

FWB DISTINCTIVES

(Prepared for the State Association of Arkansas Free Will Baptist – Aug. 8, 2007)

Beeves, Mutton, Goats, and Chickens

“The thirty-sixth annual session of that part of the church of God or Christ, commonly known as Free Will Baptist State Association, met in annual conference with Union Grove Church three miles east of Atkins, Pope County, Arkansas, September 28, 29, 30 and October 1, 1933.” (*Thursday through Sunday*.) ...Large crowds attended every session, numbering from one to three thousand. One thousand and forty-eight took lunch at the table Saturday noon.

“The people of Union Grove community assisted by the Antioch association had made arrangements to serve the noon and evening meals at the church. All meats were barbecued by Uncle Dick Hunter of Russellville (colored). Seven beeves, five muttons, twelve goats, some pork and one hundred and fifty chickens were barbecued...The meats were well cooked and nicely handled which brought compliments from every partaker...Everyone seemed to enjoy this part...” (*One FWB distinctive is our love of fellowship. This has caused some to suggest that our name should be changed to “Free Meal Baptist.”*)

[Saturday Morning Session] “...At this interval Luther G. Pressley and wife with their splendid ladies quartet, Olevia and Mildred Tullas, Ople Cartwright and Morecio Sowell made their arrival. The convention was very much honored by their talented presence and favored with a number of splendid songs suited to the occasion by them...We consider at this time that we had two of the best quartets in the state present. The other, Vay, Fay, Lena and Vernia Watkins, two sets of twins from the same family, from Balews Chaple Church, Grubbs, Ark., and are referred to in our minutes as the Blue Birds. Believe it or not, they all can sing...

[Saturday Afternoon Session] “...W.M. Guin at this special interval made a special request that the Blue Birds sing, ‘I Dreamed I Searched Heaven for You’ for some special ones who were unsaved; mentioning some of their names. The beauty and grandeurs of Heaven were so forcefully brought out in these songs; the pressure was more than the audience could bear; conviction seized upon many of the unsaved and as a result there were nine conversions witnessed and several who had grown cold and indifferent were reclaimed. Parties who had not spoke to each other for more than a year laid aside their indifferences and greeted each other with a Christian love. The spirit of the convention possibly reached its climax at this interval when seemingly the whole audience burst into praise and shouted for joy. Both saint and sinner showed their intensive interest in the victory which marked an unusual happening at the close of a business session.”¹

Imagine that! Conversions, reconciliations, emotionalism, and a spirit of repentance and revival. All at a state meeting!

A Very Brief FWB History

¹ Taken from the *Minutes of the Thirty-sixth Annual Convention of the Free Will Baptist State Association* (1933). My notes were a copy given to me by Bro. Bob Isbell.

The first Baptist Church on English soil, founded in 1612, was a General Baptist church. Our roots are deeply intertwined with their movement. The General Baptists were part of a larger group of believers who suffered persecution at the hands of the Church of England. Many of these believers fled to Holland, Amsterdam, and eventually to America, via the Mayflower.

In 1620 the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock, and founded a new colony. Whether or not any “freewill” Baptists were on the Mayflower is unknown.² What is known is that in 1638, the first Baptist church in America, founded in Providence, Rhode Island, was a General Baptist (“freewill”) church. The first known Free Will Baptist Church in America was founded in 1727 by Paul Palmer in Chowan County, North Carolina. Palmer’s group can be traced directly to the English General Baptists through his wife, Johanna, through her father, Benjamin Laker.

In 1770, English evangelist, George Whitefield toured the Colonies, holding revivals. A young, 21-year old New Englander named Benjamin Randall, heard Whitefield preach on September 28. Two days later, September 30, 1770 Whitefield was dead, and Randall was convicted of his sins. Randall reflected, “The first thoughts that passed through my mind, were, Whitefield is now in heaven, and I am on the road to hell.”³

² In the October / November 2005 issue of *One Magazine*, David Crowe writes about a possible connection between Free Will Baptists, the first Baptist church in Providence, Rhode Island, and John Alden, a Pilgrim Father who signed the Mayflower Compact. The title of the article is “From Plymouth Rock to Antioch.”

³ John Buzzell. 1827. *The Life of Elder Benjamin Randall*. Published by Hobbs, Woodman & Co. (3).

Upon his conversion, Benjamin Randall joined the Congregational Church, but departed in 1775 over liberal doctrines. In 1776 Randall was baptized and joined a Baptist church, but soon realized his beliefs did not align with their strict Calvinism. Then, in June of 1780, after much personal reflection, prayer, and Bible study, Randall started a church in New Durham, New Hampshire. A stated, foundational belief of his new church was the free will of man and the universal call of the gospel.⁴ In 1799 the name “Freewill Baptist” appeared in the church’s minutes. In 1804, the state of New Hampshire confirmed the name, and the religion, “Freewill Baptists” by legislative act.

The Northern movement (Benjamin Randall’s) grew rapidly but merged with the Northern Baptist in 1911. A small remnant, that did not merge, reorganized into the Cooperative General Association of Free Will Baptists. The Southern movement (Paul Palmer’s) struggled, losing churches to the Particular Baptists (Calvinistic), but managed to organize into associations and conferences. In 1921, the Southern churches organized into a General Conference. These two movements—Northern and Southern—which sprang up independently, united on November 5, 1935, at Cofer’s Chapel Free Will Baptist Church, in Nashville, Tennessee, becoming the National Association of Free Will Baptists. (Notice: The minutes I read preceded the formation of the NAFWB by two years.)

Who are we? What makes us unique? *We are a denomination that found its identity in what we were against instead of what we were for.* Stated more positively: *We are a denomination that is not afraid to stand up and fight for our beliefs.* We are not afraid of conflict. (At times it seems like we enjoy conflict.) We were born out of

⁴ William F. Davidson. 1985. *The Free Will Baptist in America: 1727-1984*. Nashville, TN: Randall House Publications (218).

conflict—both in England (Church of England) and in America (extreme Calvinism). We are not afraid to speak our minds, swim against the current, and call a spade a spade. This is both our strongest trait and weakest link.

Free Will Baptists are passionate people. What we believe, we believe to our core. We are passionate about Jesus. We are passionate about the lost. We are passionate about the Bible. We are passionate about missions. When our passion is aimed in the right direction there is nothing we will not attempt and nothing we cannot accomplish.

It was passion that kept our English General Baptists brothers from compromising when persecuted. It was passion that kept the struggling churches in North Carolina from folding under the pressure of extreme Calvinism. It was passion that caused our denomination to take a stand against slavery, against alcohol during the prohibition, against liberalism, against neo-orthodoxy, against connectional church government, against fanatical Pentecostalism, against abortion, against the lottery, and against same-sex marriages. This passion, born out of conflict and conviction, is our distinctive. That is who we are.

FWB Distinctives

What is a Free Will Baptist? I get that question a lot. It usually comes in the form: *What's the difference between Free Will Baptist and Southern Baptist?* My favorite answer is to say, "Well, if you're a pastor, the difference is about \$40,000.00 a year.

Who are we? Neither Benjamin Randall's movement in the North or Paul Palmer's movement in the South were in a hurry to formulate a Free Will Baptist theology. The reason for this reluctance was that our beginnings in America were revivalistic in nature. As a result, our early preachers were without formal training, and prone to intimidation by the proselytizing of the theologically trained Calvinistic preachers. However, Free Will Baptists did manage to define themselves.

Free Will Baptist doctrine is defined by three ideas; free will, free grace, and free salvation. Our central distinctive doctrine is the belief that each person has been created in the image of God, and has the freedom to think, feel, and act. *Free will* means that everyone has the ability to choose to reject or accept Christ.

Free grace means salvation is totally dependent on the grace of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. No one is outside the reach of God's grace and everyone is a candidate for salvation.

If grace is free, it only stands to reason that salvation is also free. God is just, therefore, grace must be offered freely to everyone. Thus, predestination and election, is not about me, but about Jesus. In other words, since the foundation of the world, God predetermined that all who place their faith in Jesus will be saved. Before the beginning of time, God elected that salvation would be through grace alone, by faith alone, in Christ alone. In other words; free will, free grace, free salvation.

But we have other distinctives besides doctrine. What makes us unique? As already mentioned, we are passionate. Another distinctive is that we are conservative. Always have been. Always will be. The phrase, "liberal Free Will Baptist" is an oxymoron. We live life conservatively. Our denominational departments have

conservative budgets. Our church buildings are modest. And our doctrine is fundamental. We believe the Bible from cover to cover, and most of us believe the cover as well. In our dress, in our lifestyles, in our politics, and in our beliefs, we are a conservative group of people.

Another distinctive is we are “blue-collar.” Our denomination would look a lot different if Randall’s movement would not have merged with the Northern Baptists in 1911. The remnant that did not merge eventually did merge with the Southern movement in 1935, and the Southern movement was more rural than the Northern one. As a result, to this day we are more “blue-collar” than “white-collar.” This is not a criticism. In fact, it is quite the compliment. Our people represent the best this land has to offer. We are a grass-roots denomination. The people in our churches are hard-working, family loving, flag-waving, apple pie eating, salt of the earth, people. They are people who will go the extra mile and sacrifice the extra dollar for what they believe; and they will also tell you exactly what they think and where they stand. But through it all, they will love you and accept you unconditionally.

One last distinctive, in our theology, we are middle-of-the-road. Free Will Baptist theology avoids extremes where extremes are not needed. For example: We reject the extreme doctrine that once a person is saved they are always saved regardless of how they live their lives; but we also reject the extreme doctrine that a person can be saved today, lost tomorrow, saved again the next day, and lost again the next. We believe strongly in eternal security, we simply believe it is conditional on faith in Jesus Christ. We believe strongly in apostasy, we simply believe it is a willful, knowing, rejection of Jesus, and not the result of a one-time moment of weakness. We reject antinomianism,

but we also reject repeated regeneration. We believe, whole-heartedly, in the universal call of salvation, but we do not believe everyone will be saved.

Another example of our balanced theology centers on when and how Jesus will return. We strongly believe in His real, visible, physical return, but believing in the rapture or not may depend on what side of the Mississippi River you reside or what college you attended. You can be a Free Will Baptist in good-standing if you are a premillennialist or an amillennialist. You can be a pre-trib, mid-trib, post-trib, or no-trib, as long as you believe in the literal return of Jesus Christ.

We don't believe in a connectional form of church government, but we do believe in the importance of belonging to local and national associations. We believe in both pastoral authority and congregational rule. We believe God calls people into ministry, but those who have answered the call should submit themselves to the local presbytery for ordination. Theologically, we strive to be centered instead of extreme.

What are our distinctives? We are a group of passionate, conservative, blue-collar, middle-of-the-road Christians who believe in free will, free grace, and free salvation. We did not come to this conclusion because of what someone else said. We reached this conclusion through personal Bible study and experience. That's what we are. That's what makes us unique.

The Challenge

Our distinctives have served us well, shaping who we are; and while I think we should be proud of *who* we are, we cannot be satisfied with *where* we are. We are not

where we need to be. There is so much more to be done. How do we stay who we are, but change so we can move to where we need to be?

Here are my suggestions, and they are suggestions only, and they are mine only. Please feel free to disagree. If you do disagree, don't be upset with whoever is responsible for asking me to share.

The challenge is: *How do we keep our distinctives while moving forward?*

1. By learning to be flexible.

We have to be willing to be stretched beyond what is comfortable if we want to grow. One problem with being a passionate people is that our passion is, at times, misdirected. We think others should be as passionate as we are about the same things. If someone doesn't share our passion, the tendency is to be rigid ("taking a stand for what is right"); instead of recognizing that our differences may not be in purpose, but in methodology. We must be willing to allow the next generation the freedom, and flexibility, to try new things, to step out on a limb, to push the envelope, to study the Bible for themselves, and to find their own path of living out their faith, reaching their generation. In a society that is becoming less Christian, and in a world where information doubles every 18 months, doing things the same way we did 50 years ago will not work. *Our **message** must not change; but we must allow more flexibility in our **methods**.*

2. By walking the narrow road without being narrow minded.

There's a park in Russellville called Bona Dia. This park has a path that meanders around a couple of small lakes and ponds. In places the path is narrow and quite snaky. If you walk this path with your head down, looking only in one direction, you will miss the beauty of this place. And you may step on a snake, or twist your ankle on a twig, or get run over by a bicycle. The best way to walk this narrow path is to constantly look to the right and left, as you look ahead.

Thus, the only way to safely walk a narrow path is to be broadminded. I am not suggesting that we be so open minded that our brains fall out. But neither am I suggesting that we be so close minded that we choke off all oxygen.

3. By getting out of our own way.

As we learn to be flexible, and learn to walk the narrow path without being narrow minded, I believe we will get out of our own way; and once we get out of our own way, the Holy Spirit will be allowed to guide our steps. The problem is, we want to be in control instead of Him—and so we get in our own way. The problem is, we are so afraid of losing who we are that we stay put—and so we get in our way.

We are a group of passionate, conservative, blue-collar, middle-of-the-road Christians who believe in free will, free grace, and free salvation. We can move forward, without losing our uniqueness, if we will learn to be flexible, walk the narrow road without being narrow minded, and get out of our own way.

Benjamin Randall submitted his entire life to God and answered the call to preach in what has become known as his “cornfield experience.” In a cornfield he wrote the following in his journal. The date was April, 1777. Notice, as I read what he wrote, that you will see someone who was flexible, committed to walking the narrow road, and willing to get out of his own way. We would be wise to do the same:

Dear Lord, Here I am, I am Thine. Thou hast made me and I have been the care of Thy kind providence continually, though most unworthy. Lord, take me, and use me as seemeth good in Thy sight. If it is Thy will that I should preach the gospel, Lord, take me and send me where Thou wilt; only go with me and let me have the assistance of Thy Spirit. For Thou knowest, Lord, and Thy Spirit has made me know, that I am not able to do anything of myself, but through Thee I can do all things.

Lord, I do not count my life dear to myself, so that I may win souls to Jesus Christ. I will, by Thy grace, wear out my life in Thy cause. My greatest happiness shall be to die a martyr for the gospel of Christ. Here, Lord, is also my dear wife and children. I give them up to Thee. I know not what will become of them, or how I shall provide for them; but, O Lord, Thou knowest and I cast them on Thee. Now, O Lord, accept of this hearty surrender, which I make for Christ's sake. Amen.