Enlightenment, that religious liberty's inheritance goes back to the patristic era of the church.

which God guides the person to act on those convictions, and that the state cannot coerce religious conviction from the outside. Based on these beliefs, Baptists have not argued merely for "toleration," wherein the state allows objectionable religious beliefs and chooses to restrain punishment, but for full "religious liberty," wherein the state has no authority to decree religion whatsoever and leaves such matters to individual conscience. If the Christian is called to "render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's," Baptists have historically placed religious conviction under the domain of God alone, making religious liberty a God-ordained right and not the prerogative of legislative discretion.[40]

Thus, religious liberty, for Baptists, fits naturally within a theological nexus that includes believer's baptism and regenerate church membership. If religious conviction cannot be coerced from the outside, Baptists have historically argued, what sense does it make to baptize infants who are incapable of faith? If entrance into the church requires conscientious repentance and faith, then baptism, the visible sign of the new covenant, must be administered only to those who have repented and believed. Since these convictions deny the validity of state-established religion, Baptists who hold them have often done so under threat of persecution. Early Baptists derived their convictions about religious liberty, not from Enlightenment theories of natural rights—ideals that would come to inform American political philosophy—but from their understanding of the Bible and its derivative theology.[41]

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[40] See Thomas S. Kidd, Paul D. Miller, and Andrew T. Walker, eds., *Baptist Political Theology* (Brentwood, TN: B & H Academic, 2023).

[41] The question of "influence" is always murky, historically. These ideas were being formulated in various religious and political contexts by adherents with various philosophical and theological presuppositions. The Baptist commitment to religious liberty, however, predates what is generally known as the Enlightenment period. For an argument that links disestablishment in the American context to Protestant traditions of dissent, see Nicholas P. Miller, *The Religious Roots of the First Amendment: Dissenting Protestants and the Separation of Church and State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Thomas Helwys, shortly before returning to England from the Netherlands to start the first Baptist church on English soil, wrote *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* around 1612, thought to be the first book in the English language to argue for complete religious liberty. Helwys boldly presented a copy to King James I to convince England's monarch that God had placed limitations on the power of earthly rulers. According to Helwys, Christ's declaration that his kingdom is not of this world in John 18:36 made the separation between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdoms of this world explicit. Christ himself submitted as a subject of the kings of this earth, and he hoped James would recognize the limits of his own powers by leaving spiritual matters to Christ.[42] Astutely, Helwys argued that whatever power the Protestant James possessed over his subjects' consciences, the Catholic Mary rightly enjoyed during her reign. If the monarch's authority encompassed the church, the church's theology and practice would need to change according to the prerogative of the ruler. Instead, Helwys argued for a separation of powers wherein the earthly sword is used for earthly power and the spiritual sword is reserved for spiritual power.[43] Alluding to Matthew 22:21, Helwys reasoned that if Christ had commanded his subjects to give earthly rulers what belonged rightfully to them, the king should freely grant to God what belongs to him.[44] Surprisingly, Helwys did not limit religious freedom to Christians only. Consistent with the logic of his argument, he wrote, "Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it does not appertain to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure."[45] King James

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[42] Thomas Helwys, "A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity," in *The Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys*, ed. Joe Early Jr., Early English Baptist Texts (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 190.

[43] Helwys, "A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity," 191.

[44] Helwys, "A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity," 196.

[45] Helwys, "A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity," 209.

predictably responded to Helwys's treatise by arresting him and detaining him in Newgate Prison until his death in 1616.

Roger Williams brought a similar perspective with him to Puritan New England in 1631 and quickly met resistance.[46] In contrast to Virginia, Puritan Congregationalists settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony looking to set up a model of an ideal Christian community for those back home in England. Massachusetts Bay Congregationalists theologically dissented from the Church of England in their insistence on local church autonomy, but they wished to remain subtle about it. They certainly did not want to be known as "separatists," a label that insinuated formal withdrawal and implied political treason. Thus, churches in the colony operated according to separatist principles but officially remained loyal to the Church of England. Roger Williams saw hypocrisy in their capitulation of silence and, true to form, publicly voiced those sentiments, sparking a conflict that would lead to his eventual banishment from the colony and a treatise war with John Cotton, the colony's leading Congregationalist minister.[47] During Williams's return to England to secure a charter for Providence, Rhode Island, he published *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution* in 1644, his most detailed argument for religious liberty.

Resembling Helwys's controversial position, Williams wrote, "It is the will and command of God that (since the coming of his Son the Lord Jesus) a permission of the most pagan, Jewish, Turkish, or Antichristian consciences and worship be granted to

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[46] There is ongoing debate on whether to call Roger Williams a "Baptist." He helped found the first Baptist church in America in Providence, Rhode Island, and was briefly a member there. However, he soon thereafter rejected, not only the Baptist church, but all others for their inability to conform to the New Testament model. While Williams was not technically a Baptist, his theology aligns most closely with the Baptist tradition, and later Baptists looked to him when formulating political theology.

[47] On Williams's exchange with Cotton, see especially James Calvin Davis's introduction to *On Religious Liberty: Selections from the Works of Roger Williams* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 1–45. For biographies of Williams, see Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Master Roger Williams: A Biography* (New York: MacMillan, 1957); James P. Byrd Jr., *The Challenges of Roger Williams: Religious Liberty, Violent Persecution, and the Bible* (Mercer, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002); Edwin S. Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999).

all men in all nations and countries."[48] At the heart of his argument, Williams believed that each person possesses a moral conscience over which the state has no ultimate jurisdiction. The magistrate's sword, according to Williams, is impotent to sway the conscience. Instead, the Spirit of God works by means of the word of God to change hearts and grant repentance.[49] In responding to Cotton's concern for societal harmony and his fear that granting religious freedom would lead to civil disorder, Williams made a distinction between civil and spiritual peace, noting that it was possible to have the former without the latter. Even the "wildest pagans" keep civil peace, Williams argued.[50] According to him, the breach of civil peace occurs, not when idolatrous doctrines and practices are tolerated by civil magistrates, but when such doctrines and practices are attacked with force via "weapons of wrath and blood, whips, stockes, imprisonment, banishment, death &c."[51]

It is not possible to draw a straight line of "genetic" dependence from Thomas Helwys and Roger Williams to pre-Revolutionary Baptists in Virginia.[52] Some Baptists were clearly aware of these earlier writings, but their unique historical context must be primary when examining the formation of their ideas. It is also important to note that Baptists were not the only Protestants making arguments for religious liberty in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Baptist advocates for liberty of conscience fit within a broad stream of political and theological dissent that included Quakers, Independents, Presbyterians, and even some Anglicans. However, in distinction from

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[48] Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, ed. Samuel L. Caldwell, Publications of the Narragansett Club 3 (Providence, RI: n.p., 1867), 3.

[49] Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution,* 135.

[50] Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, 72.

[51] Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, 80.

[52] For a discussion of such an approach, see William H. Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 1–6. Brackney's approach seeks to "show legitimate and demonstrative intellectual/ideological relationships and influences within an expansive religious tradition" (4).

these other groups, Baptist theology seemed to provide an organic seedbed for these ideas, for in the American context, religious liberty garnered almost universal adherence among Baptists—a phenomenon that must be attributed to both social and theological factors. Socially, Baptists generally moved among the bottom of societal hierarchies. Their insistence on a regenerate church and their practice of baptizing converts from other Protestant traditions created social animosity on both sides of the Atlantic. They often sought religious liberty for survival. Theologically, they tended to interpret the Old Testament typologically and prioritized the New Testament for guidance on ecclesiology and political theology. Eschewing Israel as a model, Baptists prioritized the spiritual nature of God's new covenant people. Genetic links connecting baptistic groups are sometimes difficult to locate, but these groups have been united across time by a shared hermeneutical approach to the Bible and its covenants.

The Opportunity of War

To speak of war as opportunity seems counterintuitive, but Virginia Baptists certainly came out of the Revolutionary War with more legal protection and social capital than they had going into it. Historians of early America give abundant attention to the complex political ramifications of the war and note the exceptional nature of America's founding on a set of universal ideas.[53] Historians will continue to debate the origin of America's founding principles—ideals such as liberty, individual rights, and limited government—but, whatever their precise origin, there is little doubt that Baptists in America were among the primary beneficiaries of those ideals becoming foundational to the new nation's government.[54] As early Baptist historian David Benedict noted,

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[53] See Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1967); Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991); C. Bradley Thompson, *America's Revolutionary Mind: A Moral History of the American Revolution and the Declaration That Defined It* (New York: Encounter Books, 2019).

[54] For a viewpoint that almost exclusively credits Enlightenment philosophy with originating America's ideological origins, see Thompson, *America's Revolutionary Mind*. For a counterpoint view that

widespread adherence to republican principles led many Americans to view "established religion as inseparable appendages of monarchy."[55] With their emphases on individual conversion and religious freedom, Baptists had long relied on the language of liberty and conscience in proclaiming the gospel. After the Revolution, related ideas, empowered by diverse intellectual currents, would gain widespread prominence in the new nation, and Baptists, for perhaps the first time in history, found themselves on the right side of the historical moment. After the war, Baptists self-consciously identified their pre-existing ecclesiological polity with America's new democratic government and became an attractive option in the new republic.[56]

Baptists in Virginia began petitioning the House of Burgesses as early as 1770 asking for relief from legal repercussions over religious conviction. The journal from the House of Burgesses notes a Baptist petition discussed as early as May 26, 1770, asking that licensed Baptist preachers be relieved from militia duty to perform their duties as ministers and for permission to preach in unlicensed meetinghouses not specified in their licenses. The House, comprised almost entirely of Anglicans, rejected both requests.[57] Baptists, however, continued to plead for relief. For example, on February 25, 1772, the House considered a Baptist petition asking for the "same toleration . . . as is enjoyed by His Majesty's dissenting Protestant subjects of Great Britain," but took no action on the request.[58] In the summer of 1774, Lord Dunmore, Virginia's crown-appointed governor, dissolved the House over its sympathies with the Boston patriots, but the governing body

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grants religion greater prominence, see Daniel L. Dreisbach and Mark David Hall, eds., *Faith and the Founders of the American Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[55] Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America*, 656.

[56] See Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 195–229; Charles F. Irons, "Believing in America: Faith and Politics in Early National Virginia," *American Baptist Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (2002): 396–412.

[57] Charles F. James, *Documentary History of the Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia* (Lynchburg, VA: J. P. Bell, 1900), 32.

[58] James, *Documentary History of the Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia*, 34.

quickly reassembled without the governor and became instrumental in leading the colony during the war by calling five separate Virginia Conventions. With Britain out of the way and the Revolution brewing, Virginia's Baptists shunned the goal of mere toleration and set their sights on the larger prize of full religious liberty.

In the summer of 1775, colonial legislators mobilized for war against the advancing British army while Virginia Baptists mobilized to end the Anglican establishment. In August 1775, the two associations to the north and south of the James River met together at Dupuy's meetinghouse in Powhatan County to strategize a petition campaign to the Virginia Convention for religious liberty. This political effort provided a unifying cause for Baptists who had been previously divided over minor doctrinal differences. The petition sent to the Virginia Convention from this meeting expressed solidarity in the "common cause" of freedom from Britain's "shocking Oppression" before specifying that the Baptist community was free to enlist in the military according to individual discretion. Since Baptists would likely be enlisting, the petition stated, it seemed prudent for Virginia's delegates to allow Baptist preachers freedom to address the troops "without molestation or abuse."[59] The Convention granted this request, giving Baptists an early victory of legitimization within the Virginia religious economy alongside Anglicans and other dissenters.

As the conflict with Britain intensified, Baptists joined other dissenters in an unprecedented petitioning effort for the cause of religious liberty. Citizens relied on petitioning to communicate concerns to government officials before 1768, but early petitions tended to address local concerns. The wartime petitions, however, focused almost exclusively on issues related to religious liberty.[60] According to Fristoe, Baptists

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[59] Garnett Ryland, *The Baptists of Virginia 1699–1926* (Richmond, VA: Virginia Baptist Board of Missions and Education, 1955), 96.

[60] John A. Ragosta, *Wellspring of Liberty: How Virginia's Religious Dissenters Helped Win the American Revolution and Secured Religious Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 46–47.

were consciously fearful of coming out of the war only to return to the same religious oppression as before: "Why hear the heart-affecting shrieks of the wounded, and the awful scene of garments enrolled in blood, together with the entire loss of many of our relations, friends, acquaintances and fellow citizens—and after all this, to be exposed to religious oppression, and the deprivation of the rights of conscience?"[61] For Baptists, freedom from British tyranny seemed empty if it entailed returning to the tyranny of the Anglican church. At the outset of the war, the end of a state-supported church was far from a certain outcome. While anti-establishment dissenters rallied to flood the Convention with petitions containing sometimes thousands of signatures, others more sympathetic to the established church did the same in support of their cause. Those in support of the establishment, unfamiliar with any other system of government, feared the societal consequences of releasing citizens from legal adherence to the church.

The summer of 1776 marked a turning point for dissenters in Virginia, for these groups were able to leverage the circumstances of war and the demand for soldiers into greater political respectability. Both Baptists and Presbyterians explicitly linked their support for the war to the demand for religious freedom through petitions.[62] While the religious affiliation of soldiers was never documented, the names of Baptist ministers appear regularly on rolls, including David Barrow and at least eight others who had been persecuted for preaching before the war began.[63] These ministers voluntarily enlisted, providing an example for their congregations to follow. To illustrate the changing political prospects of Baptists, consider the January 1778 appeal from Governor Patrick Henry to Baptist minister Jeremiah Walker. During a season of desperation for General George Washington's army at Valley Forge, the Anglican governor publicly called upon

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[61] Fristoe, *A Concise History of the Ketocton Baptist Association*, 83.

[62] See Ragosta, *Wellspring of Liberty*, 52–62.

[63] Ragosta, *Wellspring of Liberty*, 94.

one of the most respected Baptist leaders in the colony to leverage his influence for more enlistments. Not coincidentally, fellow Baptist ministers chose Walker to voice Baptist grievances before the Virginia Assembly later that year.[64]

The April 1776 election of James Madison to the fifth Virginia Convention as a representative from Orange County also marked a turning point in favor of Virginia's Baptists. Young, energetic, educated at the prestigious College of New Jersey (later Princeton), and well-connected, Madison had already expressed sympathies with the Baptist cause. In January 1774, he wrote to his college friend, William Bradford, wherein he expressed awareness of the plight of neighboring Baptists who were being persecuted for "in the main . . . very orthodox" sentiments, voiced frustration over their harsh treatment, and sought prayer "for Liberty of Conscience [to revive among us]."[65] In Madison, Baptists found an able ally to represent their common cause before the Convention. On June 12, the Convention adopted the trailblazing "Declaration of Rights," written primarily by George Mason but amended in committee. Article 16 addressed religion and originally relied on the language of toleration. Madison, however, was instrumental in drafting the language of the article's final form:

> That religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience; and that it is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity toward each other.[66]

Thus, moving beyond the rhetoric of toleration, Virginia became one of the first governments in the world to recognize religious freedom as a right of its citizens. This declaration, however, did not resolve all the complexities of church-state relations in the

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[64] Ragosta, *Wellspring of Liberty*, 96.

[65] William T. Hutchinson and William M. E. Rachal, eds., *The Papers of James Madison*, vol. 1, *16 March 1751 to 16 December 1779* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 104–8.

[66] George Mason, *The Virginia Declaration of Rights, June 12, 1776*, George Mason Personal Papers Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

colony. Madison's preferred final draft had been edited in committee to allow for ambiguity in its interpretation. Anglican representatives denied any intention of disestablishment, claiming only the aim of ending religious coercion.[67]

After denying dissenters' requests for greater toleration for years, the Virginia Convention had now released a strong statement in support of religious liberty. Baptist denominational historians have long sought to take credit for Article 16, and certainly their petitions made an impact, especially considering the need for war enlistments.[68] However, Madison's role as a new electee must also be recognized. He had encountered the thought of Locke and other liberal thinkers at the College of New Jersey, but under the college presidency of John Witherspoon, he had also witnessed the religious fervor of Presbyterians in an educational context that prioritized religious freedom. In other words, his convictions on the matter were not merely shaped by secular political theory, but also profoundly by his exposure to the way in which religion flourished when free from state control.[69] Finally, the wartime context must not be discounted as a major factor in the passage of Article 16. War often alters perspective, and the clash of British muskets undoubtedly made former religious differences seem less ultimate. All things considered, Article 16 was a decisive victory for Baptists, allowing them to worship freely, but it fell short of the ultimate aim of disestablishment. State established religion continued in the form of several remaining laws that favored the Anglican church. Article 16, therefore, did not appease all the concerns of the Baptists, but its passage energized their efforts and provided momentum toward eradicating remaining grievances.

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[67] See Ragosta, *Wellspring of Liberty*, 53–54.

[68] See James, *Documentary History*, 60–61, and Ryland, *The Baptists of Virginia*, 98–99. Both sources cite "Oration on the Life, Character, and Services of James Madison. Delivered at Culpeper Court-House, Virginia, July 18, 1836, by John S. Barbour," *National Intelligencer*, August 2, 1836. Barbour claimed that the Baptists addressed the Convention in 1776, but there is no record of such an address.

[69] Gary Wills, *James Madison* (New York: Times Books, 2002), 18.

At a May 1778 associational meeting of Virginia's Baptists, the association appointed a committee to inquire whether any remaining civil laws were oppressive to Baptists, and the committee identified Virginia's marriage law, which authorized only Anglican ministers to perform legal marriages. The association agreed to send representatives Jeremiah Walker and Elijah Craig to the next General Assembly to present a memorial asking for equal privileges for all ordained ministers in October of that same year.[70] These efforts continued for two more years until the legislature granted the Baptists partial victory by authorizing judges to grant licenses for marriage to four ministers of each sect per county and declaring marriages already performed by dissenting ministers valid. However, because no such restrictions applied to Anglican ministers, this concession still did not satisfy the Baptists.

After the Battle of Yorktown all but guaranteed American victory in October 1781, the need for new enlistments abated, and the Anglican-controlled Virginia Assembly returned to a policy of ignoring dissenter demands. Baptists, however, kept sending petitions, appealing to Article 16 of the Declaration of Rights in one June 1782 memorial requesting "equal Footing with Churchmen."[71] The following year, the same association sent a memorial asking for "full, equal and impartial Liberty of all Denominations."[72] Many of these memorials followed a common formula. First, the Baptists would express their enthusiastic support for the war, reminding the assembly of their own participation in overthrowing the British yoke. Then, relying on the rhetoric of liberty and equality, they would express disappointment over what they considered lingering oppressive Virginia laws. Rhetorically, this formula placed the Virginia legislature on the same ethical plane as their British enemies in relation to oppression and

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[70] Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of Baptists in Virginia*, 64.

[71] Ryland, *The Baptists of Virginia*, 108.

[72] Ryland, *The Baptists of Virginia*, 109.

tyranny. For example, just as American colonists accused the British Crown of taxing them without representation in government, Baptists in Virginia claimed Virginia's vestry law did the same thing to non-Anglican dissenters, since dissenters had to pay the vestry tax but could not serve in vestries. When the war officially ended in the fall of 1783 with the Treaty of Paris, these issues remained unresolved.

In October 1784, with the war now over, the growing Baptist movement in Virginia needed a new mechanism for uniting Baptist political efforts. With new associations of Baptist churches forming in the state, pastors William Webber and Reuben Ford led in the organization of the General Committee of Baptist Associations. By design, the General Committee would be composed of no more than four delegates from each Separate Baptist association in the state and would "consider all the political grievances of the whole Baptist society in Virginia, and all references from the district associations, respecting matters which concern the Baptist society at large." Under the General Committee's constitution, all its connected Baptist associations would send petitions and memorials to Virginia's General Assembly through the General Committee.[73] Thus, Baptists across the state were now more united than ever in their efforts to repeal oppressive laws and lobby representatives under one centralized institution. These efforts would be necessary, for at the same time, Anglicans were organizing to recover ground lost during the war.

In 1785, in addition to the marriage and vestry laws already on the books, the General Assembly considered Patrick Henry's bill for "Establishing a Provision for Teachers of the Christian Religion." The notion of a general assessment had been debated for some time, but Henry's backing gave it renewed momentum. Henry believed that Christianity was necessary for a healthy citizenship and drafted his bill to allow citizens to determine which Christian church received their tax. In support of the bill, the now

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[73] Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of Baptists in Virginia*, 69–70.

Episcopal Church was willing to reform marriage and vestry laws in exchange for incorporation and assessment laws.[74] Even the Hanover Presbytery, long a Baptist ally in advocating for religious liberty, backed the assessment proposal initially. James Madison led the opposition to the bill within the assembly by maneuvering to delay the vote to allow time to publish the bill for the general citizenry to consider. He also wrote his *Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments* and published it during the delay to shape public opinion.

Madison's action to bring the bill before Virginia's citizens gave Baptists time to organize their own campaign against it. At the August 1785 meeting of the Baptist General Committee, delegates resolved that Henry's bill was "repugnant to the spirit of the gospel" and that "the holy author of our religion needs no such compulsive measure for the promotion of his cause."[75] They then voted to send Reuben Ford as their delegate to present their opposition to the bill before the next General Assembly. A torrent of similar petitions from other dissenting groups joined the Baptist petition, including one from the Hanover Presbyterians, who by that time had reversed course. These efforts must not be overlooked when considering the reasons for the bill's failure to pass. According to John Ragosta, the House of Delegates received thirteen copies of Madison's *Memorial and Remonstrance* with 1,552 signatures but twenty-nine copies with 4,899 signatures of the Baptist General Committee's petition.[76]

When Reuben Ford returned to the General Committee a year later to report the outcome of his trip, he not only brought the news of the failure of Henry's assessment bill, but also of the passage of Thomas Jefferson's Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom. Jefferson's bill had been defeated twice in previous years and seemed dead due

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[74] Ragosta, *Wellspring of Liberty*, 118.

[75] Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of Baptists in Virginia*, 71.

[76] Ragosta, *Wellspring of Liberty*, 131.

to his removal as ambassador to France since 1781. Madison, however, seized the moment after the defeat of Henry's bill and reintroduced Jefferson's bill in its place. On January 19, 1786, Virginia's General Assembly enacted "that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or good, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief."[77] Due to the bill's passage, Baptists finally enjoyed full legal protection to worship according to conscience, would no longer be required to pay taxes in support of religion, and would possess the same legal privileges as Episcopalians. The era of an established church in Virginia was over. The colony that had most aggressively fought to preserve its religious establishment was now the state with the highest degree of legally protected religious liberty.[78] The triumphant Baptists would still have political battles to fight—particularly, they would lead a fifteen-year-long effort to auction off glebe lands that had been given by the British government to the Anglican church—but they now resided in the state that would model this radical new church-state arrangement before a watching nation and world.[79]

Baptist Partisans

On March 13, 1820, Thomas Jefferson, long retired from political life, wrote to his friend, Thomas Cooper, the man Jefferson had recently appointed as professor of natural science at the new University of Virginia. Jefferson held Cooper in high esteem for his intellect and academic achievements, and the two had exchanged letters from the early days of Jefferson's presidency in 1801. Cooper was a known materialist and had

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[77] "82. A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, 18 June 1779," in Julian P. Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 2, *January 1777 to 18 June 1779* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950), 545–53.

[78] Ragosta, *Wellspring of Liberty*, 133.

[79] For the glebe lands battle, see Thomas E. Buckley, "The Baptists' Assault on the Virginia Glebes, 1786–1801," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (1988): 33–69.

written Jefferson twelve days before concerned about the uproar his appointment was causing among evangelicals in Virginia. Presbyterian minister John Rice had voiced these evangelical concerns by publishing a scathing review of Cooper in his *Virginia Evangelical and Literary Magazine.* Cooper informed Jefferson that he was accustomed to "the inveteracy of the *odium theologicum*," but his peace of mind was now shaken at the prospect of moving to Charlottesville to occupy his professorship under such contentious conditions. He wanted Jefferson to assure him of no future trouble or else he "would rather decline going there at once."[80] Jefferson responded dismissingly to the magazine extract and used the opportunity to educate Cooper on the religious landscape of his native state. Jefferson assured him not to worry, for "about 1/3 of our state is Baptist, 1/3 Methodist, and of the remaining third two parts may be Presbyterian and one part Anglican. The Baptists are sound republicans and zealous supporters of their government" and "the Methodists are republican mostly." The noise, Jefferson wrote, was raised entirely by Presbyterian clergy who "remain bitterly federal and malcontent with their government." According to Jefferson, it was best to dismiss such nonsense, for such "Anglomen" had little influence and to respond publicly would only add validity to their criticisms.[81] Despite Jefferson's assurances, Cooper bowed to public pressure and resigned before ever occupying the position at the university.

While Jefferson underestimated the strength of evangelical opposition to Cooper's appointment, he accurately assessed the enthusiastic loyalty his party enjoyed from Virginia Baptists. These passionate evangelicals were not bothered that Jefferson and Madison did not share their theological convictions. In fact, they frequently carried on as if they did. Neither were the Baptists turned off by the Enlightenment tone of their

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[80] J. Jefferson Looney, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 15, *1 September 1819 to 31 May 1820*, Retirement Series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 435–37.

[81] Looney, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 15:466–67.

arguments for religious liberty, for they often relied on Lockean rhetoric themselves. When it came to religious liberty, the end could justify the means. In the middle of Jefferson's campaign for president in the summer of 1800, Baptist minister Jeremiah Moore, who had delivered a petition for religious liberty on behalf of the Ketocton Association decades earlier, wrote to ask Jefferson to clarify his position on suffrage. Moore lamented the requirement of land ownership for voting in Virginia, and Jefferson's silence on the issue puzzled him. However, he made sure to note at the outset of his letter that his "political opinions were formed during that period of Tryal and danger" of the American Revolution.[82] In other words, Moore wrote as an ally. In detailing the process by which Moore formed his political opinions, he might as well have been writing as the representative of the entire body of Virginia's Baptists as well as those who had moved west into Kentucky and beyond. The liberty achieved for Baptists during and after the war made them loyal Jeffersonian Republicans. Indeed, Thomas S. Kidd writes, "Although the election did not turn on religion alone, the campaign of 1800 pitted those who favored a strong public role for religion against those who feared a religious establishment."[83] Fear of a religious establishment certainly motivated the Baptists politically.

Indeed, eight years after Moore's letter, as President Jefferson concluded his second presidential term, the Ketocton Association sent a letter signed by its moderator, William Fristoe, in which the body congratulated the outgoing statesman on his upcoming retirement and expressed their indebtedness to him for delivering them from "the galling chains of an ecclesiastical Establishment." They were even willing to overlook his Unitarian theological outlook on their way to wishing that "the God of all

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[82] Barbara B. Oberg, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 32, *1 June 1800 to 16 February 1801* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 52–54.

[83] Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 238.

mercy and goodness may, according to his own sovereign plan of saving guilty sinners, receive you to his right hand where liberty reigns triumphant, and right and justice can never be perverted."[84] Jefferson's leadership in advancing the cause of religious liberty won him and his party decades of unwavering political support from the fastest growing religious body in the new nation.[85] Indeed, Baptists would help the Virginia Republican dynasty of Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe win six consecutive presidential elections, occupying the highest office in the land for twenty-four years from 1801 to 1824.

Thomas Jefferson was many things to many people, but to the Baptists of Virginia, he represented one supreme ideal above all—liberty. He, more than any other figure, came to represent the embodiment of democratic government and the empowerment of the common man. Jefferson's outspoken preference for the yeoman farmer over the urban commercialist identified men who resembled Baptist preachers as the future of the young nation. His vision for westward expansion excited those eager for land and opportunity and inspired sometimes whole Baptist congregations to cross the Allegheny Mountains from Virginia.[86] Jefferson's rhetoric against centralized government appealed irresistibly to uneducated preachers who had suffered under the tyranny of the established Anglican church and wanted, more than anything else, to be left alone to follow their own religious convictions while working to build a better future for their families. Todd has summarized the Jeffersonian ideal as "freedom, farms, and frontier," and Baptists moving from Virginia west into Kentucky and beyond eagerly

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[84] William Fristoe, "William Fristoe to Thomas Jefferson, 18 August 1808," Papers of Thomas Jefferson, National Archives, Washington, DC, accessed August 21, 2023, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-8538.

[85] See Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 230–43; Daniel L. Dreisbach, *Thomas Jefferson and the Wall of Separation between Church and State* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 9–54; Todd, *Let Men Be Free*, 60–81.

[86] See George W. Ranck, *The Travelling Church: An Account of the Baptist Exodus from Virginia to Kentucky in 1781 under the Leadership of Rev. Lewis Craig and Capt. William Ellis* (Louisville: Filson Club, 1910).

embraced all three emphases.[87]

Richard Matthews correctly warns against the historiographical mistake of equating Jefferson with "Jeffersonian."[88] The fawning letters his Baptist admirers sometimes addressed to him reveal that Jefferson the man did not always match the Jefferson they imagined, but Jefferson skillfully knew how to mute those differences. A lifelong student of the Bible and well-versed in its language and meaning, Jefferson grew up in the church and even served as an Anglican vestryman as a young man.[89] Like so many of his contemporaries, he often referenced God's providence in correspondence and public addresses—references undoubtedly genuine. Though his settled religious convictions resembled Unitarianism, he knew how to placate his evangelical supporters because he knew how to speak their language. He was just as comfortable corresponding with the materialist Thomas Cooper as the Baptist John Leland. Slaveholders found a kindred spirit in Jefferson, but antislavery advocates also wrote to him assuming he shared their hatred of the institution. He truly had an ability to be the person he needed to be in any context, but to the Baptists, more than anything else, he represented liberty—their most celebrated ideal.

Universally, Americans in the early republic devoted themselves to the concept of "liberty," and Baptists were certainly no exception. From Jefferson's "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" to Patrick Henry's cry for either liberty or death, the concept defined the new nation. However, defining the precise meaning of the term is no simple feat. Indeed, Barry Alan Shain identifies eight different definitions from Revolutionary-

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[87] Todd, *Let Men Be Free*, 132.

[88] Richard Matthews, *The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1984), 11.

[89] See Thomas S. Kidd, *Thomas Jefferson: A Biography of Spirit and Flesh* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), 19–20, 203–9.

era texts.[90] Missing from his analysis of these texts is the dominant modern view of liberty as autonomous freedom to act at will. Modern liberal notions of liberty are often read back into founding era texts, but the most widespread eighteenth-century uses of the term emphasized self-restraint in service to God or community.[91] Authentic liberty was liberty to do good. Baptists certainly embraced this understanding, but another form of liberty dominated their political rhetoric: liberty of conscience.

To argue for liberty of conscience was to seek the right of each person to follow his or her own religious convictions. Both Thomas Helwys and Roger Williams were seeking liberty of conscience when they argued for legal protection for even followers of rival religions. Theologically, proponents of liberty of conscience believed that God would judge the beliefs of each person and that the state had no legitimate authority in such matters. Baptists found sanction for liberty of conscience in the pages of Scripture, while Jefferson followed Locke in identifying such liberty as a right of mankind in the state of nature.[92] Whatever the source, both camps agreed that government should protect liberty of conscience as a right. Baptists, like so many others, frequently used the rhetoric of liberty without any attempt to define the term. Just like today, liberty's meaning was often assumed without precision. In fact, many in the early republic conflated civil liberty with the liberty of the gospel and tyranny with sin. To support liberty in every manifestation was tantamount to supporting Christ and opposing Satan. Baptists viewed anything that threatened liberty with suspicion and often disagreed among themselves over the validity of some of those suspicions. In fact, heated contests over liberty feature in every major debate examined in subsequent chapters.

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[90] Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 155–92.

[91] Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism*, 163.

[92] On the difference between Lockean liberty and classical republican liberty, see Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 15–23.

When America's founders met to ratify the Constitution in 1787, the culmination of a long and arduous process, they shared a common conviction that political parties were a threat to the republic and undesirable. Proponents of political parties could be found among the British, but Americans tended to universally disdain them on philosophical grounds, using the terms "party" and "faction" interchangeably.[93] However, this generation of political leaders also prized liberty of speech and understood that parties would most likely develop within any government that allowed freedom of opposition. The development of a second party of opposition in the United States was, therefore, more accident than design. As partisan battles emerged in the last decade of the eighteenth century, liberty became weaponized. For these Baptists, Jefferson would emerge as their celebrated champion of liberty over tyranny.

America's commitment to liberty of speech and liberty of press protected critics of the government and freed them to eventually organize their efforts. Having just won a war against British tyranny, many in the post-Revolutionary generation viewed efforts to build a strong central government with suspicion. All sides were concerned with maintaining liberty in a popular state, but intense sectional disagreement arose over the question of how to pursue that aim.[94] The Federalists, primarily from northern cities, would come to favor a strong national government built on the foundation of Hamiltonian finance. To them, the greatest threat to liberty was licentiousness and localism. In contrast, the Republicans, hailing mainly from rural southern locales, would emerge as America's first opposition party in the early 1790s and would come to champion strong local government, representation in Congress, and non-centralization of wealth. They viewed a return to monarchy or even aristocracy, in which the powerful few consolidated

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[93] Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780–1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 10

[94] Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 126.

great wealth and power, as the greatest threats to American liberty.

As the first Congress adjourned in March 1791, ideological differences could already be discerned, but no partisan faction had yet formed. However, by the end of that year, national newspapers like the Republican *National Gazette* and the Federalist *Gazette of the United States* began publicizing their respective agendas and fiercely criticizing the opposition. By the end of the next summer, the ideological conflicts within President Washington's cabinet were evident to anyone able to pick up a newspaper and read. The nation was polarizing into two political parties. The emergence of partisan newspapers expedited the hardening of political differences as each side furiously worked to define itself against its opposition. Published attacks, often slanderous, fueled public distrust and gave rise to widespread suspicion of conspiracy.[95]

To the Federalists, Jefferson, Madison, and their supporters wanted to undermine the new government at every turn. To the Republicans, Hamilton and his cohorts did not want a republic at all and were on their way to reviving a monarchical or aristocratic form of the British government. The French Revolution escalated these tensions as each party saw their political conflict as a microcosm of what was happening on a larger scale abroad. The Federalists identified themselves as the parallel of Britain's involvement in the conflict and saw America's former enemy as the one stabilizing force standing in the way of worldwide social anarchy. On the other side, the Republicans, at least initially, viewed the success of the French Revolution as a victory in the cause of worldwide liberty against the corruption of tyranny and the encroaching power of Britain.[96] Virginia's Baptists, already ideologically predisposed to Jeffersonian liberty, sociologically agrarian, and fearful of any return to British tyranny, easily resonated with

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[95] See Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System*, 102–11; John Ferling, *Adams Vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 135–61.

[96] See Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion*, 210–11.

Republican talking points.[97]

Virginia Baptists backed Jefferson, but the level and intensity of partisan support certainly varied. Some Baptists viewed politics with suspicion. Reverend James Garrard, penning the 1795 circular letter for the Elkhorn Association in Kentucky, noted the "distressing grievance" of seeing "professors engaged in worldly conversation in the meeting house yard, before and after the sermon."[98] According to Garrard, the sacred space of the church was not the appropriate context to discuss politics. Ironically, one year later Garrard himself would leave his Baptist ministry to pursue a career in politics, becoming Kentucky's second governor. While many were concerned about the corrupting influence of politics and many more were too occupied eking out a living on farmed land to have time for such concerns, the assumption nevertheless prevailed that a good Baptist was also a good Jeffersonian. In Jefferson and Madison, Baptists discovered "great Statesmen" whose writings "bore striking likeness" to those "whose main text-book was the New Testament."[99]

John Leland was the most outspoken Jeffersonian Baptist of his era.[100] Though he went north to New England as so many of his fellow Baptists in Virginia were migrating westward, Leland continued to impact the political opinions of Baptists through published sermons, writings, and personal correspondence. In fact, in his history of the Elkhorn Baptist Association, the oldest Baptist association in Kentucky, Keith Harper writes, "Apart from Jefferson himself, no one exercised greater influence on the

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[97] For a broader examination of the role of clergymen in party formation in early America, see Spencer W. McBride, *Pulpit and Nation: Clergyman and the Politics of Revolutionary America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 127–47.

[98] Minutes of the Elkhorn Association of Baptists, Held at Cooper's Run, August 8, 1795, and continued by adjournment until the 10th (Lexington, KY: n.p., 1795).

[99] Thomas M. Vaughan, *Memoirs of Rev. Wm. Vaughan, D.D.* (Louisville: Caperton & Cates, 1878), 61.

[100] See Eric C. Smith, *John Leland: A Jeffersonian Baptist in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 104.

political thought of the Elkhorn Association's Baptists than John Leland."[101] In some respects, Leland's life followed the same historical progression as the Virginia Baptists traced in this chapter. Born into a Congregationalist Massachusetts family, Leland's mother enthusiastically followed the New Light teachings of George Whitefield. Taught to interpret the Bible for himself, he later concluded that the Congregationalist practice of infant baptism was scripturally indefensible and submitted to believer's baptism.

Leland and his wife, Sally, migrated to Culpepper County, Virginia, in 1777, and after a brief pastorate, he began a long career of evangelistic itineracy. In many ways, Leland epitomized the rugged enthusiasm of the Separate Baptists as he crisscrossed Virginia, preaching the gospel of the new birth and winning hundreds of converts. Leland also joined his fellow Virginia Baptists in the fight for religious liberty and led the Kehukee Association in its efforts of petitioning against the assessment bill.[102] In fact, many historians believe that Leland was the prime mover responsible for rallying the entire Baptist voting bloc of Orange County in support of James Madison to the Virginia Ratifying Convention, an effort that resulted in Virginia's ratification of the United States Constitution. Leland's biographer, Eric C. Smith, highlights the importance of Leland's role: "Had Madison not been elected to the ratifying convention to stave off Henry's attacks, the story of the Constitution may well have developed differently."[103] Leland's partisanship would only grow over time, characterized comically by his gleeful presentation of a 1,235-pound block of cheese to President Jefferson upon his inauguration in 1801.[104] Leland believed God had raised up Jefferson to grant and preserve liberty and the God-given rights of mankind.

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[101] Harper, *A Mere Kentucky of a Place*, 6.

[102] Lemuel Burkitt and Jesse Read, *A Concise History of the Kehukee Baptist Association from Its Original Rise Down to 1803* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, 1850), 79.

[103] Smith, *John Leland*, 78.

[104] See Smith, *John Leland*, 167–74.

Leland is often identified as a transitional figure within the American Baptist tradition. J. Bradley Creed labels Leland an "American prophet of religious individualism" and argues that the source of his individualism was his pietism rather than any commitment to Enlightenment rationalism.[105] However, by denying the influential impact of Enlightenment rationalism, Creed overlooks the shaping influence of Jeffersonian partisanship. In fact, in Creed's construction, Republicanism appealed to Leland precisely because he was already a pietistic individualist.[106] Nathan O. Hatch examines Leland on his way to demonstrating his thesis of American culture's democratic shift, noting particularly Leland's preference of individual conscience over creed, local control over overarching structures, and populism over elitism.[107] Hatch, however, does not seek out the origins of these commitments within the scope of his project. Regardless of source, these scholars agree on identifying Leland as a seminal figure in the post-Revolutionary cultural shift toward individualism. Leland certainly inherited pietism from the New Light revivalism of his upbringing, but, as several historians have noted, his commitment to Enlightenment rationalism via Jeffersonian partisanship must not be discounted when evaluating the sources of his individualism.[108]

In 1804, Leland wrote *The Age of Inquiry; or, Reason and Revelation, in Harmony with Each Other; Operating Against All Tyranny and Infidelity: Intended as a Clue to the Present Political Controversy in the United States*, under the pseudonym, "A True Baptist." In this remarkable tract, Leland revealed the ideological components that

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[105] J. Bradley Creed, "John Leland, American Prophet of Religious Individualism," (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986), 3.

[106] Creed, "John Leland," 200.

[107] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 97.

[108] See Amanda Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 151–52; Smith, *John Leland*, 84–87, 117; Curtis W. Freeman, "Can Baptist Theology Be Revisioned?," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24, no. 3 (1997): 281–82.

undergirded his commitment to Jefferson's party. In the American Revolution and the subsequent Constitution, Leland saw God's providential hand emancipating the true Baptist church from tyranny in preparation for the global spread of the gospel, and he expected those same republican principles to prevail among other nations in preparation for that momentous worldwide revival.[109] Leland anticipated Christ's kingdom breaking into history in two mutually supportive ways. Politically, reason, unaided by revelation, would lead to a system of government that affirms liberty over tyranny. In other words, if one followed reason unhindered, he or she would arrive at Jefferson's system of democratic republicanism, and the church would then be free to proclaim the truth of the gospel without hindrance. From the religious side, revelation would attack ecclesiastical tyranny by proclaiming the spiritual liberty found in the gospel of Christ.[110]

The Enlightenment philosophy of theorists such as John Locke in the late seventeenth century and featured in the political philosophies of America's founders exalted reason. Locke believed that truths discovered by one's own reason "will always be certainer to us than those which are conveyed to us by traditional revelation."[111] In true Lockean fashion, Leland held that reason, unhindered by coercive forces, would lead inevitably to truth. He set out to prove that revelation's plan for "an entire new and distinct society" must be "consonant with reason, or cannot be supposed to proceed form the same author."[112] Revelation revealed God's plan for the church as the source of "religious liberty and spiritual happiness," while reason revealed the church's parallel,

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[109] John Leland, *The Age of Inquiry; or, Reason and Revelation, in Harmony with Each Other; Operating Against All Tyranny and Infidelity: Intended as a Clue to the Present Political Controversy in the United States* (Hartford, CT: n.p., 1804), 7.

[110] Leland, *The Age of Inquiry*, 36–37.

[111] John Locke, "Essay Concerning Human Understanding," in *18th-Century Philosophy*, ed. Lewis White Beck (New York: Free Press, 1966), 56.

[112] Leland, *The Age of Inquiry*, 11.

republicanism, as the source of "civil liberty and happiness."[113] Leland's view of the harmony of reason and revelation was unremarkable in the stream of historic Christian orthodoxy. Leland, however, followed Enlightenment thinkers in touting reason as a valid means of epistemic certainty. For him, reason not only leads to truth, but it alone can lead to certain truth without the aid of revelation. Surprisingly for a Calvinist who elsewhere penned diatribes against sin, Leland omitted any discussion of the noetic effects of sin in his theory of knowledge and subsequent political philosophy. For him, truth was accessible to anyone, freed from tyrannical hindrances, who wished to inquire after it.

Leland supported Republicanism and opposed Federalism because both reason and revelation had shown him conclusively that Republicanism celebrated liberty while Federalism promoted tyranny.[114] Federalist policies like the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 proved that Federalist politicians viewed proponents of Republicanism as heretics just as England's former kings had viewed religious dissenters.[115] These policies degraded reason by relying on "carnal weapons" to force and compel conformity to truth rather than convincing by reasoned arguments.[116] The Federalists, according to Leland, had no choice but to tout the blessings of universal liberty when they needed the support of citizens in securing independence from Britain, but with independence now acquired, they were proving their true designs of setting up a government on the British monarchical and aristocratical model.[117]

For the Baptist John Leland, upholding the cause of liberty politically through support of Jeffersonian Republicanism was tantamount to supporting the kingdom of

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[113] Leland, *The Age of Inquiry*, 11.

[114] Leland, *The Age of Inquiry*, 56. Note here the capitalization of Republicanism when discussing Jefferson's party. Both Federalists and Republicans claimed to be republicans, but Jefferson's party came to be identified with the word.

[115] Leland, *The Age of Inquiry*, 55.

[116] Leland, *The Age of Inquiry*, 44.

[117] Leland, *The Age of Inquiry*, 48.

Christ. Indeed, Leland more willingly identified with an "infidel" who shared his political views than with professing Christians who happened to be Federalists. He had an answer for the critic who wondered why, if reason and revelation were truly harmonious, philosophers who reasoned their way to Republicanism did not also find true religion. For Leland, Federalist Christians were to blame because they promulgated a false version of Christianity that displayed "the same cruel and tyrannical spirit" as the political philosophies reason had led these infidel Republicans to reject.[118] He wrote that many who are opposed to revelation due to ignorance are unknowingly nearer to revelation by virtue of their political philosophy than many others who profess a tyrannical form of religion.[119] Whether or not Jefferson was truly an infidel as many Federalists claimed, Leland located the president on the side of the kingdom of Christ solely on the basis of his commitment to political liberty. For John Leland, liberty, not Christ, occupied the central position within his theological system. To be a "true Baptist" meant to be a true Christian, and both necessitated a commitment to Jefferson's party.

Leland also embodied a shift from the explicitly theological arguments for religious liberty of earlier Baptist thinkers like Helwys and Williams to the more philosophical approaches of theorists like Locke, Jefferson, and Madison.[120] In the words of Curtis W. Freeman, earlier theorists like Helwys and Williams grounded their arguments for religious liberty, not on the "sanctity and inviolability of conscience," but on the "sovereignty and freedom of God, who alone is Lord of the conscience."[121] Even Leland's older contemporary, Isaac Backus (1724–1806), who also utilized political language in advocating for religious liberty in Massachusetts, buttressed his

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[118] Leland, *The Age of Inquiry*, 62.

[119] Leland, *The Age of Inquiry*, 70.

[120] Freeman, "Can Baptist Theology Be Revisioned?," 281.

[121] Curtis W. Freeman, "A New Perspective on Baptist Identity," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 26, no. 1 (1999): 62–63.

individualism with strong confessional theology and covenantal ecclesiology. Leland, on the other hand, showed less restraint and followed the political arguments of Jefferson and Madison toward a form of radical individualism that undermined traditional institutional authorities, including the church. Mikael N. Broadway analyzes two of Leland's writings and concludes that his "Virginia Chronicle" and "The Rights of Conscience Inalienable" either directly quote or paraphrase over eight hundred and two hundred words, respectively, from Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*.[122] Leland's uncritical adaptation of Jeffersonian and Madisonian political theory so identified the democratic language of natural rights with Baptist theology and practice that, according to Freeman, "subsequent generations of Baptists failed to distinguish between the two."[123] In Leland, a Baptist-Jeffersonian synthesis formed that merged Baptist theology with Enlightenment emphases on reason, individualism, and democratization.

The level of Leland's outspoken enthusiasm for Jefferson's party was hardly typical among his fellow Baptists from Virginia, for few Baptists carried their partisanship as far as Leland did. However, Leland's idiosyncrasies aside, the large number of Baptists from Virginia who migrated west and south in the early republic overwhelmingly identified as Jeffersonian Republicans and looked to Leland for guidance. Indeed, Harper asserts that Leland "served as the leading voice for Virginia Baptists and for many who moved to Kentucky."[124] When Carter Tarrant and David Barrow published their antislavery tracts in Kentucky, in 1806 and 1808 respectively, they featured Leland's political writings.[125] When promissionary Baptist leaders in

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[122] Mikael N. Broadway, "The Ways of Zion Mourned: A Historicist Critique of the Discourses of Church-State Relations" (PhD diss., Duke University, 1993), 219–20.

[123] Freeman, "Can Baptist Theology Be Revisioned?," 283.

[124] Harper, *A Mere Kentucky of a Place*, 3.

[125] Carter Tarrant, *The Substance of a Discourse Delivered in the Town of Versailles, Woodford County, State of Kentucky, April 20, 1806* (Lexington, KY: Daniel Bradford, 1806), title page; David Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined; on the Principles of Nature, Reason, Justice, Policy, and Scripture* (Lexington, KY: D & C Bradford, 1808), 24.

central Kentucky started *The Baptist Chronicle* to combat Campbellism, they sent several editions to Leland for approval.[126] John Taylor likewise sought correspondence with Leland as late as 1830.[127] The September 9, 1801 edition of the *Kentucky Gazette*, a monthly that frequently included Baptist advertisements, even featured Leland's presentation of the mammoth cheese to President Jefferson as a gift upon his inauguration. The story quoted the cheese's motto: "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God."[128]

Leland was not alone among Baptists in synthesizing Baptist theology with Jeffersonian political philosophy. In 1798, David Barrow, who had worked with Leland in leading associational networks to petition for religious liberty in Virginia, decided to follow many of his fellow Baptist ministers to Kentucky. Before he left, however, he wrote a circular letter to his church in Virginia in anticipation of potential "enemies" rising up in his absence to question his doctrines and principles. He was moving, he wrote, to provide for his family—a task that seemed impossible in Virginia without turning to slavery, which was morally unconscionable to Barrow, or to land speculation, which he deemed inconsistent with a life devoted to ministry.[129] After explaining his motives for leaving the state, Barrow next outlined two creeds, a theological creed in line with orthodox Calvinism and a political creed expounding the philosophy of Jeffersonian Republicanism. In a footnote Barrow specified, echoing Enlightenment thought, that his principles "are sufficiently established by scripture, reason, and common observation."[130]

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[126] Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, 570.

[127] Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, 600.

[128] All references to the *Kentucky Gazette* are available at Lexington Public Library Digital Archives, "The Kentucky Gazette (1787–1840)," https://www.lexpublib.org/digital-archives/collection/kentucky-gazette-1787-1840.

[129] Carlos R. Allen Jr., ed., "David Barrow's *Circular Letter* of 1798," in *The William and Mary Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (1963): 445.

[130] Allen, "David Barrow's *Circular Letter* of 1798," 447. Interestingly, Barrow's 1808 antislavery tract, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined on the*

Clearly reverberating language from Jefferson's Declaration of Independence and George Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights, Barrow expressed his belief that "liberty, with a right to a good character, of acquiring and possessing property, with the enjoyment of life and members, and the means of defending them, is the unalienable privilege of all complexions, shapes, and sizes of men, who have not forfeited those blessings by their own personal misdemeanors."[131] He then penned twenty-six political principles, which included government as civil compact, necessity of representation, universal suffrage for all male citizens, moderate salaries for elected officials, freedom of the press, no established church, and no religious tests for office. Carlos Allen Jr. noted that the summary was "the political philosophy of the Jeffersonian Republicans as it was popularly understood."[132] Barrow's inclusion of his political creed alongside his theological creed as well as his appeal to both reason and revelation demonstrate that he, like Leland, saw no conflict between his theological commitments and his commitment to Republicanism. Barrow was a Republican because, through reason and revelation, he found a correspondence in liberty between Republicanism and the gospel.

In 1806, a group of Virginia Baptists, by this time known as the "United Baptists" because of the union achieved between Separates and Regulars in 1787, published a revised version of the Philadelphia Confession of Faith. The changes proposed to the confession show the influence of Jeffersonian ideals. Aside from softening the confession's explicit Calvinism and omitting the practice of the laying on of hands as an "ordinance of Christ," the most drastic amendment came in Chapter 25, "On Civil Government." Here, the revisionists replaced language specifying Scripture's teaching that government was ordained by God to encourage well-doing and punish evil

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Principles of Nature, Reason, Justice, Policy, and Scripture, would make a case against slavery on similar grounds.

[131] Allen, "David Barrow's *Circular Letter* of 1798," 447.

[132] Allen, "David Barrow's *Circular Letter* of 1798," 440.

with explicit Jeffersonian language. The new statement specified, "All civil Government flows from, and originates with the people, who institute and ordain the same, but for as much as every individual member of any body corporate or politic, is possessed of natural unalienable rights, liberties, and privileges; so no constituted powers or authorities, can divest them of those rights."[133] The English Baptists who had written the original over a century before derived their emphasis on God's ordination of human government from Romans 13:1–4. The United Baptists certainly saw God behind their ideal democratic government, but their language replaced explicit reference to God with rhetoric emphasizing human origins. By 1806, Jeffersonianism had successfully made its way into the Baptist confession of faith.

Conclusion

Partisanship does not merely reflect the sum of a citizen's views on a set of given political topics, it pervasively shapes how he or she perceives the political world. Partisanship generally comes early in the order of political action, and the stronger the profession of partisan loyalty, the more predictable the political behavior. Upon granting allegiance to one side over the other, the citizen typically embraces political assumptions that shape how he or she interprets the world. Baptists in the South embraced Jefferson's party because they saw in it, in the words of Todd, "a defense of the individuality of religion, the freedom of conscious as a fundamental human right, and the separateness of the church from the civil authority."[134] Motivated initially by shared convictions regarding liberty of conscience and church-state relations, these Baptists welcomed Jefferson's Republicanism alongside their higher goals of evangelism and church planting and enthusiastically maintained hope that the former would free their churches

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[133] United Baptists of Virginia, *The Baptist Declaration of Faith, Revised and Adapted* (Alexandria, VA: Cottom and Stewart, 1806), 30.

[134] Todd, *Let Men Be Free*, 81.

and associations to better pursue the latter. This partisan commitment also provided a political mythology that shaped the focus of their movement during its rapid ascension in the new nation.

CHAPTER 3

LITTLE REPUBLICS IN JEFFERSON'S REPUBLIC: CREDIBILITY AND CONFLICT IN KENTUCKY

On May 5, 1795, David Barrow set out on a four-month-long journey southwest from his home in Southampton County, Virginia, to his future home in Kentucky's bluegrass region. His course took him down as far as present-day Tennessee and up into present-day Ohio through frontier lands largely uninhabited and susceptible to Indian attack. His diary does not indicate whether this trip was in conscious preparation for the move his large family would make three years later, but the difficulty of that decision must have been relieved by his numerous encounters with kindred Baptist ministers who had successfully preceded him in claiming lands and planting churches on the frontier. Barrow was impressed by the prospects of Kentucky's rich land, for, upon examining the Kentucky landscape, he wrote, "As to the Soil, I think, that the Great Creator endowed it with every rich property, in the greatest proportion that is to be found in the Whole U.S.A."[1] Barrow would join these preachers in the initial months of 1798, following what early Baptist historian, Robert B. Semple, described as "the vortex of the Baptist preachers" to Kentucky.[2] Indeed, upon examining the names of Baptist preachers who labored in Kentucky during the thirty years after the Revolution, those without Virginia origins prove to be the rare exceptions.

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[1] David Barrow, "The Diary of David Barrow," typed copy, James P. Boyce Library Special Collections (Louisville: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary).

[2] Robert B. Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia* (Richmond, VA: John O' Lynch, 1810), 172.

The reasons behind the "Baptist vortex" to Kentucky are varied, but economic motivations were certainly primary. When Lewis Craig led his whole congregation of around two hundred members from Spotsylvania County to Kentucky in 1781, he reportedly reminded them of the "illimitable acres of a western Canaan" that God had providentially set before them.[3] Virginia had been settled during an unfavorable time for Baptists, and the frontier offered them the opportunity for a fresh start on equal footing with their fellow citizens. For most of these Baptist opportunists, the major economic appeal came from the simple desire for fertile land to farm. John Taylor came to Kentucky in the fall of 1783, against the pleadings of his congregation, because he "had seen the place" and had "a growing family to provide for."[4] William Hickman brought his family in 1784, after scouting the land in 1776 and later comparing its glory to the Queen of Sheba traveling from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon. He later reflected, "I thought if I could get but ten acres of land, I determined to move to it."[5] Barrow, explaining his reasons for leaving in his 1798 circular letter, specified the impossibility of earning a living in Virginia without relying on slavery or turning to land speculation. He added, "And if I must turn into the business of agriculture, which I think a safe and honorable employment, common sense dictates, that it would be most advisable in a country, where the God of Nature has been the most liberal with his bounties."[6]

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[3] George W. Ranck, *The Travelling Church: An Account of the Baptist Exodus from Virginia to Kentucky in 1781 under the Leadership of Rev. Lewis Craig and Capt. William Ellis* (Louisville: Filson Club, 1910), 11.

[4] John Taylor, *Baptists on the American Frontier: A History of Ten Baptist Churches of Which the Author Has Been Alternately a Member*, ed. Chester Raymond Young (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), 111.

[5] William Hickman, *A Short Account of my Life and Travels. For more than fifty years; A Professed Servant of Jesus Christ* (1808; repr., n.p.: Kentucky Baptist Historical Society, 1969), 5.

[6] Carlos R. Allen Jr., ed., "David Barrow's *Circular Letter* of 1798," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (1963): 445.

Baptist ministers were ideal candidates for life on the frontier. In the rare event that a Baptist preacher was compensated by his congregation in Virginia, the salary would have been extremely modest. In contrast to Episcopalian ministers, Baptists were often forced to provide for their families through other means, and the skills developed in various agricultural and economic endeavors were transferable. Further, Baptist polity did not prohibit Baptist ministers from moving at will. Even in Virginia, it was common for ministers to move around from church to church in response to congregational calls. Once a minister had passed the examination of an ordination council composed of several ordained Baptist ministers, he was generally free to settle among the congregation or congregations of his choice or to itinerate, a common practice that necessitated constant travel for the purpose of evangelistic preaching and performing the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper for already established pastor-less congregations. Because Baptists considered each church autonomous, a congregation of believers could be constituted into a Baptist church without the need for authorization from any higher governing body, though most sought approval from constituted churches. Already in 1790 there were forty-two Baptist churches in Kentucky. By 1812, aided by the Great Revival in the first decade of the nineteenth century, that number had grown to 263.[7]

The Baptist experience of struggle in Virginia proved politically formative for these early settlers as they joined the ranks of thousands pushing westward. Adventuring settlers like Daniel Boone had begun moving into the lands that would become Kentucky before the Revolution, initially establishing military forts to guard against Indian attack. Kentucky officially opened for settlement upon the Virginia legislature's Land Law of 1779, a decision designed to fulfill land claims from war veterans.[8] In anticipation of

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[7] David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America* (New York: Lewis Colby, 1848), 811.

[8] Craig Thompson Friend, *Kentucke's Frontiers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 114–16.

disputed land claims, Virginia also opened four new land courts. Despite these arrangements, competing land claims created chaos as settlers rushed to mark the boundaries of new settlements. Craig Thompson Friend writes, "Confusion created an atmosphere in which it became easier to win land through court cases than actually to secure them on the ground. And Virginia just kept selling the land, anticipating that the courts or circumstance would sort it all out."[9]

Despite the chaos, many Baptists prized the opportunity to organize society on a more republican foundation. Baptists constituted churches in obedience to Christ, but some saw little distinction between advancing Christ's kingdom and spreading republicanism. In fact, they sometimes described their churches as "little republics," for they saw the church as a pure spiritual model for the type of government they hoped would prevail in the United States. Since these Baptist churches and Jeffersonianism shared commitment to values such as liberty, equality, majority rule, and local control, the simultaneous success of both was sometimes interpreted in millennial terms as evidence of the triumph of Christ in the world. Assuming congruence between the liberty of the gospel and political liberty, Baptist ministers increasingly synthesized those two worlds. This synthesis promoted a certain democratic fluidity that, according to Richard C. Traylor, was both a reason for the movement's rapid success and a source of its later struggles.[10] As the Jeffersonian-Baptist synthesis organically developed in a free market economy, Jeffersonian values sometimes clashed with pre-existing evangelical convictions and sometimes altered the way Baptists believed and practiced their faith. As will be explored below, the embrace of Jeffersonian values by Baptists on the western frontier gave the movement cultural credibility while simultaneously introducing new sources of conflict that often led to fracture, dissension, and theological weakening.

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[9] Friend, *Kentucke's Frontiers*, 116.

[10] Richard C. Traylor, *Born of Water and Spirit: The Baptist Impulse in Kentucky, 1776–1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2015), 7.

In 1989, Nathan O. Hatch argued that "the theme of democratization is central to understanding the development of American Christianity," and suggested that historians consider the appeal of religious populism in efforts to better understand the rapid growth of religion in the early republic.[11] According to Hatch's interpretation, religious movements historically associated with the Second Great Awakening attracted followers by bypassing traditional hierarchies and appealing to the democratic impulses of the common person. While later scholars have added complexity to the "democratization thesis," Hatch's interpretation remains compelling because it links cultural trends to parallel movements in the churches.[12] The Baptists who settled in Kentucky came primarily from the political hotbed of Virginia, and they came speaking the language of Jeffersonianism.[13] This chapter will show how Baptist settlers in Kentucky imbibed and synthesized the Jeffersonian vision that prized egalitarianism, liberty, the opportunity to break from an oppressive past, and optimism for a future in which liberty would reign and prosperity could be attained.

Little Republics

Baptists in the South enthusiastically participated in politics, but they did so while striving to maintain a jurisdictional distinction between secular and sacred. This distinction was instrumental in their fight for religious liberty, for, convinced that God had not granted government authority over matters of conscience, they insisted that the state check its authority at the boundary of the church door. Because these Baptists

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[11] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 3.

[12] Jon Butler adds complexity to the story by elucidating the contributions of more hierarchical church traditions to American religion, in *Awash in a Sea of Faith: The Christianization of the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). Amanda Porterfield argues that evangelical leaders attracted followers by soothing religious and political doubt, in *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

[13] Nearly all the names of early Baptist leaders documented by J. H. Spencer came from Virginia. See J. H. Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists, from 1769 to 1885*, vol. 1 (Cincinnati, OH: J. R. Baumes, 1885), 11–47.

vehemently opposed any mixed conception of church-state relations, they often worked to keep politics in its proper place and to guard their churches and associations from its corrupting influence. Political involvement was seldom discouraged for Baptist church members, but church meetings devoted to the worship of the Triune God were not the proper occasions to discuss such matters. Therefore, while church and associational minutes are invaluable in revealing so much about Baptist faith and practice in the early republic, aside from the occasional warning against the corrupting power of politics, they are mostly devoid of political rhetoric.

While Baptists were committed in principle to keeping politics out of their churches, in practice this goal was sometimes difficult. In his 1795 circular letter to the Elkhorn Association, minister and future Kentucky governor James Garrard (1749–1822) blamed the "languishing state of Zion" in the churches on the inability to maintain the distinction between the church and the world.[14] Apparently, associational leaders were struggling to keep political conversations out of the association's meeting during an intense political season. In 1810, the Portsmouth Association in Virginia debated whether it was "consistent for Baptist Churches to admit of political or electioneering orations at their Meeting-houses or places of worship," to which they concluded it was inappropriate on grounds of maintaining separation between the church and the world.[15] Clearly, the practice in at least some churches necessitated debate on the question. In 1818, George Waller of the Kentucky Long Run Association penned a circular letter in response to the problem of "being intimate with men who are deeply engaged in pursuit of worldly

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[14] Minutes of the Elkhorn Association of Baptists, Held at Cooper's Run, August 8, 1795, and continued by adjournment until the 10th (Lexington, KY: n.p., 1795), 4.

[15] Cited in Monica Najar, *Evangelizing the South: A Social History of Church and State in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 133–34.

honour, make it their business to shew their talents in political matters, or creating parties in Government, whereby both religious and civil societies are injured."[16]

Fascinatingly, Baptist churches and associations fulfilled several political functions more effectively than secular institutions. Monica Najar notes that evangelical churches were often the first institutions of any kind in western settlements and concludes, "As the case of the Baptists demonstrates, this enabled evangelicals to integrate their churches and their beliefs into the very foundation of southern settlements, providing them with a crucial means to affect civil and social norms well past the founding of the nation-state."[17] Each Baptist church formed a covenant that regulated the behavior of its members based on Scripture, and associations, which held no authority over their member churches, influenced local church decisions in other ways. While a Baptist church member entered the fellowship of the church voluntarily after giving evidence of the new birth and receiving baptism, once committed to membership, he or she was expected to submit to the established governance of that body or face communal consequences culminating in expulsion. Baptist churches functioned politically as moral courts for their members while institutionally maintaining distance from secular partisan debates. However, both pastors and individual church members, functioning in their capacity as citizens, eagerly embraced their new status as equal participants in a democratic republic and enthusiastically jumped into the partisan fray.

While James Garrard's election to Kentucky's governorship in 1796 effectively ended his ministry, others maintained dual roles. At least nine Baptists participated in the Kentucky Constitutional Convention in Danville on June 1, 1792, including three preachers: Garrard, George Stokes Smith, and John Bailey.[18] George

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[16] Minutes of the Long Run Association of Baptists, held at Drinnin's Creek Meeting House, Henry County, the 1st Friday & Saturday in September, 1818 (Shelbyville, KY: J. D. Grant, 1818), 3.

[17] Najar, *Evangelizing the South*, 9.

[18] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists, from 1769 to 1885*, 1:253.

Stokes Smith was among the earliest Baptist settlers from Virginia and took an active role in establishing several churches in the Bluegrass region before accepting the call as first pastor of Mount Pleasant Church in Jessamine County in 1803. Smith remained politically involved even after his service at the Constitutional Convention. On September 19, 1795, during the height of partisan friction over the Jay Treaty, he published a letter to the editor of the *Kentucky Gazette* in which he sought to rally the citizens of Kentucky to oppose the treaty on the grounds that it was an attempt to "establish despotism" and a threat to the "security of American liberty." He concluded the letter wishing that "every other despot will sink into infamy and reproach, while every thing that is truly republican may meet with that honor it deserves." Similarly, John Bailey pastored various churches in Kentucky beginning in 1784. He was a delegate, not only to the first constitutional convention, but also to Kentucky's second constitutional convention in 1799. Both Smith and Bailey served dual public roles as Baptist ministers and committed Republican citizens.[19]

Sometimes, however, this dual citizenship came into conflict as when the 1805 Elkhorn Association meeting ruled against the permissibility of Baptists participating in July 4th "barbacues."[20] Such celebrations became common across the nation during the early 1790s as "democratic" or "republican" societies formed in Jeffersonian hotbeds and began organizing rallies in support of the French Revolution. The February 16, 1793 edition of the *Kentucky Gazette* records the earliest known rally in Lexington, but such celebrations became common across the state, especially around elections and July 4th. Baptist leaders discouraged participation, not because they wanted to ban political involvement, but because joining in the spectacle of drinking and dancing alongside

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[19] See Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:79–81.

[20] These minutes are reproduced in William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier: The Baptists, 1783–1830; A Collection of Source Material* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1931), 417–509.

unbelievers crossed the invisible moral boundary between God's people and the world. In September 1804, David's Fork Church cited three members for "going to a barbeque and partaking with the company in eating and drinking."[21] Baptists were citizens of their cities, states, and nation, but their citizenship in heaven was supposed to take precedence. The politics of the church, in theory, ruled over the politics of the nation, but Baptists were not always successful in maintaining this order.

As an example of the local church's jurisdictional authority, consider McConnell's Run Church. On the fourth Saturday of October 1797, the church met for its monthly business meeting and appointed Toliver Craig, brother of the three ministering Craigs, to cite another male member "to appear at our next church meeting in order to give his reasons for neglecting church meetings." The topic of required attendance sparked the church to unanimously decide "that in future for missed attendance every white male member shall respectively address himself to the moderator and give his reasons for missing church meetings."[22] This new policy on required attendance led the church, three months later, to "cite Bro. Elijah Craig to appear at our next church meeting in order to give his reasons for non attendance."[23] Elijah Craig, conspicuous for his earlier role as founding pastor of the church and undoubtedly, by then, one of its most prominent members, had run afoul of the church's new policy. Evidently, he provided a satisfactory excuse for his absence, for he was serving as moderator by the next April's meeting when the church answered a new query of "whether bound slaves is fit members in the church or not." In April, Elijah Craig, himself a slave owner, read the answer to the

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[21] David's Fork Baptist Church Minutes, September 1804, University of Kentucky Special Collections, Lexington.

[22] Stamping Ground Baptist Church records, October 1797, University of Kentucky Special Collections, Lexington.

[23] Stamping Ground Baptist Church records, January 1798.

query: “Any orderly Christian though in a state of slavery has a right to the privileges of a gospel church.”[24]

Similar queries and citations can be read from virtually any surviving Baptist church minute book from the era.[25] The practice of gathering under a covenant and voluntarily submitting to the discipline of the church was inherited from the broader tradition of English dissent when the parish system was replaced by the voluntary pledge of members choosing to join in ecclesial fellowship. These Kentucky Baptists were simply imitating what their churches had practiced in Virginia where churches would meet once per month, usually on Saturdays, under the order of an elected moderator, often the pastor, to raise and answer queries, discipline members, and make important decisions pertaining to the future of the church. Common disciplinary topics included intoxication, non-attendance, sins of speech, dancing, abuse, and adultery. The above examples demonstrate the democratic and egalitarian nature of these meetings. Any member could bring up charges, and all members, including the pastor, were susceptible to having charges brought against them. Remarkably, several Baptist churches even allowed female and slave members to vote on disciplinary matters, a privilege not enjoyed in many other institutional contexts of that era.[26] The decisions made during these meetings would be recorded by an elected clerk in the “minute book.” The minute book, kept by every Baptist church, was an important symbol for the church’s collective memory, for it often included the church’s covenant, rules of order, basic doctrinal commitments, circumstances of founding, listings of members with dates of membership and dismissal or death, and the minutes from disciplinary meetings.

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[24] Stamping Ground Baptist Church records, February 1798 and April 1798.

[25] For a broad study of the habits and practices of Baptist church discipline during this era, see Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[26] See Najar, *Evangelizing the South*, 54–63, 110.

Baptists interpreted the Bible as teaching that the highest seat of earthly authority resided in the local church. In Matthew 16:18–20, Christ entrusted the keys of his kingdom to Peter and the apostles with the expectation that upon their witness, Christ would build his church. As a result of possessing the keys, whatever the church bound and loosed on earth would be bound and loosed in heaven, establishing a link between the monthly business meeting and the eternal purposes of Christ (Matt 18:15–20). When the gathered church rendered a verdict on a matter, that verdict represented the will of God. Where other denominations appealed to ecclesiastical hierarchies often far removed from the daily lives of church members, Baptists were able to settle their disputes locally before family members and neighbors. Since Baptist churches were often the first institutions of any kind on the frontier, they regularly functioned as unchallenged arbiter of social ethics, an arrangement that situated churches in the middle of society's politics and embedded Baptist values into its very fabric.[27]

When Mount Pleasant Church constituted in Jessamine County, Kentucky, in 1801, it began its minute book by listing ten "Rules for the Church While Sitting on Business." Functioning as a homespun *Robert's Rules of Order*, the list was designed to ensure that monthly business meetings remained orderly under the authority of the moderator and that members were held accountable for maintaining Christian character. Immediately after this list of rules, the minute book included a separate set of seven "Rules of Discipline." This list established the central place of business meetings in the life of the church. It specified that business would be conducted at eleven o'clock on the first Saturday of each month and that "all free male members" would be cited for nonattendance. Further, it explained that private transgressions between individual members must follow the order of Matthew 18, in which private reconciliation is sought

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[27] Jeffrey Thomas Perry, "'Courts of Conscience': Local Law, the Baptists, and Church Schism in Kentucky, 1780–1840," *Church History* 84, no. 1 (2015): 132. See also, Monica Najar, *Evangelizing the South*, 9.

first, and that public transgressions warranted public satisfaction. Finally, it stipulated that the church "hold communion twice a year" and that "it is the duty of every member to take their seat and act with discretion in partaking."[28]

Surviving Baptist minute books bear witness to the movement's remarkable uniformity, for these handwritten ledgers resemble one another in contents, order, and structure. In the absence of any overarching hierarchy, these churches relied on ecclesial traditions passed down from previous generations of Baptists. Virtually all Baptist minute books begin with some identity-forming statement. McConnell's Run Church, constituted in 1795, started its minute book with a church covenant intended to maintain "true Cristian Carricter both with Respect to Faith and Practise." With respect to faith, they outlined fundamental doctrinal beliefs on such things as the authority of Scripture, the Trinity, and Calvinistic soteriology, even borrowing language from the historic creeds of the church's first centuries. With respect to practice, they ended the covenant with a list of commitments each member was expected to make to one another. As at Mount Pleasant Church, McConnell's Run specified that no one should miss either worship meetings or business meetings "but upon Extraornary Occasions." Highlighting the central place of business meetings, the minute book's final section—right before the list of members—specified eight "Rules to be Observed in Church Meeting." The moderator would begin each monthly business meeting by calling upon the clerk to read the church covenant, a practice that served to remind those gathered of the covenantal commitments made to one another.[29]

Often historical sections would be included among the front matters of minute books. For example, Mount Pleasant Church's book began with a short history titled, "For a perpetual Memorial," in which the church traced its heritage back to Virginia in

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[28] Mount Pleasant Baptist Church records, University of Kentucky Special Collections, Lexington.

[29] Stamping Ground Baptist Church records.

1766, when “Jehovah was graciously pleased to call several of his ministring servants who lived in the southern climes of North America to come first into the Counties of Orange and Spotsylvania.” The account tells the origin story of Mount Pleasant Church—a story traced back to Virginia when Elijah Craig sought the help of Samuel Harris (1724–99) and James Reed (1726–98) from Grassy Creek Church in North Carolina to constitute a new church in Orange County. Members of these Virginia bodies would eventually join members sent out from South Elkhorn Church in Kentucky to constitute Mount Pleasant Church.[30] This newly constituted Baptist church, while fully autonomous, identified itself within a Baptist historical tradition that informed both its theology and polity.

For a movement of autonomous institutions, Baptists’ shared history of persecution and struggle in Virginia granted the hundreds of Baptist churches constituted during these early decades of westward expansion a remarkable level of homogeneity. In fact, it enabled them to form what John Seed terms “narrative identity,” which is created when a group maintains the permanence of a proper name across changing historical circumstances by telling and retelling a shared origin story.[31] The Baptist settlers who came from Virginia shared a story of persevering evangelical faithfulness under the conditions of established religion and political persecution. They retold the story of God’s political deliverance alongside their retellings of the deliverance they found in Christ. Their political struggle became essential to their narrative identity and oriented them toward certain political values that would later come to be embodied in Jefferson’s Republican party.

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[30] Mount Pleasant Baptist Church records, University of Kentucky Special Collections, Lexington.

[31] John Seed, *Dissenting Histories: Religious Division and the Politics of Memory in Eighteenth-Century England* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 1–2.

In addition to a shared narrative identity, associational networking among leaders also significantly contributed to the organic uniformity of the movement. While each Baptist church functioned autonomously, associations formed when doctrinally similar churches in given geographic areas voluntarily chose to fellowship with one another in achieving common goals. William Fristoe listed four motivations for forming associations: to share information about the advance of the gospel, to relieve desperate churches, to correct erroneous churches, and to serve as advisory councils for churches seeking guidance on complex matters.[32] While the association held no absolute authority over churches, the body could decide to disfellowship from a church that had strayed from sound doctrine or practice. Associations nevertheless wielded considerable influence, for decisions made at the associational level represented the combined wisdom of the churches represented by their most-respected leaders. Associations would generally meet once per year with each member church sending two to four elected "messengers" to deliver a report of the church's progress and to represent the church for associational decisions.

The associational model somewhat resembled the republicanism of America's government in that just as states sent elected representatives to Congress, churches sent elected messengers to associational meetings. Crucially, however, Baptists viewed the local church as the highest earthly authority, which severely limited the association's power. During association meetings, sermons would be preached, reports from the member churches would be given, and a circular letter would be read. During business sessions, delegates would consider queries from churches and elect committees to investigate complex matters before reporting results to future meetings. Answers to queries were supposed to be recommendations only, but associations could resort to expulsion from membership if churches adopted problematic doctrine or practice.

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[32] Willam Fristoe, *A Concise History of the Ketocton Baptist Association* (1808; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 2002), 15–16.

Member churches often queried the association for wisdom on thorny matters of doctrine or practice. For example, at the inaugural meeting of the Elkhorn Association in 1785, the four churches represented entertained the query, "Whether the Philadelphia confession of faith adopted by the Baptists shall be strictly adhered to as the rule of our communion or whether a suspension thereof for the sake of Society be best?" The meeting answered, "It is agreed that the said recited confession of faith be strictly adhered to."[33] Baptist churches during this era perpetually debated the appropriate level of confessional subscription. Illustrating the tension Baptists experienced between loyalty to the church and loyalty to the state, that same Elkhorn Association meeting also entertained a query on whether it was "lawful for a Christian to bear office civil or military." The association answered, "It is our opinion that it is lawful for any Christian to bear office either civil or military, except ministers of the gospel."[34] In another instance, the 1786 Elkhorn Association meeting appointed a committee to examine the "form of a marriage." Apparently, someone had requested a wedding liturgy be written for Baptist ministers within the association to use. The matter was not settled until October of 1788 when the idea was rejected and the motion "struck out." The minutes do not include the reasoning behind the association's decision, but the production of a marriage liturgy for use in autonomous Baptist churches would have been a surprising development for a tradition recently liberated from the Anglican establishment.[35]

Associational minutes show that some ministers rose in prominence among their peers, most likely due to giftedness in teaching and leadership capabilities.[36] The name "Elijah Craig," already referenced several times in this chapter, serves as one

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[33] Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 417.

[34] Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 419.

[35] Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 420–30.

[36] Keith Harper, *A Mere Kentucky of a Place: The Elkhorn Association and the Commonwealth's First Baptists* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2021), 42.

ubiquitous example. Craig gained his reputation in Virginia where he was instrumental in bringing James Reed from North Carolina to baptize a group of early Baptist converts then meeting in his barn. He also won the esteem of his Baptist peers for enduring persecution at the hands of the Anglican establishment and reportedly preaching the gospel through prison bars.[37] Elijah was not involved in his brother Lewis's "travelling church," but came a few years later, pastoring two churches in Kentucky and joining his brother in leadership of the Elkhorn Association. Aside from the Craigs, John Taylor, Augustine Eastin, Ambrose Dudley, George Smith, William Hickman, and James Garrard, who was later elected as the second governor of Kentucky, played pivotal roles in the early days of the Elkhorn Association. All these men were from Virginia. Once David Barrow moved to the state from Virginia in 1798, he immediately joined the ranks of these well-respected leaders. As Keith Harper writes, "Everyone had a voice, but some voices carried more weight than others."[38] Associational leadership provided a platform for Baptist ministers to increase their standing in the broader community, forming an informal aristocracy even as they parroted the Republican ideal of egalitarianism.

The rite of ordination also helped Baptist ministers stay connected with one another. When a potential minister expressed a desire to preach, he would first seek authorization from his church. If the church saw potential and believed him to be qualified, it would "license" him to preach. However, a license did not authorize him to administer the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper; to do that, he would need to be ordained. The licensing period served to give the potential minister the opportunity to prove that he had received the gift of preaching. John Taylor had already been licensed from Lunie's Creek Church in Virginia for four years when he met with an ordination council consisting of Lewis Craig, John Pickett, John Koontz, Joseph Redding, and

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[37] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:87.

[38] Harper, *A Mere Kentucky of a Place*, 42.

Theodoric Noel. Since these ministers already knew Taylor well, the period of questioning was abbreviated. However, under ordinary circumstances, the ordination candidate would undergo a thorough examination in which the assembled ministers would seek evidence of the new birth, ask questions related to basic doctrines, and inquire into the candidate's motivations for entering the ministry.[39] Assuming the candidate passed the examination, the council would then lay hands on him and pray. After receiving the laying on of hands, John Taylor heard a charge from Lewis Craig before accepting "the right hand of fellowship from them and all the brethren that were present." He described it as "an awfully solemn time."[40] Once ordained, in addition to being qualified to serve as a pastor and administer the ordinances, he was also able to serve on subsequent ordination councils, a task Taylor undertook for the remainder of his long ministry in Virginia and Kentucky. These shared experiences created tight bonds of affection in an otherwise isolating frontier context.

The connectedness fostered by a shared history and associational networking explains why William Fristoe could conclude his 1808 history of the Ketocton Baptist Association in Virginia with a section entitled, "Reasons why the Baptists, generally, espouse Republicanism."[41] The Baptist movement had no hierarchical ruling body and only sometimes an official confession of faith, but Fristoe could speak generally about the politics of his Baptist brethren because he operated within this identity-forming milieu. According to Fristoe, Baptists were Republicans for a few reasons. He pointed, first, to their history of suffering under monarchical governments and established religion. Baptists, of all people, knew that monarchy historically meant persecution and would never willingly return to such an order. Elijah Craig, in one of his only published

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[39] Fristoe, *A Concise History of the Ketocton Association*, 33–34.

[40] Taylor, *Baptists on the American Frontier*, 135–36.

[41] Fristoe, *A Concise History of the Ketocton Baptist Association*, 142–49.

works, concurred with Fristoe's rationale, writing that he took on "the firm disposition of a republican, in things civil and religious" in part due to his suffering in Virginia under "the old government."[42] Next, Fristoe relied on common observation. Like Leland and Barrow, he echoed the Enlightenment-inspired political philosophy of Jefferson and Madison in noting that it was "reasonable" to conclude that government is "most likely to be freest from blemishes when composed by the representative of the people."[43] Finally, Fristoe saved his most important reason for last: "Our religious education agrees with and perfectly corresponds with a government by the people."[44]

In other words, Baptists were Republicans politically because they were first republicans in their churches. By this time, "republican" had been detached from its classical usage and was basically a synonym for "democratic."[45] The New Testament, Fristoe wrote, promotes "a free and independent government by a congregational, constituted church, from whose bar there is no appeal to any higher court; this independence of church government and the right each individual member has to a voice in such a government appears from many passages."[46] These Baptists believed that Jefferson's form of republicanism, though imperfect, was largely consistent with Christ's design for his church. They latched onto the Republican party because they saw in it a political philosophy that shared their values. Christine Leigh Heyrman interprets Baptist and Methodist proclivity for Jeffersonian Republicanism as intentional leveraging in

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[42] Elijah Craig, *A Few Remarks on the Errors That Are Maintained in the Christian Churches of the Present Day; and Also, on the Movements of Divine Providence Respecting Them* (Lexington, KY: James H. Stewart, 1801), 2.

[43] Fristoe, *A Concise History of the Ketocton Baptist Association*, 143–44.

[44] Fristoe, *A Concise History of the Ketocton Baptist Association*, 145.

[45] See Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 62–63.

[46] Fristoe, *A Concise History of the Ketocton Baptist Association*, 147.

search of cultural legitimacy.[47] Similarly, Amanda Porterfield credits the success of evangelical movements like the Baptists during the Second Great Awakening to these groups' ability to manage and leverage pre-existing doubt by providing new sources of biblical and ecclesial authority.[48] Both of these readings suggest that cultural power motivated Baptists during this crucial period. Without denying this thesis, interpreters must not discount the motive of genuine religious conviction. For most Baptists, Jefferson's party was not merely a pre-calculated means to cultural power, but also a convenient partner in the pursuit of biblical fidelity. Baptists embraced Republicanism for various reasons, not least because it promoted values they also read about in their Bibles—values like liberty, equality, and localism.

Wilson Thompson (1788–1866) illustrates the way some Baptists during this era prioritized the kingdom of Christ over politics and were even willing to utilize politics in their quest to spread the gospel. Thompson was a Baptist preacher from Kentucky who eventually settled in Indiana as a leader in the Primitive Baptist movement. Between Kentucky and Indiana and before the Primitive Baptist movement got started, however, he spent some time preaching in the Missouri Territory during the War of 1812. His ministry in Missouri coincided with a season of intense partisan divide as President Madison faced severe Federalist criticism over his leadership during the war. Responding to public criticism from a Baptist-despising Methodist preacher who claimed exclusive right to preach from a public house in the territory, Thompson urged his listeners to consider recent history: "The Baptist people have always proved to be good soldiers in the Revolutionary war; and in all other wars for independence and liberty, they have proved to be valiant and trustworthy."[49] Thompson depended on the Baptist political

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[47] Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 239–49.

[48] Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt*, 1–13.

[49] Wilson Thompson, *Autobiography of Elder Wilson Thompson, Embracing a Sketch of His Life, Travels, and Ministerial Labors* (Cincinnati, OH: Moore, Wilstach & Baldwin, 1867), 220.

record to assist in endearing his preaching to patriotic Republicans, and his plea worked, for it resulted in an offer from a sympathetic Deist to use his estate as a months-long host site for Thompson's preaching.

During one of the meetings at the Deist's house, a woman came forward and expressed that her desire for church communion was hindered by her husband's refusal to allow her to be baptized. Conveniently, Thompson learned that the husband was "a staunch Deist but a warm republican—that is, a Jefferson Democrat, and almost an enthusiast on the subject of free government."[50] He, therefore, cunningly steered a conversation with the man toward the topic of politics by praising the "the auspices of a popular free government" that allowed men "freedom of conscience, of thought, of speech, and of press, and . . . to act in compliance with their own convictions of where and how they should worship God, or not to worship at all, as they choose." He further lamented the existence in America of those "who would prefer to have their own opinions and speculations established by law, that so they might control the consciences of others."[51] Once the Deist husband had enthusiastically joined in praising the rights of conscience and liberty of speech, Thompson skillfully brought up the subject of his wife's request for baptism, thus leveraging shared politics to further the kingdom of Christ by procuring the consent of the hesitant husband. Political engagement with Jeffersonianism certainly helped Baptists rise culturally, but it could also be used to serve higher causes.

Unsurprisingly, John Leland also made much of the similarities between Baptist distinctives and Republicanism. In his *The Government of Christ a Christocracy*, published in 1804, Leland argued that Christ's government combines aspects of both monarchy and democracy to form something wholly unique—what he called a

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[50] Thompson, *Autobiography of Elder Wilson Thompson*, 227.

[51] Thompson, *Autobiography of Elder Wilson Thompson*, 227–28.

"Christocracy." According to Leland, the church resembles monarchy in that Christ is absolute legislator with no associates and, like a monarch, appoints officers (pastors and deacons) to execute his will. However, like a democracy, the church protects liberty and equality for its members and empowers the congregation to wield ultimate decision-making authority. According to Leland, Christ's kingdom "greatly resemble[s] the genius of a republic" with each individual church operating as a democracy to form "one absolute empire."[52] Leland's description of local churches as "little republics" would catch on among Baptist writers in the nineteenth century, but he was merely voicing what many already assumed. To Leland, any "church" that sought to exercise power over the consciences of others was not worthy of the name; such a body had forfeited the right to be called a "church of Christ" and was instead merely a "creature of state."[53] The only valid churches of Christ, according to Leland, were the "little republics" that operated democratically and respected the right of liberty of conscience.

Joyce Appleby calls the rise of the Jeffersonian Republicans in the 1790s, "the triumph of the first truly American political movement," and in some ways Baptist churches embraced a parallel identity as a distinctly American religious movement.[54] Federalism took its political cues from the tradition of classical republicanism and looked to Britain as a model for implementation, but the Jeffersonians were much more willing to break with tradition in pursuit of cherished ideals. In the rise of the Republicans, a diverse group of Americans organized around a unified philosophical vision that promised to elevate the common man to equal political and economic status, thus liberating him from worn out customs and hierarchies that had historically held him down. Baptists were such commoners, and they naturally found the Republican vision

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[52] John Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland* (New York: G. W. Wood, 1845), 275.

[53] Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, 278.

[54] Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order*, 4.

compelling. In fact, many Jeffersonian ideals mirrored pre-existing values of their own. The monthly Baptist business meeting gave regular church members—including women and slaves—a taste of equality not experienced elsewhere. The hope of political liberty resonated with a population who celebrated liberty in Christ. While strong creedal traditions existed among some Baptists, reliance on confessions of faith was often a matter of hot debate due to fear of holding the conscience captive to something other than the Bible. Thus, the Jeffersonian willingness to break with tradition would have been seen in positive terms by Baptists. Finally, Jeffersonians tended to view the future with optimism, which fit well with the millennial hopes of evangelicals. These similarities led Jeffersonian Baptists like Leland and, as we will see below, Elijah Craig, to conclude that their goals in ministry matched the secular goals of Jefferson's party and that their work in the sacred realm ran parallel to the spread of republicanism in the world.

The Jeffersonian Economy

Appleby observes, "Where Republicans differed from Federalists was in the moral character they gave to economic development. The promise in prosperity encouraged them to vault over the cumulative wisdom of the ages and imagine a future far different from the dreary past known to man."[55] While Federalists drew from the British tradition of inherited land and wealth, Jeffersonians celebrated mobility and new enterprise in America's growing capitalist economy. Appleby notes that Republicans derived from capitalism "the promise of a new age for ordinary men."[56] In many ways, the Craig family came to represent the "First Baptist Family of Kentucky," if not in order of appearance at least in enterprising prominence. Already well-known in Virginia for their role advancing Baptist causes under persecution, the entire family eventually

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[55] Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order*, 49.

[56] Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order*, 50.

resettled in Kentucky and immediately began impacting both the religious and economic contexts of their new home.

Toliver and Polly Craig had seven sons and four daughters, and three of the sons—Lewis, Elijah, and Joseph—were ordained Baptist ministers and key associational leaders in both locales. The precise dates of each family member's migration are unclear, but Lewis brought his entire church with him in 1781 and constituted Gilbert's Creek Church, one of the first three Baptist churches constituted in Kentucky that same year. The ordained Craigs continued their earlier work of church planting and associational leadership, but they also took advantage of new economic opportunities in Kentucky. Their names, especially those of Lewis and Elijah, litter the classifieds of the *Kentucky Gazette* in reference to business dealings as varied as land speculation, education, horse breeding, owning and operating the first paper mill west of the Allegheny mountains, cloth manufacturing, agriculture, bond loaning, lumber and rope production, dry good sales, and distilling.[57]

Their business dealings sometimes triggered public controversy as when Elijah had to defend the quality of paper from his mill in the pages of the June 4, 1805 edition of the *Kentucky Gazette*. Their involvement with land sales was particularly controversial, for often they were forced to dispute land claims in overwhelmed courts weighed down with similar quarrels. As instrumental as the Craigs were in advancing the Baptist cause, some of their peers frowned on their relentless pursuit of economic gain. John Taylor, who had been a member of Lewis's church in Kentucky and later a fellow minister alongside the Craigs within the Elkhorn Association, wrote the following about his former pastor: "If we ever saw a man that could serve both God and mammon, it was

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[57] See Karen Mauer Green, *The Kentucky Gazette, 1787–1800: Genealogical and Historical Abstracts* (Galveston, TX: The Frontier Press, 1983) and Karen Mauer Green, *The Kentucky Gazette, 1801–1820: Genealogical and Historical Abstracts* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, 1985).

Lewis Craig."[58] Similarly, J. H. Spencer marked 1786 as the end of Elijah Craig's ministerial usefulness, for that was the year he moved to Kentucky. Once in Kentucky, the opportunity for "profitable speculation" overwhelmed him "in worldly business," and he "vainly imagined that he could serve God and mammon both."[59]

Ironically, the same Elijah Craig who so tenaciously pursued personal wealth through varied business ventures spoke the loudest against Baptist pastors drawing salaries from their churches. Craig felt so strongly about the issue that he self-funded his first published tract in 1801 to attack the practice. According to Craig, the practice of salaried clergy was both unbiblical and inconsistent with republican principles. Further, he believed that money-loving clergy were responsible for producing "more bloodshed and calamity than any one thing ever did in the Christian world."[60] He limited the application of the Bible passages that promoted financial support for ministers to traveling ministers as opposed to settled pastors. Pastors, according to Craig, should have to "travel the same thorny way of the laity" which will result in them preaching "much more certain and feelingly" and "with much greater benefit to the churches."[61] Salaried clergy was a vestige of monarchy that had entered the church through Constantine, and once the church returned to a "pure democracy," God would rain down blessing from heaven.[62] He bemoaned Baptist churches, finally freed from the oppression of the Anglican establishment, mimicking their tyrannical practices. Craig believed history was progressively moving toward the kingdom of Christ, and he interpreted the gains of political and religious liberty as evidence of that progress. The practice of paying clergy a salary was a step backwards; it was the undoing of liberty's gains.

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[58] Taylor, *Baptists on the American Frontier*, 166.

[59] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:88.

[60] Craig, *A Few Remarks*, 3.

[61] Craig, *A Few Remarks*, 18.

[62] Craig, *A Few Remarks*, 25.

Craig's entrenched position on salaried clergy probably motivated him to publish again in 1807, this time a personal attack against fellow Elkhorn minister, Jacob Creath. Creath was the pastor of Town Fork Church and had had a public dispute with one of its wealthy church members, Thomas Lewis, over the terms of a deal involving the exchange of slaves.[63] The church sided with their pastor in the dispute, but some in the Elkhorn Association, Craig among them, were outraged over the result and intervened, breaking their own stated convictions about local church autonomy. Thomas Lewis, much like Craig, had established himself as a successful landowner and was well-regarded in Kentucky society.[64] Jacob Creath, however, was just the type of money-loving clergy Craig had attacked in his earlier publication. Craig's *A Portrait of Jacob Creath* does not survive, but the report from the "committee of helps" requested by Town Fork Church from the Elkhorn Association to help resolve the dispute lists Craig's charges against Creath. Craig accused him of several financial improprieties, of which were charges of "dismembering society," "not preaching to churches without pay," and "grabbing the money, &c. at Frankfort."[65] The specific details of Craig's charges are impossible to know without the tract, but what survives shows the drastic lengths Craig was willing to go to defend his principles publicly.

The controversies surrounding Elijah Craig reveal some of the tensions Baptists faced as they settled westward in the new nation. Freed to pursue profit without social stigma in a context where wealth was more attainable, they still had to reckon with the Bible's warnings against loving money and the resulting ecclesial stigma associated with wealth. Further, they struggled to make any decision divorced from the political narrative of where they had come from and where they were going. While they

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[63] On this controversy, see Harper, *A Mere Kentucky of a Place*, 97–100.

[64] Harper, *A Mere Kentucky of a Place*, 99.

[65] Elijah Craig, ed., *Report of the Committee of Helps, Called by the Town Fork Church, To enquire into Sundry Charges against the Religious and Moral Character of Jacob Creath, Exhibited in a Pamphlet, published by Elijah Craig* (n.p.: Elijah Craig, 1807), 4.

championed the Bible alone as their sole authority, anything that hinted at monarchy, tyranny, or a return to an oppressive past provided its own instruction. The Bible, in other words, was interpreted through the lens of liberty's progress. Baptists were growing in every conceivable way. Capitalism meant greater wealth while their attachment to Republicanism meant more social respectability. Simultaneously, their movement was growing, alongside Methodism, faster than any other religious movement in the United States. Considering this rapid change, one would expect to see the movement change as well. One would expect, for example, to see Baptist pastors pursuing greater educational opportunities and finding greater compensation for their labors. For Elijah Craig and others, however, the pressure to define their movement in contrast to their political enemies provided a major deterrent.

Millennial Hopes

On Thursday, August 6, 1801, between 10,000 and 20,000 people gathered near the Cane Ridge Meeting House in Bourbon County, Kentucky, for a week-long "camp meeting" that would become the seminal event for the launch of the Second Great Awakening.[66] The Cane Ridge revival was not the first such revival in Kentucky, but it was certainly the largest. In 1797, James McGready, a fiery New Light Presbyterian preacher, moved to Kentucky from North Carolina, where his preaching had already sparked revivals in the early 1790s. Once in Kentucky, McGready travelled the southern part of the state to lead Presbyterian churches in "sacramental occasions," which were annual or semi-annual rituals of observing the Lord's Supper. Congregations would gather days in advance to prepare, pray, and fast. The events would last multiple days and include preaching, praying, and hymn singing. Congregants, many of whom had travelled great distances for the occasion, were encouraged to prepare themselves spiritually for

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[66] See Thomas S. Kidd, *America's Religious History: Faith, Politics, and the Shaping of a Nation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 70.

what was undoubtedly an emotional experience and one of the highlights of the annual church calendar.[67] Between 1798 and 1800, McGready led a series of such services in various southern Kentucky locales that became occasions for great religious excitement and mass conversions, shifting the focus of the gatherings from sacrament observance to soul saving.

Barton W. Stone knew James McGready from his college days in North Carolina and was presiding over two Presbyterian congregations in the Bluegrass region of Kentucky as McGready's awakenings were occurring in the southern part of the state. After visiting McGready in the spring of 1801, Stone returned to central Kentucky with news of revival and a model for turning sacramental occasions into opportunities for mass conversion. Outdoor camping at such events first came into practice during this time, not as any kind of revival strategy, but out of necessity. These events were attracting larger crowds and lasting multiple days, and people simply needed a place to sleep.[68] Several smaller camp meetings occurred in the summer of 1801, but it was the revival at Cane Ridge that would come to draw national attention and rise to symbolic stature as the starting point of the Great Revival and the western front of the Second Great Awakening.[69]

Cane Ridge was more publicized than the earlier revivals, drew a much larger crowd, and was located near the center of Kentucky's growing population. As a result of these factors, Cane Ridge was also the most documented of the camp meetings of 1801. John Lyle, Presbyterian minister of the Salem congregation in Clark County, Kentucky, kept a diary of what he witnessed over the course of those early August days. He depicted an active scene in which multiple preachers from every denomination exhorted sinners to

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[67] See Ellen Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion: The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 190–97.

[68] Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion*, 204.

[69] Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 435.

repent and believe in Christ and led hymn-singing in the meeting house as well as on stumps and in fields and tents over the course of several days. Worshipers responded in shouts and cries, some falling to the ground and weeping for mercy. He wrote, "Their looks were joyful but their appearance rather light but I cannot describe it."[70] According to Lyle's account, the most distinguishing physical response to the preaching was falling down. He concluded his account by estimating that at least one thousand of the attendees had responded in such fashion.[71] Other eyewitnesses described attendees shouting, weeping, laughing, fainting, and jerking their heads. News of the revival at Cane Ridge soon spread over the entire South, and similar awakenings featuring parallel physical responses occurred in such places as North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia. Eventually, revivals would come to impact every state in the nation.

Historians of the Great Revival have pointed to the event's frontier context for causal explanation. For example, Sydney E. Ahlstrom voiced the view of many when he contrasted the "immense loneliness of the frontier farmer's normal life" with the "exhilaration of participating in so large a social occasion."[72] Others have suggested the format of the camp meeting itself as a primary causal factor. Such interpretations, however, do not fully account for the historical data. Ellen Eslinger challenges the frontier thesis by arguing that "the problems facing Kentuckians in 1800 were no longer those of isolation, deprivation, and danger but rather of social disorganization, economic competition, and political partisanship."[73] By 1801, Kentucky was hardly a rough frontier, especially the Bluegrass region. Widespread renewed interest in religion was more the result of a rapidly changing social context that forced citizens to reconsider their

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[70] Robert Evans, ed., *The Kentucky Revival: Selected Core Documents* (Hazelbrook, Australia: Research in Evangelical Revivals, 2018), 90.

[71] Evans, *The Kentucky Revival*, 94.

[72] Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 433.

[73] Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion*, xvi.

place in the world than it was the result of an isolated and lonely populace. Eslinger's interpretation better accounts for how Baptists in Kentucky, whose leaders rarely participated in the sacramental occasions or camp meetings, experienced simultaneous revival in their churches. The names of prominent Baptist ministers are conspicuously missing from the accounts of camp meeting revivals. However, Baptist churches in the Bluegrass region were already growing rapidly by the summer of 1800, the same time as McGready's initial revivals in the southern part of the state and one year before the more celebrated camp meeting revivals of 1801. Something other than camp meeting excitement was driving renewed interest in populist religion.

On the very same weekend of the Cane Ridge revival, the Elkhorn Association of Baptists met at South Elkhorn Church, some thirty-five miles away, for their regularly scheduled annual business session. At that time, the association was comprised of forty-seven churches, and those churches reported an astounding level of growth over the preceding year—3,011 baptisms and 3,211 new church members.[74] By contrast, the meeting a year earlier had reported just eighty-two baptisms and a net loss in membership due to dismission, death, and exclusion.[75] In 1799, Elkhorn's clerk indicated "a general complaint of supiness with some additions yet we bless God peace seems to pervade the whole."[76] "Supiness" here undoubtedly refers to the condition of being "supine," indicating a general state of religious indifference. In the months between August 1800 and August 1801, region wide revival had replaced lethargy. What had changed? According to Amanda Porterfield, intense partisan disputes had created a culture of political mistrust. The federal Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, for example, were met in Kentucky by the Jefferson-penned Kentucky Resolutions, declaring the acts "altogether

[74] Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier,* 488.

[75] Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 486.

[76] Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 481.

void, and of no force."[77] In her narrative, the partisan battles outlined in the previous chapter as well as the emergence of religious skepticism undermined confidence in traditional institutions, creating doubt and suspicion, and religion filled the void. Porterfield is certainly correct to look to politics for clues, but neither the heated partisan battles that consumed the better part of the 1790s nor the publication of Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* fully accounts for the social factors impacting dramatic church growth in Kentucky between 1800 and 1802.

In his history of the Great Revival, John B. Boles minimizes the political interest of the general population of the South, arguing that their individualistic and pietistic revivalism ensured disinterest in political happenings.[78] Since Kentucky voting data from the 1800 presidential election was and remains unavailable, Boles looked to Virginia to back his claim. In Virginia, only 28 percent of adult white males—women and slaves could not participate—voted in the election, but only property owners were legally permitted to vote. No mechanism exists for determining what percentage of the adult white population was eligible to vote, nor can we ascertain the religious affiliation of the 28 percent who did. Certainly, every era of history presents instances of political non-involvement, but the full scope of the historical record suggests a Kentucky population increasingly concerned with the political fate of the nation. By 1795, the weekly *Kentucky Gazette* had been joined by the more explicitly Republican *Stewart's Kentucky Herald*, printed on paper from Elijah Craig's mill in Scott County.[79] By 1798, *The Palladium, A Literary and Political Weekly Repository*, published in Frankfort,

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[77] Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt*, 48–77.

[78] John B. Boles, *The Great Revival: Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972), 171–82.

[79] See Paul C. Pappas, "Stewart's Kentucky Herald, 1795–1803: A Portrait of Early American Journalism West of the Alleghenies," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 67, no. 4 (1969): 335–349.

joined these two publications.[80] There was clearly enough political interest in the Bluegrass region to justify three weekly newspapers covering the topic.

In fact, the decade leading up to the Great Revival had been so politically volatile that Virginia Baptist historian Robert Semple blamed spiritual coldness among Virginia Baptists in 1795 with political agitation in the churches. At the 1795 Dover Association meeting, messengers recommended a day of fasting and prayer in response to the signing of the Jay Treaty. Semple wrote, "This measure, doubtless, arose from violent party heat, which at that time, agitated the minds of Americans generally, and which it seems, frequently made its way into the pulpit and religious assemblies."[81] David Rice, perhaps the Kentucky Bluegrass region's most prominent Presbyterian minister, analyzed the Great Revival in 1803. While he concluded the revival was a genuine work of God's Spirit, he stopped short of interpreting it as the inbreaking of Christ's millennial reign. He believed that the millennium would be preceded by "a set of evangelical preachers, who will more fully realise that the kingdom of Christ is not of this world; and so disengage themselves from national attachments and political connexions."[82] Rice believed the millennium would unite nations and parties, and according to his assessment, the leaders of the Great Revival were too engaged in political partisanship to fit the description of Christ's reign of unity, peace, and love.

In 1819, Thomas Jefferson called his election to the presidency "the revolution of 1800," and while it is tempting to interpret those words as the nostalgic impressions of old age, contemporaries used similar terms at the time of the event.[83] After nearly a

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[80] Kenneth W. Rawings, "Trial List of Titles of Kentucky Newspapers and Periodicals before 1860," *Register of Kentucky State Historical Society* 36, no. 116 (1938): 268.

[81] Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, 143.

[82] David Rice, *A Sermon on the Present Revival of Religion, &c. in This Country; Preached at the Opening of the Kentucky Synod* (Lexington, KY: Joseph Charless, 1803), 39.

[83] J. Jefferson Looney, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 15, *1 September 1819 to 31 May 1820*, Retirement Series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 16–19. For an enlightening collection of essays exploring the "revolution of 1800," see James Horn, Jan Ellen Lewis, and Peter S.

decade of intense partisan fighting, Jefferson's election seemed like the vindication of republicanism. John Leland, for example, voiced the opinion that Jefferson's presidency meant just as much for liberty's triumph in the world as the revolution of 1776.[84] To Leland, Jefferson's election was proof that "heaven above looked down, and awakened the American genius, which has arisen, like a lion, from the swelling of Jordon, and roared like thunder in the states, 'we will be free; we will rule ourselves; our officers shall be honorable servants, but not mean masters.'"[85] Leland's millennial optimism may sound strange today, but reliance on millennial language to interpret contemporary political happenings was hardly anomalous at the time. In its January 26, 1801 edition, with the presidency still undecided between the two Republicans Jefferson and Burr but the Federalists already defeated, the *Kentucky Gazette* reported a "grand festival" in Lexington in which citizens invited friends throughout the state to join in celebrating the triumph of republicanism. The article claimed that "in no part of the union has the success of the late Presidential election inspired more real and universal joy, than in the state of Kentucky." According to the article, over 10,000 people joined in toasting the "universal harmony, peace, and happiness" resulting from the United States' adoption of a republican form of government. The crowd also toasted "Liberty and Republicanism throughout the World."

The February 16 edition of the *Gazette* reported another festival that occurred in Kentucky's capital of Frankfort on February 3 "to celebrate the triumph of republican principles" on the very spot where "the first legislative stand was made against the obnoxious Alien and Sedition laws." Once again, the crowd toasted several things, including their wish that "republican government endure while the earth revolves on its

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Onuf, eds., *The Revolution of 1800: Democracy, Race, and the New Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

[84] Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, 263.

[85] Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, 255.

axis" and their praise of the "most perfect constitution of government on earth." When news broke on March 9, 1801, that Jefferson had finally broken the congressional gridlock after thirty-six separate votes and secured the presidency over Aaron Burr, the *Gazette's* editor printed these words for the paper's loyal subscribers:

> I now cordially congratulate every lover of his country, every sufferer in the cause of civil liberty and especially my fellow laborers, the editors of republican papers throughout the Union, on the final event of the contest; on the glorious triumph of liberty, philosophy, patriotism, benevolence, virtue, and truth, over despotism, illiberality, treachery, malevolence, error and vice.

The editor immediately interpreted Jefferson's victory as a triumph, not just for one candidate over another, but for liberty over tyranny.

The interpretation of political events with millennial language had long occurred in Anglo-American thought. Indeed, as Ruth Bloch writes, "The belief in the millennium is one of the oldest and most enduring patterns of thought in Western civilization. The idea that human history is divinely ordained and will lead to a period of heavenly perfection on earth can be dated at least as far back as the prophecies of Isaiah in the eight century B.C."[86] Particularly in America, where the nation's unlikely triumph over Britain seemed the precursor of millennial hopes of eradicating tyranny forever, belief in a future golden age of liberty excited imaginations, and key historical events were interpreted as progressive steps along the way. In the 1790s, the partisan battles between Republicanism and Federalism as well as the debates surrounding support of the French Revolution revived a more egalitarian version of the millennialism of the American Revolution as citizens looked forward to the republican transformation of the entire world.[87] Multitudes gathered in Lexington on February 8, 1793, to celebrate France's revolution, and a visiting gentleman penned a song, printed in the February 16 edition of the *Kentucky Gazette*, with the following lyrics:

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[86] Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), xi.

[87] Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 151.

> Behold fair Freedom's flame arise
> And spreading wide to distant skies
> Make tyrants, struck with terror, fly
> The glorious flame shall never die!
> For Freedom shall, thro' every clime
> Extend her rights—their source divine—
> Proclaim to all, the great decree—
> That Man was made by nature free.

Among the toasts offered late in the evening was, "May the flame of Liberty be immortal and extend to the utmost limits of the earth."

Millennial hopes were a common refrain in the pages of Kentucky's first weekly newspaper in the 1790s, and they came from diverse voices. Some were explicitly political with only vague references to the divine, but others mixed politics and religion into a unified millennial stew. As early as April 21, 1792, the prophecies of the English Puritan Christopher Love (1618–51) were advertised as having foretold America's independence and the French Revolution. By 1805, the dispatch predicted, "God will be universally known by all—then a general reformation and peace for ever, when the people shall learn war no more. Happy is the man that liveth to see this day." In the March 29, 1794 edition, the editors of the paper included a prophecy they received from a gentleman from London and presented it "to our readers as we received it: as a support of their faith in the Millenium, which, we hope, can be supported by Scripture, reason, and the opinions of pious men." The prophecy predicted rebellion against the French king, European war, the rise of "Gog and Magog" to make war against all the world's nations by 1797, the rise of a descendent of David to destroy Gog and Magog by 1799, and, by 1800, "the remnant of all nations to be of one religion, and no more wars amongst men, who will be forever after in bonds of friendship, equality and unfeigned love towards God and one another."

Some even coupled millennial hopes with the end of slavery. On August 31, 1793, the Baptist John Bailey published a circular letter in the *Kentucky Gazette* from the "Representatives of the people believing in the doctrine of the final restoration of all

things to a state of order and happiness through our Lord Jesus Christ." The universalist group had met at the Cedar Creek Church meeting house on May 24, 1793, and claimed among their number four constituted churches, two hundred members, and five ordained ministers. Their circular letter predicted the coming day when "mankind shall then embrace each other in their common Saviour, their Blood, their language, their customs and different forms of government shall no longer be the means of animosity and contempt." They believed that "slavery of every kind shall cease, and no more clank her iron chains in the hearing of the sons of LIBERTY." These "restorationists" were a precursor to the later Stone-Campbellite movement that grew out of the Great Revival. On May 2, 1799, another anti-slavery advocate, "A Lover of Liberty," published an address linking the downfall of slavery with the coming millennium by expressing hope that "by the blessing of divine providence, joined with the present convulsion and revolutions in the world, for the sake of liberty, will not fail to bring freedom safe to the conclusion of travail, in her original appearance, without having any of her heavenly features mangled by the iron hands of tyranny, her inveterate enemy."

The election of 1800 had revealed a growing fault line dividing two competing visions for America's future with John Adams and Thomas Jefferson representing each side.[88] The campaigns were conducted within a heated partisan context that featured slander, conspiracy, accusation, and threat of violence in a worldwide context of instability, revolution, and war. When Jefferson finally emerged the victor, his supporters celebrated more than just a victory for their preferred candidate; they cheered with millennial hopes for the universal triumph of liberty and republicanism. Jeffersonian Baptists rejected the Federalist interpretation of the election that viewed Jefferson's candidacy as a conspiracy to replace Christianity and order with atheism and anarchy. To them, the election of 1800 was about securing the rights of the common man and

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[88] For the best treatment of the election, see John Ferling, *Adams Vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

guaranteeing liberty for all, and Jefferson and the Republican party together represented political protection against any Federalist return to tyranny. From the perspective of republican millennialism, the signs could not be any clearer. History was moving toward its consummated end.

In 1969, Donald G. Mathews encouraged historians to interpret the Second Great Awakening not just as a religious movement, but also as a social movement that "helped to give meaning and direction to people suffering in various degrees from the social strains of a nation on the move into new political, economic and geographical areas."[89] Few, however, have reflected on the social meaning of the Great Revival in the context of pre-existing millennial hopes connected to politics. If the American Revolution initiated the "contagion of liberty" among the general population of the United States—a contagion that only multiplied during the rise of the Jeffersonians in the 1790s—then the revivals in the South at the turn of the century need to be analyzed as divine vindication of liberty's progress in the world.[90] In fact, in response to the Federalist claim that Republicanism leads to irreligion, John Leland pointed to the Kentucky revivals as the counterpoint. He asked, "Can there be an instance given where there has been a like display of God's power in any state in the Union, which has left the people as generally federalists?"[91] Unparalleled revivals occurring in a Republican hotbed vindicated the nation's new direction under Jefferson.

Eyewitnesses to the Kentucky revivals often described the events in millennial and revolutionary terms that mirrored what was happening politically. Richard McNemar, a Presbyterian minister who later joined the Shakers, celebrated how revival preachers eschewed Calvinist creeds in favor of proclaiming a Savior who died for all. In the

[89] Donald G. Mathews, "The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process, 1780–1830: An Hypothesis," *American Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1969): 27.

[90] This phrase, "contagion of liberty," comes from Bernard Bailyn and is quoted in Mathews, "The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process," 32.

[91] Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, 264.

revivals, “everything appeared new,” and those who opposed the movement on creedal grounds were, in language echoing the Republican critique of Federalism, merely seeking to uphold the “old order.”[92] Most eyewitness accounts allude to a spirit of unity that replaced a party spirit and freed ministers from diverse denominational backgrounds to overlook doctrinal differences in favor of preaching the gospel to win converts. Presbyterian David Purviance referred to the work as a “reformation” and excitedly joined with others in renouncing “man-made creeds.”[93]

Americans, Baptists included, had come to expect revival since the days of Edwards, Tennent, and Whitefield, but this one seemed even more momentous. The Methodist John B. McFerrin noted one key difference: whereas the former revivals were often instigated by one gifted revival preacher at planned revival meetings, Kentucky’s revivals arose spontaneously through several preachers relying on “the ordinary means of grace.”[94] In other words, God was working through common men instead of elites. Revival preaching, in contrast to the stuffy creeds of Calvinism, seemed better able to reconcile Christian doctrine to “the present order of things.”[95] According to Tennessee Methodist W. L. Grissom, this period witnessed a war between “formalism and spiritual Christianity; between creed and a religious experience; between a religious faith and skepticism.”[96] As reports of revival fires returned from even distant northern cities, it seemed that Christ’s kingdom was at hand and “that the various revolutions of the present age may be rendered to that great event.”[97] At the dawn of the century, it looked as if the

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[92] Evans, *The Kentucky Revival*, 143–44.

[93] Evans, *The Kentucky Revival*, 154.

[94] Evans, *The Kentucky Revival*, 177.

[95] Methodist James B. Finley used this phrase in Evans, *The Kentucky Revival*, 208.

[96] Evans, *The Kentucky Revival*, 280.

[97] This hope was expressed in a letter from Presbyterian minister, Moses Hoge, in North Carolina, to Rev. Dr. Ashbel Green, in Evans, *The Kentucky Revival*, 328.

old order was being upended and replaced by something new. Revival participants experienced religious revolution in a social context that mirrored what was happening politically. If the rhetoric against formalism, creeds, and the old order sounds familiar, it is because Republicans were making similar arguments against New England Federalists. Also, Baptists in Virginia had levied the same critiques at the Anglican establishment.

Baptists did not participate in camp meeting revivalism to the same degree as Methodists and Presbyterians in Kentucky, but the spirit of revival impacted their churches and associations, nonetheless. Unwilling to gather around the communion table with unbaptized Christians, most Baptists viewed the sacramental occasions that united Presbyterians and Methodists in revival from a cautious distance. Revival was not new to any of these groups, for New Light sympathizers had experienced periods of revival since the preaching of Whitefield. Baptist ministers persevered through spiritually dry seasons by hoping and praying for the next divine outpouring. In 1788–89, John Taylor presided over an early Kentucky revival at Clear Creek Church in Woodford County that lasted seven months. Before it started, one of Taylor's neighbors had informed him, based on a vision, that, "God was about to revive His work among us."[98] Shortly thereafter, Taylor became burdened with an overwhelming concern for the souls of his neighbors and organized a plan in which the church's three preachers, himself included, would visit the entire neighborhood of around one hundred families to relate the message of salvation found in Christ. In all, 150 people were added by baptism to Clear Creek Church, making the now 300-member church the largest in the Elkhorn Association.[99]

Another revival occurred among Baptist associations in both Virginia and Kentucky beginning in 1789 and lasted as long as five years in some locales. The Elkhorn

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[98] Taylor, *Baptists on the American Frontier*, 195.

[99] Taylor, *Baptists on the American Frontier*, 201.

Association more than tripled between 1789 and 1794.[100] By the end of the century, revival had become a dynamic feature of the Baptist experience, but nothing prior to 1800 came close to matching the size and impact of the Great Revival. The Baptist phase of the Great Revival commenced in the spring of 1800. Preachers such as John Taylor and William Hickman, who claimed to have baptized more than five hundred in two years during this period, travelled the state preaching in Baptist meeting houses and private homes.[101] The Elkhorn Association was not the only association to benefit from this explosive growth. According to early Baptist historian J. H. Spencer, Kentucky Baptists grew from seven associations, 106 churches, and 5,119 members in 1800 to ten associations, 219 churches, and more than tripling to 15,495 members by 1803.[102] Undoubtedly, some of this growth came from camp meeting converts looking to settle down in local churches, but many came from distinct Baptist efforts.

Elijah Craig saw the revivals in conjunction with political happenings and interpreted them as evidence of the coming of the millennium. Writing in 1801, he believed "a new day as to religion" had commenced over the world and that "a spirit of free enquiry" was prevailing. Jehovah was on the verge of freeing "his people from every essential error that is essential to his declarative glory and the peace and happiness of the church."[103] He counted America's war with Britain, the success of the Baptist petitioning efforts for religious liberty in Virginia alongside Jefferson, the regicide of King Louis XVI in France, and the recent revivals in America as individual historical episodes in one great cosmic drama of God overthrowing tyranny in favor of liberty.[104] He concluded,

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[100] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:174.

[101] Hickman, *A Short Account of My Life and Travels*, 18.

[102] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:541.

[103] Craig, *A Few Remarks on the Errors*, i.

[104] Craig, *A Few Remarks on the Errors*, 29–36.

> And when we consider the unnatural condition of the work and people of God in Kentucky, great numbers getting converted, while the old members, I believe, are inwardly crying my leanness! my leanness! When we consider the present apparent revolutionizing condition of Europe, and what has taken place there in a few years back; the strange work of God in America, at present going on, and encreasing; the Sacred Scriptures, the opinions and calculations of numerous divines; and find that they all seem to center in the same point; and loudly call us to look out for great and strange events, would it not be wise in us to adhere to the sacred exhortation? Prepare to meet thy God O Israel![105]

Craig's understanding of the future unfolding of history bears remarkable resemblance to that of John Leland, with one glaring difference. Leland theorized that Christ's kingdom would consume the kingdoms of the world in two ways: ecclesiastically, as revelation removes "all carnal and worldly religions," and politically, as reason defeats "false and unreasonable systems of politics."[106] Craig was willing to interpret wars as subsequent stages in liberty's progress, but Leland believed the ultimate triumph of liberty would be won by reasoned argument alone. For him, God may providentially use wars and weapons "to break in pieces the external power and dominion of these worldly kingdoms to pave the way," but the ultimate victory must be won "by the operations of rational conviction produced by the light and force of truth."[107]

These revolutions, political and religious, were linked by common ideological commitments. According to Sidney E. Mead, "All the lines of thinking of the eighteenth century converged on the idea of free, uncoerced, individual consent as the only proper basis for all man's organizations, civil and ecclesiastical."[108] Jefferson's political victory over Federalism was celebrated for the same reason revivalists cheered the defeat of the Calvinist creed. Both victories marked the dawning of a new age of liberty. Both represented the end of coercive governments and institutions overriding individual

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[105] Craig, *A Few Remarks on the Errors*, 36–37.

[106] John Leland, *The Age of Inquiry; Or, Reason and Revelation in Harmony with Each Other; Operating Against All Tyranny and Infidelity: Intended as a Clue to the Present Political Controversy in the United States* (Hartford, CT: n.p., 1804), 36–37.

[107] Leland, *The Age of Inquiry*, 37.

[108] Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 61.

conscience and free expression. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. summarized this period of rapid change: "Democratizing forces, accumulating in the course of the 18th century, released during the War for Independence, renewed by the excitements of the election of 1800 and by the pull of westward expansion, were giving the nation new expectations and new values." These new values, he continued, included a heightened sense of the individual's worth and dignity, increased confidence in the individual's ability to think and act for oneself, optimism that expected the world to be intelligible, and a greater willingness to break from the past.[109]

Jefferson's rationalism exalted human autonomy via reason's ability to discern the clues left by nature's Creator. Simultaneously, the revival's pietism promoted human autonomy by legitimizing the personal experience of the individual sinner saved by grace.[110] Both streams came together in figures like John Leland, who combined confidence in reason with pietistic reliance on inner spiritual experience to form increasingly individualistic conceptions of the Christian faith. While ideologically diverse, the Jeffersonians were linked by their optimistic belief in the progress of history and their willingness to discard tradition in pursuit of liberty. The Baptists, committed as they were to the authority of the Bible, did not derive their millennial hopes from politics. However, for many, what was happening politically served as further confirmation of the Bible's promised future age. They interpreted each victory for liberty, whether religious or political, as another link in the progressive chain toward ultimate freedom.

Populist Calvinism

David Thomas (1732–1812) was a well-respected Regular Baptist preacher in Virginia during the pre-Revolutionary Anglican establishment years whose classical

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[109] Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The Age of Alexander Campbell," *Restoration Review* 1, no. 3 (1959): 136–37.

[110] Mead, *The Lively Experiment*, 61–62.

education distinguished him from most of his Baptist peers. Late in life, he retired to Kentucky, where blindness and old age severely limited his ministry. His arrival coincided with the Great Revival at the turn of the century, and Thomas, after reviewing Presbyterian Adam Rankin's dismissing criticism of the camp meetings, decided to take up his pen one last time to defend the events as genuine works of God.[111] Interestingly, Thomas's tract was not his first work of public apology. In 1774, while living in Virginia, he had entered the public fray with another tract, *The Virginian Baptist*, to defend his Baptist peers from the false accusations and prejudice of the Anglican establishment. He believed that if readers would "impartially" examine Baptist principles and practice by the "word of God," their fears would be laid to rest, and they would find nothing but the "pure gospel of Jesus Christ."[112]

The two tracts, written nearly twenty-five years apart, illustrate the rapid cultural changes that impacted the Baptist movement during those tumultuous years. In 1774, Thomas employed a strategy of looking to the past to connect the Baptist movement of which he was a representative with historical orthodoxy and the worldwide Baptist movement. In the preface he alluded to the Second London Confession of Faith and wrote, "This confession we have adopted as our own."[113] The bulk of the remainder of the work relies heavily on language from the confession to formulate for contemporaries Thomas's own summary of Baptist doctrine. In 1774, the pathway to cultural legitimacy came through connection with historical orthodoxy and tradition. By 1803, however, connection to the past no longer guaranteed widespread acceptance.

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[111] David Thomas, *The Observer Trying the Great Reformation in This State, and Proving It to Have Been Originally a Work of Divine Power* (Lexington, KY: John Bradford, 1802). Thomas was responding to Adam Rankin, *A Review of the Noted Revival in Kentucky, Commenced in the Year of Our Lord, 1801* (Lexington, KY: John Bradford, 1801).

[112] David Thomas, *The Virginian Baptist; Or A View and Defence of the Christian Religion as It Is Professed by the Baptists of Virginia* (Baltimore: Enoch Story, 1774), 3.

[113] Thomas, *The Virginian Baptist*, 7.

Thomas, in defending the "reformation" then underway in the Kentucky revivals, encouraged his readers to search the Scriptures, not with the assistance of any confessional tradition, but as individuals. "And when we have done all we can to obtain information," he wrote, "let us, being each one fully persuaded in his own mind, go on his own way . . . and let every one allow his neighbor the same freedom to judge and act for himself."[114] By the time of the Great Revival, Thomas appealed to the public on the basis of individual experience, not historical confessions of faith. Though no evidence suggests he ever abandoned his commitment to Baptist confessionalism, that commitment no longer served his apologetic purposes. By 1803, he sought to convince a population less interested in looking backwards that the revivals were "a preliminary essay toward" the millennium to come.[115] In some ways, the revivals at the turn of the century represented not just the conversion of camp meeting multitudes but the conversion of a large segment of the nation to a new age of liberty.

David Thomas was not alone in repackaging the Baptist faith to appeal to more democratic sensibilities. The use of the Philadelphia Confession of Faith had long been a source of contention among Baptists in Virginia, Kentucky, and the western frontier. Separate Baptists feared that subscription to a creed would interfere with submission to the Bible as sole authority, while Regular Baptists followed the Philadelphia creedal tradition inherited from English Particular Baptists which had added statements on hymn singing and the laying on of hands to the Second London Confession in 1742. In 1787, the six Virginia Baptist associations, freshly celebrating the passage of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and in the middle of a revival, overcame Separate and Regular distinctions and formed the General Committee, declaring that "from hence forth, we shall be known by the name of the United Baptist Churches of Christ in

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[114] Thomas, *The Observer Trying the Great Reformation in This State*, 20.

[115] Thomas, *The Observer Trying the Great Reformation in This State*, 31.

Virginia." Separate Baptists were historically Calvinistic, though their church covenants generally lacked the doctrinal precision of formal creeds. After much debate, the union formally adopted the Philadelphia Confession, though the following concession was made: "To prevent the confession of faith from usurping a tyrannical power over the conscience of any, we do not mean, that every person is bound to the strict observance of everything therein contained."[116] Thus, Virginia's Baptists based their union on substantive, not strict, subscription to the confession.

Baptists in Kentucky, who maintained tight bonds with their Virginia brethren through these years, had a much harder time uniting. Though the Separate Baptist South Kentucky Association united with the United Baptists of Virginia, formal unity with the Regular Baptist Elkhorn Association was more difficult to procure. They attempted to form such a union three separate times before the Great Revival, and each time those attempts proved futile due to the Regular Baptist insistence on "strict adherence" to the Philadelphia Confession of Faith and the Separate Baptist suspicion of tyranny in response to the Regular's reliance on any creed other than the Bible.[117] By 1801, however, with their churches exploding in growth and millennial hopes prevailing in light of the new "spirit of free inquiry" and the end of the "old order," such insistence no longer seemed appropriate. The old focus on historical creeds and precise doctrinal systems seemed out of touch with the triumphant revival spirit, and Kentucky Baptists finally achieved formal union based on eleven agreed-upon terms that made no allusion to the Philadelphia Confession. The terms of union affirmed shared convictions such as the authority of Scripture and the Trinity. It also affirmed several uncontroversial tenets of soteriological Calvinism such as total depravity and perseverance of the saints.

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[116] Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, 75.

[117] For the best treatment of these attempts at union, see Keith Harper, "'And All the Baptists in Kentucky Took the Name *United Baptists*,': The Union of the Separate and Regular Baptists of Kentucky," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 110, no. 1 (2012): 3–31.

However, it omitted the hot button issue of unconditional election and specified regarding Christ's atonement that "preaching Christ tasted death for every man shall be no bar to communion."[118]

Generally, these Baptists remained committed to the basic tenets of Calvinism, but during these years a new form of "populist Calvinism" began to emerge on the western frontier that was more palatable to democratizing sensibilities.[119] Complex doctrinal formulations reeked of northern elitism. Revival preachers rejoiced that multitudes were coming to Christ without reliance on creeds and precise doctrinal distinctions. John Leland exemplifies this perspective during this time. As Eric C. Smith shows, Leland often spoke disparagingly of those who over relied on Calvinist creeds and systems, yet he never managed personally to "stray far from traditional Calvinism" in his own ministry.[120] On April 30, 1805, the Elkhorn Association began advertising its new revised edition of the Philadelphia Confession of Faith in the *Kentucky Gazette* for "only 12 ½ cents for a single one or one dollar per dozen." Unfortunately, no known surviving copy of this revision exists. However, the United Baptists of Virginia published their own revision in 1806, and that version reveals the kind of doctrinal changes Baptists had in mind during this era. The previous chapter detailed the explicit democratizing of the confession's chapter on government. Besides specifying that "all civil Government flows from, and originates with the people," the most notable changes involved softening the confession's Calvinism.[121] The Virginia revision certainly remained Calvinistic, but the revisionists removed certain controversial formulations. For example, the chapter on

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[118] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:546.

[119] This label is borrowed from E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 286–90.

[120] Eric C. Smith, *John Leland: A Jeffersonian Baptist in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 135.

[121] United Baptists of Virginia, *The Baptist Declaration of Faith, Revised and Adapted* (Alexandria, VA: Cottom and Stewart, 1806), 30.

God’s decree was reduced from seven points of doctrine in the original to one single statement in the revision. Likewise, in chapter ten on effectual calling, the revisionists deleted the original confession’s description of the fates of “elect infants” and the non-elect. Baptist theology was undergoing a process of Americanization that was making it more palatable to populist sensibilities.

Post-revival Kentucky Baptists faced challenges on several fronts. On one side, they struggled to maintain doctrinal integrity during a growing period of cultural populism. On the other side, they were forced to deal with defecting brethren drawn to Trinity-denying systems like Deism and Unitarianism via Enlightenment thought. In 1803, David Barrow published *A Letter to a Friend, Defending the Important Doctrine of the Trinity.* Unfortunately, Barrow’s tract must join the considerable list of vital Baptist publications lost to history. However, his friend, the longtime Elkhorn pastor Augustine Eastin’s response, *Letters on the Divine Unity, Addressed to Mr. David Barrow, in Answer to His Letter to a Friend*, survives and enlightens the nature of the debate.[122] According to J. H. Spencer, Eastin was drawn to Unitarianism while pastor of Cowper’s Run Church after his most prominent member and ex-Elkhorn minister, Governor James Garrard, followed one of his political appointees, Harry Toulmin, into the same error.[123]

In 1802, Barrow was appointed by the Elkhorn Association to join a five-member committee to investigate the church’s heresy, and the next year, the association removed Cowper’s Run Church from fellowship “for denying the doctrine of the Trinity and holding that Jesus Christ is not truly God.”[124] In making his defense, Eastin relied on many of the same democratizing ideals as his Baptist brethren. If Christ calls his church to reject man-made systems in search of the pure religion handed down through the

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[122] Augustine Eastin, *Letters on the Divine Unity. Addressed to Mr. David Barrow, in Answer to His Letter to a Friend* (Lexington, KY: D. Bradford, 1804).

[123] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:133–34.

[124] Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 409.

apostles, he reasoned, then one would expect "free and friendly investigation" with Scripture alone as guide to lead others to reject the Trinity as well. The optimism of the age can be discerned in Eastin's placement of Unitarianism as the next stage in the historical progression—a line that included the Reformation's break with Rome—toward the ultimate vindication of truth in the world.[125] The same democratizing impulse that assisted the Baptists' rapid growth was also capable of corrupting the movement from the inside, and Baptists such as Barrow were forced to uphold historical orthodoxy during a season of loosening from historic doctrinal formulations.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the intersection of politics and the westward Baptist movement in Kentucky during the rise of the Jeffersonian Republicans and Jefferson's subsequent election to the presidency. During this period Baptists faced many challenges as they sought to balance ultimate allegiance to the kingdom of God with enthusiastic loyalty to Jefferson's party. Their alignment with Republicanism aided them by granting their once-fledgling movement legitimacy and attracting multitudes to their churches. However, their embrace of Jeffersonian ideals also presented new challenges as their leaders sought to maintain orthodoxy in a rapidly changing social context. While embracing the optimistic and sometimes millennial Jeffersonian rhetoric of liberty, equality, and free inquiry, they maintained order through unwavering commitment to church discipline. Even as they spoke the language of Jeffersonian populism, monthly business meetings and annual associational meetings continually placed the health of the community above the will of any single individual. Further, they remained institutionally committed to separation of church and state. In the early years of the nineteenth century, however, their dual commitment to Jeffersonian liberty and separation of church and state would come into conflict over the issue of slavery.

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[125] Eastin, *Letters on the Divine Unity*, 6.

CHAPTER 4

THE JEFFERSONIAN SYNTHESIS IN CRISIS: BAPTISTS AND THE EARLY ANTISLAVERY DEBATE

On April 8, 1806, Carter Tarrant resigned his position as pastor of Hillsborough Church in Woodford County, Kentucky. In October of the same year, roughly fifty miles east in Montgomery County, the North District Association expelled David Barrow, pastor of Mount Sterling Church, from his seat in the association. In September of the following year, William Hickman, one of the earliest Baptist settlers in Kentucky, resigned as pastor of Forks of Elkhorn Church in Woodford County, a position he had held for nineteen years. Each conflict centered around the polarizing and contentious issue of slavery. All three embattled pastors were well-respected prior to the slavery controversy, having each served in various associational leadership roles. However, their insistence on employing pulpit and pen to decry toleration of slavery within Kentucky churches forced those same Baptist churches and associations to publicly define a position on the issue. Ultimately, those institutions reached the conclusion that the divisive topic of slavery needed to be settled far away from the church and relegated the issue to the realm of politics. At the North District Association's 1806 meeting—the same meeting that expelled Barrow—the clerk recorded the following rationale for the association's decision: Barrow was guilty of "preaching the doctrine of emancipation, to the hurt and injury of the feelings of the brotherhood."[1]

The decisions of 1806–07 to sever ties with emancipationists cemented a legacy of toleration of slavery that would ultimately remain until the Civil War.

[1] Minutes of the North-District Association of Baptists held at Grassy Lick (n.p.: n.p., 1806), 3.

However, in the fall of 1807, these blackballed pastors joined fellow sympathizers from nine Baptist churches in the state to form a brand-new antislavery Baptist association. They called their new association the "Baptized Licking Locust Association, Friends of Humanity." The story of the Licking Locust Association offers a fascinating account of evangelical antislavery resistance in a proslavery, Republican hotbed. According to Vivien Sandlund, these activists provide an important "intellectual link between Revolutionary antislavery thought and the ideas of the immediate abolitionists in the 1830s and 1840s."[2] Unlike the more radical abolitionists that came decades later, the movement spearheaded by Barrow and Tarrant rejected neither commitment to biblical authority nor Democratic-Republican partisanship. In fact, in their various writings, these leaders combined evangelicalism, commonsense moral reasoning, and republicanism into a forceful and coherent antislavery argument.[3]

Kentucky churches responded by relegating the slavery issue to the realm of politics on the grounds that the matter was too contentious for Christian churches seeking to live harmoniously with one another. In some ways, the response of the two Baptist camps to the slavery question mirrored that of Jefferson in his personal life, who believed revolutionary principles led logically to emancipation but continued to find pragmatic reasons to delay action.[4] The debate over slavery among Kentucky Baptists during the first decade of the nineteenth century brought Republican principles into conflict and threatened to tear the Jeffersonian-Baptist synthesis apart. Antislavery theorists argued based on Republican distinctives like natural rights and policy, while their opponents

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[2] Vivien Sandlund, "'A Devilish and Unnatural Usurpation': Baptist Evangelical Ministers and Antislavery in the Early Nineteenth Century, A Study of the Ideas and Activism of David Barrow," *American Baptist Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (1994), 265.

[3] Mark Noll has called this combination of ideas in the early republic, "the American synthesis," in *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 9.

[4] See John Chester Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991).

sought to ban the topic from consideration altogether under the banner of separation of church and state. In the end, the convenience of relegation won the day as evangelical slaveholders effectively silenced their opponents and spent the next decades forming sophisticated biblical arguments to situate slavery's existence within their evangelical systems.[5] Baptist churches had long served as "courts of conscience" for their members, litigating disputes and preserving moral order.[6] Their unwillingness to speak authoritatively on the morality of slavery invited the individual will of the slaveholder to take precedence over the moral authority of the collective body. Kentucky Baptists' reluctance to disavow slavery delegitimized the local church's moral authority by categorizing a contentious ethical issue under the domain of private individual discretion.

Slavery in the Land of the Free

America's founders early on recognized the contradiction between their celebrations of equality and liberty and their nation's continued toleration of slavery. Yet, despite this obvious paradox, the new nation's leaders repeatedly capitulated to the mode of delaying action to some distant undesignated future. Few were willing to spend personal credibility on immediate courses of action. Economic forces provided substantial impetus for this initial procrastination, but views of racial inferiority soon developed to justify inaction. Concern over universal rights coming out of the American Revolution initially created an atmosphere that made slavery abhorrent to many. However, as Gordon S. Wood demonstrates, this early opposition to slavery had perverse consequences, for it "forced those Southerners who chose to retain slavery to fall back on the alleged racial deficiencies of blacks as a justification for an institution that hitherto

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[5] See Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 31–50.

[6] This term comes from Jeffrey Thomas Perry, "'Courts of Conscience': Local Law, the Baptists, and Church Schism in Kentucky, 1780–1840," *Church History* 84, no. 1 (2015): 124–58.

they had taken for granted and had never before needed to justify."[7] As long as black Americans were viewed as racially inferior, their rights could be withheld. Abolishing hereditary chattel slavery would eventually require the lives of thousands in a bloody civil war, but periodic antislavery movements arose with varying degrees of success over the duration of America's antebellum period.

Coming out of the Revolution, Virginia, the nation's largest state, was the epicenter of southern proslavery sentiment. Leery of the federal government meddling with slavery and aided by the three-fifths clause in the Constitution, representatives from Virginia sponsored legislation to protect slavery. In 1778 the state legislature banned the importation of new slaves into the state, but that measure only increased the value of existing slaves, making Virginia slaveholders wealthier. The impetus for the ban did not arise from humanitarian objections to slavery. Instead, its advocates sought to limit further growth in the slave population to mitigate the possibility of revolt.[8] In 1782, the legislature legalized manumission on the logic that property owners were free to dispense of property at their own discretion, and thousands of former slaves joined Virginia's free population. Evangelical convictions drove many of the manumissions, but most of Virginia's slaveowners held onto their slaves for economic security. Virginians criticized free blacks for alleged moral depravity and worried that they would motivate enslaved blacks to revolt. Though freed blacks could work for wages, the Virginia government restricted them in other ways in the aftermath of the Revolution. They could not vote, serve on juries, join the militia, or testify in court against whites.[9]

Thomas Jefferson exemplified the tensions created by the legal protection of race-based slavery within a government predicated on natural rights. Jefferson himself

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[7] Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 508.

[8] Alan Taylor, *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772–1832* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 37.

[9] Taylor, *The Internal Enemy*, 40.

personified the general cultural trend of early idealistic opposition giving way to ambivalence in the face of perceived economic and political necessity. Early in his political career, Jefferson accepted assignment to a five-person committee charged with formalizing America's break with Britain in 1776 and single-handedly drafted the original text of what would become known, in edited form, as the Declaration of Independence. The committee undoubtedly entrusted Jefferson with this important duty because they were aware of the young man's literary giftedness on display in his 1774 pamphlet entitled *A Summary View of the Rights of British America.* In this earlier work, Jefferson argued that Britain had forfeited the right of American allegiance through several political violations. Among Britain's indiscretions, Jefferson placed the blame for slavery's existence in America at the feet of Britain's monarchy. According to Jefferson, "The abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire in those colonies, where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state."[10] Since abolition depended on the cessation of new importation of slaves from Africa and since attempts to prohibit importation were met with "his majesty's negative," Jefferson blamed Britain for slavery's violation of "the rights of human nature."[11]

Jefferson repeated this logic in his original draft of the Declaration of Independence, writing that King George III had "waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating the most sacred right of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither."[12] The Continental Congress, to Jefferson's dismay, removed this section, which might have committed America to abolition much earlier. To further illustrate Jefferson's initial opposition to

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[10] Thomas Jefferson, *Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 115.

[11] Jefferson, *Writings*, 116.

[12] This text has been reconstructed from Jefferson's papers and is quoted in Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears*, 8.

slavery, his decision to omit explicit mention of property rights from his list of human rights—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—leads John Chester Miller to wonder if he intended to undermine slavery in the Declaration's preamble.[13] Emphasizing property rights alongside human rights would have protected slaveowners by allowing them to appeal to one set of rights in opposition to granting the other set to their slaves. Jefferson certainly believed fervently in rights of property, which makes this absence conspicuous.

Additionally, Jefferson's earliest attempt at drafting a constitution for the state of Virginia in 1776 included gradual abolition of slavery. Virginia's delegates rejected his draft, and, according to Miller, "By the summer of 1776, he had become convinced that slavery was far too solidly entrenched in Virginia to be easily vanquished by the idealism generated by the American Revolution."[14] From this early point in his political career, Jefferson, himself a lifelong slaveowner, resigned himself to the pragmatic position of perpetually waiting for a more opportune time to act. Ironically, later antislavery activists and abolitionists would interpret the Declaration's pronouncement of universal rights of liberty and equality in support of their cause while the early zeal of the text's author would cool substantially over time.[15]

Jefferson had several reasons to put off action on slavery. Economically, his personal wealth suffered from perpetual debt tied to his lavish lifestyle. His human and land property comprised most of the value of his personal worth.[16] Politically, Jefferson was too preoccupied with Hamiltonian finance and Federalist overreach during the 1790s

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[13] For a fascinating discussion of this issue and its implications, see Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears*, 12–18.

[14] Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears*, 17.

[15] For examples of later abolitionists grounding their argument against slavery in the Declaration of Independence, see Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 156, 212, 233, 296, 404, 409, 477, 520.

[16] Thomas S. Kidd, *Thomas Jefferson: A Biography of Spirit and Flesh* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), 133.

to give slavery much attention.[17] However, Jefferson also relied on views of racial inferiority to support his postponement of action, and these views manifested early in his political career. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, written in 1781, Jefferson explained why, upon emancipation, slaves should be colonized in their own land instead of allowed to mix with whites in America. Politically, Jefferson believed colonization best because he feared racial conflict would result from deep prejudices of whites toward blacks and memories of sustained injuries from blacks toward whites.[18] However, he also had "physical and moral" reasons to support his plan. He believed blacks were inferior in beauty, moral character, intelligence, and imagination. Since human beings so clearly value propagating beauty when breeding animals, he reasoned, why not apply the same principles to breeding human beings?[19]

Jefferson believed the differences between the races provided "a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people" and hesitated to balance the twin concerns of vindicating human liberty with preserving human dignity and beauty.[20] Remarkably, Jefferson would continue to voice his aversion to racial mixing even after fathering at least six children with his slave, Sally Hemings.[21] Jefferson's cognitive dissonance toward his own moral choices can be seen as early as 1781 when he criticized black men for pursuing love from "eager desire" rather than "a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation."[22] With American liberty from Britain all but secured, Jefferson lost his impetus to zealously secure universal human rights. America's new political situation demanded a different focus, that of prolonging emancipation's delay. Jefferson found his

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[17] Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears*, 123.

[18] Jefferson, *Writings*, 264.

[19] Jefferson, *Writings*, 265.

[20] Jefferson, *Writings*, 270.

[21] Kidd, *Thomas Jefferson*, 195.

[22] Jefferson, *Writings*, 265.

justification for delay in political pragmatism and racism, and much of the nation, including many Baptists, followed suit.

Slavery and Virginia Baptists

In many respects, the attitudes of Virginia Baptists toward slavery mirrored trends in the broader culture. Virginia Baptists, like so many others of the revolutionary era, grew increasingly complacent toward slavery over time. At the beginning of the Baptist movement in Virginia, however, churches granted slaves limited spiritual equality even as they continued to see them as social inferiors. Slaves heard the same sermons and participated in the same worship services alongside their white masters, even though they often sat in separate sections. Entrance into membership was likewise available to slaves through conversion and baptism. Once admitted as members, slaves were allowed to participate in communion and entered the watch care of church discipline. In some churches, slaves experienced remarkable equality and were even allowed to bring charges against masters for physical and sexual abuse.[23] Baptists' egalitarian policies toward slaves concerned Virginia's burgesses enough for them to contemplate legislation in 1772 that would regulate dissenting preachers for fear of "Corruption of our Slaves."[24]

Theological conviction compelled Baptists to grant a measure of equality, but societal prejudice limited how far they were willing to go. Baptist minute books listed members in separate columns, denoting male, female, black male, and black female members. Additionally, enslaved members were often listed beside the name of their respective masters with apostrophes to show ownership. Thus, a slave named "Lucy" would appear as "Tom Brown's Lucy." Early Virginia Baptist historian Robert Semple

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[23] Jewel L. Spangler cites three such examples, in *Virginians Reborn: Anglican Monopoly, Evangelical Dissent, and the Rise of the Baptists in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 158–59.

[24] Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 40.

recounted that at Allen's Creek Church, John Williams began preaching in 1770 and in twenty years had gathered a church with "a considerable number of black people in their society." After Williams moved away in 1790, however, the church was left without ordained leadership, and several nonordained black members filled the void by exercising gifts of preaching and administering the ordinances. Around one hundred black members were baptized and added during this season of Williams's absence. Upon his return, however, Williams saw the need to put the church in order and offered to "rebaptize" those who so desired.[25] Slaves who joined Baptist churches experienced more equality than they enjoyed anywhere else, but they never attained equal status with whites. Ordination, as the story of Allen's Creek Church illustrates, was typically not an option for enslaved members, regardless of giftedness.

The General Committee, organized in 1784 to unite the Baptists of Virginia behind the cause of petitioning government for religious rights, often took up the subject of slavery. In 1785, the General Committee determined "hereditary slavery to be contrary to the word of God."[26] In 1788, they entertained presenting a petition "praying that the yoke of slavery may be made more tolerable," but this motion was referred to the next session.[27] The next year, messengers brought up the topic of slavery again, but the question changed from how to make slavery "more tolerable" to whether the practice should exist at all. In response, John Leland drew up the following petition, adopted in 1790:

> Resolved, That slavery is a violent deprivation of the rights of nature and inconsistent with a republican government, and therefore recommend it to our brethren to make use of every legal measure to extirpate this horrid evil from the

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[25] Robert B. Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia* (Richmond, VA: John O' Lynch, 1810), 290–291.

[26] Monica Najar, "'Meddling with Emancipation': Baptists, Authority, and the Rift over Slavery in the Upper South," Journal of the Early Republic 25 (2005): 163.

[27] Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, 103.

> land; and pray Almighty God that our honorable Legislature may have it in their power to proclaim the great Jubilee, consistent with the principles of good policy.[28]

Leland's statement, written prior to the partisan debates that would change the meaning of "republican" in the following decade, demonstrates that the early Baptist political synthesis was uneasy with slavery, believing it to be both inconsistent with a republican government founded on universal rights and with Christianity. However, calling slavery a "horrid evil" and recommending "every legal measure" still stopped short of defining slaveholding as sin requiring church intervention.[29] The democratic nature of Baptist polity hindered antislavery efforts from gaining the consensus required for widespread action. Nevertheless, Leland's viewpoint represented the entire assembly, for they moved to adopt his statement and sent it to their representatives. In 1790, Virginia Baptists were at least uneasy with slavery.

However, the adoption of Leland's resolution by the General Committee did not settle the issue for Virginia Baptists. Per Baptist polity, decisions made at the associational level were not binding on local churches or individual members, and several local associations moved quickly to reiterate that decisions regarding slavery and manumission should be left to individual conscience or, for policy, to legislative government. In 1791, one year after Leland's resolution had been adopted, the General Committee, eager to respect Baptist polity, asked local churches and associations to discuss the issue of slavery and report back. The General Committee next raised the issue during its 1793 meeting and ruled that "the subject be dismissed from this committee, as believing it belongs to the legislative body."[30] As Monica Najar observes, "This was a remarkable rejection of contemporary Baptist theology and practice" which traditionally

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[28] Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, 105.

[29] Monica Najar, *Evangelizing the South: A Social History of Church and State in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 145.

[30] Najar, *Evangelizing the South*, 147.

had sought "to assert the primacy of the church in determining Christian behavior."[31] Just two decades earlier, Baptists had fought to keep the government out of their affairs on the grounds that it had no jurisdiction over the church. Now, in the face of slavery, they were willing to delegate an issue of deep moral consequence to the state. By marking slavery as a legislative issue, they had found a convenient way to ignore it altogether. This decision would provide the blueprint going forward for many Baptist churches and associations in the South.

David Barrow, like Leland, could not reconcile slavery with Christianity or republican principles. After Virginia's legislature legalized manumission, Barrow drew up a deed of manumission in Southampton County for his two slaves, Benjamin and Lucretia Blackhead, in 1784:

> Whereas an act of General Assembly Intitled an act Concerning the manumission of Slaves, gives free liberty to all persons holding slaves under Certain Restrictions to manumit or set them free. Therefore be it known to all whom it may Concern that I David Barrow . . . being duly Sensible and fully persuaded that freedom is the Natural and Unalienable right of all Mankind; and also haveing a Single eye to that Golden Rule prescribed in Sacred Writ Vizt "do to all Men as ye would they should Do to you" Do hereby Agreeable to the above recited Act Manumit or set free . . . a Negro Man Named Ben Blackhead, of about twenty three years of age, and a Negro Woman name Lucretia Blackhead of about Eighteen and I do freely and Voluntarily from a Sacred regard that I have to the rights of Mankind Acknowledge & declare them the Above named Negroes to be free Citizens of the State.[32]

Barrow would expand upon these ideas two decades later during his conflict in Kentucky, but even here in using the term "unalienable" he was intentionally rooting his antislavery argument in the natural rights ideology of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. Barrow hoped this language would appeal to his fellow Baptists who had just won religious liberty with the aid of the same political philosophy. However, as Randolph Ferguson Scully shows, "For Baptists in Virginia the era of manumission represented the

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[31] Najar, *Evangelizing the South*, 147.

[32] Cited in Randolph Ferguson Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia: Baptist Community and Conflict, 1740–1840* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 111–12.

beginning of their denominational struggles over slavery, not the end."[33] This astute observation can just as easily be applied to the general population of Virginia. The emergence of thousands of free blacks into society brought underlying fears to the surface, and many Virginians, Baptists included, decided emancipation was better in theory than in actual practice.

Leland and Barrow, the two most outspoken antislavery advocates among the Baptists in Virginia, would each leave the state in the last decade of the century, Leland to New England in 1791 and Barrow to Kentucky in 1798. Leland's strong opposition to slavery would cool over time. In fact, Leland's biographer, Eric C. Smith, writes that, like Jefferson, Leland settled into a position of "conditional termination." Both men were willing to support emancipation only under certain conditions, the question of what to do with emancipated slaves not fit for life in society being their foremost concern.[34] Leland never returned to the strong antislavery rhetoric of his late Virginia years. In fact, his antislavery efforts seemed to waver in proportion with his growing allegiance to Jefferson's emerging Republican party. Leland, probably more than any other Jeffersonian Baptist of the era, allowed the Jeffersonian agenda to influence his personal ministerial agenda. As Jefferson delayed action on emancipation, Leland followed suit.

For Barrow, on the other hand, the inability to gain antislavery traction among his Baptist brethren factored in his decision to leave the state for Kentucky. To illustrate the direction in which Barrow's fellow Virginia Baptists were moving, the 1802 Dover Association meeting, instead of progressing toward granting more rights to slaves, moved to remove rights previously granted. Due to the "degraded state of the minds of slaves" rendering them "totally incompetent to the task of judging correctly respecting the business of the church," the association's delegates decided to limit voting privileges to

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[33] Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia*, 113.

[34] Eric C. Smith, *John Leland: A Jeffersonian Baptist in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 201.

only free male members. They were particularly concerned over church situations where slaves outnumbered free members.[35] In his diary, written during his initial trip to Kentucky in 1795, Barrow observed the state's citizens idealistically: "The inhabitants abound in plenty, each one following his honest and profitable occupation entirely exempt from the horrid curse of negro slavery, that so much degrades the human race."[36] In the circular letter left to his Southampton congregation, he wrote, "I wish that all masters, or owners of slaves, may consider how inconsistently they act, with a Republican Government, and whether in this particular, they are *doing, as they would others should do to them!*"[37] Barrow hoped to find a Kentucky population more open to considering the inconsistencies of slavery with Republicanism and Christianity.

Slavery and Revival in Kentucky

During Kentucky's first constitutional convention in 1792, the slavery issue was the subject of intense debate. David Rice, a Presbyterian minister, voiced the position of the antislavery side by arguing that slavery violated natural law and that Kentucky, as a separate state, had no obligation to follow Virginia on the matter. The opposition responded with Jeffersonian arguments that free blacks and whites could not coexist in the same territory without violence. In the end, Kentucky delegates voted to grant universal suffrage to all free men but kept slavery on the books. On the heels of the adoption of the Jefferson-penned Kentucky Resolutions in response to the Alien and Sedition Acts in late 1798, Kentuckians began pushing for a new constitutional convention out of growing discontentment with the state government, and the state assembly scheduled it for May 1799. Again, the issue of slavery took center stage.

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[35] Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of Baptists in Virginia*, 130.

[36] David Barrow, "The Diary of David Barrow," typed copy, James P. Boyce Library Special Collections (Louisville: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary), May 17, 1795.

[37] Carlos R. Allen Jr., ed., "David Barrow's Circular Letter of 1798," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (1963): 450.

Editorials flooded the offices of the *Kentucky Gazette* as both sides sent their best arguments for print. In the April 18, 1799 edition, the editors included a note of explanation as to why space limitations required an orderly distribution in the order these editorials were received. Proslavery writers warned of danger to white families, while antislavery authors repeated arguments from natural rights and the Bible. In the end, slavery was more entrenched in Kentucky in 1799 than it had been in 1792, and the convention preserved it by overwhelming majority.[38]

David Barrow arrived in Kentucky just in time for the heated debates on slavery preceding Kentucky's second constitutional convention and two years before the Great Revival. It would be difficult to adequately assess the fierce opposition of Kentucky Baptists to the antislavery activism of some of their members without taking the Great Revival into account. The period of explosive growth among evangelical churches during the revival was preceded by a decade of rapid growth among the slave population in Kentucky. Studying early Kentucky census data, Ellen Eslinger estimates that the number of slaves in Kentucky increased from 12,430 in 1790 to 40,343 by 1800.[39] As aspiring settlers moved to Kentucky's available farmlands, the need for labor increased the demand for slaves. This dramatic increase in the slave population coincided with the revivals of 1800 to produce a new social dynamic within Baptist churches as many enslaved converts sought membership in Baptist churches. In fact, Eslinger sampled five Baptist churches from 1801–02 and found that anywhere from 19.4 to 59.4 percent of their new converts were slaves.[40] As converted slaves entered Baptist fellowships at increasing rates, new social complications began to emerge.

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[38] See Craig Thompson Friend, *Kentucke's Frontiers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 172–210.

[39] Ellen Eslinger, "The Beginnings of Afro-American Christianity Among Kentucky Baptists," in *The Buzzel about Kentuck: Settling the Promised Land*, ed. Craig Thompson Friend (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1999), 199.

[40] Eslinger, "The Beginnings of Afro-American Christianity Among Kentucky Baptists," 205.

While the 1805 Elkhorn Association meeting brought the conflict over slavery to a head, the impetus behind increased antislavery advocacy in the preceding years is not as clear. One Elkhorn Association historian observed, "Even the Great Revival could not erase the differences between pro-slavery and anti-slavery partisans."[41] However, it seems more plausible that the Great Revival, rather than erasing differences, provoked them. Nineteenth-century historian J. H. Spencer did not speculate over causes when he wrote, "Emancipation parties were formed in many of the churches, by which their peace was much disturbed. The imprudence of the abolition preachers, in declaiming against slavery, in the presence of the negroes, caused insubordination among the slaves, and thereby disturbed the peace of society."[42] Carter Tarrant provided his own perspective by relating his experience of living in Baptist churches where slavery was tolerated. Speaking for the antislavery contingent in Kentucky, he wrote, "Our hearts have been made to bleed with the treatment of those poor unhappy Africans among us." He recounted witnessing instances of slaves being beaten by their masters even though they were both members of the same church, enslaved spouses being separated from one another, and even children being taken from their parents.[43] Because more slaves were entering Baptist churches, slavery's injustices were increasingly hard to ignore. The influx of slaves into churches after the Great Revival presented a new social dynamic that brought underlying disagreement on slavery to the surface.

One episode from William Hickman's Forks of Elkhorn Church in January 1807 illustrates these social tensions from the perspective of those in support of slavery. At the monthly Saturday business meeting, one of the church's members, Sister Esther

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[41] Ira (Jack) Birdwhistell, *The Baptists of the Bluegrass: A History of Elkhorn Baptist Association, 1785–1985* (Berea, KY: Berea College Press, 1985), 49.

[42] J. H. Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists, from 1769 to 1885*, vol. 1 (Cincinnati, OH: J. R. Baumes, 1885), 185.

[43] Carter Tarrant, *History of the Baptised Ministers and Churches in Kentucky, &c., Friends to Humanity* (Frankfort, KY: The Press of William Hunter, 1808), 5.

Boulware, brought a charge against another member, Winney, who happened to be "Sister Esther Boulware's Winney." Interestingly, in this very same meeting, a query was raised against Pastor Hickman "for inviting Carter Tarrant to preach at his house." Tarrant had already been excommunicated from his church in neighboring Woodford County for preaching emancipation. Winney, according to Boulware, was guilty of saying that "she once thought it her duty to serve her Master & Mistress but since the lord had converted her, she had never believed that any Christian kept Negroes or Slaves," and further that "she believed there was Thousands of white people Wallowing in Hell for their treatment to Negroes—and she did not care if there was many more."[44] The church excommunicated Winney at the next monthly meeting. Winney's emboldened expressions of disrespect toward her master and mistress illuminate why the church found Tarrant's and Hickman's advocacy of emancipation so offensive: such talk disturbed order and peace.

Indeed, the North District Association's 1805 circular letter confirmed this very concern when it warned, with David Barrow certainly in view, against those "deluded, that their printing, preaching, and private conversation, go to encourage disobedience in servants, and a revolution in our Civil Government, contrary to the wholesome words of our Lord Jesus Christ."[45] Charles F. Irons shows, focusing on Virginia churches during the same period, that the racially mixed ecclesial context brought the issue of slavery to the forefront of the social consciousness.[46] Try as they might, white evangelicals could not ignore the issue in the face of a growing enslaved membership. To assuage the dilemma, many whites pivoted from emancipation to

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[44] William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier, The Baptists 1783–1830: A Collection of Source Material* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931), 328–29.

[45] Minutes of the North-District Association of Baptists; Held at Bethel Meeting House, in the County of Montgomery, State of Kentucky, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh and Eighth Days of October, 1805 (Lexington, KY: n.p., 1805), 5.

[46] Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 86.

paternalism by emphasizing the humane treatment of slaves.[47] The increasing boldness of a growing enslaved membership provoked fearful sensitivity from white members about emancipation talk in the presence of biracial audiences. Ironically, white Baptists who had formerly been prosecuted for not "keeping the peace" in society were willing to go to great lengths to preserve the peace within their congregations, including the exclusion of those who refused to comply with proslavery associational directives.

Conflict over Slavery among Kentucky Baptists

In August 1805, the Elkhorn Association met in Lexington for their annual meeting with Barrow, Tarrant, and Hickman all present and filling various leadership roles. Tarrant and Hickman pastored churches belonging to the Elkhorn Association, and although Barrow was present as a messenger representing the North District Association, he was respected enough among Elkhorn leaders to be chosen to preach one of the three Lord's Day sermons. Additionally, Tarrant preached the introductory sermon and was chosen by the assembly to serve on the committee charged with revising the Philadelphia Confession of Faith. Barrow, Tarrant, and Hickman, in other words, were hardly fringe figures among the Baptist leadership network in Kentucky, and their fellow ministers certainly knew where they stood on the issue of slavery. Nevertheless, as the meeting closed, the association, following the trail blazed earlier by Virginia Baptists, made the following resolution: "This association judges it improper for ministers, churches or associations, to meddle with emancipation from slavery, or any other political subject; and as such we advise ministers and churches to have nothing to do therewith in their religious capacities."[48]

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[47] Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 88.

[48] Minutes of the Elkhorn Association of Baptists, Met at Bryan's, August 10, 1805 (Lexington, KY: T. Anderson, 1805), 4.

According to a postscript added to the meeting minutes, several messengers left in a "disorderly" manner before the official close of the meeting, which precipitated a debate over whether to publicly reprove them by name in the minutes. Ultimately, their names were omitted, but the rapid exit was certainly a response to the resolution. Most of Elkhorn's ministers wanted to silence the antislavery faction and would no longer countenance disruption of the status quo from emancipation preachers like Barrow, Tarrant, and Hickman. The Virginia Baptist General Committee's 1793 decision was a recommendation. Elkhorn's 1805 decision issued a ruling over ministers, churches, and associations and was interpreted as a mandate. Regarding the controversial subject of slavery, Baptists were using separation of church and state, not to keep the state out of the church's affairs as before, but to delegate matters they no longer wanted to entertain. Elkhorn's leaders were essentially attempting to erect their own "wall of separation" between their churches and the state so that they could conveniently toss debates on the morality of slavery on the other side of that wall.

The Elkhorn Association was the most influential Baptist association in Kentucky, and its decision to silence emancipation preaching would have widespread repercussions.[49] In September 1805, just one month after the Elkhorn meeting, the Bracken Association expelled several ministers from fellowship over their antislavery views.[50] In October, Barrow's North District Association met, and representatives from the Bracken Association brought charges against Barrow. After hearing Barrow's response, the association wrote, "This Association is of opinion, that Brother David Barrow gave cause of hurt to the Bracken Association, by meddling with emancipation, and that his explanation and apologies are satisfactory."[51] The use of "meddling"

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[49] Keith Harper, *A Mere Kentucky of a Place: The Elkhorn Association and the Commonwealth's First Baptists* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2021), 15.

[50] Tarrant, *History of the Baptised Ministers and Churches in Kentucky,* 6.

[51] Minutes of the North-District Association of Baptists; Held at Bethel Meeting House, in the County of Montgomery, State of Kentucky, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh and Eighth Days of October, 1805, 2.

confirms the influence of Elkhorn. A trial of five ministers met with Barrow the following year and, after determining he had “no disposition to alter his mode of preaching,” expelled him at its 1806 meeting.[52] Local churches soon followed suit. In February 1806, members of Tarrant’s Elkhorn-affiliated Hillsborough Church queried, “Is it agreeable to the members of this church for the doctrines of emancipation from slavery to be preached among them?” The church voted to answer this query in the negative, and Tarrant resigned on April 8, 1806.[53] In June 1806, Clear Creek Church expelled John Sutton, who had refused to take communion with the church for some years due to its toleration of slavery, for “preaching contrary to the rule of the Elkhorn Association.”[54] In December 1806, Hickman’s Forks of Elkhorn Church decided against charging him for inviting Tarrant to preach at his house, but Hickman resigned in September of the following year because "he was distressed on account of the practice of Slavery as being tolerated by members of the Baptist Society."[55] He had been the church’s pastor for nineteen years. Kentucky’s Baptists, recently united on the heels of the Great Revival, were now divided again over slavery, but the number removed from fellowship would remain considerably small.

If David Barrow was the intellectual leader of Kentucky’s antislavery Baptists, Carter Tarrant was undoubtedly the movement’s energetic organizer and made significant intellectual contributions of his own. Immediately upon being expelled from Hillsborough Church, he and Sutton organized New Hope Church in Woodford County on July 30, 1806, with eighteen members, many of whom had followed Tarrant from Hillsborough and Sutton from Clear Creek. According to Tarrant, New Hope differed “in

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[52] Minutes of the North-District Association of Baptists held at Grassy Lick (n.p.: n.p., 1806), 3.

[53] Tarrant, *History of the Baptised Ministers and Churches in Kentucky,* 11–12.

[54] Tarrant, *History of the Baptised Ministers and Churches in Kentucky*, 7.

[55] Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 338.

nothing from other Regular Baptists, but on the subject of slavery, on which we say in our constitution, that perpetual, hereditary, involuntary, and unmerited slavery, is contrary to the Gospel of Christ."[56] Tarrant next organized a preliminary meeting at New Hope Church of "friends of humanity" in August 1807 to establish ground rules for a potential association with likeminded churches. This meeting stipulated that no member would be admitted who was "friendly to perpetual slavery," that, with a few exceptions, no slaveowners would be admitted to the association's churches, and that the body's views on slavery occasioned no alteration in its view on the gospel.[57] Then, one month later, on September 26, 1807, twenty-nine ministers and messengers representing nine different churches and 190 members formerly associated with Elkhorn, Bracken, and North District Associations met to organize the Baptized Licking-Locust Association, Friends of Humanity. At this meeting, held in Mason County, Barrow's antislavery treatise, entitled *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined; On the Principles of Nature, Reason, Justice, Policy, and Scripture*, was read aloud, "unanimously approved of, and recommended to be printed."[58]

Barrow and Tarrant believed the decisions rendered by Elkhorn, Bracken, and North District Associations were heavy-handed and anti-republican, labelling Elkhorn's initial ruling "an aristocratical decree."[59] They held as a central tenet to their argument that slavery itself violated republicanism, but they now charged their fellow churchmen with anti-republican sentiments over the way the matter was handled. They believed the

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[56] Carter Tarrant, *The Substance of a Discourse Delivered in the Town of Versailles, Woodford County, State of Kentucky, April 20, 1806. With Some Additions, and Miscellaneous Thoughts, Connected with the Subject* (Lexington, KY: Daniel Bradford, 1806), 27.

[57] Tarrant, *History of the Baptised Ministers and Churches in Kentucky*, 38–39.

[58] Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 566. For an analysis of Barrow's tract, see Keith Harper, "'A Strange Kind of Christian': David Barrow and Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined; on the Principles of Nature, Reason, Justice, Policy, and Scripture," *Ohio Valley History* 15, no. 3 (2015): 68–77.

[59] Tarrant, *History of the Baptised Ministers and Churches in Kentucky,* 6.

Elkhorn Association had defied the sacred Baptist tenet of local church autonomy by issuing a decree over its member churches. In response, Tarrant clarified that the Licking Locust Association would preserve the spirit of republicanism by allowing its member churches to hear whatever preachers each one deemed fit. Shared commitment to refusing communion with slaveholders provided the grounds of their union, but the free exchange of ideas would never be censored. Further, the tyrannical behavior of Elkhorn, Bracken, and North District Associations soured him on the biblical warrant for associations altogether. He believed, "A church is the highest ecclesiastical court in the world, and no other body has a right to preponderate over them." Associations were great for coordinating correspondence and fellowship between churches, he added, but they were never to be entrusted with decision-making authority over local churches. The best plan for an associational meeting, according to Tarrant, was to "preach and commune, break up and go home."[60] Additionally, Tarrant took comfort from the fact that, internationally, more Baptists agreed with his party than with their opponents and quoted British antislavery Baptists like William Carey and Abraham Booth.[61] The ousted "preachers of emancipation," in other words, were the ones preserving republicanism, historic Baptist principles, and communion with the worldwide Baptist movement.

Both leaders were also concerned over Elkhorn's decision to delegate slavery to political authorities and believed the move set a dangerous precedent. Tarrant pointed out that in America's democratic government, "a redress of grievance must start among the people."[62] Barrow made the obvious connection between this line of thinking and America's Revolution. If America had refused to meddle in politics when her rights and liberties were being withheld, she would still be subjected to the British Crown. In fact,

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[60] Tarrant, *History of the Baptised Ministers and Churches in Kentucky*, 42–43.

[61] Tarrant, *History of the Baptised Ministers and Churches in Kentucky*, 45.

[62] Tarrant, *The Substance of a Discourse*, 8.

Barrow chided, "Let them remember, if they support their *doctrine*, they must according to their own *principles*, go back to their old *master* George the Third; for they are expressly commanded, 1 Peter ii:17, 'Honour the king.'"[63] He further questioned the authority by which his opponents granted civil government the power to authorize sin so that Christ's ministers were not allowed to "meddle" with it. On this point, he found support in his old friend John Leland's *Blow at the Root*, which argued, "All political evils are moral evils; but all moral evils are not political evils. No evil simply moral, is punishable by political tribunal; yet every political evil comes within the jurisprudence of the Almighty, because it is morally wrong."[64] Elkhorn's decision handed the church's authority back to government after the Baptists had suffered for so long to wrestle it away. The only recourse under such a policy, according to Barrow, was to silently submit to any unjust law the civil government passed. Both the Bible and history was full of examples of faithful Christians speaking truth to tyrannical power in the name of Christ. Barrow asked, "If the prophets, or ministers of Christ, will not speak in the cause of God and truth—who may we expect will?"[65]

The aggressive Baptist response to "emancipation" preaching devastated the antislavery Baptists, especially Tarrant. To illustrate the vehemence experienced from their former associates, Tarrant listed several of the threats levelled against him: "One baptist man said he would lend a hand to whip me to death; another baptist man said he would rejoice to hear that my head was cut off; another said I ought to be put in the penitentiary; a baptist preacher said he had faced many enemies, but he knew of none he would kill as freely as an emancipator."[66] In response, his words sometimes reflected

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[63] David Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined; On the Principles of Nature, Reason, Justice, Policy, and Scripture* (Lexington, KY: D & C Bradford, 1808), 23.

[64] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 24.

[65] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 25.

[66] Tarrant, *History of the Baptised Ministers and Churches in Kentucky,* 32.

deep bitterness, as when he addressed the initial Licking Locust Association meeting in September 1807 with these words:

> Nor have they concealed their attachment to this wickedness: They have published it as on housetops, in their councils, their annual associations of Bracken, Elkhorn and North District, for several years past, in their cruel censures against the Friends of Humanity. Blinded by covetousness and intoxication with the cup of Babylon, they call evil good and good evil. . . . In perverting the scriptures to favour oppression, they cause divisions and offences, contrary to the doctrines which the saints have learned of God, and ought to be marked and avoided. . . . But God has made their wrath to terminate in our existence, as a distinct society—separated (we hope) for ever from the friends of oppression.[67]

He immediately initiated a flurry of activity delivering speeches, writing newspaper editorials, and publishing pamphlets to justify his actions and to defend the consistency of the antislavery position with biblical Christianity and republicanism.

On April 20, 1806, a mere twelve days after his pastoral resignation, Tarrant delivered a speech, later published, in Versailles, Kentucky, the same town that hosted his former church. He intended his published speech to demonstrate that he had neither "offended against the constitution of my country, or got out of the Bible."[68] He quoted at length from Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* to demonstrate his Republican loyalty. He placed himself in the same line as earlier martyrs who stood against tyranny—historical figures like "the immortal Luther, Zuingle, Calvin and Melancthon" who opposed "Popery" and biblical figures like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's image.[69] On June 21, 1806, he published a short editorial in the *Kentucky Gazette* called "Honesty the Best Policy: Advice to Religious Emancipators," where he argued that "emancipators" are wrong to remain in fellowship with slave holders. Those who refuse to "walk out like honest men" are "semi-emancipators," he wrote. Finally, in 1808, he published a history of the movement to

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[67] Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 568–69.

[68] Tarrant, *The Substance of a Discourse*, 4.

[69] Tarrant, *The Substance of a Discourse*, 7–8.

correct the "aboundings of false representations."[70] His history documented the ill treatment his party received from their various associations, provided biographical sketches of primary antislavery Baptist leaders, and concluded with meeting minutes from Licking Locust Association. Tarrant aimed all these publishing efforts toward the goal of vindicating members of his movement as uncompromised Republicans and Baptists.

Despite these efforts, the Licking Locust Association never found traction in Kentucky. Cast out of their familiar social circles within a larger context where slavery was becoming increasingly important to social and economic life, the movement struggled to attract members. In 1809, historian David Benedict began a two-year journey through the Unites States conducting research for his book, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America*. Stopping in Kentucky, Benedict's encounter with the Licking Locust Association led him to conclude that "the zeal of the Emancipators has in some measure abated, and of course they are less opposed; and it is hardly probable that any lasting effects will be produced by their means."[71] The association decided at its 1808 meeting to no longer pursue antislavery activism as an association of churches, instead constituting the Kentucky Abolition Society, a decision that enabled non-Baptists to join the work.[72] The association of churches remained committed to fellowshipping as exclusively antislavery churches and continued to keep up "a feeble, withering existence" until its dissolution in 1820 after Barrow's death, but it never grew by any significant number.[73] By 1809, William Hickman had left the antislavery movement and returned to his previous posts as pastor of Forks of Elkhorn Church and leader within the Elkhorn

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[70] Tarrant, *History of the Baptised Ministers and Churches in Kentucky*, iii.

[71] David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America, and Other Parts of the World*, vol. 2 (Boston: Manning & Loring, 1813), 249.

[72] Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America*, 2:248.

[73] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:186.

Association.[74] Whether he ever reneged on his personal antislavery convictions, he spent the last two decades of his life in uninterrupted fellowship with slave owners, much to Tarrant's dismay.

Tarrant continued to work alongside Barrow and others in the antislavery cause at least until 1815. According to J. H. Spencer, he was "regarded a good and useful man, and a preacher above medium ability."[75] His homiletical giftedness most likely explains his appeal to Kentucky Baptist churches with unoccupied pulpits. At the 1807 Elkhorn Association meeting, North Fork Church asked, "Is it consistent with the Scriptures, and gospel order, to invite Mr. Carter Tarrent, in his present standing (exclusive of his emancipating principles) into the pulpit as a gospel minister?"[76] The Elkhorn Association never issued a ruling. Though Tarrant was not named, Salt River Church asked the Long Run Association a similar question the same year, and that body ruled it "imprudent (under the present state of things) to intermeddle therewith."[77] Tarrant was effectively blackballed from the Baptist fellowship to which he had devoted his life. He sold his lands in Woodford and Barren counties around 1810 and entered into a number of bonds from 1811–13, indicating that his financial situation had deteriorated.[78] Indeed, Tarrant's contemporary, John Taylor, connected his poor financial condition to his antislavery activism, writing that his connection with the emancipators reduced him in "his worldly circumstances."[79]

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[74] Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 354.

[75] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:190.

[76] Minutes of the Elkhorn Association of Baptists, Began and held agreeable to appointment, at David's Fork Meeting-House, State of Kentucky, the 2d Saturday in August, 1807 (n.p.: n.p., 1807), 2.

[77] Minutes of the Long Run Association, Held at eighteen mile meeting house, Henry county, begun on the first Friday in September, 1807 (n.p.: n.p., 1807), 2.

[78] Charles Tarrants, "Carter Tarrant (1765–1816): Baptist and Emancipationist," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 88, no. 2 (1990), 141.

[79] John Taylor, *Baptists on the American Frontier: A History of Ten Baptist Churches of Which the Author Has Been Alternately a Member*, ed. Chester Raymond Young (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), 211.

Even as late as 1814, Elkhorn churches were still debating whether to extend Tarrant an invitation to preach.[80] As a shunned minister with Republican sensibilities, Tarrant, most likely out of financial necessity, accepted a military assignment to serve as chaplain in General Andrew Jackson's army in New Orleans during the War of 1812. He arrived, however, after the fighting was over and peace already secured. His surviving correspondence with United States Secretary of War William Crawford reveals that, though he had received an appointment, he had never received a formal commission. He was in New Orleans serving as chaplain during peacetime without pay. He wrote Crawford, "I am a poor man and am now 1200 miles from home, without funds, resources or friends." Kentucky Congressman Richard M. Johnson, an acquaintance from Woodford County, interceded to President Madison on his behalf, and he finally received his formal commission in October 1815. Johnson's letter to the president vouched for Tarrant's character in contradiction to certain "malcontents to the contrary." Tarrant's reputation as a seditious disturber of the peace—accusations certainly stemming from his antislavery activism—preceded him. Tarrant died on February 17, 1816, at the age of fifty-one, under unknown circumstances.[81] One biographer concludes, "His was a sad and lonely death—a melancholy end to a broken man."[82]

David Barrow's antislavery activism continued primarily through his work as president of the Kentucky Abolition Society, which advocated for gradual emancipation. The society constituted at the 1808 Licking Locust Association meeting and was the first such organization in Kentucky. It would become the hub of the antislavery Baptists' activism while allowing them to form partnerships with sympathizers outside the Baptist fold. Barrow led the Kentucky Abolition Society but remained active in the Licking

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[80] Tarrants, "Carter Tarrant (1765–1816)," 141.

[81] Tarrant's military career is thoroughly documented in Tarrants, "Carter Tarrant (1765–1816)," 142–45.

[82] Tarrants, "Carter Tarrant (1765–1816)," 145

Locust Association while he pastored Mount Sterling Church until his death. The society probably never had more than two hundred members.[83] Per its constitution, most likely written by Barrow, the Kentucky Abolition Society existed to pursue abolition under the laws of Kentucky, to appoint persons to speak and publish on the topic of slavery, to serve free blacks through moral instruction and education, to "meliorate the condition of slaves by every means which may be in our power," and to seek justice for slaves suffering illegally.[84] The society continued for several years after Barrow's death in 1819, eventually publishing one of the two antislavery newspapers at that time in the United States, the *Abolition Intelligencer and Missionary Magazine* under the leadership of John Finley Crowe from 1822 until 1823 when it was discontinued due to lack of funding.[85]

Barrow sought to connect his efforts in Kentucky with larger antislavery efforts going on elsewhere. Interestingly, he pursued these goals while maintaining a cordial relationship with at least some proslavery Baptists in Kentucky, for he was chosen to preach at both the 1815 and 1818 meetings of the Long Run Association. In 1810, Barrow approached the Miami Association of Baptists in Ohio "for the purpose of opening a correspondence," but this association turned him away on grounds that some in Barrow's society still held slaves.[86] Slavery was illegal in Ohio, but for the Licking Locust Association operating in a slave state, Tarrant had made allowances for fellowship with slaveholders under certain conditions. For example, fellowship would be granted in cases of slaves being too young for emancipation or of women unable to emancipate

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[83] Lowell H. Harrison, *The Antislavery Movement in Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1978), 27.

[84] John Finley Crowe, ed., *Abolition Intelligencer and Missionary Magazine* 1, no. 6 (1822): 82.

[85] Asa Earl Martin, "The Anti-Slavery Movement in Kentucky, Prior to 1850," (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1918), 46.

[86] A.H. Dunlevy, *History of the Miami Baptist Association; From Its Organization in 1797 to a Division in that Body on Missions, etc. in the Year 1836* (Cincinnati, OH: Geo. S. Blanchard, 1869), 50.

slaves because of unwilling husbands.[87] By the 1814 Kentucky Abolition Society meeting, Barrow had settled upon colonization as the solution to the nation's slavery problem, no doubt seeking a pragmatic solution for those who raised concerns against racial amalgamation and stirred up fears of violence.[88]

On March 20, 1815, he sent a letter to Jefferson along with some "enclosed Scraps," which probably included the published minutes from the 1814 Kentucky Abolition Society meeting and a copy of *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*. Nearing the end of his life, Barrow finally acted upon his wish of a personal acquaintance with the former president. In the letter he praised Jefferson for "the Spirit that breathes in Your Writings" and "your public Conduct while you filled the highest Office in the Nation." Barrow wished "Assurance of a blessed Immortality flowing though Jesus Christ our Lord" upon Jefferson and requested that Jefferson respond with "some Hints" revealing "your Knowledge, Feelings & Observations on the Subjects of Slavery & emancipation."[89] Jefferson responded on May 1, assuring Barrow of their shared concern on the topic and cautioning patience in the fight to end slavery in order to give the slave time "to be prepared by instruction and habit for self-government and for the honest pursuits of industry and social duty." Jefferson admitted that the topic of emancipation was "one of early and tender consideration with me." Had he remained in office in Virginia, he speculated, he would have pursued it more fervently, but he stood by his sentiments of the plan's difficulty as expressed in his *Notes on the State of Virginia.*[90] In 1816, in the last documented

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[87] Tarrant, *History of the Baptised Ministers and Churches in Kentucky*, 38.

[88] Minutes of the Kentucky Abolition Society, Met at George Smith's, in Franklin County, on the 19th of October, 1814, and Continued until the Evening of the Following *Day* (Winchester, KY: Martin and Patten, 1814), 3.

[89] J. Jefferson Looney, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 8, *1 October 1814 to 31 August 1815*, Retirement Series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 364–65.

[90] Looney, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 8:454–55.

fragment of his antislavery activism, Barrow published, in Georgetown, Kentucky, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African*, by the Cambridge-educated British Quaker, Thomas Clarkson.[91] Barrow died on November 14, 1819, at the age of sixty-six, and is buried in Montgomery County, Kentucky.

The Elkhorn Association's 1806 decision to ban meddling with the political issue of slavery set the course for Kentucky Baptists until the Civil War. With the issue relegated to Congress, churches could conveniently ignore it and oust anyone who broke policy on grounds of violating the sanctity of Christ's church by intermingling with secular matters. However, after the initial removals, the issue of slavery rarely came up at the associational level. Of course, there were other reasons to make peace with slavery in Kentucky. Jefferson's vision for agrarian republicanism captured the imagination of Kentucky settlers who possessed plenty of land, and slaves became increasingly important to Kentucky's economy. Eli Whitney's cotton gin made cotton an extremely valuable commodity for Kentuckians living south of the Green River, and in the early 1800s Kentucky supplied hemp to the entire South, turning it into the state's primary cash crop. Slaves were needed to keep up production demands for both.[92] These factors help explain why the antislavery Baptists struggled to gain supporters in Kentucky. Charles Tarrants suggests that the antislavery insistence on breaking from their opponents also limited their effectiveness.[93] Rather than live as a persecuted minority in a slave state, many chose instead to break completely by moving to free states, leaving Kentucky with a smaller resistance. As a result, the Licking Locust Association probably had a greater impact in other states. Similar "Friends of Humanity" Baptist movements arose in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri in the years after the Licking Locust Association's

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[91] Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African* (Georgetown, KY: Rev. David Barrow, J.N. Lyle, 1816).

[92] Friend, *Kentucke's Frontiers*, 218–23.

[93] Tarrants, "Carter Tarrant (1765–1816): Baptist and Emancipationist," 137.

constitution. The Baptized Church of Christ Friends to Humanity at Turkey Hill, Illinois, even adopted Tarrant's rules to govern their body.[94] Slavery would persist in Kentucky until the Civil War, but the impact of the Licking Locust Association's efforts outlived its founders as parallel associations took up their cause in other states.

The Republican Antislavery Argument

From the beginning the antislavery activists sought to make clear their unwavering commitment to historic Christian orthodoxy. Even as early as Barrow's decision to move to Kentucky from Virginia, he had expressed concern that his absence would cause some to "take the liberty to let out some ungenerous sayings, concerning the motives of my moving, the doctrines I have preached, and the principles I hold."[95] Barrow's unease indicates already a tendency to associate antislavery with abandonment of biblical orthodoxy, and his inclusion of his religious creed alongside his political creed was designed to hush any such suspicion. Tarrant, likewise, labored to show that the Licking Locust Association had not compromised doctrinally. In his history of the movement, he included the minutes from the group's initial meeting where rules were drawn up to specify terms of their communion. To the question, "Have our ideas of the subject of abject slavery occasioned any alteration in our views of the doctrine of the gospel?" Tarrant answered with one word, "No."[96] Consistent with the growing Republican suspicion of man-made creeds, the new association decided not to adopt any doctrinal statement other than the Bible, but Tarrant later clarified that this choice to omit the Philadelphia Confession of Faith had nothing to do with the popular confession's

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[94] See Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 88–101, 570–88.

[95] Allen, "David Barrow's Circular Letter of 1798," 444.

[96] Tarrant, *History of the Baptised Ministers and Churches in Kentucky*, 38–39.

doctrine. Since all the Confession's articles of faith came from the Bible, Tarrant reasoned, "Why not as well begin with the bible at first as at last?"[97]

Against those who assume, based on the paucity of proslavery literature in America's early period, that proslavery sentiments were not widely held until the advent of radical abolitionism in the 1820s, Larry E. Tise demonstrates that the paucity of proslavery publications does not signify the absence of proslavery ideas. Tise writes, "What was missing was the need to defend an institution that nearly everyone took for granted."[98] Indeed, proslavery arguments from America's colonial period through the Jeffersonian era show remarkable continuity. Proslavery apologists drew upon a common European intellectual heritage that cemented shared assumptions across a wide diversity of regions in colonial America. While Kentucky's antislavery Baptists very rarely responded to published proslavery literature, they were certainly aware of proslavery arguments and intentionally directed their writings toward countering such arguments.

In 1805, "Humanitas" in Lexington published *Hints for the Consideration of the Friends of Slavery, and Friends of Emancipation*. Humanitas's identity is unknown, but he most likely belonged to the fellowship of antislavery Baptists. That he published his pamphlet in 1805 in Lexington and his description of slavery as "unmerited, involuntary and endless" show association with the movement led by Barrow and Tarrant. Humanitas wrote to counter proslavery arguments put forward by "mr. Conway and mr. Harris" that justified slavery using the Bible even as they admitted slavery to "be considered repugnant to sound reason, and contrary to humanity and good policy."[99] Humanitas believed this claim undermined belief in the inspiration of the Bible. How

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[97] Tarrant, *History of the Baptised Ministers and Churches in Kentucky*, 43–44.

[98] Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701–1840* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 16.

[99] Humanitas, *Hints for the Consideration of the Friends of Slavery, and Friends of Emancipation* (Lexington, KY: Joseph Charless, 1805), iii. I have not been able to locate the publication to which Humanitas responded.

could the God-inspired Bible promote a practice that harmed society and contradicted sound reason? Humanitas thus wrote, not "against slave-holders *indiscriminately*," but only against those who would use the Bible to advocate their cause.[100]

What were those biblical proslavery arguments? Humanitas wrote two essays to counter two different arguments put forth by Conway. First, Genesis 9 tells the story of how Noah's son, Ham, sinfully looked upon the nakedness of his drunken father, resulting in the curse of perpetual servitude for Ham's son, Canaan. Though the passage makes no mention of skin color, American proslavery advocates have historically located their main biblical argument for the slavery of the black race in this passage. The "Curse of Ham" argument would gain wide popularity in the South during the antebellum period, but Conway's use of it before 1805 reveals its placement within the repertoire of arguments available to proslavery Baptists in Kentucky at that early date. Second, Humanitas responded to the claim that Abraham's example of owning slaves justified the same practice for slaveowners in America. Obviously, this position assumed equivalence between the two systems of bondage, and antislavery responses easily defeated this line of reasoning by pointing out the myriad ways the two systems differed. These same two biblical arguments were named both by Tarrant in his initial address to the Licking Locust Association in 1807 and by Barrow in his pamphlet published in 1808. Continued reference to these two arguments by Tarrant and Barrow reveals them to be widely expressed by proslavery interlocuters, but the two leaders responded to at least five other more spurious biblical arguments.[101]

Aside from biblical arguments, slavery's defenders looked outside the Bible for justification of slavery as well. For example, Barrow responded at length to those who

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[100] Humanitas, *Hints for the Consideration of the Friends of Slavery, and Friends of Emancipation*, iv.

[101] Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 568; Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 28–37.

pointed to God's providential decrees as justification. This reasoning held that since God allowed slavery to happen, it must be permissible. Barrow levelled the obvious rejoinder that such logic could also be used to "justify all the abominations that have ever infested our world," and made a key distinction between God's "moral" commands, given by God as rules for governing behavior, and God's "positive" commands, given by God on certain occasions to accomplish purposes not revealed to human beings.[102] Barrow maintained that God does not intend the latter to his people as moral guidance. Additionally, Tarrant listed several "subterfuges, to which the advocates for slavery have flown for protection": some reasoned pragmatically that since slaves are already in bondage they might as well own them as someone else; some pointed to the absence of explicit forbiddance from Jesus and the apostles; some appealed to the providence of God; some adopted a paternalistic perspective by pointing to the benefits of Christian civilization over African idolatry; and finally, some took comfort that they attained their slaves honestly through purchase rather than kidnapping.[103]

The Jeffersonian claim that slaves were incapable as a race of living as free citizens in the United States undergirded proslavery sentiments of this time. Arguments for emancipation were frequently stonewalled by imaginative portrayals of aimless free blacks wondering towns, suspected violent attacks against women and children, and alarms of "amalgamation" between black and white races—all claims meant to provoke fear. David Barrow articulated an extremely progressive view of racial equality for his time, and it is on this point that he most radically veered from the ideology of Jefferson. Barrow's surprising views on race appear as early as his 1795 diary in remarks occasioned by his observation of Native Americans during his initial tour of Kentucky. Settlers moving west lived with constant fear of Indian attack, and Native Americans at

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[102] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 43.

[103] Tarrant, *The Substance of a Discourse*, 11.

this time were viewed as cruel savages by white settlers. Cowper's Run Church, constituted in 1787 by Augustine Eastin and James Garrard, lost five of its twenty members to Indian attacks in its first year of existence. J. H. Spencer marked 1792, the year of Kentucky's constitution as a state, as the time when Indians ceased to trouble white settlers, yet deep-seated prejudices remained long after.[104] Jefferson himself expressed fascination for Native Americans and admired them for their courage and sense of honor. However, his statements never reached the level of Barrow's.

Upon visiting an Indian encampment during his frontier expedition, Barrow lamented that the Indians were looked upon by Christians as subhuman and not deserving of common justice. After observing their customs and dress, however, he noted many virtuous traits and blamed their supposed savagery on the provocations of white Christians who continually moved the boundary lines of their lands. Further, he speculated on whether the Indians learned their savagery from watching how the whites treated their slaves and reflected that "our people were no better than they; and indeed not as good considering the opportunities we have enjoyed." Barrow ended his reflections on the Indian encampment with a universal conclusion about human beings: "I think man is man in every age, in every clime, in whatsoever dress, whatever color or circumstance; and all are alike good. Alike susceptible of knowledge and equal by nature and are all alike justly entitled to equal liberty and common justice."[105] Such radical egalitarianism is difficult to locate during Barrow's time and place.

Barrow, however, also admitted no qualitative racial distinctions between whites and blacks. He called objections to emancipation based on their supposed racial inferiority "very trifling." While there is no way to know for sure, his comments on race seem to be written in response to Jefferson's own comments in *Notes on the State of*

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[104] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:253.

[105] Barrow, "Diary," June 24, 1795.

Virginia, a text Barrow knew well, for Barrow addressed each of Jefferson's main arguments. Considering their unfortunate circumstances, he wrote, "Their ingenuity, industry, honesty, virtue and fidelity to their masters and country, vastly exceed what…could be expected." He went further, "Indeed I believe I may venture to say, their talents or natural abilities, are not inferior to the whites in any respect; and evidences are not wanting to prove . . . that they are equal to any other people in arts, &c." Though Barrow did not prefer racial mixing, he did not elaborate on his reasons. He did, however, point out, perhaps with Jefferson in view, that lawful matrimony was to be preferred over "illicit embraces." He concluded, "It has long been my sentiment, that any woman, who is good enough to make a man a concubine . . . ought to serve him for a wife."[106] Assuredly, Barrow understood the radical implications of his words, for he did not enter the debate as an outsider. He was himself a former slave owner living in the heart of a slave state and most likely had neighbors with enslaved concubines. However, he was chiefly a man of principle, and he followed those principles regardless of consequence.

The antislavery Baptists carefully defined the type of slavery they opposed by using up to five adjectives or their equivalents. Humanitas wrote against "unmerited, involuntary, and endless slavery."[107] Tarrant's address identified "perpetual, hereditary, involuntary and unmerited slavery."[108] And, of course, Barrow took aim at "involuntary, unmerited, perpetual, absolute, and hereditary slavery." These activists understood that they were not attacking slavery in the abstract, but the precise form of slavery being practiced in the United States. The Bible, after all, did sanction forms of voluntary servitude and periodic enslavement. In fact, they called out the "sophistry" of their proslavery interlocuters for conflating the terms "servant" and "slave" to gain biblical

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[106] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 45.

[107] Humanitas, *Hints for the Consideration of the Friends of Slavery, and Friends of Emancipation*, iii.

[108] Tarrant, *The Substance of a Discourse*, 8.

sanction for the American version.[109] By “involuntary” and “unmerited,” the activists specified the differences between willingly subjecting oneself to indentured servitude or being forced into slavery under punitive law versus being kidnapped from one’s home and forced into slavery without cause. “Perpetual” indicated the never-ending duration of American slavery passed down through generations. “Absolute” signified the nature of American slavery in which an entire race was considered property and completely devoid of rights with no hope of release. Finally, “hereditary” pointed to the situation of the children of slaves inheriting the enslaved status of their parents. Barrow wanted readers to understand that it was not enough to establish slavery from Scripture; Scripture had to be found to prove unmerited, involuntary, perpetual, absolute, hereditary slavery—the kind practiced in the United States. If Scripture could not justify this form of slavery, the case of his opponents was defeated.

Post-Enlightenment thought elevated non-revelatory sources of knowledge, such as nature, reason, and human experience. At its extreme, Deists like Thomas Paine pitted these sources against revelation, which in turn, eliminated the foundational doctrines of Christian orthodoxy. Barrow himself had written a tract against Deism in 1803 in response to several Elkhorn ministers who had embraced the philosophy. Interestingly, Barrow’s neighboring Virginia Baptist, Andrew Broaddus, wrote a response to Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason* in 1795, entitled *The Age of Reason and Revelation*, and the surviving copy on file with Early American Imprints is one with a handwritten address to David Barrow from the author.[110] The Deist attack on biblical revelation forced Christians to consider these alternative sources of knowledge, and thinkers like Barrow and Broaddus, rather than denying the legitimacy of these epistemic

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[109] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, vii.

[110] Andrew Broaddus, *The Age of Reason & Revelation; Or Animadversions on Mr. Thomas Paine’s Late Piece, Intitled “The Age of Reason, &c.” Containing a Vindication of the Sacred Scriptures, from the Reasonings, Objections, and Aspersions in That Piece* (Richmond, VA: John Dixon, 1795).

sources, instead tried to show the consistency between revealed Christian doctrine, on the one hand, and nature, reason, and experience, on the other.[111] Barrow wrote, "Whatsoever God has thought fit to reveal in the holy scriptures, however it may exceed the limits of reason, is notwithstanding, strictly consistent with the dictates of sober reason and real justice."[112]

However, Christian theologians did not stop there in their embrace of Enlightenment epistemology; these new epistemic sources were also useful for ethics. As Norman Fiering writes, theologians in early America began to assume that "God's intentions for man, His expectations of human beings as moral creatures, could be discovered independently of the traditional sources of religious authority, through close investigation of human nature."[113] For Barrow, reason and nature validated what God had already revealed and could be pursued as independent sources for moral guidance. "*Truth*," he wrote, "is so *precious* a *jewel*, that it is well worth searching for in the deep mines of Nature, Reason, and Divine Revelation."[114] Further, he echoed Enlightenment optimism that expected free inquiry to validate the truth, even beginning his treatise with the sentence, "Truth has nothing to fear from investigation," and adding a quote from the French Enlightenment Deist, Voltaire, "If tyrants were to read my book, I should have everything to fear, but tyrants never read."[115] Though his argument from Scripture was the lengthiest section of his treatise, he saved it for last "to substantiate and cap the whole."[116]

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[111] See E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 159–72.

[112] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 12.

[113] Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 6–7.

[114] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, v.

[115] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, iii–iv.

[116] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, vii.

First, Barrow sought to show that hereditary slavery was wrong based on nature. By "nature," he was not yet drawing on natural law tradition, for he appealed to natural law under "policy." Here, Barrow's reasoning drew upon natural science as he applied Newtonian gravitational theory to social relationships. Just as inanimate objects gravitate toward one another, animate beings reveal a law of "sociability" that leads them to attach to like species. In this way, God preserves "union and harmony throughout the great whole."[117] Barrow understood the tendency of different species of animals to group together in harmony as a God-given law to keep order in the world. To break this law "must in itself be a great evil, and as far as it operates, destroys union and harmony through all creation."[118] In our very design, Barrow saw God's wise conferral of natural laws toward love and harmony within species, and hereditary slavery clearly violated those laws. Anticipating his opponents pointing to the upheaval of nature after the fall into sin, Barrow refused to give ground. Sin was a deviation from God's first principles. To continue to deviate from God's original plan is to follow the course of Satan, the original enslaver of the whole human race.[119]

Next, Barrow treated reason and justice together. He defined reason as "one of the distinguishing characteristics that marks the difference between man and other animals," and noted that reason enabled human beings to fulfill the dominion mandate over the earth given by God in Genesis 1:26–28.[120] When reason is tempered with virtue, justice being chief, human beings govern over creation with temperance. However, when reason is clouded by passions, desire for comfort, or selfish interests, man "degenerates to a tyrant." For Barrow, justice was the true test for determining whether reason was clouded. If the end of a man's action is unjust, his reason must be "clouded with

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[117] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 9.

[118] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 10.

[119] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 11.

[120] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 11.

darkness."[121] Barrow located property rights in God's granting of the earth to Adam for dominion and food in Genesis 1:28 and astutely pointed out "not a word of one *man's* being given to *another man* as his property."[122] On this point, Barrow declared that slaveowners should be owed nothing upon freeing their slaves. "If *human creatures* are not *lawful property*," he wrote, "then reason and justice say, they ought to go out *without redemption*; and their owners think themselves well off, to get clear of them on as *good terms*."[123]

Mark A. Noll traces the shift among early American Christians in embracing republican principles as compatible with orthodox Protestantism, writing, "In this picture, the exercise of government was thought to enhance human flourishing if it could be structured to preserve freedom; but if government arbitrarily abridged liberty, the result could only be individual degradation and national decline."[124] Both Barrow and Tarrant rooted their argument against slavery within this framework. Barrow did not single out republicanism explicitly as one of his chief arguments against slavery but treated the topic under "policy." Tarrant, however, argued that slavery was contrary to republican principles, good policy, and the word of God, choosing to treat republicanism and good policy as separate lines of argument. Under his brief section on republicanism, he merely pointed out the obvious contradictions between the principles of liberty and equality enshrined in America's government and the despotic tyranny of chattel slavery. Barrow saw the same contradiction, expressing his astonishment,

> that men who have only a moderate share of common sense . . . should have the assurance, to come forward . . . under the names . . . of republicans, patriots, friends to the American revolution . . . professed enemies to absolute monarchy, despotism,

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[121] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 12.

[122] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 13.

[123] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 14.

[124] Noll, *America's God*, 56–57.

> aristocracy . . . who themselves, both in principle and practice, are absolute monarchs, despots and aristocrats at home.[125]

He struggled to fathom how Baptists of all people could punish slaves merely for endeavoring to worship God according to the dictates of their own consciences.[126]

Both activists believed that the strength of the nation was tied inexorably to its citizens possessing permanent interest in the nation's well-being, and Barrow followed Locke and Jefferson in linking property rights to good citizenship. He reasoned that a civil community's strength consisted in its number of "free, virtuous and industrious inhabitants." Further, the way to increase the number of such citizens is by giving them a permanent interest in the well-being of their community, and the way to grant that permanent interest is by permitting them the right "of acquiring, holding and enjoying property."[127] Barrow's argument drew upon the natural law tradition that looked beyond human government to discover inherent rights given by God through nature. Indeed, he wrote, "*Slavery* with all the mortifying degradations it involves, does not, nor indeed cannot, divest man, the noble image of his adorable Creator, here below, of the sensations and powers it has pleased his kind benefactor to endue him with."[128] This same tradition undergirded the entire edifice of America's government. Specifically, Barrow, echoing Jefferson, named the rights of liberty, property, equality, and the pursuit of happiness. He believed that all these rights were being denied America's slaves, and he predicted terrible consequences for the nation—"some national scourge" that "in all probability may be a war."[129]

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[125] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined,* 21.

[126] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 18.

[127] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 18–19.

[128] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 20.

[129] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 20.

However, Barrow and Tarrant were not only concerned with far off future consequences; they expressed republican concerns that slavery was harming the nation presently. Tarrant observed that slavery weakens the military of the nation, making it necessary to always have troops ready to suppress insurrection. Further, he wrote, slavery negatively impacts society by promoting insensitivity toward the miseries of fellow people and stimulating vice among slaves.[130] Barrow held that slavery promotes evil on two sides, the master's and the slave's. Regarding the master, slavery produces "imperiousness, covetousness, idleness, effeminacy, pride, hardheartedness, cruelty, superfluity of naughtiness and adultery, prevention of lawful marriage, and of obedience to parents, disqualifying converts for membership in the church of Christ." On the side of the slave, the institution results in "perpetual celibacy, or inevitable adultery, very often, necessitous theft, lying, low cunning, gross ignorance, dirtiness, indecency, fornication."[131]

Finally, saving their strongest arguments for last, both Tarrant and Barrow made their cases from the Bible. Tarrant declared, "The general tenor of the Gospel militates against the custom of slavery."[132] For him, "the Gospel system condemns evils of every kind, with every species of injustice."[133] Expressing a radical notion for his time, Tarrant did not believe Americans had special rights over other nations, arguing that Christianity levelled all nations and that Americans had no more right to enslave Africans than Africans had right to enslave Americans.[134] Tarrant pointed to biblical passages that clarified the duties of all Christians. Isaiah 58:6 called Christians to "loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that you

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[130] Tarrant, *The Substance of a Discourse*, 10.

[131] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 26.

[132] Tarrant, *The Substance of a Discourse*, 10.

[133] Tarrant, *The Substance of a Discourse*, 17.

[134] Tarrant, *The Substance of a Discourse*, 19.

break every yoke."[135] He showed that in Mark 12:30-31 Jesus called his followers to "love the Lord thy God with all they heart, and with all they soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength" and to "love they neighbor as thyself." In Luke 6:31, Jesus had taught, "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise."[136] For Tarrant, these clear teachings made hereditary slavery unthinkable.

Barrow spent several pages refuting the argument that justified slavery on grounds of the Bible's instructions to servants and masters.[137] He examined the contexts of many such passages to show the difference between biblical systems and the one practiced in America. If the mere mention of a word was grounds for justifying its practice, Barrow argued, then "*polygamy* or a *plurality* of wives, stands on as good ground as *perpetual*, *hereditary slavery*."[138] He likewise cited external biblical scholarship to demonstrate the absurdity of marking the entire African race with the curse of Ham.[139] For Barrow, the clearest statement in Scripture that could be applied to the American form of slavery was Exodus 21:16: "He that stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death."[140] Likewise, Barrow noted the clear opposition in the Bible to oppression and extortion and made the case that slavery as practiced in the new nation fit the description of those terms. However, the most potent argument against slavery, according to Barrow, was that it, "under examination, appears contrary, to the example and doctrines of the blessed Redeemer."[141] On this point he alluded to many of the same references as Tarrant. To those who would respond that

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[135] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotation is from the King James Version.

[136] Tarrant, *The Substance of a Discourse*, 21.

[137] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 28.

[138] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 30.

[139] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 43.

[140] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 33.

[141] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 38.

Jesus only spoke allegorically and had no intention of speaking into political situations with his teachings on justice and mercy, Barrow responded strongly, "To suppose, that Jesus Christ, had no regard to common justice, is paying him a very poor compliment, as the God of the universe, and final judge of all things. The truth is, his examples and doctrines, are sufficient guides in every case, to those who love and wish to obey the truth."[142]

Conclusion

Kentucky Baptists came out of the Great Revival more united than ever. In the excitement and enthusiasm of rapidly growing churches in a nation led by political allies, they finally achieved consensus and threw off the old monikers of "Regular" and "Separate" for a new one, "United." However, unity would not last long. As increasing numbers of slaves joined the fellowship of Baptist churches, deep disagreements over the moral legitimacy of slavery became unavoidable. Sickened over the mistreatment of slaves, antislavery activists began preaching emancipation, and proslavery church members responded with concern that such ideas were dangerous to good order, peace, and unity. The 1793 Virginia Baptist General Committee had already perfected the art of avoiding the issue when that association ruled that debates about the moral complexity of slavery belonged to the secular legislative body. In 1805 the Elkhorn Association took that philosophy one step further by seeking to ban any preaching about emancipation from churches and associations. Both sides were committed to the principles of Jeffersonian Republicanism, and different aspects of that political philosophy became lynchpins in each side's respective arguments. Proslavery Baptists emphasized separation of church and state to relegate the issue to individual conscience, while antislavery Baptists appealed to the principles of America's founding. Ultimately, the two sides proved irreconcilable as antislavery Baptists were pushed out, and those who remained

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[142] Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined*, 39.

made peace with slavery until actual war broke out over half a century later. The conflict over slavery, however, would not be the last politically charged dispute between Kentucky Baptists in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER 5

THE FERVOR OF JEFFERSONIAN POPULISM: BAPTISTS AND THE ANTIMISSION DEBATE

In 1815, the Long Run Association of Kentucky, formed in 1803 of twenty-four churches in the Louisville area, met for their annual meeting. Two special guests were in attendance that September at Bethel Meetinghouse near Shelbyville among the dozens of ministers and local church representatives. David Barrow, the controversial antislavery activist and pastor of Mount Sterling Church in Montgomery County, came to preach one of the three Lord's Day sermons. Additionally, John Taylor, the influential Virginian whose preaching had sparked revivals among Kentucky Baptist churches fifteen years earlier, made the trip to open the meeting with an introductory sermon. Neither minister pastored a church belonging to the association, for Barrow's church associated with the antislavery Licking Locust Association and Taylor's membership at that time belonged to Big Spring Church of the Elkhorn Association. Significantly, both men would have been present for the reading of a letter from New England Baptist missionary Luther Rice "on the subject of foreign missions" and for the approval of a recommendation from Isaac McCoy to appoint a committee "whose duty, shall be, to open subscriptions, and receive contributions; which they shall appropriate, according to their wisdom—for the support of missionaries, on our Western frontiers."[1] By 1815, the nationwide interdenominational obsession of interest and activity in Protestant missions had reached the Baptists of Kentucky.

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[1] Minutes of the Long Run Association, Held at Bethel Meeting House, the First Saturday, Sunday and Monday in September 1815 (n.p.: n.p., 1815), 2.

Unbeknownst to those present at Bethel Church that September, the topic of cooperative missions would become hotly contested among Kentucky Baptist churches within the next five years, and John Taylor would be among the loudest of those raising alarms. Historians of the antimission debate have often failed to account for the controversy's complexity. For example, David Bebbington argues that the theological convictions of High Calvinism primarily drove antimission opposition and points to the coinciding antimission movement in England as proof.[2] According to his interpretation, the existence of two parallel antimission movements on each side of the Atlantic precludes the explanatory potency of the American political context. However, Bebbington fails to acknowledge the complexity of antimission sentiment in America. However much the theologically eccentric Daniel Parker and the later Primitive Baptists opposed mission societies on soteriological High Calvinist grounds, other antimission critics such as Taylor, Elias Smith, John Leland, and Alexander Campbell were hardly extreme predestinarians and had little theological critique of the movement beyond the biblicist appraisal that such institutions were not sanctioned explicitly in Scripture.[3] Noting the diversity of the movement, Byron Lambert was certainly right to point out that it may be more accurate to speak of "anti-missionisms."[4]

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[2] David Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 90.

[3] James R. Mathis argues that the antimission response was a "theologically based cultural response to the religious, doctrinal, and structural changes sweeping through American denominations," in *The Making of the Primitive Baptists: A Cultural and Intellectual History of the Antimission Movement, 1800–1840* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 2. Mathis correctly rejects the High Calvinism interpretation, but he also unnecessarily rejects political forces in favor of religious concerns. Complex concerns fed antimissionism, and omitting political biases paints an incomplete picture. James Leo Garrett Jr. argued that even Parker, who certainly espoused extreme predestinarianism, never connected his antimissionism to these views, in *Baptist Theology: A Four Century Study* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 207. Garrett derived this observation from the pioneering work of O. Max Lee, "Daniel Parker's Doctrine of the Two Seeds," (ThM thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1962).

[4] Byron Lambert, "The Rise of the Anti-Mission Baptists: Sources and Leaders, 1800–1840" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1957), iv. Several more recent works treat aspects of the antimission controversy. For example, Walter B. Shurden devotes one chapter to the topic in *Not a Silent People: Controversies That Have Shaped Southern Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1972), 35–47. Shurden lists four causes for antimission sentiment: ministerial jealousy, fear of centralization, suspicion of greed,

For the Baptists that have been the subject of this study, antimission sentiments emanated, at least in part, from a populist political mythology that had its roots in the Virginia Baptist experience under the Anglican establishment. Colonial Virginia Baptists resented Anglicanism's favored position and begrudged the haughtiness they discerned in highly educated and wealthy Anglican ministers. As Rhys Isaac has shown, when Virginia Baptists rejected Anglicanism, they were not merely refusing an unscriptural theological system; they were rejecting the Virginia gentry's way of life.[5] An element of populism in the face of powerful elites motivated Baptists from an early stage and was also present within early intra-Baptist conflicts between Separates and the more educated Regulars. The partisan debates of the 1790s strengthened this populist spirit and created a Jeffersonian political mythology that pitted the Republican yeoman farmer who valued freedom, equality, and simple living against the Federalist aristocrat who stood for centralization, control, and accumulation of wealth. According to Alex Zakaras, political myths give meaning to the present by providing widely accepted narratives that "reduce the chaos and complexity of political life to familiar patterns." They place individuals and communities in unfolding dramas with high moral stakes that invite meaningful action.[6] For Jeffersonian Baptists, the success of both nation and church depended on the preservation of democracy against the constant threat of tyranny. Within this mythology, the growth and popularity of large national mission institutions represented a return to

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and hyper-Calvinism. However, his treatment does not attempt to explore ideological roots and treats it as one unified movement. Sam Haselby devotes three illuminating chapters to the mission movement and its opposition in *The Origins of Religious Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 193–315. Haselby shows how both sides contributed in their own unique ways to the development of Christian nationalism in America, but he is less interested in the complex nuances of various antimission arguments. In contrast, Lambert's exploration of antimissionism's ideological roots as well as his insight that it was actually several distinct movements make his dissertation the most complete single source on the antimission movement, even after more than a half century.

[5] Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 172.

[6] Alex Zakaras, *The Roots of American Individualism: Political Myth in the Age of Jackson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), 12–13.

hierarchical structures that separated the haves from the have nots and jeopardized the pure worship of God's people. Though the various critics of mission societies represented diverse theological backgrounds, all of them endorsed the political ideals of Thomas Jefferson.

Elijah Craig's 1801 tirade against salaried clergy manifested an early form of this populist mythology applied within the Baptist ecclesial context of Kentucky and foreshadowed the later arguments of antimission critics. As examined in chapter 2, Craig's objection rested on his belief that paying ministers salaries was a return to the money-loving ways of established Anglicanism and violated republican principles. While some Baptists added theological arguments to their critique of mission societies, antimission critics saw their growing popularity as a threat to republican principles and an unwanted intrusion into their domain. They questioned the motives of educated elites attempting to gain control in a land where the Holy Spirit was already using their preaching to initiate revivals and grow churches. The antimission argument mimicked many of the talking points of Jeffersonian partisanship and foreshadowed the widespread appeal of Andrew Jackson who would utilize this populist political mythology in his fight against the Bank of the United States and federal encroachments on the rights of states. Antimission interlocuters believed they were defending the common man and the local church from the age-old threat of tyranny. For them, the battle against mission societies was the next chapter in the fight to preserve liberty.[7]

[7] Keith Harper also connects Jeffersonian ideals to the rise of antimissionism, in "Thomas Jefferson, North American Baptists and…*Home Missions?* Reflections on Unintended Consequences," *American Baptist Quarterly* 35 (2016): 206–23. Likewise, Bertram Wyatt-Brown saw the antimission movement as an early manifestation of sectional awareness in the South, in "The Antimission Movement in the Jacksonian South: A Study in Regional Folk Culture," *The Journal of Southern History* 36, no. 4 (1970): 501–29.

The Advent of Cooperative Baptist Missions

In 1792, British Baptists, under the leadership of Andrew Fuller, William Carey, John Ryland Jr., and others, formed the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) in Kettering in order to act "together in society for the purpose of propagating the gospel among the heathen."[8] By 1793, the BMS had organized the cooperative efforts of several British Particular Baptist churches in support of the organization's first two missionaries, William Carey and John Thomas, who were sent to India. By 1800 the BMS had sent out a total of twelve missionaries to various parts of the world and would enter the next century adding Bible translation and publication of gospel tracts in various languages to its work. The explosion of American voluntary societies in the early decades of the nineteenth century is sometimes presented as a distinctly American phenomenon arising out of a political context that prioritized separation of church and state, the emergence of evangelical revivalism, development of new technological innovations, and the unique circumstances of competition arising from the rush to settle the nation's vast frontier lands.[9] However, the success of the BMS in Britain must also be considered when explaining American Baptist participation in cooperative mission efforts. Carol Crawford Holcomb writes, "The founding of the BMS marked a major turning point not only for Baptists, but also for the history of Protestant missions." Holcomb then lists several similar organizations formed in Britain in the aftermath of the BMS, including the Congregationalist London Mission Society (1795) and the Anglican Church Missionary Society (1799).[10]

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[8] F. A. Cox, *History of the Baptist Missionary Society, from 1792 to 1842*, vol. 1 (London: T. Ward, 1842), 3.

[9] For example, Sam Haselby rightly sees the boom of Protestant voluntary societies as playing "an important role in the development of American religious nationalism," in *The Origins of American Religious Nationalism*, 234ff. However, by focusing exclusively on the development of American religious nationalism, Haselby ignores the influence of British predecessors.

[10] Carol Crawford Holcomb, "Baptist Missions and the Turn toward National Denominational Organizations: The Baptist Missionary Society and the Triennial Convention: 1792/1812," in *Turning*

Reports of Carey's work in India circulated widely among American Baptists. David Benedict wrote that churches in America frequently received reports "of the successful operations of our British brethren in India" which "led them to make liberal collections for that age, in favor of their distant denominational friends."[11] In 1790 British Baptist John Rippon began publishing his *Baptist Annual Register* with a two-fold goal: to educate the world about Baptists and to bring Baptists into greater awareness of their own history and ongoing work around the world.[12] Many leading Baptists had maintained trans-Atlantic correspondence both before and after the Revolution. Leaders like James Manning, Samuel Stillman, and Isaac Backus on the American side exchanged letters with British Baptists such as Caleb Evans, Samuel Stennett, and John Ryland Jr. According to Hywel Davies, Rippon's *Register* "intended to institutionalize the correspondence which had previously been of an accidental and personal nature."[13] Rippon's *Register* collected reports from Baptists around the world into one widely read publication, resulting in an increased Baptist denominational consciousness. Thus, American Baptists in places like Kentucky and Tennessee were getting annual updates on the BMS and Carey's work in India, while British Baptists in Bristol were learning about revivals in Kentucky.

The success of the BMS was causing American Baptist associational self-reflection as early as 1803, for in that year Elder Martin Ross asked the Kehukee Association in North Carolina, after reading Rippon's *Register*, "Is not the Kehukee

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Points in Baptist History: A Festschrift in Honor of Harry Leon McBeth, ed. Michael E. Williams Sr. and Walter B. Shurden (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 120.

[11] David Benedict, *Fifty Years among the Baptists* (New York: Sheldon, 1860), 112–13.

[12] For more on Rippon, see Ken R. Manley, *'Redeeming Love Proclaim': John Rippon and the Baptists*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 12 (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2004).

[13] Hywel Davies, "The American Revolution and the Baptist Atlantic," *Baptist Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1995): 141.

Association, with all her numerous and respectable friends, called on in Providence, in some way to step forward in support of that missionary spirit which the great God is so wonderfully reviving amongst the different denominations of good men in various parts of the world?"[14] In 1812, New England Congregationalists sent a group of missionaries that included Adoniram and Ann Judson and Luther Rice to India. On their sea voyage, however, the Judsons converted from Congregationalist to Baptist principles after conducting a study of baptism in preparation for meeting William Carey and company in Calcutta. Luther Rice would soon follow. After receiving baptism from BMS missionary William Ward, the Judsons eventually settled in Burma while Luther Rice returned to America to organize a new national Baptist convention to support their work. In the recently baptized Judsons, Baptists in America had their first foreign missionaries. In Luther Rice, they had their first mission society organizer.

As American Baptists began contemplating greater organization of support for missions within their own theological enclave, the larger world of American Protestantism was undergoing a parallel shift toward vast denominational and interdenominational cooperation. America's perceived victory in the War of 1812 combined with opening of vast tracts of western and southern lands opened the floodgates of migration from east to west. Daniel Walker Howe writes, "Seldom in human history has so large a territory been settled so rapidly."[15] As much as American Baptists drew inspiration for organizing from the groundbreaking work of their British brethren, other catalyzing factors arose uniquely from within this rapidly changing American context. The French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville observed during his 1831

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[14] George Washington Paschal, *History of North Carolina Baptists*, vol. 1 (Raleigh: The General Board North Carolina State Convention, 1930), 544.

[15] Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 125–26.

trip to the United States the "democratic and republican" character of American Christianity.[16] Particularly, he marveled that, despite formal separation of church and state, America surpassed all other nations in religion's influence over society. Religion impacted the nation, not top down through state enforcement, but bottom up through voluntary submission to Christian mores as Americans connected preservation of republicanism with Christianity's spread. In America, Tocqueville saw something unique and counterintuitive—a thriving religious culture in a nation that was constitutionally disestablished.[17] Tocqueville's visit happened to come on the heels of an explosion of organized Protestant missionary activity that sought to impact every level of society.

When New England Federalists looked to the unsettled and isolated West, they grew concerned about America's future. How could republicanism thrive in a context so far removed from Christian institutions? Could America survive the moral degeneracy of a growing frontier population? In their search for wealth, were westward migrants merely seeking to gain the whole world while forfeiting their souls? Most importantly, Federalists saw the rise and popularity of Jeffersonian Republicanism as a threat to the kind of Christian republic they hoped to maintain. New England Federalists believed Jefferson's election in 1800 and reelection four years later confirmed the nation's drift toward atheism and immorality. With the help of elaborate conspiracy theories, they linked Jefferson's party with the religious iconoclasm of revolutionary France and leveraged public alarm to recruit adherents to their cause.[18] In response to such concerns, New England evangelicals—mainly Congregationalists and Presbyterians—worked to

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[16] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Carmel, IN: Liberty Fund, 2012), 467.

[17] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1:472–84.

[18] For more on the evangelical Federalists, see Jonathan J. Den Hartog, *Patriotism and Piety: Federalist Politics and Religious Struggle in the New American Nation* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

organize cooperative efforts of Protestants in America toward the goal of civilizing and evangelizing the entire continent. Disconnected from the highest seats of national political power because of the triumph of Jefferson's party, Federalist Protestants adopted a strategy of voluntarism in hopes of preserving what they believed any healthy republic required—a virtuous citizenry. Without government support through taxes, voluntarism allowed previously established Congregationalist and Presbyterian churches to continue to impact society. They leveraged the freedom secured under democratic national government to organize voluntary institutions to convert unbelievers, reform immoral behavior, and, ultimately, save the republic.

American Protestant mission efforts were not new, for Protestants had long worked toward the goal of evangelizing Native Americans and civilizing society by teaching biblical ethics. However, early nineteenth-century efforts manifested several new innovations. First, the level of cooperation swelled to unprecedented levels. In the forty years between 1787 and 1827, New Englanders alone established 933 Protestant voluntary associations and poured immeasurable financial resources into missions.[19] Second, because so many of these efforts pooled resources from across sectarian boundaries, American Protestantism began a process of deemphasizing fine theological distinctions to find unity around basic shared doctrine and ethics. Mirroring the millennial thirst for unity experienced among southern denominations during the Great Revival, northern voluntary societies muted divisive theological debates in an effort to promote unity behind the common cause of missions and reform. Every major denomination participated in the pooling of resources to support mission agencies, and huge interdenominational agencies like the American Bible Society formed to distribute

[19] Haselby, *The Origins of American Religious Nationalism*, 238.

Bibles across the nation and world.[20] As a result, the character of American Protestantism changed as it became less doctrinal but more unified and centralized. Finally, these massive movements and mergers handed Protestants unparalleled influence over American culture. In fact, Sam Haselby affords Protestant voluntarism a key role in the development of American religious nationalism. By unifying much of the nation behind a doctrinally-muted but ethically-charged version of Protestantism in service of patriotism, they made the American people "more the same."[21]

From its earliest history as a small sect emerging out of New Light Congregationalism, the American Baptist movement had often been insulated from larger cultural trends. However, benefitting greatly from America's independence, the process of Constitution making, the rise of the Jeffersonians, and recent revivals, that same movement, by the early decades of the nineteenth century, had become a major Protestant option alongside the Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Episcopalians. The Baptist experience in America tells an evangelical rags-to-riches story—from persecuted faction to influential movement that in significant ways embodied the nation's democratic ideals better than its competitors. No other religious body benefited from broader cultural and political developments as much as the Baptists did. The Baptists entered the new nineteenth century with justified millennial optimism as they celebrated newfound cultural legitimacy, swelling church membership rolls, and increasing unity.

However, at the turn of the century, Baptists remained disconnected as a national denomination. In fact, the democratic nature of the Baptist movement seemed to preclude the hierarchical organizational structure usually necessary to form a nationwide denomination. Baptists had no formal mechanism for uniting hundreds of autonomous

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[20] For the history of the American Bible Society, see John Fea, *The Bible Cause: A History of the American Bible Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[21] Haselby, *The Origins of American Religious Nationalism*, 234–35.

local churches behind a single cause. As chapter 1 demonstrated, the post-Revolutionary Virginia Baptists were able to achieve unity behind the shared cause of advocacy for political rights, and associational state-level unity thrived all over the nation. However, these forms of unity remained occasional, volatile, and regional. Without hierarchical structure, Baptists achieved national unity through the shared conviction that the world needed the gospel. "With only slight exaggeration," Joshua Guthman writes, "it can be said that the foreign and domestic missions cause was responsible for organizing Baptists as a denomination."[22] Excited over the success of the BMS across the Atlantic and impacted by many of the same factors contributing to broader evangelical voluntarism, Baptists zealously united behind a long-treasured cause—the shared desire to spread the gospel both at home and abroad.

Upon his return to the United States in 1813, Luther Rice travelled among Baptist churches and associations to collect financial support for the Judsons. After discovering several smaller Baptist societies already committed to cooperative missions, he began to conceive of a nationwide agency of delegates from these smaller bodies. In one letter, he wrote, "The plan which suggested itself to my mind, that of forming one principal society in each state, bearing the name of the state, and others in the same state, auxiliary to that; and by these large, or state societies, delegates be appointed to form one general society."[23] In May 1814, Rice's plan came to fruition when the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States of America for Foreign Missions met and constituted in Philadelphia. The name of the organization would later be shortened to the Triennial Convention since it met every three years. The convention met "for the purpose of carrying into effect the benevolent Intentions of our

[22] Joshua Guthman, *Strangers Below: Primitive Baptists and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 30.

[23] Quoted in H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 346.

Constituents, by organizing a plan for eliciting, combining, and directing the Energies of the whole Denomination in one sacred effort, for sending the glad tidings of Salvation to the Heathen."[24] At the initial meeting, Luther Rice was commissioned as domestic missionary to continue organizing support in America, and Judson, though absent, was officially adopted as foreign missionary to India though he would later settle in Burma. Millennial hopes were present as the convention's president, Richard Furman, celebrated the recent awakening of evangelical cooperation with expectation that "the glory of the latter days is at hand."[25] Though eleven of the original thirteen states were represented along with the District of Columbia, no delegates from west of the Appalachian Mountains attended the initial meeting of the Triennial Convention.

In his 1814 address, Furman noted the necessity of prioritizing a foreign mission first, but he looked forward to raising enough money to direct efforts toward improving the state of Baptist churches at home in America. Of primary concern, Furman explained the need to educate future gospel ministers in preparation for ministry among a society exploding in scientific knowledge. He believed "the minister of the sanctuary should increase in an equal proportion" to the growth in knowledge of the general population.[26] During its 1817 meeting, the Triennial Convention officially launched its home mission efforts by appointing Connecticut-born John Mason Peck and Kentucky-born James Welch as missionaries to the Missouri Territory. Rice visited Kentucky for the first time in 1815 and attended the annual meetings of several associations. On August 14, 1815, Rice personally read a circular letter to the Elkhorn Association in

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[24] American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, *Proceedings of the Baptist Convention for Missionary Purposes; Held in Philadelphia, in May, 1814* (Philadelphia: Ann Coles, 1814), 3.

[25] American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, *Proceedings of the Baptist Convention for Missionary Purposes*, 41.

[26] American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, *Proceedings of the Baptist Convention for Missionary Purposes*, 42.

which he requested permission to "present thro' the Associations of each Church in our union" a copy of the annual report from the foreign mission board of the Triennial Convention and for the association to appoint a secretary to "keep up correspondence with that board." After preaching a sermon on Matthew 6:10, Rice collected an offering "of 150 to 200 dollars . . . for missionary purposes."[27] Rice, known as a powerful preacher, visited several other associations in the state with similar requests, and his efforts successfully resulted in the establishment of at least six local missionary societies that would serve as auxiliaries to the Triennial Convention.[28] In 1815, Rice was warmly received in Kentucky, and churches and associations responded to his pleas with generous offerings.

However, by the time John Mason Peck travelled through Kentucky in 1817, the mood had shifted significantly among many Baptists. Peck visited several churches where he preached to warm reception and took up collections. Upon arriving at Friendship Church in Winchester during their monthly Saturday meeting, however, he met opposition from the moderator who opposed his party's efforts. Peck's purpose ultimately prevailed and culminated in a collection, but here he encountered, for the first time, total opposition to the missionary spirit. He was shocked to "hear men, professing the religion of Jesus Christ, openly declare that they hoped they should never hear more of missionaries, and wanted no collections for such purposes." The next day, Peck penned the following entry in his diary as he prepared to preach at the same church: "A solemn work this day lies before me. I have to preach in defence of the missionary cause—the cause of Christ—amidst a host of opposers, whose eyes are blinded by

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[27] Minutes of the Elkhorn Association of Baptists, Convened at Town-Fork Meeting House, the 2D Saturday in August, 1815 (n.p.: n.p., 1815), 2–3.

[28] Frank M. Masters, *A History of Baptists in Kentucky* (Louisville: Kentucky Baptist Historical Society, 1953), 191.

prejudice, whose hearts are become unfeeling and regardless of their perishing fellow-men in darkness."[29] Peck hoped his sermon on Romans 1:16 would permanently erect the "missionary standard" in that quarter.[30] Among many in Kentucky and further west, the missionary standard did indeed prevail, but strong cultural trends prevented universal acceptance. By 1820, many of Kentucky's Baptist churches and associations had decided to discontinue correspondence with the Triennial Convention.

The Rise of Antimissionism

To adequately grasp the ideological undercurrents of antimissionism, the diversity of the movement must be recognized. Surprisingly, opposition to voluntary mission societies arose from a broad range of ideological and geographical quarters. When Baptists in Kentucky rallied opposition to organized missions, they were joining a disparate coalition that included other evangelicals, universalists, Quakers, Unitarians, Deists, freethinkers, and eccentrics from various frontier locales as well as major east coast cities.[31] As diverse as this conglomeration was, Jeffersonianism was their common thread. While some of these groups added theological reasons for opposition, they all believed that the strengthening voluntary movement threatened the progress of liberty in the nation. Mission societies deserved scorn and resistance because such organizations sought to centralize what ought to be kept local and to formalize from the top that which functioned best as originating with the people. In short, they saw the movement as a remnant of the Old Order and were unwilling to cede authority back to New England elites.

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[29] John M. Peck, "Rev. John M. Peck's First Journey through Kentucky in 1817," in *The Christian Repository and Family Visitant, A Monthly Magazine*, vol. 8, ed. S. H. Ford (Louisville: Bradley & Gilbert, 1859), 261.

[30] Peck, "Rev. John M. Peck's First Journey through Kentucky in 1817," 262.

[31] Lambert, "The Rise of the Anti-Mission Baptists," iv.

Of course, Jefferson himself had "sworn upon the altar of god eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."[32] In this case, the views of Jeffersonian antimissionists were not far from those of Jefferson himself. When the New England Congregationalist Jedidiah Morse invited the aging Jefferson to join his mission society to Native Americans in 1822, Jefferson agonized over how best to respond. After seeking Madison's advice on the matter and then asking the sitting president and fellow Virginian, James Monroe, to sign off on his reply, he sent a lengthy and somewhat combative response. In his letter to Madison, Jefferson wrote that he was "anxious to know your thoughts on the subject because they would affect my confidence in my own." Reflexively, he disapproved of such associations because of their ability to "grapple with & controul the government." Voluntary associations were necessary, Jefferson believed, only in conditions of tyranny as when the Continental Congress organized to overthrow Britain's control of the colonies. Under America's government—one that Jefferson believed represented the whole of the people and protected the rights of all citizens—such societies would only bequeath outsized influence on a handful of powerful individuals. He held that the elected government was the best organization to accomplish benevolent ends, for it had "superior means, superior wisdom, and [operated] under limits of legal prescription."[33]

In Jefferson's response to Morse, the same letter approved by and passed through Monroe, he assured him of his whole-hearted support for the cause of the physical and moral improvement of Indian tribes. However, he was concerned that the size of such associations would grow to the point of rivaling and jeopardizing the elected

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[32] Barbara B. Oberg, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 32, *1 June 1800 to 16 February 1801* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 166–69.

[33] Thomas Jefferson, "From Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 25 February 1822," Papers of James Madison, Rives Collection, Series 2, Additional General Correspondence, 1780 – 1837, Microfilm Reel: 26, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, https://www.loc.gov/item/mjm022779/.

government. Morse's society included powerful politicians, members of the judiciary, clergy, and private members who paid for the privilege of joining. Jefferson was particularly troubled that clergy—no doubt he had the New England variety in mind—would make up the majority of the society's voters and thus possess the power to direct the will of members who were also elected political leaders. He called the prospect of elected leaders organized in a voluntary society against the will of the people "a fearful array." Jefferson questioned the necessity of such organizations when the elected government, representing the people, was already working toward the same goal of Indian reform. He concluded, "This association, this wheel within a wheel, is more likely to produce collision than aide, and that it is, in it's magnitude of dangerous example, I am bound to say that, as a dutiful citizen, I cannot in conscience become a member of this society."[34]

Antimissionist evangelicals shared Jefferson's animosity toward voluntary societies, and many surpassed him expressing their revulsion. These evangelicals were likely not influenced by Jefferson's explicit statements on voluntary societies, for the former president did not publish his antagonism widely. However, Jeffersonian political concerns tended to accompany antimission sentiments. Thus, the connection was not so much between Jefferson and the antimissionists as Jeffersonianism and antimissionism. Fearing that massive interdenominational organizations would interfere with the organic ministry of local congregations and return individual consciences to a form of bondage, men like Elias Smith and John Leland loudly expressed their opposition to such endeavors. Smith and Leland, though not institutionally connected to one another, shared many similarities.

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[34] Thomas Jefferson, "Thomas Jefferson to Jedidiah Morse, 6 March 1822," Simon Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Philadelphia, PA.

Both men were New Englanders who were fiercely loyal to Jefferson. Further, they each shared millennial hopes for America's role in the world and opposed every manifestation of real or imagined tyranny. Stylistically, both Smith and Leland could be erratic and often seemed to write for shock value. Of course, there were also key differences. Elias Smith would eventually leave behind, not only the Baptists, but all doctrinal creeds and even Trinitarian orthodoxy, eventually embracing universalism, while Leland remained historically orthodox within the Baptist fold for the whole of his long life. Smith and Leland are important figures in the frontier antimission debate because their early opposition most explicitly reveals the ideological roots of the diverse movement. Later antimission advocates would not always connect their opposition so overtly to politics even though they shared the same populist insecurities against salaries, education, hierarchy, and expertise.

Elias Smith, who Lambert called "the true parent of American anti-Missionism," was an ordained Baptist minister from Connecticut who began distancing himself from the Baptist movement as early as 1802, launching a movement of "Christian" churches that came to be known as the Christian Connection.[35] Anticipating the later biblicism of Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell, Smith rejected every doctrine and practice that lacked explicit New Testament sanction, including Nicene Trinitarianism. He was a devoted Jeffersonian Republican who believed that Christ's government of righteousness consisted of liberty, equality, unity, and peace, and, further, that any government that resulted in the opposite of those values—bondage, inequality, discord, and war—was the government of Antichrist.[36] The Constitution of the United States, Smith believed, established America on the righteousness of Christ's kingdom,

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[35] Lambert, "The Rise of the Anti-Mission Baptists," viii.

[36] Elias Smith, *The Whole World Governed by a Jew: Or the Government of the Second Adam, as King and Priest* (Exeter, NH: Henry Ranlet, 1805), 26.

proving that America's government was an earthly expression of the kingly government of Christ.[37]

In contrast to all other governments on earth, Smith maintained that America's government was "from heaven."[38] Jefferson himself was "raised up by the King of kings, to fill the most important place in the world."[39] Regarding Jefferson, Smith believed that "such men as he is will, ere long, be in office throughout the whole world" as he expected Christ's kingdom to spread to all nations through the furtherance of civil and religious liberty.[40] Against the empty Federalist threats that Jefferson's election would lead to atheism, Smith rejoiced that six years of his presidency had only resulted in religion's rapid growth in the South "where they are clear from those tyrannical men which disturb our peace here."[41] In Smith's interpretation, Jefferson's election furthered the spread of political and religious liberty, and liberty provided the context for Christ's kingdom to thrive.

Upon launching his Christian Connection association, Smith concurrently engaged in an energetic and innovative publishing campaign to promote his ideas.[42] Of his various publications, Smith's *Herald of Gospel Liberty*, which ran from 1806 to 1817, gained the widest readership. Smith's opposition to missionary societies spanned decades and matured over time, but his animosity dates to at least 1806, making him the earliest antimission preacher on record.[43] According to Lambert, he was the first to articulate the

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[37] Smith, *The Whole World Governed by a Jew*, 27.

[38] Smith, *The Whole World Governed by a Jew*, 31.

[39] Smith, *The Whole World Governed by a Jew*, 34.

[40] Smith, *The Whole World Governed by a Jew*, 58.

[41] Smith, *The Whole World Governed by a Jew*, 73.

[42] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 73.

[43] Lambert, "The Rise of the Anti-Mission Baptists," 110.

"full-blown anti-Missionism . . . based on Scripture and gathering together in one the individualism, the militant congregationalism, the hatred of Yankee money and established religion, the anti-intellectualism, the anticlericalism, and the Jeffersonian political enthusiasms of the popular classes in America."[44] In Smith's view, purity and liberty were inexorably linked. Meticulously following the explicit teachings of the New Testament guaranteed purity, and purity ensured gospel liberty. Tyranny and bondage resulted when unauthorized practices crept into the church. Since missionary societies and seminaries could not find New Testament sanction, lovers of liberty must stand opposed. In contrast to the powerful work of God's Spirit already manifesting on the frontier because of obedient gospel preaching, Smith saw mission societies, seminaries, and the burgeoning publishing industry as man-made "religious manufactories."[45]

Elias Smith's antimissionism illuminates the Jeffersonian ideological framework from which these populist critiques naturally arose, but his outspoken rejection of the Baptists combined with theological heterodoxy limited his influence. John Leland, however, enjoyed widespread respect from Kentucky's Baptists stemming from their shared political involvement in post-Revolutionary Virginia. In fact, John Taylor, who would carry the antimissionary torch among Kentucky Baptists, maintained correspondence with Leland as late as 1830.[46] Leland, the outspoken Jeffersonian, opposed Baptist denominationalism as early as 1814, when he preached to Baptist delegates in Philadelphia on the eve of the fateful meeting that would culminate in the formation of the Triennial Convention.[47] Leland chose Isaiah 10:27 as his text, which

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[44] Lambert, "The Rise of the Anti-Mission Baptists," 112–113.

[45] Lambert, "The Rise of the Anti-Mission Baptists," 111.

[46] See "Extracts from a Letter to Rev. John Taylor of Kentucky, Dated Dec. 10, 1830," in John Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland* (New York: G. W. Wood, 1845), 600–2.

[47] On Leland's antimissionism, see Eric C. Smith, *John Leland: A Jeffersonian Baptist in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 225–39.

prophesied the destruction of a "yoke" upon the anointing of Christ. To Leland, this yoke was, of course, the "yoke of bondage or slavery" that often manifested itself when men assumed power over other men.[48] The ancient kings of Israel were "very like the people now-a-days [who] form societies, and they must have a president and two or three vice-presidents, to be like their neighbors around them."[49] Leland's point could hardly be missed: Christ, the anointed one, had come to free his people from the kind of bondage mission societies often represented; his fellow Baptists who longed for such a society were merely aping the methods of their more respectable Federalist neighbors.

Of course, Leland's warning would not be heeded by his fellow Baptists. Once the Triennial Convention had succeeded in organizing the vast efforts of American Baptists behind the cause of cooperative missions, Leland grew louder in his opposition, even writing articles in Elias Smith's *Herald of Gospel Liberty* and elsewhere.[50] Leland, like Smith, was ever conscious of guarding "pure Christianity" in the nation and never tired of counteracting tyranny wherever he found it hiding. "What a pity," he wrote, "that the only religion on earth, worth having, should be perverted, by *priest-craft*, to a trade of emolument—an article of merchandise—a science of the schools—a sanctuary for crimes—a pretence for extermination—a claim for power, and a speculation for money."[51] Ever the evangelist, Leland rejoiced in missionaries going out to spread the gospel. However, he worried that the promise of a pre-determined salary for potential missionaries would lay "a temptation before them which may be too strong for many to withstand." The call of Christ required "sun-burnt faces and hard hands," not those

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[48] Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, 376.

[49] Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, 377.

[50] Smith, *John Leland*, 230.

[51] Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, 493.

motivated by "an easy and genteel living."[52] To Leland, the whole missionary enterprise appeared "more like religious parade than humble piety."[53] Leland assessed the flurry of organized mission activity of his day and concluded, "There is but little likeness between the religion of the present day and that which prevailed in the prime of Christianity."[54]

John Leland cared little for the "mechanical" language used by mission societies in reference to religion. In 1821, Ebenezer Porter, professor and later president of Andover Seminary in Massachusetts, in an attempt to recruit future missionaries, speculated scientifically on the number of preachers needed per soul in a given geographic location.[55] Leland considered such calculations "extremely flat and anti-Christian."[56] Who could estimate what the Spirit intended to do with even one preacher? Leland longed for simplicity. He looked back nostalgically to the uncorrupted days of Jesus and the apostles. Writing to John Taylor in 1830, Leland identified as his God-ordained lot the call "to watch and check *clerical hierarchy*, which assumes as many shades as a chameleon." He looked back fondly on earlier times when preachers at associational meetings relied on zealous gospel proclamation to win sinners and lamented the "new order of things" in which those same meetings now featured "high encomiums on Sunday-schools, tract societies, Bible societies, anti-mason societies, etc., with a strong appeal to the people to aid with their money those institutions which are to introduce the millennium; assuring the people that 'every cent may save a soul.'"[57] Due to Leland's outsized and early influence upon his Baptist peers, Lambert credited him

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[52] Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, 494.

[53] Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, 495.

[54] Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, 555.

[55] Nathan Whiting, ed., *The Religious Intelligencer for the Year Ending May, 1821*, vol. 5 (New Haven: Nathan Whiting, 1821), 605.

[56] Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, 526.

[57] Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, 601–2.

with leveraging the emotional impact of the Jeffersonian conflict with Federalism into a "religious ideology which stood opposed to all extracongregational institutions."[58] Initially, Kentucky Baptists resonated with the call to spread the gospel and received missionaries from the Triennial Convention with excitement and pledges of support. However, by 1820, Leland's populism had gained considerable momentum in the region as southerners perceived belittling attitudes and corrupt intentions in missionaries being sent from the Northeast.

Antimissionism in Kentucky

Bertram Wyatt-Brown dated southern antimissionism to the post-war depression of 1819 when southerners began reacting strongly against the Bank of the United States and the "eastern establishment."[59] This date makes intuitive sense considering both John Taylor and Daniel Parker published their respective antimission diatribes in 1820. However, Baptist historian J. H. Spencer marked 1816—the year following Luther Rice's initial foray into Kentucky—as the point at which antimission sentiments first began to appear in the state, and John Mason Peck's testimony about the opposition he encountered in 1817 affirms this earlier date.[60] Prior to 1816, Baptists in Kentucky enthusiastically supported missions of all kinds and generously contributed to Baptist voluntary causes. The influential Elkhorn Association had launched their own Kentucky Society for Foreign Missions in 1813, and associations in Kentucky generally followed their lead as the state's largest and oldest body.[61] Additionally, Elkhorn had

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[58] Lambert, "The Rise of the Anti-Mission Baptists," 150.

[59] Wyatt-Brown, "The Antimission Movement in the Jacksonian South" 509–10.

[60] J. H. Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists, from 1769 to 1885,* vol. 1 (Cincinnati, OH: J. R. Baumes, 1885), 570.

[61] S. H. Ford, ed., *The Christian Repository and Family Visitant*, *A Monthly Magazine*, vol. 8 (Louisville: Bradley & Gilbert, 1859), 480.

enthusiastically received Luther Rice at its 1815 meeting, collecting a generous offering for the Triennial Convention's ambassador. Baptists in Kentucky did not go on written record against mission societies until 1820, but opposition in the region dates to at least 1816.

What precipitated the shift from widespread cooperation to growing animosity, especially among a population segment that had long celebrated the cooperative missionary efforts of Baptists in Britain? In theory, Baptists in the South had few reasons to oppose voluntary mission societies. The theology of High Calvinism, which sparked some British Baptists to question the prudence of sending missionaries for fear of violating God's decrees, did not enjoy widespread support in Virginia and Kentucky until the rise of the Primitive Baptists in the late 1820s. The Regular Baptists who prioritized the Calvinistic Philadelphia Confession were often just as evangelistic as the Separates and sometimes more so. Further, Jeffersonian optimism and the revivals of the early 1800s had created a context where doctrine was being less emphasized to achieve unity, as evidenced by multiple efforts to make the confession of faith more amenable to democratic and populist concerns. The argument against mission societies from their lack of warrant in the New Testament was also a later development, notably missing from American Baptist commentary on Carey's Baptist Missionary Society. In theory, Kentucky Baptists were not opposed to mission societies. Opposition seemed to arise only when theory changed to actuality, or when New England missionaries began showing up in frontier settlements.

From their earliest reports, northern Protestants openly disparaged the manner of life they discovered on the frontier. Often motivated by the twin desires to raise more funding and inspire others to follow their lead, visitors wrote scathing reports of immoral and uncivilized frontier populations. As the population of America moved ever westward, New England Protestants read these reports with growing concern about the future health

of the nation. Was America moving toward an irreligious future where immorality and chaos reigned? Pre-existing frontier religious movements like those led by Baptists and Methodists were not considered legitimate by many educated clergymen from more respected denominations in northern and eastern urban centers. The frontier was a land of isolated destitution. Though not a missionary, British traveler Fortescue Cuming's published account of his 1807–09 travels through the "frontier" countries of Ohio and Kentucky provides an early example of this disparaging urban sentiment:

> It may not be improper to mention, that the backwoodsmen, as the first emigrants from the eastward of the Allegheny mountains are called, are very similar in their habits and manners to aborigines, only perhaps more prodigal and more careless of life. They depend more on hunting than on agriculture, and of course are exposed to all the varieties of climate in the open air. Their cabins are not better than Indian wigwams. They have frequent meetings for the purposes of gambling, fighting and drinking. They make bets to the amount of all they possess. They fight for the most trifling provocations, or even sometimes without any, but merely to try each others prowess, which they are fond of vaunting of. Their hands, teeth, knees, head and feet are their weapons, not only boxing with their fists . . . but also tearing, kicking, scratching, biting, gouging each others eyes out by a dexterous use of a thumb and finger, and doing their utmost to kill each other.[62]

Similar reports were sent home from frontier missionaries and published in widely read missionary magazines. In New England, *The Panoplist and Missionary Magazine* published such reports from Congregationalist missionaries, one of which observed that "the character of the settlers is such as to render it peculiarly important that missionaries should be sent among them. Indeed, they can hardly be said to have a character." Since the ignorant settlers would listen to any public speaker, the report continued, "every species of heretics" including "the Baptist and Methodist denominations are exerting

[62] Fortescue Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country, Through the States of Ohio and Kentucky; A Voyage Down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, and a Trip Through the Mississippi Territory, and Part of West Florida, Commenced at Philadelphia in the Winter of 1807, and Concluded in 1809* (Pittsburgh, PA: Cramer, Spear & Highbaum, 1810), 118.

themselves to gain a footing." The report concluded, "If we do not come forward and occupy this promising field of usefulness, they will."[63]

John Mason Peck, even though a Baptist sent by the Triennial Convention, shared this common New England perspective.[64] During his 1817 trip through Ohio and Kentucky, he wrote of the "backwardness" of the churches he encountered. He was particularly aghast by their refusal to pay adequate salaries to pastors or make significant donations to missionary causes. Regarding cultural depravity, he found "sober and industrious" people in some parts, but in other places, "idleness, counterfeiting, and whisky drinking are principal characteristics." To make matters worse, he discovered that "the people appear to lack a spirit of improvement," and "education . . . is quite in the background."[65] Rugged Methodist and Baptist preachers had long found success preaching the simple gospel on the frontier, often leading massive movements of revival. In their minds their success validated the simplicity of their principles. Armed with their Bibles and filled with the Holy Spirit, they were not looking for help from educated and salaried experts. Precipitous New England interest in frontier reform seemed unnecessary at best and ill-conceived at worst. Constant appeals for monetary support raised suspicions about greed, and haughty judgments directed at their way of life insulted their sense of honor. These Baptists had rejected the hierarchy of honor embedded in New England institutions in favor of equality. However, they maintained a sense of pride in their defiance of norms and the egalitarian way of life that resulted.[66] Arrogant eastern

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[63] Samuel T. Armstrong, ed., *The Panoplist and Missionary Magazine*, vol. 11 (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1815), 183.

[64] Contra Randy K. Mills who assumes this attitude was "probably not shared by Peck," in "The Struggle for the Soul of Frontier Baptists: The Anti-Mission Controversy in the Lower Wabash Valley," *Indiana Magazine of History* 94, no. 4 (1998): 308.

[65] Peck, "Rev. John M. Peck's First Journey through Kentucky in 1817," 258.

[66] This is the thesis of Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Paradox, Shame, and Grace in the Backcountry," in *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s–1880s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 106–35.

missionaries presumed superiority and mistakenly assumed poor rural settlers would eagerly welcome their efforts for improvement. Many southerners, however, refused to see the New England way of life as improvement and vehemently opposed what they perceived as an offense to their honor.

Northeastern Protestant missionaries, disillusioned by democratic trends and unimpressed by populist religion, set their sights on the frontier to save the nation. Antimission populists recognized this movement as a threat to republicanism, equality, and liberty—in short, their entire way of life—and fought back. Every political mythology identifies an enemy that bears responsibility for what's wrong in a nation and outlines a proposed solution. For New England Protestants, the enemy was an uncouth populace that suffered from a dearth of viable institutions and a government that rewarded apathy. Their solution sought to pour capital, technology, and manpower into improving morals and civilizing the ill-mannered according to the New England way. In short, they looked to leverage Protestant institutions to build the nation in their likeness. For many Jeffersonian Baptists in the South, New England Federalism and its spawn were merely the newest manifestations of the age-old enemy—tyranny. For them, solutions did not derive from imported hierarchies that relied on monetary clout to impose their will on unsuspecting people but originated locally from a free and equal populace. As Haselby writes, for the antimissionists, "Missions were a problem, but churches were a solution; bankers were a problem, too, but farmers and independent producers were another solution."[67] They took offense at the widespread assumption that they needed assistance from elites who represented a way of life they inherently despised. They were trained by their views of government, by their histories, and by their church traditions to suspect concentrated power, and so they opposed the hierarchical structure

[67] Haselby, *The Origins of American Religious Nationalism*, 288.

of mission societies, even the ones that shared with them theological labels and evangelistic goals.

Life in the East looked much different than life on the western frontier. Older and more developed eastern cities were beginning to develop manufacturing economies that depended on a strong national bank for security. Western settlers competed for vast tracts of land and developed strong agricultural economies that supplied the East with raw materials for industry. They viewed banks suspiciously for the ways in which they consolidated wealth and leveraged accumulated power against small farmers. As easterners looked despairingly on the backward manner of frontier life, westerners believed they represented the future of the nation. The West promised the possibility of equality of opportunity in that each white male citizen could make his own way on seemingly unlimited lands through resourcefulness, self-reliance, and hard work. Jefferson's Republican government preserved liberty through continued protection of rights guaranteed in the Constitution. Westerners did not pine for eastern civilization, for to them the New England Way was outdated. The two regions also differed vastly in their religious expectations. Westerners despised the stiff formality of New England preachers who read their written sermons without feeling. When educated preachers showed up asking for money, they questioned motives and suspected greed. Who needed book learning when God had endowed every man with common sense and every Christian with his Spirit? Who needed wooden sermons dressed up with fancy language when God's Spirit had been igniting revival fires through simple but impassioned gospel proclamation?

Fueled by the political mythology highlighted above and growing sectionalism, the antimission sentiment spread rapidly among Kentucky Baptists. Associations and churches that initially cooperated with mission societies began withdrawing support. Randall Allen Corkern scoured the minutes of local churches and associations and found

what he termed "an almost complete reversal of policy" among several bodies.[68] Churches began voting to withdraw support and cease correspondence with mission societies as early as 1817. In 1818 West Fork Church of the Salem Association moved to strike a clause referencing "the missionary business" from their letter to the association, and that same year the Forks of Elkhorn Church, a prominent member of the Elkhorn Association, agreed to "Discontinue the Correspondence with the ferrean Board of Missions."[69] At its 1817 meeting, exactly one third of the twenty-one associated churches of the North District Association communicated opposition to continued correspondence with the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions in their associational letters. The opposition was strong enough to warrant the association to oblige and cease all correspondence.[70] Thus, three years before John Taylor published *Thoughts on Missions*, widely believed to be the source of antimission sentiment in Kentucky, a prominent Baptist association of twenty-one churches decided against correspondence with national missionary Baptists.

In 1819 the Elkhorn Association's circular letter presented a defense of "Missionary and Bible Societies," arguing that such organizations "embrace the most important concerns which can engage the attention of mortals."[71] Aware of sentiments to the contrary, the letter continued, "These societies propose not to advance the riches, the honour and distinctions of this world as such, but they dissiminate the *law of the Lord* which *is perfect, converting the soul.*" The letter, which spoke on behalf of the

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[68] Randall Allen Corkern, "A Study of the Education, Morals, Salary and Controversial Movements of the Frontier Baptist Preacher in Kentucky from Its Settlement until 1830," (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1952), 263.

[69] Corkern, "A Study of the Education, Morals, Salary and Controversial Movements of the Frontier Baptist Preacher in Kentucky from Its Settlement until 1830," 264.

[70] Minutes of the North District Association of Baptists, Held at Bald Eagle Meeting-House, in Bath County, State of Kentucky, on the 4th Saturday in July, In the Year of our Lord 1817 (Lexington, KY: Thomas T. Skillman, 1817), 4–5.

[71] On the antimission controversy in the Elkhorn Association, see Keith Harper, *A Mere Kentucky of a Place: The Elkhorn Association and the Commonwealth's First Baptists* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2021), 111–30.

association, blamed opposition to the missionary cause in the "Western Country" on "misrepresentations which have originated from a distance, designed to vilify and slander the characters of those who are more immediately employed in the management of it." The association called for greater oversight and accountability but doubled down on the viability of mission societies.[72] The following year, at Elkhorn's 1820 meeting, a committee responded to the requests of several Elkhorn churches to drop correspondence with the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions by highlighting the association's desire to continue to "receive religious intelligence from a distance." However, by 1821, the Elkhorn Association had dropped correspondence to keep peace within the association.[73] Several other associations in the state followed suit.

Clearly, the antimission sentiment pre-existed John Taylor's 1820 tract. However, the populist ideology undergirding the movement received a boost as Jeffersonian loyalists and simple western farmers began reacting to troubling trends in the broader culture in the latter years of the decade. James Monroe's 1817 election to president, which inaugurated the fifth of six consecutive presidential terms for the Jeffersonian "Virginia dynasty," launched what some contemporary commentators called the "era of good feelings." A spirit of national pride dominated in the wake of America's victory in the War of 1812, and prospects for western settlement continued to inspire hope. Seizing this optimistic national mood, Monroe had promised to cut through divisive partisanship in favor of rule by consensus of all American citizens. This idealism, however, never actually became reality. The Federalist party effectively ended upon Monroe's election, but the rush to join the Republican party by ambitious politicians

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[72] Minutes of the Elkhorn Baptist Association, Held at Big Spring Meeting-House, Woodford County—Aug. 1819 (n.p.: n.p., 1819), 7–8.

[73] Corkern, "A Study of the Education, Morals, Salary and Controversial Movements of the Frontier Baptist Preacher in Kentucky from Its Settlement until 1830," 268–69.

resulted in factionalism as the dominant party's tent struggled to contain the diverse voices acting within it.[74] Regarding the end of partisanship, the dissolution of the Federalist party merely facilitated the transition from interparty conflict to intraparty rivalries.

Inventions like the cotton gin combined with the ever-expanding availability of western lands helped facilitate rapid economic growth and westward migration during the Jeffersonian era. However, in 1819, America entered its first economic depression due to falling cotton prices and overreactions to market instability. State banks were forced to call in loans to pay their own debts to the Bank of the United States, and the market was flooded with everyone trying to sell at once. The "Panic of 1819" hit small farmers the hardest as many lost homes and farms because of the economic instability.[75] If westward settlers needed further reason to distrust New England institutions, the economic depression of 1819 provided it. Politically, the Missouri Controversy added further fuel to the fire of growing sectionalism between southern and northern states. Fearing that the admission of Missouri as a slave state would provide the South a majority in Congress, northern politicians in 1819 sought to restrict slavery in the new state. Jeffersonians in the South, however, opposed any federal restrictions on slavery on the grounds that the contentious subject was constitutionally a state issue. The question gridlocked Congress until the Senate worked out a compromise that tied Missouri's statehood to agreement on prohibiting slavery in lands north of Missouri's southern boundary in the future and admitting Maine as a free state at the same time.[76] The whole debate surrounding

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[74] Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 95.

[75] See Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 142–47.

[76] See Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 147–60.

Missouri exacerbated pre-existing sectional tensions over the question of political control of the nation and revealed a growing fault line over the issue of slavery.

John Taylor's tract provided more fuel for the already red-hot embers of antimission sentiment in Kentucky and beyond. Taylor was a popular revival preacher with Virginia roots who remained active in Kentucky Baptist associational life for most of his long life. In fact, at the age of sixty-seven, he lamented that he was only able to attend five associational meetings that year when it was his usual custom to attend "six to eight."[77] From his experience attending such meetings, he had reached the conclusion that a "deadly evil" had swept through his beloved community of Kentucky Baptists, one known by "the epithets or appellations of *Missionary Boards*, *Conventions*, *Societies*, and Theological Schools."[78] Taylor primarily criticized mission societies on the grounds that they were concerned more with accumulating wealth and power than preaching the gospel. In making this critique, however, he made it abundantly clear that politics, honor, and sectional jealousies also drove his sentiments. The vehemence of his rhetoric may have been influenced by his expectation of impending death due to some "bodily calamity" of which he did not expect to recover.[79] Ultimately, he did recover, for he went on to live thirteen more years until the age of seventy-nine.

Taylor's uneasiness with missionaries began as early as 1812 when Presbyterian missionaries John F. Schermerhorn and Samuel J. Mills arrived in Kentucky from New England on a missionary tour. After meeting a friend of Taylor's in Cincinnati, they were instructed to travel the sixty miles out of their way to Taylor's farm to ascertain "the state of the Baptist society in Kentucky."[80] Apparently, their discovery left them

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[77] John Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions* (Franklin County, KY: n.p., 1820), 3.

[78] Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions*, 4.

[79] Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions*, 3.

[80] Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions*, 5.

indifferent, for they were astounded at the disparity between the number of Baptists in the state and the "puny" recompense offered to their ministers. As a result, they instructed Taylor that if he would stir them up to fund mission societies, they would get in the habit of giving money to their own preachers as well. Taylor, unimpressed, smelled "the *New England Rat*," an epithet that, according to Keith Harper, indicates the view that "organized mission work was little more than a religious form of Federalism that would seriously disrupt Baptist life as he knew it."[81] Indeed, Taylor's tract did not linger long on the mission efforts of other denominations. He also smelled the New England Rat among his own. He feared that New Englanders Judson and Rice, though newly baptized and leading the mission efforts of American Baptists, still held New England—that is, Federalist—religious and political principles. Since they had been sent out originally from New England Congregationalists, Taylor believed it safe to assume they had no "aversion to the English government."[82] The Baptist leaders organizing mission societies in America, according to Taylor, were "verging close on an aristocracy, with an object to sap the foundation of Baptist republican government." These large organizations violated the Baptist view that "the highest court Christ has fixed on earth, is a worshipping congregation, called a Church."[83]

Taylor was not fond of the entire mission-funding apparatus, but Luther Rice was the main target of his scorn. He repeated various second-hand accounts to illustrate the extent of Rice's greed and lust for fame and power, but he also drew from personal recollection of Rice's 1815 visit to the Elkhorn Association. He recalled a preacher

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[81] Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions*, 6; Keith Harper, "Downwind from the New England Rat: John Taylor, Organized Missions, and the Regionalization of Religious Identity on the American Frontier," *Ohio Valley History* 9, no. 3 (2009): 26.

[82] Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions*, 8.

[83] Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions*, 11.

whose "pathos" went higher "the nearer he came [to] getting the money."[84] Taylor's full assessment of the missionary is worth quoting at length:

> Though I admired the art of this well taught Yankee, Yet I considered him a modern Tetzel, and that the Pope's old orator of that name was equally innocent with Luther Rice, and his motive about the same. He was to get money by the sale of indulgences for the use of the Pope and Church; Luther's motive was through sophistry and Yankee art, to get money for the mission, of which himself was to have a part.[85]

Taylor backed his assessment with various accounts from friends and acquaintances of Rice's greed and gluttony. Rice was the epitome of everything Jeffersonian Baptists in Kentucky were supposed to despise. He represented, not the work of the Spirit, but the work of men. He crisscrossed the country seeking to accumulate wealth at the expense of hardworking rural farmers and artisans. His presence represented "the great machine" seeking to assert its will on the "poor, half-witted Baptists."[86] Taylor did not oppose Luther Rice and Baptist mission societies because he opposed missions; he opposed them because they represented a mode of political thinking and maneuvering that transgressed his most treasured values as a Jeffersonian Baptist.[87]

John Taylor also took offence at the way Baptist missionaries John Mason Peck and James Welch reported the religious climate of Missouri. He wrote, "From their statements, one would think there was not surely a preacher in the country that deserved the name, and hardly a church there that was in good order, whereas the fact is, there are three Baptist associations in the territory, and as many preachers, perhaps, as there are in Kentucky according to the number of people."[88] He had personally taken trips to

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[84] Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions*, 9–10.

[85] Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions*, 10.

[86] Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions*, 9.

[87] Harper, "Downwind from the New England Rat," 34.

[88] Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions*, 13.

Missouri, and he knew the names of ministers, associations, and churches. He believed these exaggerated reports were designed to justify the missionaries' continued service, for without dire need, their salaries were unwarranted. These assessments insulted Taylor's sense of honor, for they discounted the ministries of the myriads of uneducated Baptist preachers that preceded their arrival on the frontier—preachers just like Taylor. He found ridiculous the missionary assumption that education was necessary for effective gospel ministry and worried that the insistence on studying the original languages of the Scriptures would "destroy our confidence in all translations, and thereby take our Bible from us."[89] Kentucky's twenty thousand "homespun preachers" may have lacked theological schooling, but at least their hands were not "too delicate either to make tents, or pick up a bundle of sticks, to make a fire to warm themselves as Paul did."[90] By Taylor's reckoning, he was not alone in his assessment of these two men, for every "intelligent Baptist in Missouri" he knew was either "jealous of" or "prejudiced against" them, leading him to expect little success from their efforts.[91]

One year after *Thoughts on Mission* hit the press, *The Reformer*, an antimission magazine printed in Philadelphia by Theophilus Gates, published a letter from John Taylor in which he detailed the reception of his tract among Baptists in Kentucky. In response to a request to print one hundred more copies of the tract, Taylor related that his friends had advised against republishing due to "a dreadful tempest . . . already blowing in Kentucky, on account" of it.[92] By Taylor's reckoning 450 copies had already been printed, and he estimated that three-fourths of the Baptists in Kentucky approved of its

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[89] Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions*, 25.

[90] Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions*, 25–26.

[91] Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions*, 18.

[92] Theophilus Gates, ed., "Intelligence from Kentucky," *The Reformer* 2, no. 21 (September 1, 1821), 193.

contents. He had personally presented the book to eight associations, and only Elkhorn and Salem "voted the book back to its author with indignant contempt." Though the book riled up some animosity against him, Taylor believed it also gained him more popularity than he had ever enjoyed among Baptists in the state.[93] One year later, Taylor did not regret writing the book. In fact, he had expected to die at the time of its authorship, and he speculated that God had providentially ordained his recovery for the purpose of bearing his antimission witness. If his book were now blank, he wrote, "I should wish it filled again, and with nearly the same it now contains." To please his critics and relent from his attack would be to "displease God."[94]

In the letter Taylor reiterated that his attack was not against missionary efforts, for to attack missions, he wrote, "would be to contradict the actions of my life, for nearly half a century."[95] He had written for two main reasons. First, no one was criticizing "missionary undertakings," and all published opinions up to that time were encomiums of praise. Taylor did not like the dishonest reports that portrayed his ilk as "half-bred savages, fighting here in the woods." All the missionaries he had met relished the opportunity to insult him and his way of life. He wrote to set the record straight.[96] Second, Taylor wrote to defend Baptist republicanism. He noticed that the Baptist missionary societies then springing up were all either self-appointed or appointed by Luther Rice. Taylor's Baptist ecclesiology recognized the local church as the highest authority on earth. For any missionary partnership to gain validity, local churches and associations would need to act in the matter. According to Taylor the Triennial

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[93] Gates, "Intelligence from Kentucky," 195.

[94] Gates, "Intelligence from Kentucky," 197.

[95] Gates, "Intelligence from Kentucky," 199.

[96] Gates, "Intelligence from Kentucky," 196.

Convention was "an outrage on Baptist principles of republican government."[97] Luther Rice was the epitome of the "New England Rat," seeking to impose aristocracy upon a democratic people. By his own reckoning, Taylor was merely standing for the same republican principles for which Baptists had advocated in Virginia some forty years earlier.

Taylor's crusade ultimately failed to stop the momentum of the denominational missions' machine. As Harper writes, "Taylor watched as the modern mission movement launched one of the most far-reaching drives for organizational efficiency in the history of Christianity. He did not like what he saw, but he was powerless to stop it."[98] In fact, according to James E. Welch, one of the named targets of Taylor's criticisms, Taylor's zealous antipathy eventually cooled. Welch wrote that he saw Taylor at an associational meeting in Kentucky in 1830 where Taylor requested that his antimission diatribe from a decade before be permitted to "sleep in silence."[99] More fringe movements like Alexander Campbell's Disciples of Christ and the hyper-Calvinistic Primitive, or Hard-Shell, Baptists inherited the antimission impulse.[100] Taylor shared aspects of primitivism with both Campbell and the Primitive Baptists as all three imagined themselves standing in the old paths against encroaching aristocracy. Further, all three followed populist inclinations to reject the elitist trappings of salaried ministries, formal education, and institution building in favor of simplicity and localism.

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[97] Gates, "Intelligence from Kentucky," 198.

[98] Harper, *A Mere Kentucky of a Place*, 122–23.

[99] William Buell Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit; Or Commemorative Notices of Distinguished American Clergymen of Various Denominations*, vol. 6 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1860), 158.

[100] On Campbell's Disciples movement, see Douglas A. Foster, Paul M. Blowers, Anthony L. Dunnavant, and D. Newell Williams, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbellite Movement* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004) and David Edwin Harrell Jr., *Quest for a Christian America, 1800–1865: A Social History of the Disciples of Christ*, vol. 1 (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1966).

Nonetheless, however much Taylor resonated with some aspects of these movements, his historic Baptist convictions disallowed him from following either movement. In fact, in 1830 Taylor published *A History of Clear Creek Church and Campbellism Exposed*, in which he called Alexander Campbell and Primitive Baptist Daniel Parker the "East goat" and the "West goat," respectively. Taylor noted many similarities between the two controversial figures. They both claimed the title "Baptist," published magazines to expound their radical views, and were busy "distracting the Baptists in the Western country." Taylor provocatively imagined a debate between the two, who he claimed were "of about equal worth," in which they would debate all their controversial teachings. Taylor did not mince words in his analysis of both: "I consider the extremes of those big goats, and those who adhere to them, a great curse to the present generation of men."[101] Thus, Taylor ended his life and career in Kentucky somewhat of "an anachronism"—theologically within the mainstream Baptist fold but reluctant about its denominational mission direction.[102]

William Warren Sweet noted that from 1820 "on for many years, there was hardly a Baptist church in the west, nor an association, that did not experience internal troubles over the question of missions."[103] Some followed Taylor's example of chastened resignation within the United Baptist fold. However, thousands more left the Baptist movement altogether over the issue. By 1846 antimission Primitive Baptists in the United States would come to number over 68,000, and Alexander Campbell's Disciples

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[101] John Taylor, *A History of Clear Creek Church; And Campbellism Exposed* (Frankfort, KY: A. G. Hodges, 1830), 8.

[102] Lambert, "The Rise of the Anti-Mission Baptists," 316.

[103] William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier: The Baptists, 1783–1830* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931), 62.

movement was estimated to have 160,000 members.[104] Kentucky hosted a disproportionate number of members from both groups, most of which made the jump from Baptist churches. These populist movements resonated deeply with Baptists in the South. The Primitive Baptists represented a turn to separate from the worldly capitulations of the Baptist movement and return to the old paths of what they considered orthodox confessional Calvinism. The Campbellites, though not confessionally Calvinistic, likewise appealed to the populist impulse to rid the church of every manmade accoutrement of religious ritual and return to the pure Christianity of the apostles. The antimission spirit would live on, not within the mainstream Baptist fold, but in these splinter movements that attracted thousands from Baptist churches.

From Jeffersonian to Jacksonian

In his biography of John Leland, Smith writes, "Though it seems scarcely possible, Jackson would inspire Leland to even greater flights of enthusiasm than had Thomas Jefferson."[105] Leland's devotion to both presidents verged on excessive, but the smooth transition from devotion to the trio of Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe to Jackson was a well-trodden path for many Baptists in the South. This shift makes sense, for in some ways Jackson embodied Jeffersonian ideals better than Jefferson himself. Like Jefferson, he defended the rights of ordinary citizens and identified with the common man. More than Jefferson, he successfully presented himself as a commoner. He was the embodiment of a rough and tumble independent southerner—a war hero who had bravely led America to glory at the Battle of New Orleans and conquered the southern Indian tribes. He was exactly the kind of man who could stand up to New England elites and

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[104] Joseph Foulks Winks, ed., *The Baptist Reporter and Missionary Intelligencer*, vol. 4 (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1847), 341.

[105] Smith, *John Leland*, 183.

their corrupt institutions, and rural Americans in the Old Southwest exuberantly lined up to support him.

Jackson entered the 1824 presidential race as a political outsider and joined a race that included four other seasoned contenders, all identifying as Jeffersonian Republicans. To his competitors he seemed ill-equipped for the nation's highest office. He lacked education and experience, and his infamous temper and authoritative command style caused consternation. However, the population saw a war hero who represented a nation on the rise. His campaign presented him as a man of the people—defender of the rights of man, advocate for universal white male suffrage, and the only candidate willing to serve the wishes of the common citizenry in Washington. As Daniel Feller writes, "In the eyes of both friend and foe, the frenzy for Jackson took on the look of a budding revolt against politicians' control of politics."[106] Though Jackson secured more popular votes than anyone else, he fell short of the majority, and the House of Representatives schemed to hand the nomination to John Quincy Adams instead via Kentuckian Henry Clay's "Corrupt Bargain."[107] To many general voters, especially those in the South and West, the election reeked of aristocratic conspiracy. That sentiment only increased over the four years of Adams's presidency as the Federalist second president's son leveraged increased tariffs toward the goal of national improvement projects. During Adams's term, Jackson busied himself consolidating support. The election of 1828 saw Jackson carry the popular vote of every state from Virginia southward and west of the Appalachian Mountains. He also won New York and Pennsylvania for good measure. The people finally had their president.

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[106] Daniel Feller, *The Jacksonian Promise: America, 1815–1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 69.

[107] See Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 208–11.

Jackson's critique of the American political establishment mirrored the antimissionist critique of oversized denominational missions' machinery in several respects. In fact, T. Scott Miyakawa presented antimission sentiment and Jacksonianism as parallel manifestations of the same cultural resentment.[108] Indeed, the same populist political mythology drove both movements. In the populist mind, the nation and its churches would flourish if and only if authority rested totally with the people. The American people were sovereign, and Jackson saw himself as the embodiment of that sovereignty.[109] The enemy, for both antimissionists and Jackson's voters, was aristocracy, or the accumulation of power by the elite few. Just as antimissionists despised the overreach of aristocratic Yankee evangelicals on the frontier, Jackson warred with the Second Bank of the United States because he saw it as an agency of overcentralized government usurping the will of the people. For Jackson, as for Jefferson earlier, all oversized institutions were a threat to democracy. In 1832 Jackson vetoed a bill to recharter the bank. In his war against the bank as well as in his opposition to several other big government policies, Jackson was, according to Howe, "capitalizing on a combination of populist resentment of the rich with faith in limited government and local autonomy." This resentment, Howe notes, "represented a distinctively American political tradition going back to colonial times, expressed most notably in the Revolution and more recently by Antifederalists and Old Republicans."[110] The Baptists of Virginia who had scattered westward into Kentucky and beyond during those first decades of the nation's existence provided a continuous link of populist resentment during all these phases.

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[108] T. Scott Miyakawa, *Protestants and Pioneers: Individualism and Conformity on the American Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 156.

[109] Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 367.

[110] Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 380–81.

Conclusion

Historians of antimissionism have often treated the phenomenon as one unified movement motivated primarily by High Calvinist soteriology. As a result of this interpretation, more diverse ideological roots are obscured. By the 1830s Primitive Baptists were indeed mirroring the theological arguments of the British Strict Baptists by levelling predestinarian theological arguments against mission societies. However, earlier critics like Elias Smith, John Leland, and John Taylor represented an earlier antimission critique that was fueled more by political and sectional sentiments. These figures were not opposed to offering the gospel to the unbelieving world. They were, however, bothered by aristocratical tendencies of large voluntary societies and haughty appraisals of their way of life by educated New England missionaries. They were also opposed to what they considered greed and elitism. Interestingly, all these early American antimissionists were Jeffersonian populists who tied the future prosperity of the nation to the maintenance of liberty and equality in a constitutionally protected democratic government. They saw mission societies as simply the latest threat to these values. Despite these criticisms and splinters, the Triennial Convention was largely successful in uniting American Baptists around the missions cause until 1845 when sectional differences over slavery birthed the Southern Baptist Convention. However, before that division, Alexander Campbell's Disciples' movement siphoned off thousands by appealing to the same populist Jeffersonian sentiments Baptists had been cultivating internally for the previous three decades.

CHAPTER 6

A MORE JEFFERSONIAN OPTION: BAPTISTS AND THE CAMPBELLITE CONTROVERSY

David Barrow died on November 14, 1819, fifteen days after his sixty-sixth birthday, at his home in Montgomery County, Kentucky, where he had labored as pastor of Mount Sterling Church for over two decades. Barrow's pastorate in Kentucky coincided with a chaotic era for the state's Baptists. He witnessed the millennial euphoria of the revivals after the turn of the century and played a leading role in uniting the Regular and Separate factions into one body of United Baptists in the revivals' aftermath. He publicly defended orthodox Trinitarianism against Baptist friends in the Elkhorn Association who had turned to Deism. He then willingly fractured the unity he had labored to secure over the issue of slavery, launching, alongside Carter Tarrant, an antislavery Baptist association and committing the remainder of his life to advocating against slavery by founding and leading the Kentucky Abolition Society. While Barrow never entered the public fray over mission societies, his participation in that body and his lifelong commitment to denominational cooperation both preclude interpreting his silence as disapproval of Baptist cooperation. Barrow's life ended before Taylor published *Thoughts on Missions*, but his Regular Baptist confessionalism and lifelong pursuit of education and activism call into doubt whether his brand of Jeffersonianism would have resonated completely with the populist tone of Taylor's tract.

Throughout his life, Barrow pastored various churches in the vicinity of his farm in Montgomery County. In addition to his main pastorate at Mount Sterling, he also provided pastoral care for stints at nearby Lulbegrud, Grassy Lick, and Goshen churches. Since churches during this era often met only once per month, Barrow led additional

services on the Sundays he had free. However, after the 1806 ruckus in the North District Association over Barrow's emancipation views, all churches except Mount Sterling parted ways with the controversial pastor. In 1817, Barrow befriended a young Baptist minister by the name of "Raccoon" John Smith, newly arrived from southern Kentucky to fill four vacant Montgomery County pastorates: Lulbegrud, Grassy Lick, Spencer Creek, and Bethel. Raccoon John had received his nickname from none other than the seasoned Elkhorn minister Jacob Creath after an associational sermon in which Smith alluded to his backwoods upbringing where "saltpeter caves abound, and raccoons make their homes."[1] At the time of his arrival, Smith shared Barrow's Regular Baptist confessionalism, and the two men likely swapped pulpits occasionally with Barrow preaching at Grassy Lick and Smith returning the favor at Mount Sterling.[2] Barrow's death, therefore, provided the occasion for Mount Sterling to call a familiar face to fill its pastoral vacancy. In 1823, Raccoon John Smith gave up his Lulbegrud pastorate to accept Mount Sterling's call and promptly returned the church to the North District Association.

The year 1823 was a key year for Smith in another regard as well, for on August 3, Alexander Campbell began publishing *The Christian Baptist*. Smith subscribed to the monthly magazine around Christmas of that year.[3] Almost immediately, Smith joined a growing movement of Campbell enthusiasts among Baptists in Kentucky. Campbell, whose views will be explored more fully below, sought to bring the church back to a "restoration of the ancient order of things," a phrase used repeatedly in the pages of his journal. Relying on a provocative writing style that fiercely attacked all critics, Campbell presented his views that God intended to initiate the millennium in

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[1] John Sparks, *Raccoon John Smith: Frontier Kentucky's Most Famous Preacher* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), 120–21.

[2] Sparks, *Raccoon John Smith*, 192.

[3] Sparks, *Raccoon John Smith*, 204. On Campbell, see Douglas A. Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2020), and Eva Jean Wrather, *Alexander Campbell, Adventurer in Freedom: A Literary Biography*, 3 vols. (Forth Worth: Texas Christian University Press and the Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 2005).

America and that the church needed to prepare for that glorious future by reforming back to its pristine apostolic state, thus establishing true Christian unity on the sole foundation of the New Testament. Consequently, Campbell vehemently rejected the use of creeds and the formation of mission societies on the logic—by this time familiar to Kentucky Baptists—that neither practice rested on biblical warrant. However, his linking of baptism with actual remission of sins was his most controversial teaching and the primary cause for Kentucky Baptists' revolt to what they later nicknamed "Campbellism." Several Kentucky Baptist pastors became "Campbellites" by joining Campbell's growing restoration movement, and Raccoon John Smith passionately led the way.[4]

Initially, Smith remained entrenched in the Baptist movement, seeing Campbell's precepts as the key to ending the contentious sectarianism that prevailed within Kentucky Baptist associational life. However, by 1828, he had completely adopted the Campbellite system that proposed to free Christianity from all man-made accoutrements and subsequently led Mount Sterling to reject their church covenant and the Baptist label in favor of Campbell's approved terms of "Disciples" and "Christians."[5] Thus, within a decade of David Barrow's death, the lifelong Baptist's church of two decades was no longer Baptist. By the end of 1829, most North District Association churches had abandoned the principles of union drawn up by Barrow and others in 1801 on grounds that such terms represented a yoke of slavery.[6] Campbell's ideas found a greater welcome in Kentucky than in any other state of the union and caused so much controversy among Kentucky Baptist churches that J. H. Spencer, writing shortly after America's Civil War, would refer to the years 1829–30 in the state as a Baptist "civil

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[4] On Campbell's movement, see Douglas A. Foster, Paul M. Blowers, Anthony L. Dunnavant, and D. Newell Williams, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbellite Movement* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004) and David Edwin Harrell Jr., *Quest for a Christian America, 1800–1865: A Social History of the Disciples of Christ*, vol. 1 (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1966).

[5] Sparks, *Raccoon John Smith*, 267.

[6] J. H. Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists, from 1769 to 1885*, vol. 1 (Cincinnati, OH: J. R. Baumes, 1885), 615.

war" where "every form of public worship became a subject of wrangling and debate."[7] Raccoon John Smith would boast in 1828 to his wife, Nancy, that in just a few months of preaching Campbell's message he had "baptized seven hundred sinners and capsized fifteen hundred Baptists."[8]

What made Kentucky Baptist churches such fertile soil for the seed of Alexander Campbell's restoration movement? Why were Kentucky Baptists so impacted by his message? In all historical movements, discerning causal factors proves complex, and the emergence of Campbell's Disciples of Christ is no exception. No single cause can fully explain the success of Campbell's movement. However, the previous four chapters present a trajectory that assists in illuminating Campbell's appeal to Jeffersonian Baptists in Kentucky. Nathan O. Hatch calls the Disciples of Christ "the most American of denominations"—a title that would have certainly fit the Baptists before Campbell's rise.[9] Baptists had imbibed the principles of Jeffersonian Republicanism since their early fight for religious liberty in Virginia around the time of the Revolution. Kentucky Baptists, above all, valued the ideals of liberty, equality, and localism, scorned tradition, authority, and hierarchy, and over time learned to synthesize these Jeffersonian impulses seamlessly with their unique brand of evangelical Christianity.

Jeffersonianism grew in their region in lockstep with the growth of the Baptist movement, and each relied on the other for success. Baptists valued primitivism before ever arriving on America's shores. However, in Jefferson's America, they discovered a government that inspired millennial hopes, while in their churches, they inched ever

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[7] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:617.

[8] John Augustus Williams, *Life of Elder John Smith with Some Account of the Rise and Progress of the Current Reformation* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard, 1904), 208.

[9] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 220.

closer to "religion of, by, and for the people."[10] As the previous chapters have shown, Kentucky Baptists were softening on their creedal commitments after the revivals at the turn of the century, and populism was prevailing in the antimission movement that opposed salaries, formal education, and cooperative institutions. This trajectory left Baptists without the institutional scaffolding to withstand the ever-increasing populist drift, and as a result, Baptist churches were left vulnerable to Campbell's movement, which better embodied many of their cherished Jeffersonian ideals. Specifically, this populist path made Campbell's movement immensely appealing as the intuitive next step toward a more democratized American religion—one that treasured liberty and opposed centrality, formality, and authority.[11]

The Rise of Alexander Campbell

Alexander Campbell was born September 12, 1788, into an era of intense religious and political upheaval in present-day Northern Ireland. His father, Thomas, was a Presbyterian minister who moved to America in 1807 to escape the stress of religious conflict that was negatively affecting his health. His new home, however, would not provide the respite he desired, for he soon found himself embroiled in theological controversy with American Presbyterians over his lax communion policy. In 1809, Thomas Campbell removed himself from under the authority of the Chartiers Presbytery in Pennsylvania and began preaching a message emphasizing unity between denominations to sympathetic listeners. On August 17, 1809, he organized a meeting "consisting of persons of different religious denominations . . . to form themselves into a

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[10] This phrase is found in Nathan O. Hatch, "The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People," *The Journal of American History* 67, no. 3 (1980): 547.

[11] See Austin Bennett Amonette, "Alexander Campbell among the Baptists: An Examination of the Beginning, Ambiguity, and Deterioration of Their Relationship, 1812–1830" (PhD diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2002), 22–24; Anthony Dunnavant, "'Mountaineers Are Always Free': The Stone-Campbellite Traditions," in *Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in Regional Pluralism*, ed. Bill J. Leonard (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 208–9; Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The Age of Alexander Campbell," *Restoration Review* 1, no. 3 (1959): 141–50.

religious association."[12] This group, exasperated by the "rancour of party contentions," desired to unify their churches on the authority of the Bible alone and "not by any interpretation of it."[13] In other words, Thomas Campbell believed that unity could be achieved among Christians of various denominations if they discarded creeds and submitted to the plain meaning of Scripture.[14] According to Thomas, the church lacked unity because of extra-biblical practices and beliefs.

Alexander Campbell arrived in America, along with the rest of Thomas's family, on September 29, 1809. By the time the twenty-one-year-old reached America's shores, he had been classically educated in philosophy, theology, and history and had even taken classes at the University of Glasgow where he studied Scottish commonsense philosophy.[15] Upon meeting his father in America and learning about his new Christian association, Alexander eagerly joined the unification cause and quickly adapted to the informal preaching style preferred on the American frontier.[16] Preaching, however, was never Alexander's primary focus. Early on, Campbell learned the powerful impact of print media during a time that Daniel Walker Howe labels a "communications revolution" in America. "During the thirty-three years that began in 1815," Howe writes, "there would be greater strides in the improvement of communication than had taken place in all previous centuries."[17] Campbell relied on the printed page to advance his own

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[12] Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington* (Washington, PA: Brown & Sample, 1809), 2.

[13] Campbell, *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington*, 3.

[14] On Thomas Campbell, see Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell*, 15–28.

[15] Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell*, 36.

[16] Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell*, 49.

[17] Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

ideas as well as to berate anyone who opposed them.[18] He published anonymous articles in the *Washington Reporter* (PA) as early as 1810 attacking the social behavior of the local community's youth.[19] His career took off, however, when he published his debate over baptism with the Presbyterian John Walker.

Until 1811, both Thomas and Alexander Campbell were pedobaptists or at least had not yet explicitly rejected the practice. However, the impending birth of Alexander's first child in 1812 made him reevaluate the issue. After a period of serious study of Scripture, Campbell concluded that it taught only immersion of repentant believers as valid baptism and asked a local Baptist minister to immerse him. His father soon followed his lead, and shortly thereafter, the Campbells' Brush Run Church united with the Redstone Baptist Association of Pennsylvania. Douglas A. Foster contends that Alexander's role in leading the movement to accept believer's baptism provided the impetus for his ascension as the primary leader of the reform.[20] By the time Alexander accepted John Walker's challenge to debate baptism on June 19, 1820, he was a Baptist.

During the Walker debate, Campbell laid out a typical Baptist position on the questions of who should be baptized and what method should be used between sprinkling, dipping, or immersion. While the debate itself provoked only local interest in eastern Ohio, the published account drew national attention as multiple editions went to press.[21] This debate made Campbell somewhat of a celebrity among Baptists. John Taylor later remarked that reading this book caused him to rejoice "that Baptists in the west had such a man as Campbell among them," and his "desire to see, and be with him, was

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[18] On Campbell's publishing ministry, see Beth Barton Schweiger, "Alexander Campbell's Passion for Print: Protestant Sectarians and the Press in the Trans-Allegheny West," *American Antiquarian Society* 188, no. 1 (2008): 117–54.

[19] See Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell*, 49–51.

[20] Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell*, 53.

[21] Schweiger, "Alexander Campbell's Passion for Print: Protestant Sectarians and the Press in the Trans-Allegheny West," 129.

greater than to see any other man living."[22] Campbell would continue to cultivate a reputation as a controversialist by participating in other debates with the view to later publish them throughout his career. The widespread popularity of this format only fueled his reliance on satire and ridicule for which he later became known. In 1823, Campbell opened his own printing office in Buffaloe, Pennsylvania, from which he would go on to continuously publish a monthly magazine for the remainder of his life until his death in 1866. From 1823 to 1830, his monthly was called *The Christian Baptist.* Thereafter, he published the *Millennial Harbinger*, changing the name to mark his transition out of the Baptist fold. He also published several books and a controversial new translation of the Bible over these years from the same printing office.

Campbell would go on to lead a massive movement of Disciples of Christ churches and found and lead Bethany College in present-day West Virginia. However, since this study is concerned exclusively with Campbell's influence on Kentucky Baptists, only the years coinciding with his connection to the American Baptist movement will be considered. Additionally, since most Baptists encountered Campbell's ideas through his *Christian Baptist*, published between 1823 and 1830, those writings will take precedence. In fact, Campbell boasted in 1826 that "the Christian Baptist is extensively read in Kentucky."[23] In the preface to the first edition, dated July 4, 1823, Campbell claimed that his monthly was "pledged to no religious sect in christendom" and "free from any controlling jurisdiction except the bible."[24] Claiming the Bible as their ultimate authority, Baptist readers would have had no misgivings with such a scheme, and the journal's title communicated sympathy with Baptist concerns even if Campbell modified "Baptist" with his favorite label, "Christian." In the very first edition,

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[22] John Taylor, *History of Clear Creek Church; And Campbellism Exposed* (Frankfort: A. G. Hodges, 1830), 44.

[23] Alexander Campbell, ed., *The Christian Baptist* (St. Louis, MO: Christian, 1823–30), 239.

[24] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 1.

Campbell's diatribes against missionary societies and salaried clergy would have certainly resonated with populist Baptists like Leland and Taylor, who had already critiqued the same institutions on similar grounds.

Alexander Campbell's Appeal to Baptists

Campbell appealed to Baptists for several reasons. First, they considered him one of their own, even though his relationship with the Baptist movement was always uneasy. Having such a gifted controversialist representing their views in the public square excited many Baptists in what was rapidly becoming an overcrowded religious milieu. Because of his baptism debates, Baptists eagerly adopted Campbell as their champion against pedobaptist errors. Second, Campbell drew followers for the same reason bombastic public figures have throughout history. The era, in fact, featured several evangelical controversialists who started populist movements by relying primarily on the printed word. Figures such as Elias Smith, Lorenzo Dow, and Theophilus Gates gained prominence through their own publishing endeavors.[25] After Campbell, the Baptist J. R. Graves would advance the cause of his Landmark movement—partly in reaction to Campbell—chiefly through publishing his own monthly, the *Tennessee Baptist*.[26] All of these figures, though diverse ideologically, worked from similar playbooks. They published affordable monthlies that created easy access to their views, and they kept the public's interest by majoring on controversy and ridiculing their opponents. This strategy works to this day.

Third, Campbell's ideas resonated deeply with Baptists. Several of his views provided logical next steps in the trajectory toward greater liberty and equality in America and filled imaginations with millennial expectations that placed America at the

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[25] These three figures as well as Campbell all feature prominently in Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity.*

[26] On Graves, see James A. Patterson, *James Robinson Graves: Staking the Boundaries of Baptist Identity* (Nashville: B & H, 2012).

center of God's plan for the world. Division-weary Baptists latched on to Campbell's America-centric millennialism that prioritized the necessity of evangelical unity as well as his populist anti-authoritarianism that rejected creeds as unnecessary man-made interferences to achieving that sought after unity. As previous chapters have shown, Baptists had been cultivating predispositions in this direction since the Revolution. Jeffersonian partisanship intensified these commitments by providing a political myth that helped them locate their movement on the side of liberty and equality against various enemies that represented authoritarian oppression. American evangelicals of various stripes shared the habit of connecting God's kingdom with America, but Campbell and the Baptists shared a common methodology. They each rejected the authoritarian substance of New England Puritanism in favor of empowering the common man. These resonances helped Campbell lure thousands of Baptists out of their churches and into his movement despite theological anomalies regarding the nature of conversion and baptism.

Mark A. Noll demonstrates that America by this time had arrived at a surprising intellectual synthesis that combined evangelical Protestantism, republican political ideology, and commonsense moral reasoning.[27] One may wonder how Campbell absorbed a nearly identical synthesis, having grown up an ocean away in Northern Ireland. Campbell, however, had access to the European intellectual sources of this synthesis and grew up in closer geographical proximity to these ideas. Thomas ensured that the writings of John Locke were part of Alexander's classical education, and Campbell remained a lifelong reader of the Enlightenment thinker. At the University of Glasgow, Campbell also encountered the ideas of Francis Bacon. Combined with Locke's notion of the mind as a blank slate, Bacon hammered home the idea that the mind gains knowledge through observation and experience.[28] However, as much as Campbell shared

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[27] Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 9.

[28] Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell*, 38.

intellectual roots with America's founding generation, his application of those ideas was rarely typical. For example, in the August 1, 1825 edition of *The Christian Baptist*, he turned Lockean epistemology against creeds, arguing that Locke's denial of innate ideas contradicted the classical Christian understanding of natural revelation. Since Locke, Campbell wrote, "exploded the doctrine of innate ideas," Calvin's notion of "natural religion" whereby the "human mind is naturally endowed with the knowledge of God" was disproved. For Campbell, Calvin's doctrine contradicted Paul's claim in 1 Corinthians 1:21 that "the world by wisdom knew not God." Creeds, therefore, were merely human, or natural, attempts at describing God and were incapable of rising above the natural state of knowledge. Only that which originated from God, supernatural revelation, could bring true and saving knowledge of God to human beings. According to Campbell, Calvin and any who followed his views regarding natural knowledge of God were guilty of "deism."[29]

While Locke's theory of knowledge shaped Campbell's understanding of revelation and, as we will see later, his conception of the nature of saving faith, the Enlightenment philosopher's theory of government led him to adopt a system of political theology congruent with that of the Jeffersonian Baptists. According to Harold L. Lunger, Campbell's "views of the social compact and the principles of government were essentially those of John Locke and the natural rights school of social and political philosophy."[30] Baptists would have heartily agreed with Campbell's applied logic to the question of whether Christians should seek religious toleration from civil authorities:

> The mere asking for toleration recognizes a right which no civil government possesses, and establishes a principle of calamitous consequences, viz. that opinions contrary to the majority, or the national creed, are a public injury, which it is in the power of government to punish or tolerate, according to their intelligence and

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[29] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 172.

[30] Harold L. Lunger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell* (St. Louis, MO: The Bethany Press, 1954), 66.

> forbearance. Civil rulers have no right to tolerate or punish men on account of their opinions in matters of religion.[31]

Campbell often used his *Christian Baptist* editorials to raise alarms over religious bodies becoming too involved in politics or vice versa. For example, he twice opposed governmental land or cash grants to religious schools and guarded the separation of church and state with Leland-like zeal.[32] Earthly governments, including America's, were "purely political" and concerned only with securing "man's political rights" and promoting "his political happiness."[33] Campbell resonated deeply with Baptist sentiments when he insisted, in the May 2, 1825 edition, that educational schemes that sought to unite church and state "will not suit the genius of our country, and much less the enlightened republican spirit of Kentucky."[34]

These convictions on the proper relationship between church and state led Campbell to side with the likes of Leland and Taylor on the contentious issue of missionary societies. Campbell expressed his antipathy to organized societies publicly for the first time in his second series of articles for the *Washington Reporter* in 1820–22. In 1815, a group of citizens in Washington, Pennsylvania, organized the Washington Moral Society. Each member pledged to report "any one known to be guilty of profane swearing, Sabbath-breaking, intoxication, unlawful gaming, keeping a disorderly public house, or any other active immorality punished by the Commonwealth."[35] Campbell wrote these articles under the pseudonym "Candidus"—the same name used by Samuel Adams during the Revolution in his Lockean defense of natural rights.[36] Mirroring the

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[31] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 230.

[32] These examples are cited in Lunger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell*, 50.

[33] Alexander Campbell, ed., *The Millennial Harbinger*, vol. 1 (Bethany, VA: Alexander Campbell, 1830), 306.

[34] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 153.

[35] Wrather, *Alexander Campbell, Adventurer in Freedom*, 1:234.

[36] Wrather, *Alexander Campbell, Adventurer in Freedom*, 1:238.

three components of Noll's American synthesis, Campbell argued that these societies ran contrary to evangelical religion, Pennsylvania's and America's Constitution, and reason, and stated his case in twenty-one separate letters over parts of three years. These societies violated the Constitution because they defied individual liberty of conscience and improperly mixed the respective domains and functions of church and state. Campbell's rhetoric was indistinguishable from that of the Baptists in their fight against the established church since the time of the Revolution.

James L. Gorman shows that the Campbells were not initially opposed to missionary societies and charts their participation in transatlantic missionary cooperation across a broad spectrum of evangelical denominations prior to 1820.[37] However, Alexander's public foray into the Washington Moral Society dispute marked a clear turning point. In 1824, he admitted that he contributed to the missionary cause until his conscience forbade him.[38] What led to such a sharp about turn? Campbell's regular attacks on missionary societies in the early editions of *The Christian Baptist* reveal him echoing several of the same concerns raised earlier by Leland and Taylor. When the Campbells moved to America and ascended the ranks of populist evangelical leadership, they entered an intensely divided milieu that pitted people of their theological ilk in a defensive position against impinging eastern hierarchies. The Campbells' desire for unity across denominations initially led them to praise broad cooperation. However, in America, they identified the strengthening voluntary society movement as a threat to unity and despised this movement's emphasis on collecting large sums of money to fund its efforts. In the very first issue of *The Christian Baptist*, Alexander set his movement in contrast to the norm he then saw prevailing that featured "long sermons, modelled after Grecian and Roman orations, logical themes and metaphysical essays . . . praying

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[37] James L. Gorman, *Among the Early Evangelicals: The Transatlantic Origins of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2017).

[38] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 72.

societies, theological schools, education societies, missionary societies, Sunday schools, and in raising large sums of money by every way that ingenuity can devise."[39]

In the second issue of the monthly, published September 1, 1823, Campbell included a lengthy essay entitled, "Remarks on Missionaries." He began by comparing the organization of missionary societies to the Crusades, arguing that both attempts at world conversion were equally "absurd and superstitious . . . enthusiastic and unscriptural." Modern missionaries, according to Campbell, were merely "persuading some individuals to put on a sectarian profession of christianity." He believed the local church was the only warranted institution called to evangelize the world and that no real success would ever be achieved as long as "christians of this age" rely on "hireling priests and ecclesiastical courts modelled after the forum, the parliament, or national conventions." After this essay, Campbell included a report from the Baptist General Convention meeting in New York and wrote, "It is much to be desired that the Baptists in the western country will not imitate these precedents of pompous vanity, so consecrated in the east."[40] While Campbell's antagonism to missionary societies repeated the sectional suspicions of many of his Baptist counterparts, his main concern—and what continued to drive his critiques—was that such efforts were "unauthorized in the New Testament."[41] Campbell repeatedly critiqued the missionary system. In fact, in 1825 a reader from Mason County, Kentucky, wrote to congratulate him that his paper had "well nigh stopped missionary operations in this state."[42] At least in part due to the previous work of Taylor and other antimissionary voices, Campbell's antimissionary rhetoric joined a chorus of opposition and won for him enthusiastic ears in the Bluegrass region and beyond.

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[39] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 7.

[40] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 13–17.

[41] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 53.

[42] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 144.

Earlier chapters have documented the rise of evangelical millennialism that looked to America as the staging ground from which God would establish his kingdom on earth. The Great Revival, coinciding as it did with the Jeffersonian era, birthed widespread optimism and a newfound desire for unity that often saw sectarian doctrinal distinctions as a hindrance to the spread of liberty. Among Baptists, John Leland and Elijah Craig both gave expression to various forms of this hopeful sentiment. The Campbells, too, held to a version of American exceptionalism that believed the young nation had been providentially chosen by God for such an exalted fate.[43] According to his earliest biographer, Alexander's high hopes for America developed shortly after his arrival in his new homeland. Robert Richardson described Campbell's thoughts as he lodged in a hotel enroute to his initial meeting with his father: "After his devotions, he gradually fell into slumber amidst grateful reflections upon the goodness of Providence in bringing him to a land under the benign influence of the free institutions, the equal rights, the educational advantages, and the moral and religious elevation secured to all in a purely Protestant community."[44]

In 1815, he wrote to his uncle in Ireland praising the deliverance Americans enjoyed from "a proud and lordly aristocracy" in contrast to Europe where "national evils" could be traced to "their proper source . . . civil and religious tyranny." In true Jeffersonian fashion, Alexander was amazed by the absence of inherited hierarchy in American society. "Here," he wrote, "is no nobility but virtue; here there is no ascendance save that of genius, virtue and knowledge. The farmer here is lord of the soil, and the most independent man on earth." He closed his letter by stating that he would not

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[43] On the ideological roots of American exceptionalism, see John D. Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion: Reassessing the History of an Idea* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

[44] Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, vol. 1 (Cincinnati, OH: Standard, 1913), 210.

trade American citizenship for the position of the King of England.[45] Throughout his life in America, Campbell lived out this vision, choosing to locate his home and college in the rural setting of Bethany, Virginia.[46] Austin Bennett Amonette notes that "both Thomas and Alexander Campbell were enamored with Jefferson's Declaration of Independence."[47] In fact, Campbell pointed out in the preface to the first edition of *The Christian Baptist* that he intentionally wrote it on July 4, drawing a comparison between his work in declaring liberty from religious tyranny and Jefferson's earlier work of declaring liberty from political tyranny.[48] Six years later, Campbell began the preface for the seventh and final volume of *The Christian Baptist* with these words: "This is the fourth day of July, the day on which this nation was born, and the day on which Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died. On this day I wrote the preface to the first volume of the Christian Baptist, and it is the day on which I write the preface to the seventh and last volume of this work."[49] Foster maintains that, despite his democratic rhetoric, Campbell never fully embraced a purely democratized understanding of equality, for he always believed, much like Jefferson, that commoners should defer to the most virtuous and knowledgeable.[50] This hierarchical understanding, however, seldomly appeared in the pages of *The Christian Baptist*.

Instead, subscribers excitedly read about Campbell's plan for the restoration of "the ancient order of things" in the United States. Campbell combined primitivism, Lockean epistemology, and millennialism to publicly espouse the optimistic hope that sectarianism would disappear once people heard the plain truths of the Bible unchained

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[45] Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, 1:464.

[46] Amonette, "Alexander Campbell among the Baptists," 92–93.

[47] Amonette, "Alexander Campbell among the Baptists," 94–95.

[48] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 4.

[49] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 569.

[50] Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell*, 55.

from human traditions.[51] For Campbell, God's millennial kingdom would be marked by Christian unity, and unity would be achieved only when Christians forsook their creeds and manmade traditions and returned to the Bible alone, thus returning to "the ancient order of things." In attacking creeds, Campbell was reviving a debate between Baptists that had been recently placated by the union of Regulars and Separates but never fully put to rest. Baptists in America had been debating the use of creeds since colonial times. The terms of Baptist union in Kentucky in 1801 settled on eleven agreed-upon doctrinal points designed to guard against heresy but left open divisive issues like the extent of Christ's atonement.[52] All Baptists acknowledged Scripture's authority over creeds and confessions, and both Separates and Regulars agreed on the necessity of some level of doctrinal consensus as evidenced by the Separate Baptists' use of church covenants in place of confessions. The issue was always a question of extent. The Separates in Kentucky who had lived through the Trinitarian controversies with Augustine Eastin and James Garrard knew the importance of doctrinal agreement on the essentials even if they shied away from the full Calvinistic system espoused in the Philadelphia Confession. However, Kentucky Baptist dependence on creeds had weakened in conjunction with America's democratization.

Campbell insisted that no extra-biblical document of any kind be used as a basis for unity. Christians would only achieve the ever-allusive aspiration of harmony when they threw out every man-made document and rallied around the Bible alone. Campbell failed to see, however, that by insisting on the adoption of "the ancient order of things," he was merely asking his readers to substitute their old creeds for the unwritten one of his own making. As Foster notes, "Underlying all of Campbell's doctrinal

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[51] Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell*, 59.

[52] On this union, see Keith Harper, "'And All the Baptists in Kentucky Took the Name United Baptists': The Union of the Separate and Regular Baptists of Kentucky," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 110, no. 1 (2012): 3–31.

statements was the assumption that immersion for the remission of sins and the full set of doctrines and practices embodied in the ancient gospel as he saw it were inherently part of this simple affirmation of faith."[53] British Baptist Andrew Fuller had earlier argued for the impossibility of creedless Christianity when he wrote, "The man who has no creed has no belief."[54] Baptist critics of Campbell recognized Fuller's point when they labeled his movement "Campbellism" over the reformer's objections. Campbell hated the label, arguing, "It is a nickname of reproach invented and adopted by those whose views, feelings, and desires are all sectarian; who cannot conceive of christianity in any other light than an *ism*."[55] However, his critics realized that his plea for a return to the New Testament was really a call to Campbell's own articulations of what the New Testament taught.

Campbell had very specific ideas in mind when he spoke about the "ancient order of things." In his series bearing the title, "A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things," begun February 7, 1825, he distinguished between human creeds and genuine religion. Human creeds always need reformation, he argued, since they are human constructions. However, genuine religion cannot be reformed, only discovered, since it remains pure in the inspired pages of the New Testament. Campbell assumed that the blank slate of the unprejudiced mind, freed from creedal biases, would see what he sees upon encountering the New Testament and did not account for the possibility of alternative interpretations. To him, creeds created the predispositions that prevented people from interpreting the Bible correctly. If such human constructions were abandoned, the mind would finally perceive the plain meaning and recover the ancient faith. Nevertheless, he could not resist specifying exactly what the liberated mind would

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[53] Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell*, 86.

[54] Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, vol. 3, *Expositions – Miscellaneous*, ed. Joseph Belcher (1845; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1988), 449.

[55] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 451.

find. Behind all his statements about the plain meaning of the Bible and his insistence that good works were more valuable than sound opinions, Campbell consistently returned to his own unnamed and unwritten creed that emphasized, above all, baptism for the remission of sins. Campbell articulated his understanding of Scripture's sufficiency in terms of literal exactitude. In the words of Errett Gates, "It was his conviction that every future need and exigency of the church on earth had been foreseen and provided for by Christ and his apostles."[56]

Despite resonating with Campbell's apostolic primitivism, unifying millennialism, and Jeffersonian populism, numerous Baptists recoiled at his teachings on the nature of saving faith and baptism for the remission of sins. Beginning with the latter, the Philadelphia Confession specified that baptism was a sign of the believer's status of having already been forgiven of sins. Baptists historically recognized remission as God's response to the sinner's act of repentance and faith in Christ. Baptism, for most Baptists, had no saving significance beyond signifying what God had already accomplished through faith. Campbell, however, read passages such as Acts 2:38, where Peter called unbelievers to repent and be baptized for the remission of sins, and insisted on a causal relationship between baptism and remission.[57] Interestingly, Campbell's first public pronouncement of this controversial doctrine occurred in Kentucky in May 1823 during a debate with Presbyterian William Maccalla that was later published. Here, Campbell employed a list of Scripture references to support his position, concluding, "He does not say, he that believeth, and keeps my commands, shall be saved; but he saith he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved. He placeth baptism on the right hand of faith."[58]

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[56] Errett Gates, *The Early Relation and Separation of Baptists and Disciples* (Chicago: R. R. Donnelley & Sons, 1904), 53.

[57] He suggested that "for" in Acts 2:38 means "in order to obtain," in Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 417.

[58] Alexander Campbell, *A Debate on Christian Baptism, Between the Rev. W. L. Maccalla, a Presbyterian Teacher, and Alexander Campbell* (Buffaloe, PA: Campbell & Sala, 1824), 117.

Campbell's willingness to include baptism alongside faith under the umbrella of salvation was certainly an uncharacteristic position for Baptists, but he did not yet make baptism necessary for salvation. Instead, at this early stage, he distinguished between actual remission of sins concurrent with faith and formal remission of sins at baptism. His position, however, changed over time, and by 1828, he had collapsed this distinction into one act occurring upon immersion.[59]

In January 1828, Campbell began a new series called the "Ancient Gospel," which began by lamenting how few Christians truly understood the true saving significance of baptism. Misremembering his position during his 1823 debate with Maccalla, Campbell erroneously stated that he then contended baptism "was a divine institution designed for putting the legitimate subject of it in actual possession of the remission of his sins." Looking back, he admitted his nervousness at that time due to the novelty of his view. Five years later, however, Campbell was no longer hesitant but confident that his view of baptism was "an essential part of the christian religion."[60] He wrote in the next part of the series, "So soon as our bodies are put under water, at that very instant our former, or 'old sins' are all washed away, provided only that we are true believers."[61] He believed baptism was "necessary to forgiveness."[62] Responding to critics every month in the pages of *The Christian Baptist*, Campbell became more galvanized in his views and more emboldened to declare them publicly. As his irregular views became clearer, opposition from Baptists increased until Campbell finally definitively distanced himself from the movement altogether in 1830.

Baptist ministers may have easily ignored Campbell's writings had not his loyal devotees taken his views into local Baptist churches and associations across the

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[59] Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell*, 72.

[60] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 401.

[61] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 416.

[62] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 454.

western frontier. Campbell was a successful writer and gifted controversialist, but the spread of his movement greatly depended on evangelists. In 1828, Campbell boasted of John Secrest's efforts in Ohio. Secrest, following Campbell's plan of proclaiming "the gospel and christian immersion in its primitive simplicity and import" baptized nearly five hundred in the span of five months.[63] Secrest would perform these immersions immediately without requiring a testimony of conversion. He was joined in Ohio by Walter Scott and others. In Kentucky, Raccoon John Smith, Jacob Creath and his nephew, Jacob Creath Jr., and others followed the same plan and became apostles of Campbellism. A great number of those coming to receive immersion for the remission of sins were members of Baptist churches. To better grasp the radical disruption Campbell's baptismal theology was introducing, his position on the nature of saving faith and conversion must also be considered, for the two emphases met at the public spectacles of Campbellite baptism services on the shores of rivers and creeks all over the region.

The Great Awakening during America's colonial period had reacted against nominal Christianity by insisting on the necessity of real experiential encounter with the Holy Spirit. The revivalists of that period insisted on the insufficiency of reliance on family ties and charged each individual to seek the new birth personally and experientially through faith. Assurance of salvation came to depend on one's personal conversion experience. The American Baptist tradition in both Regular and Separate forms was firmly rooted in this early evangelical understanding of conversion. In fact, Baptists took it one step further by predicating church membership on one's ability to relate their conversion experience before the congregation clearly and convincingly. This testimony typically contained two aspects: experience of conviction over sin and experience of relief upon repentance and faith in Christ. Since baptism was a sign of conversion and not required for conversion itself, permission to receive it depended upon

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[63] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 402.

the Baptist congregation's satisfaction with the testimony and discernment of the new birth. A valid testimony served as proof of regeneration. Without it, the purity of Christ's church would be defiled and entrance into the body remained closed. In some ways, Campbell's version of Second Great Awakening revivalism advocated a return to nominalism. For him baptism was more than a sign; it accomplished forgiveness of sins. Thus, he required no testimony, only confession of faith in Jesus. Combined with this view, Campbell also articulated a rationalistic view of saving faith that discouraged even the attempt to discern the Holy Spirit's work upon the soul.

According to Campbell, the Holy Spirit was not required for conversion. The Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures, but salvation required nothing further than to believe in the propositions revealed therein. The event of baptism marked the first direct encounter between the Christian and the Spirit, for, according to Campbell, baptism marked the moment of indwelling. In 1825, an anonymous reader from Kentucky wrote Campbell for further clarification on his understanding of faith. He wondered how Campbell's scheme could explain why some sinners who are confronted with the truth believe and others do not. If faith was merely intellectual assent to the facts about Jesus revealed in the Bible, what caused someone to acquire it? Campbell responded by insisting that faith is "neither more nor less than believing in some testimony." Beyond that, he refused to speculate, claiming that God had not revealed the answers to our "why's and wherefore's." Further speculation on such "philosophical questions" was "utterly unprofitable, vain, and endless."[64]

In 1829, in a series called "Queries Answered," Campbell responded to various questions from readers. To one query concerning his view of faith, he wrote:

> Do you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, that he died for our sins, that he was buried, that he rose again, that he ascended on high, that he has commanded reformation and forgiveness of sins, to be proclaimed in his name among all nations—I say, do you believe these sacred historical facts? If you do believe them,

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[64] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 142–43.

> or are assured of their truth, you have historic faith, you have the faith which Paul and the Apostles had, and proclaimed—Paul was no more than assured these facts were true, you have the same faith—Arise, and be immersed like Paul, and withhold not obedience; and your historic faith and obedience will stand the test of Heaven.

Contrary to the Calvinist scheme, Campbell taught that human beings required no divine help to believe. A man could believe in Christ just as easily as he could believe "the well attested facts concerning the person and the achievements of General George Washington." To deny this ability was to assert insufficiency in the finished work of Christ.[65] Campbell maintained that the church had no right to require any more than what Jesus and the apostles required in the New Testament—confession of faith in what Scripture revealed about Christ. Campbell's scheme simplified a dilemma that had long been a source of anguish among American evangelicals, for it located assurance of salvation in rational assent, removing it from the mysterious realm of God's dealings with the soul. The Calvinist often agonized over questions of whether one's conviction over sin was sufficient and whether the Holy Spirit had genuinely initiated the new birth upon faith. For Campbell, such concerns were speculative and not worth pursuing.

In an age of growing populism, Campbell concocted a theology to fit the times. Conversion was now within everyone's grasp because everyone could believe the revealed propositions about Christ and receive baptism for the remission of sins. Campbell's surge in popularity coincided with the election of Andrew Jackson as President of the United States. Jackson's rise provides insight into the broad appeal of Campbell, for both men embodied many of the same ideals. Jackson's political campaign leveraged his success as a war hero during the Battle of New Orleans and spun a myth of him as the common man's candidate ready to stand up for the rights of every citizen. It was a story about a poor orphan boy pulling himself up by the bootstraps in the face of powerful elites. Jackson utilized print media to deliver a commonsense message that

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[65] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 529.

deeply resonated with rural voters.[66] Campbell likewise targeted the common man when he decried high-minded philosophical speculation and railed against creed-bound sectarians. His message instructed followers to use their own commonsense to interpret their Bibles. The meaning was plain to anyone willing to look for it. As Andrew Jackson ushered in a new era for the common man, Alexander Campbell extended the nation's optimism toward hopes of worldwide Christian unity and the inauguration of God's long-promised millennium. Campbell's populist movement grew as Americans in general were trending in a more anti-elitist direction.

The Campbellite Battle in Kentucky

Alexander Campbell never settled comfortably into his Baptist identity. In 1826, he admitted that he only maintained his connection to the Mahoning Baptist Association in Ohio to "shield [him] from such far-off and underhand attacks." He had no interest in starting a new sect, and the Baptists, for a variety of reasons, lent him a protective bubble within which to operate his plan. He preferred several things about the Baptists over other sects. Specifically, he fancied that they "have as much liberality in their views . . . as is to be found amongst any other people," and that they "have always been as eminent friends of civil and religious liberty as any sect in Christendom." However, above all, he admitted that the Baptists were the only sect who would tolerate a reformer such as himself.[67] Baptists were not centralized enough in their polity to keep Campbell from impacting their churches, and by his own admission, there were obvious resonances between Baptist belief and many of Campbell's teachings. Nevertheless, Campbell made it clear that he did not want Baptists to interpret his presence among them as affinity with their ways. He intended to change them.

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[66] On Jackson's campaign, see David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *The Rise of Andrew Jackson: Myth, Manipulation, and the Making of Modern Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).

[67] Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, 217.

Interestingly, Campbell never appealed to Virginia Baptist pastors to the same degree as he did to so many in Kentucky. While Virginia Baptists held to the same Baptist principles, their associations were older and more unified, having functioned as United Baptists since 1787. Also, by this time, Virginia was well ahead of Kentucky in terms of economic development and population size. Generally, Virginia Baptist pastors operated in closer proximity to theological schools, pastored churches that held more tightly to doctrinal standards, supported pastors with salaries, and were more willing to cooperate denominationally in missions than their Kentucky Baptist peers. These advantages created an institutional buffer of protection against Campbell's teachings. Some Virginia Baptist churches were indeed won over to Campbell's views, but relatively few of Virginia's major Baptist leaders joined the movement. In Kentucky, however, P. S. Fall in Louisville, James Fishback in Lexington, Jacob Creath and Jacob Creath Jr., in Woodford County, and Raccoon John Smith in Montgomery County, among others, all became prime movers within Campbell's reform movement, while Jeremiah Vardeman of the Elkhorn Association, considered one of the most popular preachers in Kentucky at that time, and Walter Warder of Bracken Association, wavered for a time while considering Campbell's views before later returning to the Baptist fold and joining actively in opposition.

The conflict ramped up gradually as individuals and churches began to realize the full extent of Campbell's views and their consequences. Pro-Campbell voices, rather than exiting, remained at their posts in hopes of convincing their Baptist peers to adopt reformation principles. Consistent with Campbell's overconfident epistemology, they believed that, given the opportunity to clearly express their views, scores would clearly perceive the truth and follow. Campbell's efforts were so divisive because he explicitly targeted what he considered sects. He and his followers were willing to split churches because they believed they were calling members out of error to join God's millennial advance. Additionally, joining his movement was easy, for it only required confession

and immersion for the remission of sins. William Vaughan's son, Thomas, who published his anti-Campbellite father's memoirs after his death, provided the following tongue-in-cheek description of Campbell's followers in Kentucky: "Every one of them was full of light and knowledge, and their hearts burned within them to communicate their doctrines to others. Whenever an opportunity presented itself, either in public or in private, they were discussing the topics suggested and developed in *The Christian Baptist.*"[68]

Kentucky Baptist churches experienced another revival during the years 1827–28. However, unlike previous revivals, Campbellite preachers provided much of the stimulus, and the nearly 15,000 persons baptized and added to Baptist minute books during this season disproportionately represented churches with Campbellite sympathies.[69] Unlike the revival of 1801, this one did not lead to a spirit of unification. Simultaneous to the instability introduced by such a large influx of new members in a short span of time, Campbell's views were becoming ever more crystallized. Since Campbell denounced the use of creeds, instead opting to spread his views unsystematically in the pages of his monthly, ambiguity surrounded his teachings. That all changed in the summer of 1829 when the Beaver Association of Ohio and Pennsylvania withdrew fellowship from Campbell's Mahoning Association of Pennsylvania and published a summary of his views. Beaver's summary placed Campbell's irregular teachings in creedal form, enumerating eight specific teachings as grounds for their withdrawal. Particularly, the "creed" specified four statements related to baptism, two related to Campbell's denial of the role of the Holy Spirit in saving faith, and one each on election and the use of creeds.[70] This document was disseminated among Kentucky Baptists through newspapers and introduced at various associational meetings

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[68] Thomas M. Vaughan, *Memoirs of Rev. Wm. Vaughan, D.D.* (Louisville: Caperton & Cates, 1878), 162.

[69] Frank M. Masters, *A History of Baptists in Kentucky* (Louisville: Kentucky Baptist Historical Society, 1953), 213.

[70] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:610.

the following year. For the first time, Kentucky Baptists possessed an extracted summary of Campbell's teachings, and action soon followed.

Silas M. Noel, pastor of the Frankfort Church, had already waged a war of words with Campbell in the pages of Spencer Clack's Kentucky-published *Baptist Register.* In 1829, he led his church to present a letter to the Franklin Association requesting that the association act to remove churches under Campbellite control. His letter was the first official document written in opposition to Campbell among Kentucky Baptist churches.[71] It drew a sharp line. Borrowing language from the Apostle Paul, he wrote, "We have high authority to count those who preach another gospel accursed." With such intense rhetoric, Noel identified followers of Campbell's theology as heretics. He was urging his Baptist peers to stop viewing Campbell's followers as another disagreeing sect within the bounds of American evangelicalism. He believed they had "made shipwreck" of their faith and that following Campbell's "creed of the no creeds" on faith and baptism placed them outside the confines of orthodoxy. [72] In spite of Noel's heightened warnings, the Franklin Association was not yet ready to take decisive action. Undoubtedly, several within the association identified with Campbell's movement, and many others were not comfortable delivering their longtime friends and co-laborers over to Satan so explicitly. Though Noel's efforts failed at this time, his unequivocal rejection of Campbellism raised the alarm in the state, and several other leaders, including William Vaughan and George Waller, joined Noel in beginning to work toward the goal of complete separation from churches under Campbellite control. One year later, the Franklin Association would gather again, and this time they would be ready to act.

In the year between Franklin Association's 1829 and 1830 sessions, the Creaths, though not members, led efforts to lead the association's South Benson Church

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[71] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:611.

[72] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:611–13.

to reject its creed and adopt the following motion: "That no creed is necessary for the church but the scriptures as they stand." This conflict resulted in the Campbellite minority leaving the church and constituting a new one on the content of the motion.[73] These circumstances alerted Franklin's churches to the schismatic potential of Campbell's ideas and prepared them to take decisive action at a special session in July 1830 in advance of the following fall's normal associational schedule. Spencer believed that this meeting "was probably the most important association ever held in Kentucky."[74] All the association's churches were present as well as messengers from several other Kentucky associations. Borrowing a page from Beaver Association's playbook, Silas Noel devoted the circular letter to defining the creed of Campbellism, only his summary was much more thorough. He clarified that the disagreements between the Baptists and Campbellites were not the result of the Campbellites' rejection of the Philadelphia Confession of Faith, but of the Baptists' rejection of Campbell's "Confession of Faith."[75]

With great irony, Noel entitled his extraction of Campbell's doctrines, "The Thirty Nine Articles," alluding to the 1571 Anglican confession by that same name. Noel copied problematic passages from *The Christian Baptist* until he reached the number thirty-nine and interspersed his own comments throughout. The thirty-ninth article brought his attack to its climactic conclusion. He quoted a statement from Campbell on church government that seemed to deny democratic congregationalism in favor of rule by bishop. In response, Noel wrote, "Truly, this is not democracy; nor is it a moderate aristocracy. What is it, short of Episcopacy or Papacy!"[76] To those gathered in Frankfort for their annual meeting, the next step seemed obvious. They unanimously replied to a

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[73] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:622.

[74] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:624.

[75] Minutes of the Franklin Association of Baptists, Convened in Frankfort, Kentucky, on the Second Friday and Saturday in July, 1830 (Frankfort, KY: A. G. Hodges, 1830), 6.

[76] Minutes of the Franklin Association of Baptists, Convened in Frankfort, Kentucky, on the Second Friday and Saturday in July, 1830, 15.

query about communing with Campbellites that anyone denouncing creeds or constitutions "ought to find no place in our pulpits, or at our communion tables." Further elaborating, the minutes state, "By approaching any table set by those people to commune, they would thereby forfeit the fellowship of all regular or united Baptist churches."[77]

As Silas Noel labored in the Franklin Association, William Vaughan, recently returned from Ohio, preached against Campbellism in the north of the state within Bracken Association churches. His efforts motivated Walter Warder, pastor of Mays Lick Church, to join the cause of opposition after previously wavering. Warder likely penned Bracken's 1830 circular letter that specified the reformers' doctrine as compromising "the grand fundamental truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ." Raccoon John Smith's biographer, John Augustus Williams, credited the efforts of Vaughan and Warder with preventing Bracken from defecting to Campbell's movement.[78] George Waller led the opposition to Campbellism in the Long Run Association, serving as moderator in 1830 when the association decided against allowing two churches with Campbellite sympathies to join. In response to an inquiry from two member churches seeking advice on Campbellism, the committee responded by reminding those gathered of the association's original constitution on the Philadelphia Confession. They declared, "As the principles of Alexander Campbell are in direct opposition to the existence and general dictates of our constitution, we therefore advise our brethren, that they discountenance those writings and all those who support that course of rebellion against the principles of our Associational existence."[79]

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[77] Minutes of the Franklin Association of Baptists, Convened in Frankfort, Kentucky, on the Second Friday and Saturday in July, 1830, 2–3.

[78] Williams, *Life of Elder John Smith with Some Account of the Rise and Progress of the Current Reformation*, 387.

[79] Minutes of the Long Run Association of Baptists, Held at Drennon's Creek Meeting-House, in the Town of New-Castle, on the 1st. Friday and Saturday in September, 1830 (n.p.: n.p., 1830), 2.

In 1829, the Elkhorn Association wisely changed its policy of allowing its member churches to send as many messengers to the association meeting as desired. Anticipating the schemes of several churches who had Campbellite majorities, the association limited the number of votes per church with at least one hundred members to two and granted another vote per every additional one hundred members. This decision undoubtedly kept the association from falling under Campbellite control. Leading up to the momentous 1830 Elkhorn meeting, the Creaths and Josephus Hewitt, all Campbellite adherents, were members of Versailles Church. However, before the meeting, Creath Jr. moved his membership to Providence Church, and Hewitt joined South Elkhorn Church. These leaders enacted this strategy to maximize their voting impact on the reformation's behalf. However, their plan backfired. On the first day of business, Jeremiah Vardeman, a one-time Campbell sympathizer, made a motion to expel Versailles and Providence churches due to holding members "who have taken part in constituting minorities of churches that have departed from the faith and constitution of this body."[80] The churches of Elkhorn also resolved to drop correspondence with churches and associations holding Campbell's doctrines "whenever occasion, in our judgement, may require it."[81] Thus, Kentucky's most storied and influential Baptist association spoke definitively against Campbell's reformation efforts.

David Barrow's old association, however, could not be saved. Raccoon John Smith's assault on creeds appealed to the strong Separate Baptist presence within the North District Association, and the majority voted in 1829 to sever ties with the United Baptists. According to the ten North District holdout churches, their Campbellite opponents "even deny the special operation of the Spirit in quickening the dead sinner,

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[80] Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Elkhorn Association of Baptists, Held at Silas, Bourbon County, Ky. commencing on Saturday the 14th day of August, 1830 (n.p.: n.p., 1830), 4.

[81] Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Elkhorn Association of Baptists, Held at Silas, Bourbon County, Ky. commencing on Saturday the 14th day of August, 1830, 4.

and by way of ridicule, ask, where did the Spirit hit you? whether in the shoulder or under the fifth rib, etc."[82] The majority of churches comprising the Tate's Creek Association likewise joined Campbell's reformation. In both cases, Kentucky's other Baptist associations refused to commune with the Campbellite majorities and continued correspondence with the greatly reduced minorities. The Tate's Creek Association was reduced from twenty-five churches with 2,661 members to five churches with 159 members, and the North District Association was reduced from twenty-four churches with 2,265 members to ten churches with about eight hundred members.[83] Similarly, in 1832 Boone's Creek Association fell from thirteen churches with 1,800 members to seven churches and 439 members.[84] Richard C. Traylor estimates that, overall, around one-fourth of the total number of Kentucky Baptists joined Campbell's movement.[85] Interestingly, the Licking Association, which had earlier withdrawn from the United Baptists over their insistence on stringent subscription to the Philadelphia Confession, remained largely unaffected by the controversy. Their strict adherence to the Philadelphia Confession put to rest doctrinal ambiguities and sustained unity during a season of great turmoil for Kentucky's Baptists.

Analysis of the Campbellite Controversy

Since the nation's founding, American citizens tied the success of the nation to the preservation of liberty. The definition of that term, however, did not remain static over that time. To Jeffersonians, freedom increasingly came to be defined in juxtaposition to any institution claiming authority they perceived as illegitimate or tyrannical. As a result, they gradually came to understand liberty as meaning "freedom from constraint"

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[82] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:618.

[83] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:638.

[84] Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, 1:640.

[85] Richard C. Traylor, *Born of Water and Spirit: The Baptist Impulse in Kentucky, 1776–1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2015), 100.

as they learned to mistrust all forms of external control. They suspected large urban centers, federal taxation and laws, national banks, and powerful voluntary societies for the same reasons; these institutions sought control and threatened their way of life. On the frontier, this philosophy combined with a lifestyle that deemphasized communal interdependence as yeomen farmers spread out on their own tracts of land and pursued the American dream largely without interference. Meanwhile, Jeffersonian Republicanism provided a powerful political mythology that identified hierarchy and control as impediments to flourishing as free citizens.

Concurrent to Jeffersonianism's political dominance, America's market economy was booming, giving American citizens unprecedented choice in mobility, manners, and lifestyle. Prosperity and choice combined to provide favorable conditions for the cultivation of a widespread sense of personal autonomy among America's citizenship. As the Jeffersonian era transitioned into the Jacksonian era, Americans, in the words of Daniel Walker Howe, "were increasingly able to define themselves through voluntary choice." [86] The common person, or at least the free white male, felt a sense of being master of his own destiny. The individual citizen was free to act as distinct agent of his own self-defined ends. Observing this aspect of American political culture led the French observer of America, Alexis de Tocqueville, to use the term "individualism," which was at that time a new concept.

In contrast to "egoism," which Tocqueville defined as "passionate and exaggerated love of oneself," he defined individualism as a calmer sentiment that disposes the American citizen to isolate from the larger society in favor of the creation of smaller societies "for his own use."[87] Tocqueville saw this individualism as deriving from

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[86] Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 107.

[87] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols., ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Carmel, IN: Liberty Fund, 2012), 2:882.

equality. He observed that in aristocratic societies the lines distinguishing various communities are fixed and static, the result of inheritance. In democratic societies, by contrast, equality of condition levels these fixed walls and allows citizens to create new communities "constantly out of nothing."[88] For Tocqueville, therefore, individualism did not mean absolute separation from communal loyalties, but living in a state of fluctuating communal loyalties. During the Jacksonian era, American citizens increasingly enjoyed the freedom to move between different communal loyalties at their own discretion.

These cultural trends assist in accounting for the widespread appeal of Alexander Campbell's movement. Anthony Dunnavant argues persuasively that labeling Campbell's movement "restorationist" obscures the positive "goods" that Appalachian Christians found in joining it. Namely, Dunnavant claims that Campbell's movement offered "freedom":

> To the Stone-Campbell traditions, 'The Glorious Liberty of the Children of God' has meant 'freedom to respond to the gospel,' 'freedom from creedalism,' 'deliverance from ignorance and superstition,' 'redemption from sin and death,' as well as 'liberation from oppression.' Evangelism was, in part, understood as offering 'the gift of freedom.'[89]

Similarly, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. argued, "Though Campbell carried his belief in the separation of church and state to the point of virtually ignoring the politics of the day . . . he was nonetheless expressing a predominant Jacksonian mood in his opposition to the political presumptions of the churches."[90] Campbell's message resonated deeply with a rapidly democratizing culture.

In a political economy that distrusted human authority, Campbell's "no creed but the Bible" mantra offered the individual a way to bypass the corruption and tyranny of human systems and hierarchies on the way back to the purity of the primitive church.

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[88] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2:884.

[89] Dunnavant, "'Mountaineers Are Always Free" 208–9.

[90] Schlesinger, "The Age of Alexander Campbell," 148.

In a market economy that emphasized autonomous choice, Campbell appealed to torn consciences struggling to discern the work of the Holy Spirit with an appeal to just believe the facts and be baptized. He offered self-made people a form of self-made religion. Finally, in a context featuring the emergence of Tocqueville's brand of individualism, Campbell provided an opportunity to break with old troubled ecclesiastical loyalties in exchange for a new community that would help usher in the millennial reign of Christ. Alexander Campbell manifested the evangelical embodiment of America's most cherished ideals. Baptists, who had long prided themselves on embodying American values, now had to reckon with Campbell's cunning one-upmanship. Adaptation of Jeffersonian values, which had earlier helped the Baptists climb the ranks of cultural legitimacy, backfired when those same values led thousands to leave Baptist churches for Campbell's reformation.

As evidenced by the example of the Licking Association, however, a stronger confessional identity provided an antidote to Campbell's charm. The Baptists could not match Campbell's populist appeal, but they could double down on their historical theological convictions by proving that Campbell's teachings were outside the bounds of orthodoxy. Unfortunately, due to widespread creedal laxity, most Kentucky Baptist churches and associations were not in position to act decisively on Campbell's doctrinal anomalies. Chapter 2 detailed Kentucky Baptists' softening stance on creeds and the emergence of a more populist form of Calvinism illustrated by attempts to revise the Philadelphia Confession. Inspired by millennial hopes and Jeffersonian optimism, Baptists in Kentucky achieved unity between Separates and Regulars amid the Great Revival only after Regular Baptist holdouts relented from requiring subscription to the confession. Additionally, antimission arguments further spread fear of institutional regulation. As America trended toward greater autonomy and individualism, Baptists acclimated to the spirit of the age. Traylor observes that Campbell's anticreedalism

"appealed to Baptists . . . because they had actually already come as close to implementing his vision as was possible, and many were disappointed with the results."[91]

Some Baptist leaders recognized early that confessional adherence could thwart Campbellism's advance and sought to restore order by leading Baptist institutions to stricter adherence to these documents, while others strengthened their dependence on creeds and confessions only after witnessing the carnage of Campbell's movement on vulnerable Baptist churches. In 1826, the Long Run Association with George Waller as moderator received queries from the Louisville and Shelbyville churches concerning the necessity of a "*declaration* of Faith," and seventeen out of twenty-two churches voted in favor. The minutes record the following rationale for the decision: "We disavow any authority over the book of God; unanimously believing, that it is the only supreme directory over our faith and practice, but in accordance with the answers of the churches, we consider it necessary in order to unity, and purity in the churches, that we have a written declaration of Faith." Further, the minutes reported that a committee from Long Run had met with similar committees from Elkhorn, Licking, and Franklin to determine conditions for unity and correspondence between these associations. They based their cooperation on each body agreeing to "maintain and defend the doctrines revealed in the Holy Scriptures as set forth in their confessions of Faith."[92]

The same year Long Run reaffirmed the central place of the Philadelphia Confession Silas Noel penned a circular letter on the topic of unity for the Franklin Association, of which he served as moderator. Noel drew a distinction between creeds enforced by civil authority and those agreed upon through voluntary association of Christians. The former use was illegitimate, but the latter was not only allowed, but

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[91] Traylor, *Born of Water and Spirit*, 107.

[92] Minutes of the Long Run Baptist Association. Held at Elk Creek Meeting-House, Spencer County, Ky. On the first Friday in September, 1826 (Bloomfield, KY: W. H. Holmes, 1826), 4.

necessary. Noel turned the tables on his anti-creedal opponents by accusing them of tyrannizing over the consciences of others:

> To deny to any religious society the privilege of expressing their views of the Bible in their own words and phrases, and of denying admission to those who reject their views, is a violent interference with the rights of conscience—it is tyranny.—It is to subjugate the many, with all their interest, right, and happiness, to the dictation of one or a few—*the very essence of* tyranny.[93]

According to Noel, the preservation of unity, purity, and peace depended on an agreed upon creed, which he defined as "an epitome, or summary exhibition of what the Scriptures teach."[94] Importantly, he made another distinction between an individual's ability to believe according to conscience and the church's ability to deny fellowship based on those beliefs. No one was denying the right of the former, but Noel believed his opponents were undermining the latter. Without a creed, Noel believed a church was forced to harbor "the vilest heresies that now disgrace the Christian name."[95] Any claim to the contrary was an affirmation of the legitimacy of a creed, for how else could such distinctions be made? The Bible alone could not combat heresies, according to Noel, because nearly all the heresies in history claimed scriptural warrant.[96] The work of leaders like Waller and Noel seem to have made an impact, for the associations that reaffirmed their commitment to creeds largely withstood Campbellism and remained entrenched within the Baptist fold, while associations that renounced creeds, like Tate's Creek and North District, fell into the hands of Campbellite reformers.

Other leaders galvanized their creedalism after the Campbellite divisions. Early in his career in Virginia, John Leland critiqued overreliance on creeds and

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[93] Minutes of the Franklin Association of Baptists, Held at Buffaloe Lick, Shelby County, on the First Friday and Saturday in August, 1826 (Bloomfield, KY: W. H. Holmes, 1826), 6.

[94] Minutes of the Franklin Association of Baptists, Held at Buffaloe Lick, Shelby County, on the First Friday and Saturday in August, 1826, 6.

[95] Minutes of the Franklin Association of Baptists, Held at Buffaloe Lick, Shelby County, on the First Friday and Saturday in August, 1826, 7.

[96] Minutes of the Franklin Association of Baptists, Held at Buffaloe Lick, Shelby County, on the First Friday and Saturday in August, 1826, 8.

theological systems. He worried that Christians would accept their respective creed without verifying its doctrines personally from the Bible and their own experience.[97] He also believed creeds were divisive in breeding contention and pride. In 1788, he even refused the request of wealthy Virginia planter and fellow Baptist Robert Carter to write down a statement of beliefs due to these concerns.[98] While he never targeted creeds as the work of Satan as Campbell did, he thought their use placed an unnecessary mediator—what he called a "Virgin Mary"—between the individual soul and Scripture. If Jesus wanted his church to have a creed, he reasoned, then certainly he would have left one. Like Campbell, Leland blamed human reliance on creeds for the divisions within Christianity.[99] Leland, however, did not remain entrenched in this view.[100] In 1832, he finally wrote his own personal creed in seven articles that restated five-point Calvinism in his own words. In 1834, he led his church in Cheshire to publish a statement of beliefs.[101] It would be impossible to state with certainty whether Leland's shift was precipitated by reaction to Campbellism, but it would be naïve to suggest those explosive events were far from his mind. In his one mention of Campbell in his published works, he criticized the controversialist for insisting on no creed but the New Testament while simultaneously altering his "creed" with a new translation and for insisting other Christians adopt his own "creed" of "no creed."[102]

John Taylor was ordained a Regular Baptist in Virginia—a tradition that held the Philadelphia Confession in high honor. However, throughout his ministerial career, he

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[97] John Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland* (New York: G. W. Wood, 1845), 123–24.

[98] Eric C. Smith, *John Leland: A Jeffersonian Baptist in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 133.

[99] Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, 114.

[100] Smith, *John Leland*, 134–35.

[101] Smith, *John Leland*, 135.

[102] Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, 511.

moved between Regular and Separate Baptist churches indiscriminately, and his published writings neither praise nor condemn reliance on creedal formulations. By his own admission, he "never was a violent creed man."[103] Further, his *Thoughts on Missions* expressed the brand of populism that usually accompanied anticreedal arguments. However, the threat of Campbellism induced him to pick up his pen once more in the middle of 1830, at the age of seventy-eight, with the publication of his book, *History of Clear Creek Church; and Campbellism Exposed.* Taylor wrote to expose the Creath-led disorder in Clear Creek Church that resulted in a contentious split between the Campbellite faction and those who remained committed to the church's original creed and constitution. Taylor advised Kentucky's Baptist associations to break off correspondence with those responsible for such disorderly conduct as well as with any church or association that tolerated them. Taylor's book played a pivotal role in recommending the plan of action eventually followed by Franklin and Elkhorn Associations later in the year.

Taylor's tract took aim not only at Alexander Campbell but also at Primitive Baptist leader and extreme predestinarian, Daniel Parker. Both men represented dangerous disruptions to godly order.[104] In fact, Taylor's entire argument rested on Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 14:40 that all things in the church be done decently and in order. The Campbellites represented division, anarchy, and confusion. Taylor expressed frustration at his Baptist brethren's failure to utilize the tools of order available to them, and at this seasoned period of his life, he was willing to name names: "Where was the well-meaning Lewis Sullivan, the Mitchums, McQuadies and others, that they did not tell this young passenger, that his course was disorderly, and that his object seemed to be,

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[103] Taylor, *History of Clear Creek Church*, 36.

[104] Taylor, *History of Clear Creek Church*, 3.

rent and schism; one of the greatest evils in a church."[105] In response to the Campbellites, the self-admitted "not a violent creed man" made a scriptural argument in defense of creeds, seeing creeds used in Acts 15, Hebrews 6, and even the Lord's Prayer.[106] He recounted Elkhorn's decision of 1786 to deny a seat to any church that refused the advice of the association as well as the association's historical record of dropping churches for doctrinal error or disorderly practice and wondered why this pattern was no longer being followed.[107]

Both Leland and Taylor had opposed voluntary associations on populist grounds. Both feared that the local would be overtaken by large hierarchical structures controlled from afar and wanted to spare free citizens from greedy tyrannical forces. Neither liked the idea of placing local Baptist churches and local Baptist money in the hands of boards run by distant Yankee elites. At first, Alexander Campbell appeared on the scene as an ally to these concerns. He, too, opposed mission societies and spoke the populist language of the common man. However, over time Campbell and his followers proved that unmitigated populism carried threats of its own kind of tyranny—the tyranny of doctrinal error and ecclesial disorder. Campbellism appealed to the masses in part because it claimed to simplify Christianity and to rid the faith of hard-to-understand abstractions and extra-biblical accessories. Its spread revealed that some form of institutional control was needed. Churches and associations needed a standard under which to unify and a shield to protect from doctrinal error. Since 1801, Kentucky Baptists, with a few exceptions, had softened both the doctrinal content of the Philadelphia Confession and the level of subscription required. Over those same years, populist impulses prevailed as Baptists sparred over voluntary mission societies, salaried

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[105] Taylor, *History of Clear Creek Church*, 17.

[106] Taylor, *History of Clear Creek Church*, 30–31.

[107] Taylor, *History of Clear Creek Church*, 38–39.

pastors, and formal education for ministers. In response to Campbell, however, many Baptists, seeking a way to bring order to the chaos, renewed their commitment to both creedalism and cooperation. In the following decade, after losing defections to both Campbellism and the emerging Primitive Baptist movement, Baptists in America would unify even more around cooperative missions and doctrinal agreement.

Conclusion

After 1830, the Baptist movement divided into three major factions: the populist anti-creedal Campbellites, the High Calvinist Primitives, and the missionary Baptists. The missionary Baptists, chastened by these defections, united around the cause of voluntary missions both at home and abroad and strengthened their confessional commitment. However, even this unity would not last. In 1845, Baptists in the South separated from the Triennial Convention and formed the Southern Baptist Convention after the Foreign Mission Board refused to appoint slaveholding missionaries. As the nation faced contentious political disagreement over slavery that ultimately divided the nation in two, Baptists followed suit. Cultural mirroring between politics and church continued despite Baptist espousal of separation of church and state as Baptists foreshadowed the same lines of division that would manifest during America's bloody Civil War sixteen years later. Baptists long believed that not even the gates of hell would prevail against Christ's church. However, they struggled to account for the destruction wrought by political loyalties trumping loyalty to Christ. Political ideas have ecclesial consequences. Some lessons are hard to learn.

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ABSTRACT

JEFFERSON'S BAPTISTS: EVANGELICAL PARTISANSHIP
IN THE EARLY AMERICAN REPUBLIC, 1800–1830

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After the Revolution, opportunistic settlers from Virginia began streaming over the Allegheny Mountains to settle frontier lands to the south and west. Numbered among them, Baptists came in droves, spreading not only the evangelical gospel, but also Thomas Jefferson's unique brand of Republican politics. This dissertation explores how Baptists in the trans-Appalachian West synthesized their evangelical convictions with their own vision of Jeffersonian Republicanism between the years 1800 and 1830. This synthesis impacted politics as Jefferson's party came to dominate the region, but it also impacted Baptist churches in profound ways. After joining with Jefferson's party during their shared fight to secure religious liberty in the infant nation, Baptists increasingly embodied Jeffersonian ideals through ecclesial practices that prioritized individual liberty and opposed any semblance of authoritarianism. However, the same partisan loyalty that aided them in coming to dominate a region left their churches and associations vulnerable to emerging religious movements that better embodied those same Jeffersonian ideals. This dissertation explores the Jeffersonian-Baptist synthesis in the context of the fight for religious liberty, Baptist ecclesiology, the debate over slavery, the anti-mission controversy, and the emergence of Alexander Campbell's Restoration Movement.

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