

# I WAS THERE

William Lippard

## Doctrinal Finality at Grand Rapids

The framers of the (American Baptist) Convention's Constitution in 1907 used the term "Convention" because they were afraid to use the term American Baptist Church because they feared such usage would give offense to hosts of believers in the historic Baptist principle of local Baptist church independence and autonomy who held that the organized ecclesiastical life of American Baptist churches consisted of a voluntary association of multitudes of local and independent Baptist churches over whom no organization could exercise any doctrinal or political or ecclesiastical control....

For all American Baptists affiliated with the American Baptist Convention, the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a period of storm and turmoil. For nearly fifty years, whether as individuals or local churches or associations or conventions, they were plagued by creedal dissensions, doctrinal disagreements, and theological controversies...between the fundamentalists and the liberals and modernists.... In 1921 at the annual convention in Des Moines, the fundamentalists compelled the Baptist Home Mission Board to accept a huge gift with creedal conditions attached, from a wealthy donor in California. Some months earlier the Baptist Foreign Board had declined a similar gift with similar creedal conditions attached from the same donor....

(In 1946) the fundamentalists realized they had one more chance to impose their doctrinal views upon all Baptists. So they converged on the annual American Baptist Convention at Grand Rapids which proved to be the convention with the largest registration of delegates and visitors in Baptist history. The presiding officer was Mrs. (Anna Canada) Swain who proved to be a parliamentarian of the first order. The convention, because of the doctrinal issues involved, was the stormiest, wildest, most tumultuous in American Baptist history. Throughout all the storm, confusion, vituperation, name calling, and other aspects of unruly mob convention, Mrs. Swain presided with superb dignity, rare calmness, and exquisite composure... Three times during that wild session the howling mob gave its applause to Mrs. Swain for the unassailable fairness of her parliamentary decisions....

At a similarly stormy and wild convention 22 years earlier in 1922 at Indianapolis when the convention almost got out of control, Dr. Cornelius Woelfkin introduced, as a substitute to the creed which the fundamentalists wanted the convention to adopt, the following resolution:

"The American Baptist Convention affirms that the New Testament

is the sufficient ground of our faith and practice, and we need no other statement."

...A similar parliamentary procedure was introduced at Grand Rapids...in an effort to put an end to the tumultous, acrimonious wrangling over the attempt to have the convention adopt a creed,

“Resolved: that we reaffirm our faith in the New Testament as a divinely inspired record and therefore a trustworthy, authoritative and all-sufficient rule of our faith and practice. We rededicate ourselves to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and call our entire denomination to the common task of sharing the whole gospel with the whole world.”

...In editorializing that momentous session, I wrote in *Missions*: “Never before were major issues of concern to American Baptists set forth so clearly, pleaded so persuasively, discussed so thoroughly, debated so fairly, argued so honorably, and settled with such finality. Those who settled the issues at Grand Rapids were neither liberals, modernists, fundamentalists, conveservatives. They were Baptists!”

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William Lippard was editor of the American Baptist publication, *Missions*, for over four decades. These excerpts have been taken from a typescript that was apparently part of his memoirs, written c.1974.

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