

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE LANDMARK MOVEMENT

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History of Baptists

by

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Introduction

The Landmark Movement was an overreaction to the Campbellite controversy, claiming direct Baptist succession through the ages and an exclusive hold on the church, however the movement was based on faulty assumptions instead of actual historical evidence.

The movement erupted in the Southern Baptist Church in the mid-nineteenth century.¹ While its overall impact in the church had varying degrees of influence, it did not spread to northern churches.² It began as an overreaction to another extreme theological view, with leaders that had a penchant for controversy but were powerful communicators and effective at convincing others of their views through print and speaking. However, in their zeal they came to theological conclusions and opinions and then tried to find the supporting evidence rather than examining the evidence and letting it shape their theology. This paper will demonstrate this by briefly explaining the Campbellite controversy, recording the primary influences in forming the Landmark Movement and how they did so, the core beliefs of the Landmark Movement, and the resulting controversy and response from the Southern Baptist Church.

The Campbellite Controversy

Originally from a Presbyterian background, Alexander Campbell and his father, joined the Baptist church in 1812.³ However, while they accepted immersion, it was not long before they were pushing for reforms in the Baptist church as a whole on issues of Old Testament

¹ Robert G. Torbet, *History of the Baptists*, 3 ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Pr, 1978), 281.

² Thomas A. Askew, *The American Church Experience: a Concise History* (Grand Rapids: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2008), 187.

³ H. Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 1990), 241.

authority, the nature of saving faith, the role of baptism in salvation, and other core beliefs. In addition, they opposed missionary societies, titles, and salaries for ministers.⁴ Essentially, they wanted to remove any human traditions from church and bring it back to a “primitive order.”⁵ By this they meant core practices found only in scripture.

Over time, his teachings split the denomination, with hundreds of churches leaving with him to form the Church of Christ denomination.⁶ His ideas were able to catch momentum because of the combination of a simple approach to scripture and resentment from churches distant from the main offices of the denomination feeling unrepresented or left out. This was the first major internal division for the Baptist church, out of which provided the groundwork for the Landmark Movement’s values of extreme core Baptist theology and traditions being embraced.⁷

The Landmark Movement

With the trauma of a denominational split and the uncertainty cast on Baptist traditions and heritage, the climate in the aftermath of the Campbellite controversy fostered a search for “ecclesiastical certainty.”⁸ This climate was ripe for the extreme forms of Baptist theology that were developed in the Landmark Movement. Ultimately, the goal of the Landmark Movement was to establish the Southern Baptist Church as the one true church.⁹

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987), 375.

⁶ McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, 241.

⁷ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 376.

⁸ C. W. Hall, “When Orphans Became Heirs: J.R. Graves and the Landmark Baptists,” *Baptist History and Heritage*, 37(1) (2002): 112.

⁹ Ibid.

Leaders in the Movement

There were three main leaders in the formation of the movement, referred to by their followers as the “Great Triumvirate”; James Madison Pendleton, Amos Cooper Dayton, and James R. Graves.¹⁰ Of the three, Graves was the primary voice of the movement, providing the initial spark to its formation, and driving it throughout the years.

James R. Graves

Graves was born in Vermont, was converted at the age of 15 and then baptized in the Baptist church there.¹¹ While he did not have any formal education, he was hired as a principal for academies in Ohio and Kentucky, and over time demonstrated such a natural talent that a Baptist church in Kentucky licensed him to preach. He committed himself to a self-taught program of study to prepare for the pastorate, covering modern languages and the Bible, and was eventually ordained at the age of 24.¹²

The church he was a part of, and that eventually ordained him, was pastored by Ryland Dillard, a man passionately opposed to the Campbellite teachings and deeply concerned about its spread through his region.¹³ From there, Graves moved back to Ohio where he was invited to preach at a church led by what he would later call “a brilliant infidel.” The story goes that with

¹⁰ James E. Tull, "The Landmark Movement: An Historical and Theological Appraisal," *Baptist History and Heritage*, 10, no. 1 (January 1975): 5.

¹¹ James A Patterson, "James Robinson Graves: History in the Service of Ecclesiology," *Baptist History and Heritage*, 44.1 (2009): 73.

¹² *Ibid*, 74.

¹³ Hall, “When Orphans Became Heirs: J.R. Graves and the Landmark Baptists,” 112.

just one sermon, Graves was able to turn the congregation from the Campbellite teaching and would spend the rest of his life committed to protecting others from the Campbellite “infidels.”¹⁴

From there, Graves moved to Nashville to become a teacher. During that time he also accepted a pastorate, but it was short lived as he became the assistant editor of the *Tennessee Baptist* in 1846.¹⁵ Two years later, Graves became the editor, a role he would hold for over forty years.¹⁶ Between his influence through the Tennessee Baptist, and his powerful oratory skills, Graves was able to powerfully build momentum and drive the Landmark Movement.

Amos Cooper Dayton

In 1813 Dayton was born in New Jersey to a Presbyterian family, and as such was baptized six months later.¹⁷ He studied medicine in New York City and graduated at 22 years old, however he only practiced medicine for a short period before transitioning to dentistry. During his early twenties, Dayton had a period of doubts, even embracing universalism briefly, but after a severe illness that would impact him the rest of his life, he found himself convinced that “the Bible is of God, and universalism of the Devil.”¹⁸

Dayton remained a Presbyterian until 1852 when some of the books he was reading finally convinced him of the failings of his current denomination and convinced him to become

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Patterson, "James Robinson Graves: History in the Service of Ecclesiology," 74.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ James E. Taulman, "The Life and Writings of Amos Cooper Dayton (1813-1865)," *Baptist History and Heritage*, 10, no. 1 (January 1975): 36.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Baptist. He was baptized and a week later preached his first sermon, eventually becoming ordained in the Baptist church. He began writing for the Tennessee Baptist in 1853 and eventually became an associate editor working with Graves in 1858.¹⁹ While his favorite writing style was fiction, a genre he excelled in, he was most known for the 1858 book *Pedobaptist and Campbellite Immersions*, in which he powerfully attacked the Campbellite movement and bolstered the credibility of the Landmark Movement.²⁰

During his years of association with Graves and his involvement in the Landmark Movement, Dayton was a powerful writer. Because of his connections with the Bible Board where he served first as an agent and then the corresponding secretary, he quickly became known in the Southern Baptist denomination.²¹ He eventually became the Southern Baptist Church Sunday School Union president, and then transitioned to the secretary position.²² Through his prominence, he was positioned well to be part of the trio of leaders in the Landmark Movement.

James Madison Pendleton

Much of Pendleton's fame came through his crusading to abolish slavery.²³ He was born in 1811 in Virginia, but grew up in Kentucky on a farm. At 26 he took his first pastorate in Bowling Green, Kentucky, where he would remain for twenty years. He was known for not just

¹⁹ Tull, "The Landmark Movement: An Historical and Theological Appraisal," 5.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Taulman, "The Life and Writings of Amos Cooper Dayton (1813-1865)," 38.

²² Ibid, 39.

²³ Victor B. Howard, "James Madison Pendleton: A Southern Crusader Against Slavery," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 74.3 (1976): 192.

reaching out to the free in his region, but evangelizing the slaves as well. His speaking style was that of reason, not emotionalism, and was an effective communicator with a strong hold on his material.²⁴ He was powerful in debates, and a strong writer, with each of these skills contributing to his rise in influence. By the 1840's he was writing for several of the Baptist papers, even ones who disagreed with him but appreciated his ability.

While he never embraced the Landmark Movement to the degree of Graves or Dayton, he did become a compelling advocate for it in the areas he agreed with. His tracts urging Baptist churches to stop participating in pulpit exchanges with non-Baptist churches, and his speaking quickly rose in popularity, causing Graves to reach out to him and begin working together.²⁵ His greatest influence came through his 1867 book, *Church Manual*, a guide on Baptist life based on Landmark values, a work that has had a lasting influence in the Southern Baptist Church.²⁶

The Landmark Movement's Tenets

With the Southern Baptist Church still reeling from the Campbellite controversy and its efforts to change the core beliefs of the Baptist church, there was a hunger for the call to a stricter, more defined Baptist theology. Graves led the charge in this, developing much of the Landmark theology, and using his resources and connections through his paper, *Dayton*, *Pendleton*, and others to rapidly spread throughout the church, particularly in the Southwest.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid, 193.

²⁵ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 449.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, 446.

Most did not think of it as a new movement, but rather a return to what they thought were core Baptist beliefs. However, in actuality, the tenets of Landmarkism were extreme versions of Baptist tradition, loaded with danger for the church.

The name itself, the Landmark Movement, was based on two Old Testament passages; Proverbs 22:28 and Job 24:2, both of which in the King James Version caution against removing the old landmarks set by those who went before.²⁸ With their intent of preserving historic Baptist practices and theology, the name was a natural one.

Graves wrote in his booklet, *Old Landmarkism: What Is It?*, that for him the issue began to crystalize on the day his mother and sister were baptized by a pastor who also performed infant baptisms. He wrote of his frustration that over the course of one day, this man baptized believers and infants, immersing some, pouring water over others. He writes, “Those different acts for ‘one baptism’ made an indelible impression,” one that was further magnified by the pastor’s seeming disinterest in the whole process.²⁹ For years he wrestled with these and other issues he saw as problems in the Baptist church, culminating in him, as editor of the *Tennessee Baptist* presenting to the Southern Baptist Convention in 1851 these five questions³⁰:

1st. Can Baptists, consistently with their principles or the Scriptures, recognize those societies not organized according to the pattern of the Jerusalem church, but possessing different *governments*, different *officers*, a different class of *members*, different *ordinances*, *doctrines* and *practices*, as churches of Christ?

2d. Ought they to be called gospel churches, or churches in a religious sense?

²⁸ Tull, "The Landmark Movement: An Historical and Theological Appraisal," 3.

²⁹ Joseph Early Jr., *Readings in Baptist History: Four Centuries of Selected Documents* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 116.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 117.

3d. Can we consistently recognize the ministers of such irregular and unscriptural bodies as gospel ministers?

4th. Is it not virtually recognizing them as official ministers to invite them into our pulpits, *or by any other act that would or could be construed into such a recognition?*

5th. Can we consistently address as brethren those professing Christianity, who not only have not the doctrine of Christ and walk not according to his commandments, but are arrayed in direct and bitter opposition to them?

These questions, and the resulting answers came to be known as the Cotton Grove Resolutions. Ultimately, under Grave's leadership, the tenets of the Landmark Movement came to be³¹:

1. Baptist churches are the only true churches in the world. The Landmark Movement was highly exclusive and viewed the Baptist church as the only church bearing all the marks of a true church. As such, they believed that the church Christ founded was a Baptist church, regardless of its name at the time. A further ramification of this belief was the conviction that only Baptist churches have ministers, ordinances, and preaching recognized as authoritative and true in God's eyes.
2. The true church is a local, visible institution. Landmarkism rejects the idea of an invisible, or universal church. Each church is to be self-governing under Christ, maintaining its own discipline.
3. The churches and the kingdom of God are coterminous. According to Graves, "church" and "kingdom" are synonymous terms in the Bible. The true churches together form the kingdom, much like the independent states form the United States of America. One of the ramifications of this belief was that if only Baptist churches are true churches, and the

³¹ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 450-452.

kingdom of God is comprised of Baptist churches, then to be saved, or in the Kingdom, one must be Baptist – a point that Graves did deny was his intent.

4. There must be no “pulpit affiliation” with non-Baptists. Up until this point, there had been a lot of cross-denominational teamwork and pulpit swaps. Revivals were a popular tool, and often times pastors from different denominations would take turns teaching. However, because Baptist churches were viewed as the only true churches, these preachers from other denominations were viewed as leaders of secular organizations, with unrecognized ordinations, and therefore should not be allowed to have the pulpit in a Baptist church.
5. Only a church can do churchly acts. This specifically addressed the doctrines and practices surrounding baptism, communion, preaching, and other church traditions. Because Baptist churches were viewed as the only true church, as a result, baptisms, communion, and other practices were no longer recognized as valid from other churches. This even extended to missionaries; the tasks missionaries engaged in were to be exclusively performed by the Baptist church, and as a result proponents of the Landmark Movement attempted to dismantle the foreign missions program.
6. Baptist churches have always existed in every age by an unbroken historical succession. Graves wrote in his booklet, *Old Landmarkism: What Is It?*, that while they utterly and complete reject the idea of apostolic succession, they are convinced that the true church, the Baptist church, “has had a continuous existence” since Christ founded it “in the days of John the Baptist.”³² This was a popular teaching point, because it not only validated

³² Early, *Readings in Baptist History: Four Centuries of Selected Documents*, 122.

the traditional Baptist views and practices, it created a strong sense of superiority and accomplishment.

Controversy

In the late 1850's, tensions began to explode as Graves continued to push further into the authority and established leadership structures of the Southern Baptist Church. In 1858, Graves established a Southern Baptist Sunday School Union in an attempt to undermine and replace the existing Southern Baptist Publication Society. For some time Graves had criticized the SBPS due to disagreements with its policies, literature, and leadership.³³ Graves' pastor, Howell, however, disagreed with him and opposed his efforts to take control, triggering a series of personal attacks by Graves at Howell. Over the course of the next year, Graves, and 46 others of his followers, were brought through church discipline and removed from that church.

In 1859, Graves attempted at the Southern Baptist Convention to dismantle the Foreign Mission Board and instead place the control of missions into the individual churches. This created significant tension at the convention, and while the Board was ultimately protected, they did allow for individual churches to run their own missions if that was their conviction.³⁴ One of the results of this, however, was a growing sense of concern that the Landmark Movement encouraged division and a "rise of denominationalism."³⁵ Rather than building the Southern Baptist Church, it was instead distancing them from one another.

³³ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 456.

³⁴ Tull, "The Landmark Movement: An Historical and Theological Appraisal," 13.

³⁵ Torbet, *History of the Baptists*, 282.

In another move that frustrated Graves and his intent to publically confront Howell at the convention, rather than the convention embracing and celebrating Graves' rise in influence, it instead made Howell the president. While Howell did ultimately step down in an effort to bring unity between the Southern Baptist churches that stood on opposite sides of some of these issues, it was still an undeniable setback to the Landmark Movement.

Between these setbacks, and then the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, the Landmark Movement lost a lot of its momentum. Tull writes that "the rising tide of Landmarkism was arrested and subdued by the Civil War."³⁶ Much of the rebuilding in the church after the war in the Southern states was carried out by Baptists who were not a part of the Landmark movement, further quelling their influence as others rose to prominence. Dayton passed away towards the end of the war in 1865, and Pendleton moved to Pennsylvania that same year where he would spend the rest of his ministry years.³⁷

Overall, Southern Baptists had grown tired of the constant controversy stirred up by Graves and the Landmark Movement, and were increasingly frustrated with the frequent attacks against their leaders. With only Graves remaining to spearhead the movement, and his influence no longer what it once was, the momentum was gone. Adding to that, McBeth writes, "As the true nature and spirit of Landmarkism became clearer, it lost much of its appeal."³⁸ While all of these factors combined to see the Landmark Movement fade in its presence, its influence has not

³⁶ Tull, "The Landmark Movement: An Historical and Theological Appraisal," 13.

³⁷ Ibid, 14.

³⁸ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 457.

completely disappeared. Some of the beliefs and attitudes continue to this day in some Southern Baptist Churches, but mostly in the form of a general aloofness and reluctance to work with other denominations, and an unwillingness to recognize “alien” baptisms.³⁹ For the most part, by the time Graves passed away, almost all recognized the faults in Landmarkism’s tenets, with few being able to hold to more than just portions of the beliefs.

Conclusion

The Landmark Movement was initiated and led by individuals who loved God and desired to pursue His kingdom. They were passionate about scripture, and in light of the Campbellite Controversy, it is clear that there was a hunger for a return to the hallmarks, or landmarks, of Baptist faith. While Dayton and Pendleton each played roles in leading the Landmark Movement, it is clear that their influence was under the leadership of Graves.

At its core, the Landmark Movement was a flawed theological system based on an incorrect approach to theology. Graves arrived at his opinions and beliefs based on Baptist tradition, defined his views and then interpreted scripture based on those ideas. The Baptist church, in the span of history, was still relatively young during his time – yet because of his conviction that it is the one true church, he interpreted the previous 1800 years of church history based on that opinion rather than an appropriate historical approach, interpreting records and scripture through his lens. The correct approach would have been to instead try to place himself in the shoes of the New Testament Christian, understanding their culture, their context, and then interpret scriptures as best he could in the way that they would have.

³⁹ Tull, "The Landmark Movement: An Historical and Theological Appraisal," 17.

One has to wonder if Graves, clearly a brilliant man, was in some ways limited in his ability to appropriately approach and handle these topics by the limits of his own education. On the one hand, his talents and ability were recognized early on, but at the same time he created his course of self-guided education. Did he unintentionally leave out areas of study that would have given him a more balanced approach? Or did his accomplishments and intelligence create an overconfidence resulting in an arrogance that not only saw his understanding of the church and scripture as correct, but as the one true understanding? Much like the misguided Pharisees and other religious leaders of the gospels?

In conclusion, it is not surprising that the Movement eventually collapsed on itself. While on a surface level it initially appeared to be a Baptist movement, it did not take long for Christians to recognize the faulty assumptions and flawed logic that undergirded the movement, and ultimately, its diversion from Baptist tradition, much like the Campbellite movement before it.

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