

# Historical Perspective

By Dr. Stephen LeBar, National Executive Director of CBAmerica in 2006

## Early History

The Conservative Baptist Association came into existence in 1947 with the purpose of providing a fellowship of churches that hold in common certain basic convictions concerning core issues of biblical faith and Baptist polity. The very word "conservative" gives identity to the movement, because the intent was to conserve (to keep, to retain) the basic biblical distinctives that have historically distinguished Baptists as a people of God. Furthermore, Conservative Baptists have, from their inception, been deeply involved in a worldwide missionary outreach.

The initial core of churches was comprised of those departing from the Northern Baptist Convention (now American Baptist Churches) over issues of theological liberalism, abandonment of Baptist polity and centralized denominational control. In 1943 the Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society (now WorldVenture) had been formed because of similar issues and the appointment of missionaries under the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society regardless of their liberal positions.

In a series of conferences held in 1947, about 3,000 people endorsed the recommendations of an appointed committee. Included was a reaffirmation of faith in the New Testament as divinely inspired, trustworthy and authoritative. The outcome of those meetings was the formation of CBA of A. The Conservative Baptist Home Mission Society (now Mission to the Americas) was formally launched in 1950.

By 1953 there were 500 churches in national association, and an additional 240 churches fellowshipping in state associations. From the outset, fellowship was offered to "autonomous Baptist churches without regard to other affiliations." Myron Cedarholm, the second General Director, listed several fundamental principles of the movement. (1) It was a confessional body, declaring its fundamental doctrines. However, Cedarholm went on to say, "The CBA believes that details of interpretation and application are the prerogative of the local church, under the illumination of the Holy Spirit." (2) It was a fellowship of independent churches. He emphasized that the Association is not a denomination. It has no power to make decisions for the churches or to impose programs upon them. It has no desire to establish centralized authority, ecclesiastical connectionalism or dependent organizations that the churches must support. "However, there rightly exists among the churches an interdependency." (3) It had "no organic relationship to the organizations which its churches support." Each of the agencies was independent of the others. (4) It refused to make contributions a prerequisite for membership.

There has always been some confusion as to how the church association relates to the two mission societies. As early as 1949, the leaders of the three groups recognized the "growing confusion that exists in the minds of many people, who regard these various conservative organizations as one and the same." The consensus was that each should function as an autonomous group and should seek to serve its own constituency. Nonetheless, in the years that followed, numerous unsuccessful attempts were made to bring all under one organizational umbrella. The latest attempt came to a halt in 2004.