The Struggle for the Soul of Frontier Baptists: The Anti-Mission Controversy in the Lower Wabash Valley

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With the exception of the slavery issue, the anti-mission controversy in the early part of the nineteenth century divided American Baptists like no other question in the denomination's history. In the Old Northwest, especially in the Illinois and Indiana regions of the lower Wabash valley, the struggle caused considerable damage, splitting not only churches but also communities and families. The fight among frontier Baptists, which seemed to concern doctrinal questions, really involved an array of political, economic, regional, and cultural considerations. These problems also represented many points of social cleavage found in the nation. To understand better the bitter feud among Baptists in the early nineteenth century, several threads of conflict that have been present since the colonial era should be examined.

All Baptist bodies have historically held to certain principles that set them apart from other Protestant groups. They believe, for example, in baptism of adults only, total immersion as the only proper mode of baptism, and congregational autonomy. Despite the similarities among Baptists, many issues have long created divisions. Over time these differences have often led Baptist congregations to adopt more specific names to differentiate their particular group from other Baptist bodies. Baptists trekking from the New England and Middle Atlantic colonies into Virginia and the Carolinas labeled themselves either Separate or Regular Baptists. Separate Baptists of the South stood firmly against written or stated creeds of faith and remained highly revivalistic. Because the Separates did not emphasize creeds, Arminian believers, who were called General or Free

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1 Leon McBeth, a leading historian of the Baptist denomination, has observed that the anti-mission movement created the first major doctrinal controversy for the Baptists. See Leon McBeth, The Baptist Heritage (Nashville, Tenn., 1987), 377.


Will Baptists, found shelter in Separate congregations. These free will professors contended that God made salvation available to all who believed in Jesus Christ as their savior. Contrary to most Baptists, Free Will Baptists argued further that because all persons possessed free will, they could choose or not choose salvation. They also held that someone, after their first acknowledgment and acceptance of Christ, could once again fall into sin and lose salvation. Because the philosophical points of free-will theology were developed by the Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius (1560–1609), believers in free will were called Arminians. Most Baptists, however, followed the tenets of John Calvin (1509–1564), believing that God selected a special few to be saved. The Baptist and other Protestant groups who subscribed to Calvinist theology were often referred to as Calvinists. They also believed that the elect could not fall from grace. Regular Baptists in the South, most of whom used the Calvinistic Philadelphia Confession of Faith, typically looked down on the Separate bodies, whom they perceived as too liberal in their acceptance of members, especially those members who believed in the doctrine of free will. Robert Semple, a Regular Baptist historian from Virginia, contended in 1810 that the “Separates were not sufficiently explicit in their principles, having never published or sanctioned any confession of faith; and that they kept within their communion many who were confessed Arminians . . .” Yet because of the powerful influence of frontier revivals in the 1780s, and also perhaps because of the necessity for cooperation on the frontier, a strong cry arose in Virginia toward the end of the eighteenth century for these Baptist groups to unite. This union, which occurred in 1787, led Separate and Regular Baptists to declare themselves United Baptists. Under the terms of this concord, United Baptists were to allow for differences in doctrinal beliefs on such issues as salvation and election.

In Kentucky the denomination also struggled with tensions between Regular and Separate groups. As in Virginia, the Calvinist churches outnumbered others. What Arminianism did exist could be found among some Separate Baptist congregations, although most Separate churches were Calvinist. After a great revival swept through Kentucky, the two Baptist churches came together in 1801. Resembling the Virginia case, the union represented compromise between

4 The controversy over election dates as far back as Saint Augustine (354–430), who formulated a strict doctrine of predestination. Later Protestant leaders such as Luther and Calvin reformulated the doctrine, using Augustinian theology as their base.

5 A few congregations who called themselves General Baptists also appeared in early Virginia and the Carolinas. They were founded by General Baptists from England, but their influence slowly diminished from heavy pressure by the more numerous Calvinist Baptist groups.

the more organized, Calvinist Regulars and the revivalist, nonconformist Separates. The ninth article of the 1801 Articles of Faith—"that the preaching Christ tasted death for every man shall be no bar to communion"—clearly signaled that Baptist congregations were more tolerant in matters of doctrine.

By the early 1800s a few Baptist churches had been established north of the Ohio River in the territory gained after the American Revolution. These young churches operated under the compromise forged earlier in Kentucky and often called themselves United Baptists or made reference to the Kentucky accord in their church constitutions. Despite the presence of Baptists and numerous other denominations, religious leaders in the East considered the region to be largely unchurched and therefore ripe for mission work. The missionary impulse that drove eastern Baptists into the western regions was loosely organized in 1814 in the Baptist Triennial Convention, which created a structure for missionary efforts. In 1817 the convention officially launched its home missions program. A key worker in this endeavor was John Mason Peck, a young pastor from Connecticut. At first Peck hoped to travel as a missionary to India or some other foreign land. Writing in his diary in 1813, he lamented, "how many thousands of poor benighted heathen there are who worshipped the idol juggernaut . . . Oh how I wish . . . that I might be able to bear the gospel to some distant pagan land!" He was asked, however, in 1817 to serve in the interior of America. In his diary Peck described his feelings about his first assignment. "The long agony is over. The Board have accepted Mr. Welch and myself as missionaries to the Missouri Territory . . . Oh Lord may I live and die in the cause!" He quickly perceived that the western frontier, especially the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys, were ripe for missions. "A large part of the United States," he reported, is "involved in darkness . . . there is an abundant field there for missionary work." Another time he wrote back east to plead for more help with the western efforts: "you MUST devote yourself to the cause in the West—Now is the crisis—tomorrow will be too late!" Other Baptist ministers also labored in this new field.

In southwestern Indiana, Isaac McCoy spread the Baptist version of the gospel. Coming from Kentucky, McCoy also operated under the more tolerant united creed. In 1809 he received a call to pastor

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8 Ibid., 49.
9 Ibid., 37. While Peck pleaded for more assistance, many westerners, such as Kentuckian John Taylor, complained that Peck's reports made it seem "as if the whole (western) country was almost a blank as to religion." John Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions* (Franklin County, Ky., 1820), 9.
JOHN MASON PECK (1789-1858)

Maria Creek Church in Knox County. Soon Maria Creek, with four other Baptist churches, in what would become the southwest corner of Indiana, formed the first association of Baptists in the state, called the Wabash District Association. John F. Cady, in his history of Missionary Baptist churches in Indiana, observes that the idea and practice of missions did not at that time loom as a problem for frontier churches in the Northwest Territory. He pointed out that “a number of Baptist bodies in Indiana voted to purchase copies of the minutes of the first two sessions of the Triennial Convention and a few of them explicitly approved the case.”11 The Indiana Baptist leader Jesse Holman, in a letter to a Baptist association in 1818, also showed great support for the home mission effort, noting that “Bible and Missionary societies have extended the written preached gospel to every quarter of the Globe, with a zeal and sweep unexampled in any age of the World since the days of the Apostles. . . . Oh may its beams enlighten the darkest recesses of Indiana.”12 In the 1817 minutes of the Wabash District Association, a letter appears, written and signed by Elder Alexander Devin and Isaac McCoy, which reiterated the warm support for missions in southwest Indiana. “Numerous missionaries are proclaiming the way of life and salvation through a crucified and risen Jesus . . . and the Lord is blessing the work preached.”13 Events were conspiring, however, to create a powerful anti-mission spirit that would rip the Baptists apart throughout the country.

Part of the problem for the mission effort in the lower Wabash valley concerned the view many white settlers held towards Indians in the region. Cady notes that the “inability of the majority of frontier Baptists to respond to the ethical challenge of McCoy on the friendly regard for the Indians operated to intensify their hostility to the missionary cause and to make them seek other arguments against it.”14 William Cockrum also offers a number of examples in his Pioneer History of Indiana of early white settlers in southwestern Indiana killing Native Americans without remorse.15 One exception, however, to this resentment toward the Indians could be found in the Maria Creek Church.16 This congregation, and the Union Asso-

11 John F. Cady, The Origin and Development of the Missionary Baptist Church in Indiana (Berne, Ind., 1942), 38. Cady’s book is essential in helping scholars understand the anti-mission conflict in Indiana.
12 Jesse L. Holman to Laughtery Association of Baptists, 1818, Jesse Lynch Holman Correspondence (Hamilton Library, Franklin College, Franklin, Indiana).
13 Minutes of the Wabash District Association, October, 1817, Samuel Colgate Historical Collection (American Baptist-Samuel Colgate Historical Library, Rochester, New York).
14 Cady, The Origin and Development of the Missionary Baptist Church, 40.
15 William M. Cockrum, Pioneer History of Indiana (Oakland City, Ind., 1907), 105-29, 197-236.
16 One of the principal families in the Maria Creek Church, the Polkes, were captured earlier in Kentucky by Indians and were held prisoners for some time. William Polke later worked with McCoy among the Miami Indians in Indiana. Elder McCoy’s wife, Christina, a sister to the Polke brothers, had also lived in Indian captivity.
ciation that the Maria Creek Church later joined, continued long after to support the mission effort. The church especially supported McCoy, their former pastor, who worked among the Indians both in Indiana and later in the Michigan and Kansas territories. In his later career, McCoy continued work for the Indians in Louisville, Kentucky, and died while raising money for his Kansas mission.

Another factor working against missions involved the anti-eastern sentiment found in the Upper South and Old Northwest. Nathan Hatch argues that it was the eastern inception of the mission movement and its somewhat hidden agenda that enraged westerners. Speaking of the first organizational meeting of this movement at Philadelphia in 1814, Hatch describes other projects besides mission work that the eastern Baptists had in mind. "They used the occasion as a splendid opportunity to centralize the amorphous collection of churches and associations variously identified as General Baptist, Regular Baptist, Separate Baptist, Particular Baptist, or Freewill Baptist." Hatch points out that the primary leaders of this movement were urbanites from Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Charleston. "Seventeen of the thirty-two delegates came from the established, dignified Philadelphia Association. The principals were men of cosmopolitan outlook—not unlike the delegates to a more famous Philadelphia convention three decades earlier. They believed in strength through unity of action and envisioned national solutions to national problems." Among many frontier Baptists, sectional jealousies, spurred on by the Jacksonian movement, also intensified the anti-mission spirit. Mission societies headquartered in Boston and New York led the Kentuckian John Taylor to "smell the New England Rat" at work in western mission efforts from the beginning. Uneducated frontier ministers also feared they would be overshadowed by eastern missionaries. "We don't care about them missionaries that gone amongst them heathen way off yonder," announced one midwestern minister. "We don't want them here. . . . These missionaries will be great, learned men, and the people will go to hear them preach, and we shall all be put down." Westerners also sensed that behind the veil of the easterners' concern for their western "brothers and sisters" lay a conceited attitude that perceived uncouthness and immorality among people living on the frontier. Although probably not shared by Peck, it was no doubt the majority opinion in the East. Criticism of western morality issued primarily from New England, headquarters of the Baptist missionary efforts. One eastern missionary assert-

18 Ibid.
19 Quoted in McBeth, The Baptist Heritage, 376. John Taylor stood with Daniel Parker as one of the primary opponents to missions.
ed that the "character of the settlers is such as to render it peculiarly important that missionaries should early be sent among them. Indeed, they can hardly be said to have a character."21 Another wrote that the region had been settled "chiefly with immigrants from Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee" and that "the state of morals is generally very low."22 Another article published in the East declared that "the population of the valley of Mississippi may be set down as half infidel."23 Easterners could not altogether be blamed for their condescending views. Making even a meager living on the frontier was difficult at this early time, and the first settlers were mostly hunters followed by "half hunters—half farmers" whose housing consisted of rude, one-room, dirt-floor cabins. One traveler's description of the people of southern Indiana in 1819 is typical of accounts sent back to the East. Richard Lee Mason wrote, "We passed one of the most miserable huts ever seen—a house built out of slabs without a nail; the pieces merely laid against a log pen such as pigs are commonly kept in, a dirt floor, no chimney. . . . This small cabin contained a young and interesting female and her two shivering and almost starving children, all of whom were bareheaded and with their feet bare. There was a small bed, one blanket and a few potatoes."24

Mostly illiterate and, as a result of intense isolation, lacking in social graces, these settlers were seen by easterners to be almost as "heathen" as the Indian population. Men on the frontier often engaged in no-holds-barred contests, where they gouged out eyes and bit off pieces of nose or ear. The liberal use of whiskey remained common for the time, even among ministers and children. One English traveler, observing the wild and lawless environment where settler behavior seemed to differ little from native culture, noted, "It may not be improper to mention 'that the backwoodsmen' as the first emigrants from the eastward of the Allegheny mountains are called, are very similar in their habits and manners to the aborigines, only perhaps more prodigal and more careless of life."25 Another observer, a visiting military official to the Kentucky frontier, described the cruelty of backwoods fighting. "When two men quarrel they never have an idea of striking, but immediately seize each other, and fall and twist each other's thumbs or fingers into the eye and push it from the socket till it falls on the cheeks."26

24 Richard Lee Mason, Narrative of Richard Lee Mason in the Pioneer West (New York, 1819), 34.
ISAAC MCCOY (1784-1846)

Another issue that divided western and eastern Baptists concerned money. Churches on the frontier did not want their hard-earned money going east. John Taylor, in his 1819 pamphlet *Thoughts on Missions*, accused would-be missionaries of only being interested in financial gain. He compared missionaries to horse leeches who sucked the blood from their victims, while Daniel Parker complained that the missionary Luther Rice was paid as high as eight dollars a week besides his travel expenses.²⁷ Such accusations greatly stirred people on the frontier, where money was scarce.²⁸ Westerners blamed politicians in the East for the economic depression that swept the land in 1819. Coupled with this hard feeling was the strong Baptist tendency, particularly from the Separate Baptists, for church autonomy. Denominational boards dominated by easterners threatened individual church freedom. Finally, many anti-mission groups claimed an organized mission concept could not be found in the Bible. "It has neither precept nor example to justify it within the two lids of the Bible,"²⁹ declared Daniel Parker. He elaborated his position in his pamphlet *A Public Address to the Baptist Society*, published in 1820. "We Baptists profess to believe, and we think upon scriptural authority, that the internal work of the calling and sending out of preachers, is . . . performed by the Spirit of God on the heart."³⁰ Parker argued that the calling and training of missionaries by a human agency such as the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions (BBFM), rather than by God, was not scriptural and therefore wrong. The problems created by anti-mission groups might not have so profoundly affected the Wabash valley had it not been for Parker.

Born in 1781 in Virginia, Daniel Parker grew up in the backwoods of Georgia "in an uninhabited wilderness," where he roamed the woods "as a hunter nearly as much in the company of Indians as whites."³¹ He grew up without formal education, becoming a Baptist in 1802 and at the age of twenty-three beginning to preach. About this time he married Patsy Dickerson. Parker was aware of his rusticity when he wrote, "I had until this time, been altogether raised and traditionized to the backwoods, or frontier country, having no learning, and being rough and coarse in my language and manners. I made but a poor appearance as a preacher."³² It was a limitation that put him frequently on the defensive.

²⁸In southwestern Indiana, legitimate paper currency and coin were so difficult to find that coonskins and whiskey became legal forms of tender. See Joseph P. Elliot, *A History of Evansville and Vanderburgh County, Indiana* (Evansville, Ind., 1897), 112.
³⁰Ibid., 41.
³¹Parker, "A Short History," 263.
³²Ibid., 270.
Parker left Georgia for Tennessee in 1803 feeling that “the Lord had work for me to do.” He stayed until 1817 and spent much of his time organizing churches and arguing with Methodist ministers over free will. Using what he called “my old Jerusalem Blade, which has two edges and cuts every which way,” Parker labored “to cut off everything that was aiming to touch the crown on the Redeemer’s head, or remove the rights and foundation of the church of God.” While in Tennessee, he worked arduously against missions. To Parker the BBFM loomed as the churches’ greatest enemies “in human form.” As a member of the Concord Association, he battled successfully against what he termed the “mission plan.” By 1817 he had become alarmed by the apparent success of missions in the Wabash valley. Believing he could succeed there as well, he moved his family north and purchased land in Crawford County, Illinois, just west of the Wabash River. Records show that Parker soon owned a mill and other properties and served as a juryman and road supervisor. The census reports that by 1820 eight Parker children were living in the household. In 1822 he was elected as a state senator. In his most important political act, he helped stop an attempt to legalize slavery in Illinois, but he was defeated for reelection to the Illinois senate in 1826 and to the lower house in 1832. As it turned out, the fight against missions, not politics, remained his primary arena.

In Illinois and nearby Indiana, Parker threw his whole effort into the fight against missions. “Until this time,” he wrote later, “I had lived in perfect peace with the Baptists, all in love, fellowship, and union; but from that time until now, the greatest enemy I ever had in human shape is the mission spirit or principle . . . led by men who call themselves Baptists.” He now boldly declared that he would “not sacrifice the faith of God’s elect.” While his anti-mission position found numerous followers, some of his other theological notions eventually stirred opposition. This was especially true of his doctrine of “the two seeds.” First proposed in a pamphlet in 1826, this idea represented a position far beyond orthodox Calvinism. Parker claimed, “It is evident that there are two seeds, the one of the serpent, and the other of the women.” He argued that “the women’s seed came from ‘Christ and his elect’ while, ‘the serpent seed’ here spoken I believe to be the non-elect.” No effort of any ministry, declared Park-
er, could change either group. This view represented an extreme position. For all his lack of education and manners, he was apparently a powerful speaker. His main adversary in the mission struggle, John Mason Peck, noted that he was "one of those singular and extraordinary beings whom Divine Providence permits to arise as a scourge to his church, and as a stumbling block in the way of religious effort." Peck described his antagonist as "without education, uncouth in manner, slovenly in dress, diminutive in person, unprepossessing in appearance, with shriveled features and a small, piercing eye." Yet "few men," he conceded, "have exercised a wider influence on the lower and less educated class of frontier people." Describing Parker's remarkable energy, Peck observed that he possessed "a zeal and enthusiasm bordering on insanity, firmness that amounted to obstinacy, and perseverance that would have done honor to a good cause." He had unusual powers of persuasion because he knew "how to lay upon every prejudice of his hearers." "Repeatedly have we heard him when his mind seemed to rise above its own powers, and he would discourse for a few moments . . . with such brilliancy of thought and force and correctness of language, as would astonish men of education and talents." Despite his virtues, however, Parker "was not the kind of man who would suffer another to hold a more elevated place in the estimation of Baptists than himself."

While in Illinois, Parker soon became prominent in the Lamotte Baptist Church, which belonged to the Wabash Association. Here, he was as industrious in his anti-mission zeal as Peck was for missions. In his Indiana Baptist History, William T. Stott notes that "as long as Parker was in the [Wabash] Association there was discord and distrust, for Parker's view represented the most radical predestination." In fact, what Parker found at first in the Wabash Association was a strong missionary spirit led by the Maria Creek Church and its minister Isaac McCoy. This influential church was the mother church for a number of other congregations, including Parker's own Lamotte Church. At first the Wabash Association did not oppose missions. In 1815, the year after the organization of the Baptist Missionary Union, the association appointed McCoy secretary of the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions (BBFM). The Maria Creek Church minutes show that in September the church agreed "to receive the report of the B.B.F.M. forwarded by said Board to the Wabash Asso-

40 Quoted in David Benedict, A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World (New York, 1848), 864-65.
41 Quoted in Cady, The Origin and Development of the Missionary Baptist Church, 41.
42 Quoted in Benedict, A General History, 123.
43 Quoted in Edward P. Brand, Illinois Baptists: A History (Springfield, Ill., 1930), 68.
44 William T. Stott, Indiana Baptist History (Franklin, Ind., 1908), 62.
ciation for use of the churches.” McCoy continued as secretary and
received $6.75 to pay for his corresponding expenses. In 1817 the
association responded to a circular letter from the mission board by
noting that “this Association has received with much pleasure the
above mentioned circular, and is highly pleased with the informa-
tion derived therefrom.” Parker’s influence, however, emerged as
soon as he settled in the region and took the Lamotte pulpit and
other pulpits. One of the churches he pastored, Little Vine, fired
the first shot in 1818 in what would become a war among Baptists
on the frontier. It took the form of a query to the Wabash Associa-
tion. “Are the principles and practices of the B.B.F.M. in its present
operations justifiable and agreeable to gospel order?” Agreeing to post-
pone any decision until the next year, the association finally replied
that “they are not agreeable to the Gospel order.” In 1819 the asso-
ciation withdrew fellowship from the mission board. Parker, howev-
er, was still not satisfied because some churches continued to correspond
with the board or failed to exclude members who supported the mis-
sion idea. The Lamotte Church then asked the Wabash Association
what was to be done with churches that let members belong to mis-
sionary societies.

In response to the Lamotte inquiry, the association, in the unit-
ed Baptist spirit forged in Virginia and Kentucky, recommended that
“the churches bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Parker, however, was not about to let the matter go. He declared, “As God never intends to make peace with his enemies,
neither does Daniel Parker intend to make peace with his enemies
by compromising the truth of God’s word.” He would “kill the Mis-
sionaries or they should kill him.” The Maria Creek Church fought
back in 1820 by asking the association “to point out to us the wicked-
ness of the Baptist Board of Missions and it will be our happiness to

45 Minutes of the Maria Creek Church, September 23, 1815, Indiana History
Collection (Vincennes University Library, Vincennes, Indiana).
46 Minutes of the Wabash District Association, October, 1817, Samuel Colgate
Historical Collection.
47 Because of the shortage of pastors on the frontier, Baptist ministers often
held more than one pulpit. In such circumstances, a minister would preach perhaps
only once or twice a month at a church, depending on the number of churches with which
he worked.
48 Most histories maintain that the Lamotte Church sent the original query,
but Ben F. Keith argues that it was Little Vine, another church Parker pastored, that
sent the first query. See Ben F. Keith, History of Maria Creek Church (Vincennes,
Ind., 1881), 31-35.
49 Quoted in Keith, History of the Maria Creek Church, 31-32.
50 Minutes of the Wabash District Association, October, 1819, Samuel Colgate
Historical Collection.
51 Ibid.
52 Parker, “A Short History,” 280.
53 David Hornaday to “Mr. Editor,” in The Baptist Weekly Journal of the Mis-
sissippi Valley (April 4, 1835).
avoid everything we conceive contrary to the mind and will of Christ.”

The association leaders, apparently recognizing the volatility of the issue, answered the Maria Creek Church, “We hope no use will be made of the decision of the last Association relative to the subject of missions, to the distress of Zion, contrary to the commands of Christ.” Patoka Church, in nearby Gibson County, asked what should be done “in cases where principles and practice of the B.B.F.M. are cherished and nourished among us.” In response the association advised “the churches to cherish brotherly love, and to walk in all the commands of Christ blameless.” Such answers from the association’s leadership affirmed that Baptists were expected to operate under the United Baptist spirit of compromise and were to be tolerant on issues such as missions.

Parker’s immediate reaction to Maria Creek’s letter and the association’s neutral position was to write his Public Address to the Baptist Society, which outlined his case against missions. The real showdown over the issue, however, took place in June of 1822 at the Patoka Meeting House in northern Gibson County. This particular meeting was one of the most important events in early Indiana Baptist history. Originally called by the Wabash District Association to allow churches of the body to vote on changes in the constitution, delegates soon moved to consider the missions problem. The meeting erupted in a five-hour debate with Peck and Parker taking up most of the time. Peck gave a vivid description of the exchange in a journal entry. “Saturday, 8th June. Reached the association, near Princeton, Ind., and was affectionately received by Brother William Polke some other brethren, but soon discovered strong prejudices and jealousies on account of my missionary character. No seat was allowed me.” On the ninth Peck reported that Parker preached vehemently against missions. After the sermon Peck attempted to discuss the subject with Parker in a rational manner. “In my interview with Brother Parker I alluded to his address about missions, and told him I could cheerfully give him my hand, as a conscientious and well-meaning, though greatly-mistaken brother. He is a most determined opposer of the whole mission system.” Peck spoke the follow-

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54 Minutes of the Wabash District Association, October, 1820, Samuel Colgate Historical Collection.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 The full title of this work was A Public Address to the Baptist Society and Friends of Religion in General, on the Principle of the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions for the United States of America. Parker erroneously believed his work stood as the first of its kind, but other anti-mission arguments had appeared earlier.
59 The move to change the constitution involved an attempt by Parker and other anti-mission advocates to exclude more easily mission-oriented churches. See Keith, History of the Maria Creek Church, 60-66.
ing day. "In the evening I preached in the court-house at Princeton on the subject of missions, and spent the night with Brother Devin. My mind quite engaged." As the meeting progressed it became obvious to Peck that a major crisis loomed ahead. "Prejudices have risen up, and some are, I doubt not, influenced by selfish motives. It appears very evident that Parker is determined not to yield, or give up the ground he had assumed. To effect his purpose he has been engaged for some time among a portion of the churches." He soon discovered how stubborn Parker could be. Noting that the Wabash Association had originally supported mission efforts, Peck described the final exchange.

Finally the meeting moved to consider charges against a church which supported the missions. This gave full scope for discussion on the propriety of missions endeavor. Mr. Parker opposed them with all the ingenuity in his power, and Mr. Wm. Polke as ably defended them. I then obtained leave to speak, and entered on a detail of facts connected with this subject. The whole discussion lasted about five hours, and excited peculiar interest in the public mind. A large assembly seemed unwilling to stir from the place till the decision was reached. I have never before met with so determined
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an opposer to missions in every aspect. But the decision gave me decided victory to the cause of missions, fully sustaining the church which had contributed to their support.60

The end result of the Patoka meeting turned out to be only a temporary victory for the idea of missions. The worst was yet to come. Parker now traveled throughout the region to a number of Baptist associations where he violently opposed mission work. Eventually, he admonished churches and associations not to correspond with any Baptist groups that supported missions, which led to the creation of the Union Association in 1824. Made up of churches mostly in Knox, Daviess, Pike, Sullivan, and Vigo counties, this group continued, despite Parker’s efforts, to carry on in the old united tradition. Ultimately, Union Association churches and other congregations that supported missions were called Missionary Baptist. Unfortunately, Parker’s and other anti-mission leaders’ works exacerbated the issue nationwide. Rhetoric often became harsh, with one anti-mission minister declaring, “do not forget the enemy, bear them in mind, the howling destructive wolves, the ravenous dogs, and their filthy and numerous whelps.”61 Unaccountably, in a circular letter written in 1825, the Union Association still apparently hoped for peaceful resolution through tolerance and compromise: “let brotherly love continue. . . let us be careful to avoid whatever weakens the ties that unite us, and equally careful to do all in our power to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace.”62 Of course “unity of spirit” did not follow. By 1824 Baptists began to splinter throughout the region. Meanwhile, traveling extensively throughout the Wabash, Little Pigeon, and Salem associations in southwest Indiana, and other associations in the region, Parker continued to fight all mission efforts.

One way to understand the struggle over missions in the lower Wabash valley is to examine the minutes of several local churches and associations involved in the clash. In the 1824 Wabash Association minutes, for example, several items reveal aspects of the mission struggle.

Union Association petitioned by letter and messengers to open a correspondence with us which was refused on account of their having united with Maria Creek Church, which we believe to be in disorder. Agreeably to the direction of the Churches (claiming their right to votes in the last years minutes) Maria Creek Church is published as excluded from this Association for justifying her members in the support of the principles and practice of the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions.

Elder Daniel Parker informed the Association that his having knowledge that the Little Flock Church, with Elder Harris, had gone into the Union Association with Maria Creek Church, which he believes was in disorder, as the Churches composing the

60 Quoted in Babcock, Memoirs of John Mason Peck, 173-74.
62 Minutes of the Union Association, September, 1824, Manuscript Division (Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, Indiana).
Wabash Association had manifested cause of grief with said Maria Creek Church on the mission subject, and had received no satisfaction, together with the counsel of his brethren, as far as he had opportunity, was the cause of his objecting to Elder Harris preaching his introductory sermon to this Association, believing it to be his duty for the sake of good order, and he now submits the case to the Association to say whether he did right or not. The voice of the Association being taken, say that Elder D. Parker was fully justifiable in what he had done.63

The minutes of the Little Pigeon Association also illustrate the concern over the mission problem. John Cady notes that from “1823 to 1828, the problem of the policy to be pursued with regard to missionary benevolence dwarfed all other considerations in the sessions of the Little Pigeon Association.”64 Individual church minutes also show how the mission feud affected local congregations. The Maria Creek Church minutes constantly addressed the mission controversy, the issue often taking up several entire pages for each meeting. The April 14, 1821, meeting record is a typical example.

Elder Daniel Parker presented a charge in writing to this church of which the following is a copy: “I am grieved with my Brethren Wm. Polke & Joseph Chambers because I view they have sinned in joining with and supporting of the principles and practice of what is called the Baptist Board of foreign missions which principles and practices I view as departing from the gospel faith and general principles and practice of the Baptist Union.” Tho our church did not receive the above mentioned charge Elder D. Parker offered the following charge. “I feel I have cause of grief in consequence of the illegal proceedings of Maria Creek Church in her manner of dealing with me.”65

Cady also contends that it was because of the intensity of this fight in the local Little Pigeon Church that a young Abraham Lincoln (his father was a strong supporter of Parker) became hostile to organized religion. Lincoln’s church, claims Cady, had been too much concerned with the theological bickering stirred by Parker over missions “to be able to contain the inquiring spirit” of the youthful Lincoln.66

Another church whose minutes reveal the division caused by Parker was the Providence Church in Gibson County. The August 24 minutes of the church asserted that it would have “no correspondence with the board of foreign missions.”67 In 1825 the church struggled with a related problem, the establishment of a new religious

63 Minutes of the Wabash District Association, October, 1824, Manuscript Division (Indiana State Library).
65 Minutes of the Maria Creek Church, April 14, 1821, Indiana History Collection (Vincennes University Library).
67 Minutes of the Providence Church, August 24, 1824 (Citizens National Bank, Francisco, Indiana). Providence Church was a member of the Salem Association. This organization, an offshoot of the old Wabash District Association, was formed in 1822 and included churches in Gibson, Posey, and Vanderburgh counties. Because of Parker’s work, this group became a Primitive Baptist association by 1830. The Salem Primitive Baptist Association and many other Primitive Baptist groups eventually distanced themselves from Parker because of the “two seeds” controversy.
group in the region, the General Baptists. This body had formed in response to the anti-mission feud and offered members of the original Baptist congregations a place to escape the bitter fighting that embroiled United Baptists. Minutes of the Providence Church are filled with references to this problem. The following minute, dated March 25, 1826, is typical of the Providence Church’s response: “Took up the cases of sister Elisabeth Strickland and sister Lucinda Graves and Charlotta Peck. The church say they are no more of us in as much as they withdrew from us and joined a people known as the General Baptist which we think be in disorder.” Several other churches within the Salem Association besides Providence lost members to this new movement as well. The New Hope Church in nearby Vanderburgh County was especially hit hard by losses to the recently formed Liberty General Baptist Church. The General Baptist movement had sprung up in Vanderburgh County under the leadership of a former United Baptist minister from Kentucky, Benoni Stinson.

Having been at the 1822 meeting in Patoka, Stinson reported that the hyper Calvinist tone of Parker’s preaching offended him. “When I got there,” said Stinson, “the Calvinistic preached their hard doctrine . . . and I thought wounded the cause of God.” Stinson, however, still hoped to install the united spirit he had known in Kentucky in the new Salem Association. When he was unable to get the united article—“that the preaching Christ tasted death for every man shall be no bar to fellowship”—inserted in the Salem articles, he started a new congregation in 1823, named Liberty, in Vanderburgh County, and in 1824, along with three other Baptist churches, formed the Liberty Association of General Baptists. An article of faith that appeared in both the Liberty Church and Liberty Association constitution declared this group’s complete acceptance of general atonement, which contrasted with the Calvinist doctrine of limited atonement. After 1824 the General Baptists became a constant thorn in the side of the more Calvinist and anti-mission Salem, Little Pigeon, and Wabash associations. Initially somewhat Calvinist in practice (Stinson’s group kept the moderately Calvinist article of faith regarding the perseverance of the saints and also practiced closed communion), Stinson’s first biographer believed that the founder of the General Baptists was probably seeking to reestablish the United tradition he had known in Kentucky. Because of Parker’s work, however, Stinson’s

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68 Minutes of the Providence Church, March 25, 1826 (Citizens National Bank).
69 William Reavis wrote the first piece on Stinson. See William Reavis, The Life of Benoni Stinson (2 vols., Oakland City, Indiana, 1876). The next year he began a series of articles, “Life of Benoni Stinson, Together with a Short History of the General Baptist Denomination.” The series ran from August 23, 1877, to November 3, 1878, in the General Baptist Herald, volumes 5 to 6, and was published in Boonville, Indiana.
70 William Reavis, “Stinson Series,” General Baptist Herald, August 2, 1877. At one point this series was lost to scholars until copies of several issues of the Herald were discovered in 1994 in the Oakland City University archives.
71 Ibid., May 16, 1878.
band of General Baptists slowly moved away from its Calvinist roots, dropping the perseverance of the saints article by 1845 and practicing open communion in most of its churches by this time as well.\footnote{Nearby Little Pigeon Baptist Church also labored with the problem of members subscribing to the general atonement doctrine. The 1829 minutes relate that “Br. Wm. Whitenhill [sic] rose and informed the church that he did not hold the Doctrine of Election and pre Destination and wish’d to be no more a member with us on that account. Taken up and laid over until our next meeting.” The church membership attempted to “labor” with Whittinghill over the issue but, that process proving unsatisfactory, the church denied “a fellowship with Br. Wm. Whittinghill for denying the doctrines of election & predestination & refusing to obey the voice of the Church.” See Minutes of the Little Pigeon Baptist Church, November 7, 1829, February 13, 1830 (Princeton Public Library, Princeton, Indiana).} It is likely, however, that Stinson would never have initiated this movement had it not been for Parker’s (and others’) hyper-Calvinism. By Stinson’s death in 1869, the General Baptists were a dominant force in southwestern Indiana as well as in parts of southeastern Illinois and western Kentucky.\footnote{Cady, The Origin and Development of the Missionary Baptist Church, 76-81.}

Individual church minutes reveal that the anti-mission struggle split families and communities as well as congregations. The Providence Church records show that many of the people who abandoned that church for the General Baptists were named Strickland, which occurred while two Strickland men continued as Regular, then Primitive, Baptist ministers. William Reavis, whose parents and family were prominent in the Providence Church, reported that while his father’s people took Parker’s position on general atonement and missions, his mother’s side espoused strong support for missions and general atonement. Reavis himself would become a General Baptist minister. So intense were the debates in this family over issues stirred by Parker’s anti-mission crusade that one Reavis cousin was given the name Daniel Parker Reavis, while Reavis himself named one of his sons after Benoni Stinson, as did two other former members of the Providence Church. The Salem Association, to which the Providence Church belonged, adamantly opposed missions, revivals, and Sunday schools. Reavis noted that arguments about missions became so vehement that often people within the same families and communities quit speaking to one another and forbade family members to converse with “the enemy.”\footnote{Reavis, “Stinson Series,” August 9, 1877.}

Parker’s anti-mission movement wrought a decisive change in Baptist life in the Wabash region. An entirely new Baptist movement, the General Baptists sprang up in response to Parker’s hyper-Calvinism, which soon spread to Illinois and Kentucky. This group had little to do with the more numerous Calvinist Baptist groups in the area. The Union Association of Missionary Baptists also struggled on alone. By 1833 there were twenty-one Baptist associations in Indiana, with a total membership of 11,334. More than half of these
associations came to hold the anti-mission position. Unfortunately, as I. George Blake points out, "without a missionary vision . . . most of the anti-mission associations have ceased to exist." Ultimately, the great majority of anti-mission churches took the name Primitive Baptist. Because of their exclusion of revivals, Sunday schools, and educated clergy, these churches faded into obscurity. In Indiana, Cady observes, "the later history of the Primitive Baptists has been one of almost uninterrupted decline. Some seven or eight of their associations in Indiana have become extinct or practically so. About a dozen of them still carry on, but they number only three to five churches each." Nor was the fragmentation of Parker’s anti-mission efforts confined to Baptist churches in southwest Indiana and southeast Illinois. In Tennessee, where Parker began the fight, it was reported that all "missionary societies were dissolved . . . and the spirit of death rested upon the whole people." Ironically, Parker considered his work in the lower Wabash region of Indiana and Illinois to be his crowning achievement. "But my very soul should thank God, that I succeeded in driving out from among the Baptist in the bounds of the Wabash District Association, and her correspondence, all the supporters of the corrupting mission principle, Arminian stuff & c." Perhaps more battered than he betrayed in his Church Advocate, Parker, just before leaving the Wabash valley in 1830 for Texas, penned the following verses:

And saints and angels join in one,  
In splendour round the throne;  
To praise the Father and the Son,  
And Spirit Three in One.

My enemies, what do you think,  
You know may trouble me!  
But then, Oh! Then, out of your reach  
I shall forever be.

Your worldly religion and its wealth  
Will then exposed be;  
While grace will give the saints content  
In all eternity.

As the American religious historian William Warren Sweet summarizes the results of the anti-mission struggle, the "unevan-

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76 Today a few Primitive Baptist congregations, including Providence in Gibson County, still occasionally hold services.
77 Cady, The Origin and Development of the Missionary Baptist Church, 55-57.
79 Parker, "A Short History," 286.
80 Ibid., 167.
gelical type of Calvinism which it fostered led to bigotry and intolerance, and its absurdities brought the churches and ministers into dispute among those who most needed their ministrations and their restraints." Sweet also sees the anti mission spirit as especially hard on education "at the very time when educational foundations needed to be laid." Finally, he points out that "much of the energy which might have been utilized to spread religion among the scattered and rapidly increasing population of a new country was expended in quarrels and resulted in bad feeling and estrangement among those who called themselves Christians." In a larger sense, the anti-mission movement probably contributed to the development of American sectionalism, which was made more pronounced by a strong strain of anti intellectualism common on the frontier. Tied closely to the great mistrust of missions was a powerful antipathy on the part of westerners toward education. While eastern Baptists who came west, like John Mason Peck, became strong advocates for an educated clergy, most westerners did not see a need for a minister to have much formal schooling. H. Leon McBeth concludes, "Lingering opposition to denominational programs, continuing suspicion of theological education, and rigid Biblicism represent the legacy of the anti-mission movement. Baptists in areas where antimissionism flourished have inherited a pronounced susceptibility to other ultra-conservative movements."

Peck's plan for missions, however, was not a complete failure. By 1832 the American Baptist Home Mission Society sponsored fifty missions in ten states, two territories, and Canada. Ten years later the society's endeavor had brought almost eleven thousand converts on the frontier and established four hundred churches. In 1833 the General Association of Baptists in the State of Indiana formed at Shelbyville. The association represented twenty churches in fifteen counties mostly around the Indianapolis area. This group, which was deeply committed to missions, stated in a circular letter its hope to commence "a plan for uniting the energies of Baptists of Indiana in support of the Gospel of Christ . . . [in order to] preach the Gospel to every creature." In southwest Indiana, however, only the small and courageous Union Association moved forward in the spirit of the United Baptists in its missionary endeavors. The continued work of this lonely but brave group helped carry the flame of Baptist evangelism to future generations.

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84 Ibid., 370.
85 Minutes of the General Association of Baptists in the State of Indiana, April 26, 1833, Manuscript Division (Indiana State Library).