

Those People Called Conservative Baptist

By Bruce L. Shelley (Adapted)

On a chilly day in 1943 in Chicago, the temperature hovered around zero most of the day. Newspapers on Michigan Avenue told about the Russian advance against the Germans at the Dnieper River. But across town at the Tabernacle Baptist Church, the men and women who climbed the steps to the auditorium of the church had neither the weather nor the war on their minds. They were gathering to do the work of God. These men and women, after prayer, ratified the recommendations of earlier meetings, elected eighteen directors, and appointed their first missionary couple, Mr. and Mrs. Eric Frykenberg, for service in India. This was the birth of CBFMS, the Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society, known as CBI and now WorldVenture.

Most of us consider 1943 a long time ago, a time before the atomic bomb, before the Beatles and Viet Nam, before satellites, terrorism, crack and AIDS. But in these forty-four years, Conservative Baptists have sent nearly a thousand missionaries to Japan Brazil, Indonesia, Austria, Zaire and twenty-three other countries, and contributed significantly to the resurgence of American evangelicalism.

Conservative Baptists, counting about 230,000 members within their churches, are one of the mid-size Baptist groups in America. Their history and mission, however, make them a bit unusual in the list of Baptist bodies. In just over four decades Conservative Baptists have created what they like to call "the movement." Like many Americans, Conservative Baptists have their reasons for rejecting bureaucracies, especially religious bureaucracies. So, to avoid traditional denominational structures, Conservative Baptists choose to work within "the movement." They like the suggestions of action, growth and mission.

The movement rallies about twelve hundred churches, chiefly in the northern United States, in the Conservative Baptist Association of America. But the movement also serves hundreds of other churches through WorldVenture; Mission to the Americas, Southwestern Conservative Baptist Bible College in Phoenix, Arizona, and three theological seminaries, Denver Seminary, Western Seminary and the Conservative Baptist Seminary of the East. Since each of these agencies and schools has its own governing board and budget, the Conservative Baptist movement is not one, but seven organizations functioning like cooperating interdenominational or "para-church" ministries. The comparison to interdenominational schools and missions is appropriate because Conservative Baptists are a part of the larger picture of American evangelicalism during the last fifty years.

The 1940's mark not only the birth of Conservative Baptists, but also that of a host of well-known evangelical ministries including the National Association of Evangelicals, Youth for Christ, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, and the National Sunday School Association. During World War II and the years immediately following, millions of evangelicals felt that the hour had come for them to recover their mission to America and the nations beyond. Billy

Graham is the best-known spokesman of this recovery, but Conservative Baptists have played a significant part. Conservative Baptists saw the hand of God in the creation of CBFMS, because they were committed to an orthodox missionary society for their churches. The background of that concern lies in the fundamentalist modernist struggle within the Northern (now American) Baptist denomination.

As early as 1920 conservative pastors tried to establish doctrinal standards for missionary agencies within the Northern Baptist Convention. But every attempt to get the denomination to accept such standards proved futile. Finally, in 1943, after renewed but frustrating efforts to create theological tests for the Northern Baptist Convention's missionary program, several hundred conservative churches joined in the call for the creation of the Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society. The Conservative Baptist Association of America was organized when it became apparent, at the Northern Baptist Convention meeting at Grand Rapids, Michigan (1946), that the older convention would not tolerate a competing missionary agency within its structures.

From the start, then, Conservative Baptists had two concerns: missionary expansion and adherence to the gospel. Accepting, affirming and sharing the gospel are not the only ways to reflect the Christian faith. Some Christians come to the faith with moral concerns. They ask, "What is Christianity doing to help people in the world?" Others believe that to be a true Christian, you must belong to the right church. That is the institutional expression of religious faith.

Still others understand Christianity through some religious experience that they have had. That is the experiential approach to faith. Each of these has an element of truth. But Conservative Baptists have always insisted that the first word to say about Christianity is how much God has done for us. By participating in the widening witness of evangelicals in America, Conservative Baptist agencies grew rapidly during the first fifteen years of their independent ministry. In the late 1950's, however, the movement was drawn into a conflict within evangelical circles. The vast majority of Conservative Baptist churches cooperated with evangelical para-church agencies like the National Association of Evangelicals and, specifically, with the Billy Graham Association. A militant minority within Conservative Baptist circles, however, taking their cues from Graham's critics, insisted that Graham's "cooperative evangelism" was dangerous and to be avoided. These were the "fundamentalists" within Conservative Baptist ranks.

After seven years of intense debate over second separation, the militant minority, consisting of about two hundred churches, left Conservative Baptist ranks and found a new home in fundamentalist circles. These fundamentalists demonstrated a danger that seems to accompany confessional Christianity. It is what we may call "scribalism." It is an arrogant confidence in the power of religious dogmas. It is the assumption that if we know the right truths in our heads, we will have the spiritual reality in our hearts. "Scribalism" often shows its true colors when it attempts to refine doctrine on top of doctrine. It loves systems. It is given to word games. It builds walls between us and them by insisting that every truth has to be defended with holy passion. And all seem to be equally important for a believer's salvation.

Conservative Baptists rejected "scribalism" and have kept their focus on the essentials of the gospel.