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The GARBC—A Rich History and Heritage (Part 1/2)

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The General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (GARBC) was founded in 1932 as an outgrowth from the ashes of the Baptist Bible Union. Early in its history the GARBC expressed its fundamentalist convictions of (1) opposition to modernism and compromise, (2) opposition to conventionism and denominational control, (3) the desire to raise a standard in these days for local churches committed to evangelism, missions, and solid Bible teaching and preaching, and (4) a commitment to practice principles of personal lifestyle separation standards.

These convictions resulted in allowing into the formal fellowship of the GARBC only those churches which had cut their ties with the old Northern Baptist Convention and other groups made up of a mixed multitude. The Association also decided that they would not own or control any mission societies, educational institutions or agencies of compassion. Rather, they would give formal approval on an annual basis to fundamentalist Baptist mission, educational and social organizations which sought this approval and agreed to the stated standards of the fellowship of churches.

The annual national meeting of the churches was to be primarily a time for fellowship and good preaching. A National Representative was hired to be a spokesman for the Association of churches, and any necessary business between annual meetings was to be handled by a Council of Fourteen (later expanded to eighteen) made up of persons nominated by the churches and elected by messengers from the local churches at the annual meeting. No more than four of the eighteen Council members could be "salaried servants," that is, employees of the approved agencies. A modified form of the historic New Hampshire Confession of Faith with a premillennial statement was formally adopted, resolutions stating the Association's convictions often passed at annual meetings, and literature items were published by the Association which clearly articulated the position of the group.

And so the GARBC grew, beginning in the 1930s with a handful of churches, and reaching a high in 1984 of 1,603 fellowshipping churches. The GARBC web site (www.garbc.org/churches), however, presently lists 1,398 churches in its fellowship, a total drop of 205 churches over the past 20 years. Why has this happened? Several possible reasons could be given. First, just as in other evangelical and fundamentalist groups, evangelistic zeal and the starting of new churches have dropped off. Complacency, materialism, and a preoccupation with other things have all contributed to this decline.

Second, a number of controversies at various times have led some to drop their GARBC identification. In the mid-1970s the Association sought to clarify and update their doctrinal statement, which they did. In the process, the issue of Calvinism with its view of unconditional election was raised, discussed and debated, resulting in some local churches on both sides of the issue deciding to drop their affiliation. Others were disheartened when "approved" agencies broadened out and no longer wanted the exclusive GARBC identification. In 1985, Los Angeles Baptist College became The Masters College with Dr. John MacArthur as its president and dropped its GARBC connection. In 1987, Western Baptist College began allowing faculty and trustees to be members of Conservative Baptist churches; this action disturbed many Regular Baptists who knew of the CBA's broadened position. And in 1999-2000 Grand Rapids Baptist College and Seminary, which had merged with Grand Rapids School of the Bible and Music and changed its name to Cornerstone University, dropped its GARBC relationship.

Some also felt that the Association was more greatly influenced by personnel from its approved agencies than it should be, and desired to see the GARBC constitution amended so that no agency personnel could serve on the Council of Eighteen. This issue came to a head at the 1990 annual GARBC meeting at Niagra Falls, NY. That same year some had circulated the names of strongly traditional and fundamentalist men as possible nominees to the Council of Eighteen. At the Niagra Falls meeting this prior communication was described by some as underhanded and even unethical, causing further discouragement.

Third, the greatest reason perhaps for the slowed growth in the GARBC would be the broadening out and polarization within the movement. There were significant rumblings by 1986 among GARBC pastors that the fellowship of churches, as well as its approved agencies, were tolerating things which were inconsistent with the GARBC's earlier formal position. The vocal response of some leaders within the Association was to disclaim any drift and to accuse those so concerned as being divisive and adding petty issues to their fundamentalist position. This response resulted in the formation and rise of Regular Baptists for Revival. These people urged a revival of and a return to the GARBC's former convictions. These convictions were, after all, the "glue" which held the Regular Baptist movement together. That polarization is still present in the Association, although some of those concerned have dropped their Regular Baptist affiliation. Recognition of this polarization led some leaders to believe that the approval system had outlived its usefulness, and at the annual meeting in 2000 the approval system was dropped and

a new partnering and networking of various agencies introduced.

Whether or not this new arrangement was an improvement remains to be seen. With some partnering agencies today also identifying with the Southern Baptist Convention, the Council of Eighteen is recommending the dismantling of the partnering arrangement at the 2004 GARBC annual meeting. The critical issue facing the GARBC today is whether it will hold the line on ecclesiastical separation (both primary and secondary), personal separation standards, and an attitude of militancy regarding its historic convictions. There appears to be an identity crisis on the part of some as to just what the historic position of the GARBC has been. A review of the literature items which the GARBC had widely published (especially numbers 6, 10 and 12 dealing with the GARBC position on separation) is important here.

Dr. Paul R. Jackson wrote:
"Separation is an eternal principle. It is God's commandment that we must separate from unbelievers. *Further, in the third place, it is God's commandment that we separate from our brothers when they walk in disobedience.* Now I know that many men who will go along forthrightly, and shout Amen as far as we have gone, will object at this point, and say 'I believe in full fellowship with all evangelicals.' Well, God doesn't!. . .

"One of the great Biblical doctrines of the faith is separation from the world and from apostasy. Men that are tearing our churches and our associations apart in fighting Biblical doctrines are causing divisions contrary to doctrine. We have a responsibility to walk separately from our brethren who insist upon being unbiblical in these areas of their conduct (from "The Position, Attitudes, and Objectives of Biblical Separation," GARBC Literature Item #12).

And Dr. David Nettleton wrote:
"The great Apostle had never allowed himself to be drawn into anything which would limit his message. He could say with a clean conscience, 'I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you *all the counsel of God.*' Why cannot many say that today? In my case, and in many other cases, it was due to a desire to reach a larger audience and to work with a larger group of Christians. Many have been carried away from full obedience by a noble-sounding motto which has been applied to Christian work, 'In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity.' Some things are not essential to salvation but they *are* essential to full obedience, *and the Christian has no liberty under God to sort out the Scriptures into essentials and non-essentials!* It is our duty to declare the whole counsel of God, and to do it wherever we are. . . .

"Today we are choosing between two alternatives, A LIMITED MESSAGE OR A LIMITED FELLOWSHIP. If we preach all of the Bible truths, there are many places where we will never be invited. If we join hands with the crowd, there will be the limiting of the message of the Bible. . . .

"God has given us a great message to preach. It contains the glorious Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, but it is not limited to that Gospel. He has commissioned us to preach the Gospel, baptize our converts, and indoctrinate them (Matt. 28:19, 20). He has given us the very best system of follow-up work, which is the building of Bible-believing churches and joining converts to them. He is calling us to loyalty and obedience.

"We need no new message. We need no new method. We need only the spirit of obedience found in Paul when he testified, 'For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God'" (from "A Limited Message or a Limited Fellowship," GARBC Literature Item #10).

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