

A Brief History of Free Will Baptists

By Eric Thomsen

Sixty Free Will Baptists from 12 states gathered at Cofer's Chapel at 7:30 on a Tuesday evening in November 1935. They came to the small, brick building in Nashville, Tennessee, to form a new fellowship they called the National Association of the Original Free Will Baptists. In one sense, the meeting was the beginning of an exciting, new journey. In another way, it marked the end of a long and sometimes difficult quest across more than 300 years and two continents.

Free Will Baptists are one of the oldest religious bodies in the United States. They did not split off from any other group, and they don't go back to a single person, time, or place. In fact, you have to return to Elizabethan England before the colonization of America.

In the year 1600, most Christians were members of the Church of England, the official state church. In fact, it wasn't legal to be part of any other church. But the solid walls of state control had begun to crack. Religious dissenters gathered to worship on their own terms, holding to their own doctrine. In doing so, they risked their necks.

One such group fled London in 1607. Led by clergyman John Smyth, they escaped to Holland where they were influenced by two important doctrines. One was the Baptist doctrine that insisted that infant baptism was not valid – that one had to be baptized after an intelligent acceptance of the Gospel. Smyth baptized himself and then baptized his followers. The act clearly renounced all ties to the Church of England. They formed their own distinct identity as a congregation of baptized believers.

The other significant influence was Dutch Arminian theology. Arminius, after whom the doctrine was named, rejected the prevailing Calvinistic views of his day, which taught that all events are pre-determined by God, without freedom of choice for man. In contrast, Arminius taught that men are free, that Christ died for all men, and that every man is free to accept Christ and be saved or to reject Christ and be lost. Smyth's group embraced this doctrine as the proper interpretation of the Bible.

In 1611, when religious persecution began to decline in their homeland, Smyth's "Baptists," led by Thomas Helwys, returned to England. The date marks the establishment of the first Baptist church on English soil. The group soon became known as "general" Baptists because they taught the Arminian doctrine that Christ died for all men – a general (universal) atonement. By 1633, a second Baptist congregation had been established. This group preached Calvin's doctrine that Christ died only for the "elect." They were called "particular" Baptists. Before long, Baptist congregations had sprung up throughout England – some general, others particular.

Consequently, when Baptist congregations were established in the American colonies, they represented both groups. However, most Baptist historians generally agree that the first Baptist churches in America were general Baptist in doctrine. The particular Baptists, however, were better organized and more dogmatic in their preaching. Before long, their influence prevailed, and many general Baptist congregations were swayed to particular Baptist doctrine. Some of them, however, maintained the doctrine of general atonement. Among these were the earliest "freewill" Baptist churches in America.

One particular group of churches emerged in eastern North Carolina in 1727, some 50 years before the American Declaration of Independence, under the leadership of Paul Palmer. We know little about the influences that contributed to his doctrine, but history documents his ministry along the banks of the Chowan River, preaching general Baptist doctrine and establishing Baptist churches.

By 1752, 16 churches had become part of this fellowship. The Palmer churches continued to expand until 1750, when particular Baptist preachers proselytized the group, and most converted to particular Baptist doctrine.

A few of Palmer's congregations remained true to the doctrine of their founder, and it was from this nucleus that modern Free Will Baptists in the southeastern United States sprang, explaining why Free Will Baptists still have a strong presence in North Carolina today.

A different situation developed in New England where the prevailing churches were Congregational, and Calvinism continued to be the prevailing doctrine. In 1780, a young preacher named Benjamin Randall began preaching "free will" doctrine and immediately found himself in hot water with the religious establishment.

Consequently, Randall and his followers – no longer in good standing with their former church – organized a Baptist congregation in New Durham, New Hampshire, on June 30, 1780. From its humble beginnings, the movement flourished. By 1820, the movement consisted of 220 churches throughout New England. The group called themselves "Freewill Baptists." Although the name was originally used in derision, it stuck.

Historians are not sure exactly when the name "freewill" was officially accepted, but Arminian doctrine was commonly referred to as "free will" doctrine in those days. It was only logical that these Arminian Baptists, whether Palmer's or Randall's be called "free will" Baptists.

The Randall movement, as it came to be known, grew rapidly and far outstripped other Free Will Baptists in organization and expansion. The movement spread throughout New England and westward across Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, and Illinois. By 1900, 1,500 churches in more than 20 states enjoyed an energetic foreign missions outreach, several educational institutions, a vigorous antislavery society, and a thriving publishing ministry. The movement had been instrumental in the abolition movement,

including the founding of Storer College in Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, the first college for freed slaves.

In 1910-1911, the movement, which had come to be known as the General Conference of Free Baptists, merged with the Northern Baptist Convention and lost its identity as a Free Will Baptist organization. Naturally, some churches refused to cooperate with the merger, especially in Southern Ohio, Southern Illinois, West Virginia, Missouri, and points west. These scattered Free Will Baptist congregations gradually began to look to the Free Will Baptists in the Southeast for fellowship.

Free Will Baptist groups continued to spring up sporadically across the southeastern United States, often with no visible connection with other Free Will Baptists. One group in western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee probably did not have any connection with the Palmer-Parker churches. That seems certainly true of a group in Middle Tennessee, where the origin apparently lies within Separate Baptists. Another story from West Alabama describes how the first Free Will Baptist preacher rode on horseback to Carolina to be ordained before returning to organize a Free Will Baptist church in the area.

While we cannot trace all the connections, we do know that by 1910-1911, when the northern (Randall) line of Free Will Baptists merged with the Northern Baptist Convention, Free Will Baptist churches existed in the Carolinas, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas with little or no connection with the Randall movement or no connection with each other. These churches were largely unaffected by the merger between the Randall movement and Northern Baptists.

From time to time, efforts were made to organize these scattered churches, and many regional associations came into existence only to fail. One that lasted, however, was the General Conference, organized in 1921, in Nashville, Tennessee. It included representatives from Georgia, the Carolinas, Tennessee, and Mississippi. Another was the Cooperative General Association, organized in 1916 at Pattonsburg, Missouri. The Cooperative Association had representatives from Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Arkansas.

Until 1935, these organizations existed separately, one representing western Free Will Baptists and Randall churches that had not merged with Northern Baptists. The other represented churches in the southeastern United States. In November 1935, the two organizations met at Cofer's Chapel Free Will Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee, joined hands, and formed the National Association of Free Will Baptists. At first, they intended to remain two distinct organizations, but the unity and cooperation they experienced soon made this unnecessary.