

# Deliver Us From Evil: Baptists, Slavery & Freedom

A historical perspective of  
American Baptists' continuing  
commitment to prophetic justice

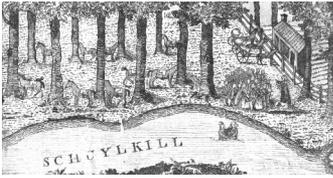
American Baptist Home Mission Societies

“For the love of Christ urges us on...”

2 CORINTHIANS 5:14-15



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Baptism scene in Schuylkill River near Philadelphia, Pa.



In 1651 Obadiah Holmes, pastor of a Newport, R.I., Baptist church, was publicly whipped for evangelistic work in Boston, Mass.

## The Militant Minority

In the 17th and early 18th centuries, Baptists—a religious minority in America—struggled against legal pressure to attend and pay taxes to Congregational and Anglican churches. Many refused, suffering beatings, imprisonment and loss of property. Mainstream Christians labeled these militant Baptists “fanatics” and “troublemakers.”

## The Great Awakening

Despite persecution, the number of Baptists grew rapidly. Revival and growth, which began in New England in the 1740s, reached many Southern colonies by the 1760s. Most converts came from classes of poor whites and Africans who “awakened” to spiritual concerns. These new Baptists invigorated old congregations and began many new ones, including a few exclusively African.

## The Struggle Continues

When the revival period was over, New England counted more than 312 congregations, and Virginia 300-plus, with more than 35,000 members. Freedom to preach and plant churches was no longer an issue for Baptists. Efforts to overcome laws that favored “established” religion, however, continued well into the 19th century, as Baptists were increasingly raising questions about another established institution—slavery.



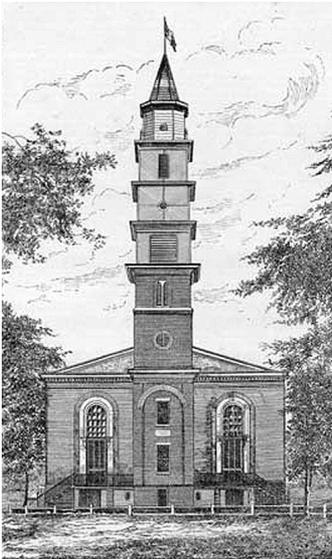
Meeting in the African Church,  
Cincinnati, Ohio, 1853

## Preach It

By the mid-1700s, many denominations were preaching to slaves, but Baptists attracted the largest number of African converts. Some of the appeal was Baptists' informal, emotional preaching and the incorporation of "call and response," the West African practice of listeners' verbal interaction with speakers.

## Teach It

The Baptist conviction that each believer should study the Bible and discern God's revelations led to great change in slaves' lives. Matthew Moore, a white Baptist preacher, taught a slave, George Liele, to read; Liele went on to teach, preach and baptize many converts, including Andrew Bryan, founding pastor of the First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Ga.



First African Baptist Church,  
Savannah, Ga.

## The Slave Preacher

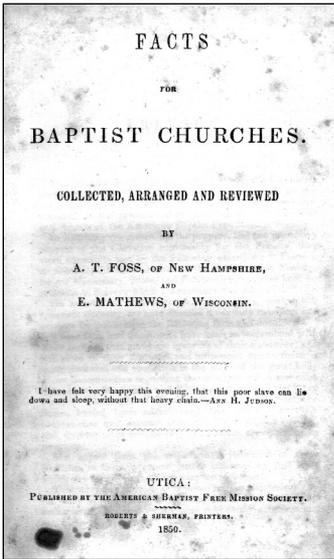
Yet in mixed race congregations, Africans often were not equal participants. One white Virginian observed: "...among the African Baptist[s] in the southern states, there are a multitude of preachers and exhorters whose names do not appear on the minutes of Associations. They preach principally on the plantations to those of their own colour and their preaching, though broken and illiterate, is in many cases highly useful."



George Liele



Andrew Bryan



Book published by American Baptist Free Mission Society to share abolitionist vision, 1850



Isaac Backus

## Revolution and Revelation

When large numbers of Africans joined Baptist churches before the Revolutionary War, slavery became an important issue in the church. And the war—fought for the ideals of personal freedom and liberty—created a social context for advocating its end. The Clifton Park Baptist Church, New York, expressed the sentiment that other white congregations and Baptist groups were feeling during the late 18th century: *“We believe that all mankind are born Equally free and that none has a right to Enslave or hold them in Bondage, let their colour be what it may and we have no fellowship with such unfruitful works of Darkness.”*

## The Constitution vs. Slavery

Some Baptists, however, swallowed their distaste for slavery, citing legal or constitutional concerns. Isaac Backus, a white Baptist, refused to oppose the U.S. Constitution because of antislavery sentiment: *“No man abhors that wicked practice more than I do...But let us consider where we are and what we are doing. In the article of confederation no provision was made to hinder the importing of slaves.”* Backus hoped slavery would die a gradual death on its own.



**The Economics of Human Bondage**  
 After the war, slavery's revolutionary issues of freedom and morality quickly faded—undercut by its economic profitability and the desire among Baptists to move into circles of influence in their communities. Queries about slavery disappeared from minutes of association meetings during the early 1800s, and Baptists grew into an American mainstream religion that viewed slavery as a burden to shoulder and bear.

**Biblically Justified**

Even several Southern Baptist associations condemned slavery following the American Revolution, but their voices fell silent too—for fear that talk of emancipation might encourage slave rebellions. These Baptists stopped apologizing for slavery; some even defended it as a positive good, sanctioned in Scripture. In 1823 Richard Furman, pastor of First Baptist Church in Charleston, S.C., wrote in part: *"...Had the holding of slaves been a moral evil, it cannot be supposed, that the inspired Apostles, who feared not the faces of men, and were ready to lay down their lives in the cause of their god, would have tolerated it, for a moment, in the Christian church."*



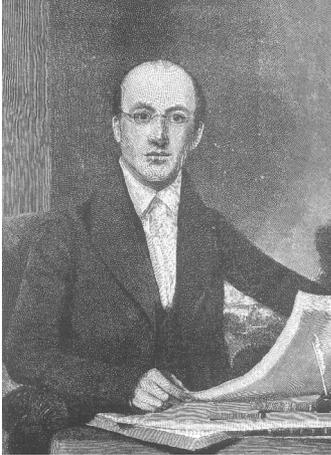
Auction house, Whitehall Street  
 Atlanta, Ga., 1864



Front page of "The Liberator," 1859

## Biblically Condemned

Baptists in the North strongly disagreed that slavery was scripturally based. In fact, most grassroots support for antislavery petitioning came from Baptists. So fervent was abolitionist sentiment in New England that it led to the formation of the American Baptist Anti-Slavery Convention.



William Lloyd Garrison

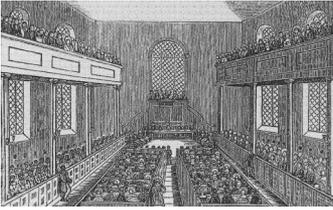
Resolutions passed at an 1838 meeting of the New Hampshire Baptist Anti-Slavery Society showcase the abolitionists' vehemence: "... *We regard the institution of American Slavery, as it exists in the Southern States, opposed to the gospel of Christ, and morally wrong. ... We view the plan of immediate and entire emancipation as the only safe and practicable mode of freeing our nation from the shame and sin of Slavery.*"

## The Church Condemned

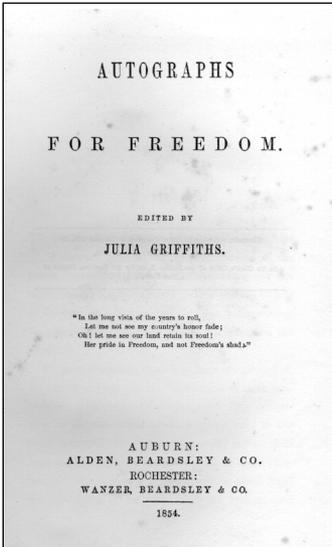
Influenced by African leaders, William Lloyd Garrison, son of a pious Baptist woman, became a rabid supporter of immediate emancipation—which he promoted through his Boston newspaper, *The Liberator*, and the interracial American Antislavery Society that he founded. This society grew increasingly critical of American churches as "the bulwark of slavery."



Slave family, Aiken's Landing, Va., 1861



Triennial Convention of Baptists in America, First Baptist Church Richmond, Va., 1835



Gift book published by Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society as a fundraising and consciousness-raising project

## A House Divided...

In 1840 the American Baptist Anti-Slavery Convention warned Baptists that if they did not deal with slavery, "further Christian fellowship would be impossible." The Alabama State Convention reacted by withholding mission dollars until the national societies declared their sentiments. At its 1841 meeting in Baltimore, the Board of the General Missionary Convention issued a statement of neutrality. In response, antislavery Baptists formed a separate American Baptist Free Mission Society.

## ...Cannot Stand

By 1844 it became clear that Baptists would divide over slavery-related issues. The General Missionary Convention tried to preserve unified support for mission work by passing a gag rule that barred mention of slavery at meetings. But Georgia Baptists, testing The American Baptist Home Mission Society, asked that a slaveholder be appointed a missionary to the Cherokee Indians. The executive board declined the application, 7 to 5.

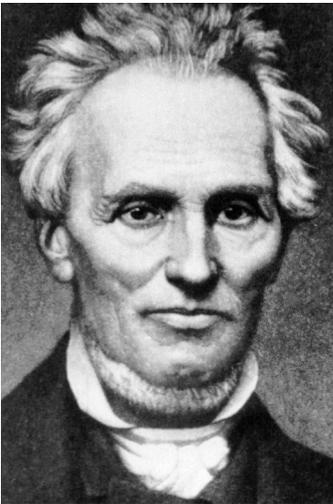
As a result, Southerners withheld funding from national societies, organizing their own Southern Baptist Convention in 1845. Home missionaries appointed prior to the division had to choose between the old board and the new Southern board. All but one remained loyal to The American Baptist Home Mission Society.



Meachum built a boat like this for his  
"School for Freedom"



Dred Scott



John Mason Peck

## A Pioneering Partnership

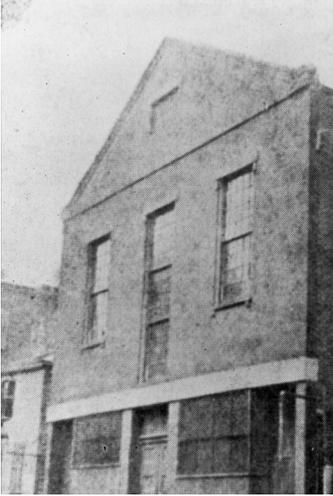
Commissioned as a missionary to the Missouri Territory by the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the USA for Foreign Missions, John Mason Peck met John Berry Meachum—a former slave who had been able to buy his freedom, along with his father's—in St. Louis, Mo., in 1818. Meachum and his wife became Peck's steadfast assistants, and in 1825 Peck ordained this African pioneer, who went on to serve the First African Baptist Church in St. Louis for 38 years. During his ministry, Meachum advised Dred Scott, whose lawsuit for freedom reached the U.S. Supreme Court.

## The Three Rs

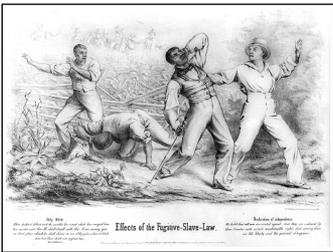
Meachum and Peck worked side by side, providing education for Africans. Rather than submit to an "unjust" law passed by Missouri making it illegal to educate Africans, these Baptist pastors continued their work through a clandestine operation disguised as Sunday school. Not long after its inception, however, the sheriff closed this school in the basement of an African church.



Runaway slaves on the Rappahannock River, Va., 1862



Twelfth Baptist Church, Boston, Mass.



"Effects of the Fugitive-Slave-Law" print published in New York, 1850

## Education with a River View

Undaunted, Meachum built a steamboat, anchoring it in the middle of the Mississippi River, where the state had no jurisdiction. By rowboat, he transported students to his floating "School for Freedom" where hundreds of African children learned their "three Rs" in the late 1840s and 1850s.

One of Meachum's outstanding students, James Milton Turner—a founder of Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Mo.—became the first African American U.S. diplomat, appointed by President Ulysses S. Grant as ambassador to Liberia in 1871.

## What Price Freedom?

Baptist slave preacher Anthony Burns took to heart the lesson that Christ came to set all men and women free. In 1854 Burns boarded a boat in Richmond, Va., escaping to Boston, only to be recaptured under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. His case sparked a battle involving 2,000 antislavery Bostonians, both African and white. Burns was returned in shackles, but, within a year, Boston's Twelfth Baptist Church, an African congregation, and its pastor, William Grimes, raised \$1,300 to purchase Burns' freedom.



A "Contraband" School



Joanna P. Moore and students  
Nashville, Tenn., date unknown



Slave family, Beaufort, S.C., 1862

## A Great Good

Mission projects ministering to African Americans began in the 1840s, immediately after formation of The American Baptist Home Mission Society, but became especially critical during the Civil War. In 1861 Solomon Peck went to Edisto Island and Beaufort, S.C., to work with former slaves. With President Abraham Lincoln's permission, he offered religious services and schooling to thousands of African Americans. Reports indicated Peck did "a great good in preaching to them and protecting them from the depredations of white men." He labored throughout the war, recruiting more teachers from the North, including his own daughters.

## A Different Kind of Christian Soldier

In 1863 Joanna P. Moore traveled to the Mississippi River's Island No. 10 on her own—supported only by government rations and her home church—to work with "contraband" refugees. Eventually The American Baptist Home Mission Society appointed her an official missionary, but without pay. In remedy, Chicago Baptists formed the Women's Baptist Home Mission Society in 1877, appointing Moore its first missionary and raising funds for her. Despite threats from vigilante groups like the Ku Klux Klan, Moore taught reading by training women to teach their families at home in "Fireside Schools."



Friendship Baptist Church, Atlanta, Ga., where Spelman College was founded



Lumpkin's Jail, Richmond, Va., a seed of Virginia Union University



Slave quarters, Port Royal, S.C., 1862

## Free to Learn—Finally!

Responding to the Civil War's devastation, many groups shipped food and clothing to freed people, but The American Baptist Home Mission Society—understanding that true emancipation meant education—assisted with founding and supporting industrial institutes, academies, colleges and seminaries for African Americans.

## From Humble Beginnings

Schools for freed people began in humble settings like the abandoned Lumpkin's Jail and former slave quarters where Richmond Theological Seminary (now Virginia Union University) was founded. The American Baptist Home Mission Society solicited for a special "Freedmen's Fund" that supported dozens of educational institutions. Some institutions originally begun by African Americans, such as Arkansas Baptist College in Little Rock, were rescued with Society funds, and the Society made annual appropriations to Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary (now Spelman College)—begun in the basement of Friendship Baptist Church by the Woman's American Baptist Home Mission Society.

## A Thirst for Knowledge

The number of American Baptist schools for freed people gradually increased. By the turn of the century, 69 Baptist women worked in African American schools and colleges from Alabama and Arkansas to Texas and Tennessee. In 1900 the aggregate enrollment in 31 institutions aided by The American Baptist Home Mission Society was 8,664—3,775 males and 4,889 females.



Morehouse College, Atlanta, Ga.



W.E.B. DuBois

## The Grand Plan

Henry L. Morehouse, The American Baptist Home Mission Society secretary from 1879 to 1891, led during a time when African American institutions struggled to find funds and staff, and the Society was channeling half of its annual budget into educational work among freed people.

*"The Making of a Race is our mission"* was Morehouse's motto for a grand plan to assist with education, in its broadest sense, of "Negro" men and women.

## The Talented Tenth

Morehouse believed providing liberal arts education was key to establishing African American leadership, disagreeing with the vocational "hands-on" education emphasized by Booker T. Washington. Morehouse argued: *"By means of well equipped Christian schools... we may lay hold of the talented tenth man and send him out with mental breadth and balance for the elevation of his people."* W.E.B. DuBois borrowed this phrase from Morehouse, joining the chorus of African American leaders emphasizing the importance of liberal arts education opportunities—comparable to those offered by the very best white schools—for African American students.



Physical education class, Spelman College, Atlanta, Ga., year unknown



Benedict College, senior class year unknown

## TIDINGS

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### SLOW THROUGH THE DARK

Slow moves the pageant of a climbing race;  
 Their footsteps drag far, far below the height,  
 And unprevailing by their utmost might,  
 Seem faltering downward from each hard won place.  
 No strange swift-sprung exception we; we trace  
 A devious way through dim uncertain light—  
 Our hope, through the long-vistaed years, a sight  
 Of that our Captain's soul sees face to face.

Who, faithless, faltering that the road is steep,  
 Now raiseth up his drear insistent cry?  
 Who stoppeth here to spend a while in sleep,  
 Or curses that the storm obscures the sky?  
 Heed not the darkness round you, dull and deep—  
 The clouds grow thicker when the summit's nigh.

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

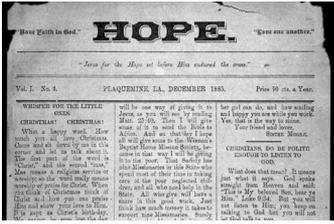
Monthly publication, Woman's American Baptist Home Mission Society, 1911

## Times Were Changing

Many early teachers of African Americans were white. By the beginning of the 20th century, however, Miss L.H. Upton, dean of Spelman Seminary (now Spelman College), observed "wonderful change" taking place: *"Not only are all the public schools of the South for Negroes taught by Negroes, but Negroes are on the faculties of schools carried on by Northern societies, and sometimes constitute the entire teaching force."*

## Spelman Spelled Success

In 1906 Spelman Seminary took pride not only in its survival, but also in the social change its successful graduates were making: 87 percent of all graduates had taught since leaving the school; 41 percent were still teaching; 17 percent worked as housekeepers; and 7 percent were continuing their studies. Also, 58 alumnae taught in schools aided by The American Baptist Home Mission Society, 40 worked as teachers for city grade schools, and six were serving as missionaries in Africa.



Monthly periodical associated with Joanna P. Moore's Fireside Schools, 1885



Abyssinian Baptist Church, New York



Publications about race relations for American Baptists, circa 1960

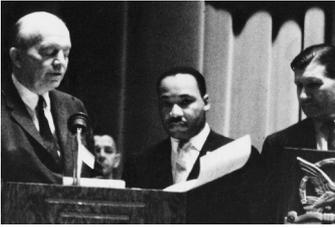
## Hope Comes in Many Guises

During the first half of the 20th century, the Woman's American Baptist Home Mission Society continued its ministry to African Americans through Fireside Schools and Joanna P. Moore's magazine, *Hope*, which delivered Bible lessons and other helpful material to more than 20,000 homes. In addition, the Woman's American Baptist Home Mission Society opened Christian centers in several Northern cities in the 1930s, mainly to help African Americans in need.

The American Baptist Home Mission Society continued to fund teachers at five schools for African Americans and supported Mather Industrial School at Beaufort, S.C. During the Depression, the Society organized thousands of women to ship food, home supplies and Bibles through its White Cross circles to African Americans in the South.

## Breaking Down Barriers, Building Bridges

In the 1940s The American Baptist Home Mission Society established 11 Educational Centers for pastoral leadership "to emphasize the necessity for Christian people to develop the attitudes and accept responsibilities which will break down racial barriers and bring real brotherhood." The strength of New York City's Abyssinian Baptist Church, one of the earliest African American Baptist congregations, was a deciding factor in locating the first center targeting African American pastors and migrants from the South in Harlem.



Martin Luther King Jr. receives the Edwin T. Dahlberg Peace Award, 1964



Demonstration, Brooklyn, N.Y., 1963

## We Shall Overcome

In 1954 when the American Baptist Convention endorsed *Brown vs. Board of Education*—the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that overturned segregation in schools—it urged Baptists to stand against segregation in housing and employment as well. So after the Woman's American Baptist Home Mission Society and The American Baptist Home Mission Society combined ministries in 1955, programs aimed at solving racial problems continued as part of the new organization, The American Baptist Home Mission Societies.

## God's Grace in Desperate Times

At a time—1957—when teachers could be dismissed from public schools for mentioning Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., The American Baptist Home Mission Societies published in “Home Mission Digest” the script of a King speech delivered in 1956 at the American Baptist Assembly at Green Lake, Wis. King's words ring true even today:

*“It is impossible to look out into the wide arena of American life without noticing a crisis in race relations. ... Those of us who struggle against racial injustice must come to see that the basic tension is not between the races ... [but] between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. ... God grant that we will wage the struggle for justice with dignity and discipline ... to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice.”*

# TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE



Image featured in many antislavery publications

Today, American Baptist Home Mission Societies continues this legacy of prophetic justice—rooted in centuries of courageous and committed ministry to victims of injustice—through Immigration and Refugee Services, Intercultural Ministries, Socially Responsible Investing, the Children in Poverty initiative and more.

Three African Americans have served American Baptist Home Mission Societies as executive director since the organization's founding in 1832: Dr. Paul Nichols (1989 – 1990); the Rev. Dr. Aidsand F. Wright-Riggins III (1991 – 2015); and the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Haggray (2015 – present).

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The “Deliver Us From Evil: Baptists, Slavery & Freedom” exhibit was produced by National Ministries (now known as American Baptist Home Mission Societies) in 2007 to honor the 175th anniversary of The American Baptist Home Mission Society, the 130th anniversary of the Woman’s American Baptist Home Mission Society and the 100th anniversary of American Baptist Churches USA.

The exhibit premiered at the 2007 ABCUSA Biennial in Washington, D.C., and was shared with American Baptists at the 2009 ABCUSA Biennial in Pasadena, Calif., and the 2013 ABCUSA Biennial/Mission Summit in Overland Park, Kan.

With deep appreciation, American Baptist Home Mission Societies acknowledges the contributions—of both time and resources—to this exhibit by the American Baptist Historical Society.

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