

Baptist Student Union: Roots and Early Pilgrimage

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“A campus ministry discovers the course of its authenticity and authority by discovering its roots.” This statement was made to a student work class at Southwestern Seminary by Dr. Robert L. Johnson while serving as an executive of National Institutes of Campus Ministers.

And all of us have heard varying versions of this observation: “The movement that fails to learn from its past is destined to repeat the same errors.”

But even if we are not searching for the authenticity and authority of Baptist Student Union nor for avoidance of our collective errors, I appreciate the privilege of sharing with you as we do a bit of root-digging and then give our attention to the beginnings and development of what we call Baptist Student Union.

As I begin, let me make two statements which I hope will clarify my presentation of this paper. First, I have written in the first-person even though it assumes to be an historical treatment. But, I would find it difficult, indeed, to be wholly objective in light on my years of involvement in this ministry. In fact, I have made no serious effort to avoid subjective comments and personal evaluations but sincerely hope I have made the distinction between fact and feeling.

I need also to say that I have tried to follow the suggestion of the program makers in limiting my material to a discussion of the Baptist Student Union Movement. Hence, I have not attempted to examine the historic, basic, essential, and continuing ministries which Baptist churches have provided for their students. That deserves a treatment of its own.

Some roots are deep even if they are not primary. As a matter of fact we do not know just how deep are those which go back to that first college in the colonies: Harvard, founded in 1636, only 16 years after the Plymouth landing.

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But, we do know from extant correspondence that by the end of the century—and we guess long before that—Harvard students were participating in voluntary religious exercises in what were known as Harvard Religious Societies which, at some periods, met secretly to avoid the ridicule of fellow-students. This development is somewhat surprising in view of the fact that the students were subject to required courses in religion, to daily chapel, and to compulsory and lengthy Sunday services. The societies developed along three lines: theological discussion and debate; religious fellowship, prayer, and revivalism; and foreign missions. This was the background from which the rapid spread of Christian student organizations to other campuses came at the beginning of the 1800's.¹

The First Great Awakening (1725-1750) saw a tremendous surge of spiritual revival particularly in the New England colonies and more particularly in the Congregational churches. There is every reason to believe that many college students were involved in spiritual experiences within their church fellowships. And, in spite of the prevailing secularism and the intellectual currents during the Enlightenment, the Christian student groups continued but were certainly minorities on each campus.

Though some historians contend that the First Great Awakening had run its course by 1750, it appears that the Baptist cause reaped its greatest growth in the aftermath of the Awakening. This was especially true in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia which experienced the coming of large numbers of Separate Baptists from northern states.²

Despite this growth of Baptist churches in the South and the spiritual dynamics evidenced by Separate Baptists generally, there was still a prevailing attitude of indifference and even hostility among them regarding "higher learning." Feelings of resentment had developed from earlier times against the established churches, primarily the Congregationalists and the Anglicans. Baptists had been forced, except in Roger Williams' Rhode Island, to pay taxes for the support of the establishment preachers who, they felt, were too highly educated at the expense of Holy Spirit power. For these and other reasons Separate Baptists, in particular, were suspicious of everything that they associated with higher education. But, much of this negativism was destined to change as a new century dawned and the Second Great Awakening was ushered in with the arrival of the 1800's.

And, this brings us to one of the most significant and best known events in the sequence of student ministries beginnings and to several dramatic developments associated with that event. I refer to the Haystack Prayer Meeting in the summer of 1806 on the Williams College campus, a Congregational school, in Massachusetts. The story is too familiar to require more than sketching. Several undergraduate students were meeting in the meadows to pray for revival on their campus. They were caught in a sudden rain storm and took shelter under a haystack. While there, they continued to pray. One of the group, Samuel G. Mills, a freshman, shared his world missions dream and challenged his fellow students to join him in launching a worldwide missions movement. Three of the four joined Mills in his commitment and other Williams students were responsive to the challenge. Two years later Mills led those offering themselves for overseas service to organize a student missions group to be known as the Society of Brethren.

Caught up in the spirit of a worldwide witness, the members of the society began an intensive letter-writing campaign to other college campuses, sharing their personal experiences. They also sought opportunities to tell their story and share their dream in all contacts with students from other campuses. The responses were encouraging. The level of intensity was rising. Societies of Brethren began to appear in other colleges. Inevitably, the question arose, "Who will help us to go across the world to witness for Christ? Who will send us?" The Congregationalists had no missions society or board, and, indeed, there was no such organization anywhere in the colonies. So, prayerfully and boldly, students from the colleges took their appeal to the Congregational leadership. Two years later (1810) there was organized the first missions board in the New World, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (Congregational). By the time two more years had passed the Board sent out five young missionaries: Adoniram Judson of Brown University (originally named Rhode Island College in Providence); Samuel Knott, Jr., of Union College; Samuel Newell of Harvard; and Gordon Hall and Luther Rice both of Williams College.³

We will not forget the prevailing spirit of revival, already identified as the Second Great Awakening, which was gaining momentum during this first decade of the 1800's. And, with that in mind, we are persuaded that this series of dramatic events in

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the beginnings of an American-born world missions program was vitally related to the work of God's Spirit throughout the colonies. However, from your and my perspective, there is a deep sense of satisfaction in being reminded of the roles God gave to a bunch of students—whose dreams, commitments, and faith-in-actions resulted in both immediate and long-range missions victories—in the homeland, college campuses, and around the world.

Students of campus ministry roots have pointed out that the missions movement thus began led rather directly to the formation, a few years later, to the student YMCA and YWCA and still later to the organization of the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM). And, some of these students also like to trace the beginnings of the American Bible Society and the American Educational Society back to this early missions thrust.

And, of added interest to us as we seek to identify some of our BSU roitage and the connectedness of Christian student experiences from these six, action-packed years (1806-1812) to the birth of BSU more than 100 years later, is the fact that by 1850 approximately 100 campuses had Student Missions Inquiry Groups sometimes called Missions Volunteer Bands, stemming directly from the "Haystack" days. Adopting inter-campus communications techniques of the Societies of Brethren, these local campus mission fellowships exchanged missions information in almost chain-letter fashion. Identities beyond their own groups were established—identity in particular with a worldwide mission program. Groups united in prayer revivals. Though separated geographically and with mailings as their primary medium of exchange, they established, in 1815, the hour of nine o'clock in the evening as a common time for "A Concern of Prayer," which eventually grew into the World Day of Prayer for Students.⁴

Home Mission endeavors sprang up as churches were founded on the frontier, and mission offerings were secured. A final word about this period (roughly the first 50 years of the 1800's): Although missions was the central concern and unifying catalyst throughout the period, there were some student groups on the campuses which focused upon the development of the devotional life, theological and ethical issues such as anti-slavery and temperance . . . *But still, from 1636 to 1858 (222 years) no campus-wide come-one-come-all Christian student program had emerged. We praise the Lord for giving Christian students*

the abundantly fruitful "special-interest" groups but surely He was ready to give the students of the next half-century an instrument through which, potentially, they could reach out to the whole academic community—without (and this was of critical importance) the loss of mission fires and the close fellowship which would preserve their "sense of belonging."

And in the good year 1858 that very gift arrived on one campus: the University of Virginia, and soon thereafter at the University of Michigan and then spread rapidly throughout the nation. I speak, of course, of the Student Young Men's Christian Association (Student Y.). Many of the older campus religious societies were absorbed in this broader-based movement.

The YM program reads like the program of an organization very familiar to you and me:

- worship
- Bible Study (individual, group, and correspondence courses)
- personal witnessing
- evangelistic campaigns
- missions (local and worldwide)
- ministries (in jails, poor houses, boys' clubs in slum areas, rescue missions, etc.)⁵
- moral, ethical, and social issues and actions.

The Student YM was thought of as a "lay" movement and was designed to work in cooperation with the churches and saw itself as inter-denominational. In principles and practice it was also interracial and intercollegiate; and, interestingly enough, YM, from the first, was open to young women students who in 1886 established the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). The two campus Christian entities worked in close cooperation.

To the Student YM must go other distinctions in the field of campus ministries.

They pioneered in creating what we know as the Cabinet-Committee organizational pattern which provided amply for widespread assumption of student responsibilities and significant representation of the whole campus. The YM also discovered the need for full-time leadership. The title "secretary" was chosen for these men (lay persons) who in the beginning served for one year only but later were privileged to serve for unlimited periods.⁶ Other firsts for Inter-collegiate YMCA were

the development of regional, state, and national conferences and the establishment of on-campus or near-campus facilities and later the development of permanent-type conference centers.

An important question to you and me: Were the YM and YW inter-denominational or non-denominational and what was their relationship with the churches? The Y-people felt that they were inter-denominational in that they were committed to the principle of working with the churches, and there are many evidences of such cooperation. However, as one would assume, the nature of the relationship apparently varied with the situations and the persons involved. But, most importantly, now there was a living student ministry model with purpose, program, structure, and methodology for immediate use and as a continuing resource for emerging student ministry movements down to the present moment.

In addition to our indebtedness to Student Y for providing us guidelines for our Baptist Student work, it should be noted that throughout our SBC territory untold numbers of Baptist students participated in Y-Work, served in leadership roles, and were immeasurably blessed of God through it—on both Baptist and tax-supported campuses. So, by design or by necessity, Southern Baptists delegated to the YM and YW much of their responsibility for on-campus ministries with their students.

The point has been made that the Christian student missions emphasis of the early 1800's was carried forward on the campuses through the Missions Inquiry Groups and Missions Volunteer Bands. I have observed also that missions was, from the beginnings, a basic element in the Y programming—a “core area” if you please—and the next major development gives ample testimony in support of this fact.

In 1886 the Student YMCA sponsored a two-week Inter-collegiate Conference with a primary emphasis on missions and invited D. L. Moody, who was a strong Y supporter, to serve as conference chairman. Mr. Moody accepted and the conference was held on the campus of his school, Mt. Hermon College in Northfield, Massachusetts. At this conference 100 young men volunteered for mission service overseas. They came to be called “The Mt. Hermon Hundred” and involved themselves in spearheading deputations to campuses in an unparalleled nationwide effort that electrified the student world.⁷

Within two years the Mt. Hermon impact had aroused

world missions interest and commitment to such a high level of intensity—with hundreds volunteering for career missions service—that it was thought wise to design a special national structure which was known as the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM) organized in 1888.

The SVM's stated purpose was five-fold: to lead students to consider the claims of foreign missions as a life-work; to guide volunteers in their pre-appointment study and missions activities; to organize all volunteers in an organized, aggressive movement; to secure a sufficient number of volunteers to meet the demands of the mission boards; and, to motivate interest in and support of foreign missions by students who remain at home.

You and I know that missions challenges, missions education, and missions service preparation were being carried on in Southern Baptist churches and would have been provided even if there had been no SVM. The fact remains, however, that many Baptist students who went out to serve under our Foreign Missions Board were strongly influenced by experiences in the SVM and in the continuing YM and YW concentration on missions. Surely, we are grateful to God that Southern Baptists have long since become strongly involved in all categories of Christian missions and that we in Baptist Student ministries are called upon to play a key role in the discovery, the nurture, and in the provision of in-service missions experiences for our own students.

Denominational efforts to effect campus-based student work on state university campuses began in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Among the first of the major denominations to initiate work with students was the Presbyterian Church, USA. They started their work at the University of Michigan in 1887 and by 1905 a center had been built and a full-time student pastor called to the work.

The Congregationalists inaugurated student ministries at the University of Wisconsin in 1906, and the Lutherans began on the same campus the following year.

Soon most of the major denominations were involved in developing their own programs. In the majority of these early approaches to student work, the technique involved establishing a church near the campus and calling a "university pastor." Usually the congregation took the name "University Church"

with the denomination's name included in the identification of the fellowship. The home of the university pastor was considered to be the "home-away-from-home" for the students. Several denominations created student work foundations for the purpose of funding and guidance, such as the Methodists' Wesley Foundation.

In 1909 the Disciples of Christ added another dimension to the university pastor approach by establishing Chairs of Bible at the universities of Michigan, Virginia, Texas, Kansas, and Missouri with course credit granted by the institutions for the elective work offered in the Bible Chairs.

We Southern Baptists adopted both the University Church and the Credit Bible teaching programs. Neither was developed in all of the states of the Convention, but the Bible Chair ministry was—and continues to be—very fruitful in Texas where presently there are more than thirty chairs on college and university campuses and they constitute an important factor in Texas Baptist Student Union movement under the supervision of the Division of Student Work.

In the fullness of time—if not a bit later than that—Southern Baptists felt they should establish their own organization for ministering with college and university students. The year was 1921, and the enabling action was taken by the Convention meeting in Chattanooga. As recorded in the Convention minutes, the vote was unanimous "to create the necessary organization to begin and promote a southwide program of Baptist Student religious activity."

The Convention suggested that the work be promoted under the direction of an Inter-Board Commission, the members of which should be the secretaries of the four general boards of the Convention and of the Woman's Missionary Union.

The Commission invited Dr. Frank H. Leavell, then serving as Secretary of the Baptist Young People's Union (BYPU) of the Georgia Baptist Convention to head the new program. Dr. Leavell accepted the opportunity and began work on January 1, 1922. Memphis was chosen for the location of Dr. Leavell's office, which was described as one room, two desks, a typewriter, a stenographer, and an executive secretary—with a dream. And Dr. Leavell commented in later years that this small office was "undergirded by a tremendous conviction on the part of a few and by the prayers and resources of the great Southern

Baptist Convention.”⁹

But, I did not start an account of the story of BSU’s beginnings at the real point of beginning! In fact, there were already Baptist Student Unions at work on a half-dozen campuses in Texas when Dr. Leavell moved into his office. But, again, I have jumped the gun in my narrative. And, I doubt seriously if anyone—even those most intimately involved as students or as denominational and church workers in Texas—really knew exactly where the starting blocks were. There is ample evidence that many had been praying and yearning for the day when Baptists would develop their own work with students.

But, let me take you all the way back to 1903. Three Baylor students, who were active in the Y on campus traveled by train to Ruston, Louisiana to attend a Southwestern Regional YMCA Conference. They and several fellow-students had been talking and praying for a Baptist-sponsored “student religious program” (as they called it). And, the Ruston experiences, brought into sharper focus by their sharings during their return train ride to Waco, caused the three to feel that God had given them a vision of a denominational organization for enlisting and guiding students of Texas. The student reporting this vision-experience was to become the first Texas BSU Secretary almost exactly sixteen years from that day.¹⁰

This student-with-a-vision was Joseph P. Boone, in preparation for the ministry. But, more later about him and his work. We move, in following Boone’s account, to another historic day in BSU’s future: October 21, 1905. I give you Joe Boone’s own words:

On the 21st day of October, 1905, a group of six Baylor students, believing that God would lead in the launching of such a program for students, formed a prayer covenant, agreeing to pray for divine guidance in the life of each member and to pray that Texas Baptists might be led to assume responsibility for a religious program for Baptist students. They prayed that this program would include the calling out of Christian leaders in Christ’s worldwide missionary program and provide a greater support in the Baptist churches for worldwide missions. Two of these six students were themselves planning to go as missionaries in a short time; Basil Lee Lockett to Africa, and Harry H. Muirhead to Brazil. The other four members of the covenant

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group were Julian H. Pace, Tandy Y. Adams, Joseph M. Dawson, and myself.

Despite the fervent prayers of the Baylor Covenanters and of many other Baptists, it would be fourteen more years before their prayers were answered. It is difficult to identify the causes for the delay in a brief statement. Here are some of the more obvious factors in the thinking of Texas Baptists. The Student YM and YW movements were very popular with students and other college people. As already cited, many Baptist students occupied leadership roles in the Y's and some entered the YM/YW field vocationally after graduation. They liked the job the Y was doing. Some of the administrators of public colleges feared more denominational involvement in the academic communities. There were those on Baptist campuses who thought they did not really need another student religious organization. Still others—perhaps the majority—were not opposed to a Baptist student movement but did not believe sufficient funds were available. Some of the state Sunday School and BYPU leaders in the state were opposed to a new student organization, arguing that the emphasis on student ministries could best be done through these two church organizations. And who knows? Perhaps it just was not God's time for it, although the convinced Covenanters and others were not willing to blame the Lord for the painful delay.

In any event, by 1919 a number of elements converged to convince the Texas Executive Board that the time had come for action. Again, the Y-Movement played a part. Although still strongly supported by many Baptists, there were others, particularly pastors, who had become upset about what they interpreted as "liberal" tendencies in the Y literature and programming and felt, somewhat ironically, that the YM and YW people were being too successful in their involvement of Baptist young men and women, resulting in a growing disinterest among Baptist students in their home and college churches. Also weighing rather heavily on the side of creating a denominational organization was the obvious effectiveness of the denominations which had already established their student ministries. And those who hesitated because of the cost were relieved by the Texas Baptist enthusiasm over the response to the Seventy-Five Million Fund Campaign, a portion of which was ear-marked for "new work." Hence, when the proposal was presented to the Texas Executive Board in the fall of 1919, it

was adopted without a single dissenting vote, and Dr. Boone was invited to accept the state leadership position. His response was positive, and he went to work early in 1920.

A student work conference was held in the summer of 1920 which was attended by fifteen students and five workers with students. It proved to be a history-making event. A name was adopted to be submitted for consideration by the Executive Board. The name chosen was *Baptist Student Union*, and Boone stressed the prayerful consideration given to each of the three words. Four years later the name was adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention for the Convention-wide student movement.

Three months later the first State BSU Convention was held at Howard-Payne College with 250 registered.

The first "complete" Council-Committee BSU organization was structured at Baylor College (now University of Mary Hardin-Baylor) where the 1921 State BSU Convention was held. Dr. Boone authored the first *BSU Manual*.

Frank Leavell, the first SBC Baptist Student Union Secretary, was a man of good Mississippi stock, the fifth of nine boys in the well known Leavell family, and a man of many gifts. A graduate of the University of Mississippi, he had a brief period of experience in the business world before going to work as BYPU Secretary in Georgia. His work with young people gave him valuable experience for his ministry with college students. He was a man of keen intellect, deep spiritual commitment, and warm out-going personality.

In addition Leavell was a man of decision and action as reflected in the four objectives which he set for himself during his first year in the office:

1. To visit each Baptist school
2. To publish a monthly magazine, *The Baptist Student*
3. To issue monthly bulletin board posters for each school
4. To hold, in the spring of 1923, three regional student conferences at one of which each school may be represented.¹¹

All four goals were realized. And several hundred students attended the first regional conferences. The man with a dream

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was off and running—according to plan followed with discipline, hard work, and high enthusiasm.

NOTES

1. Sabin P. Landry, Jr., *Review and Expositor*, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1972, p. 311.
2. Roy Fish, *Lord's Free People*, Ft. Worth, Evans Press, 1976, pp. 103, 104.
3. Robert H. Eads, *The Campus Ministry*, Valley Forge, The Judson Press, 1964, pp. 66, 67.
4. *Ibid.* p. 67
5. C. Howard Hopkins, *History of the YMCA in North America*, New York, Association Press, 1951, pp. 286, 187.
6. Richard C. Morse, *My Life with Young Men*, New York, Association Press, 1918, p. 164.
7. John R. Mott, *Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions*, New York, Association Press, 1946, pp. 10-15.
8. Clarence P. Shedd, *The Church Follows Its Students*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1938, p. 16.
9. John A. Held, compiler, *A Brief History of the Baptist Student Union*, Nashville, Broadman Press, 1946, pp. 20, 21.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 7.
11. Claude V. Broach, *Dr. Frank*, Nashville, Broadman Press, 1950, p. 77.