

The Liberty to Vote

It was a matter of courage and conviction.

The Wood River Baptist Association was founded in 1838 in Illinois and soon consisted of black Baptist congregations in Illinois, Kentucky and Wisconsin.

In August of 1865, the Association held its 27th annual meeting at Emancipation Baptist Church in Springfield, Illinois. It was three months after President Lincoln's assassination. Elder R. DeBaptiste, pastor of Olivet Baptist Church in Chicago, gave the opening sermon, based on Psalm 46:5 "God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God shall help her, and that right early."

In past years, the Association had alternated preaching and business sessions during its three-day annual meeting. Organized to "promote the prosperity of the general union, and advance the Redeemer's kingdom," no word—not even during the recent war years—had been recorded regarding current events or the issue of slavery—except for one sentence in the Association's Covenant:

. . . we will discountenance all oppression of our fellow men, and the withholding of just wages among ourselves and others, as far as our influence may extend.

If the Wood River Association had put itself on record for a political cause, it would have endangered former slaves in their congregations and undermined their collective ability to fulfill the Association's mission.

"A man has not got his liberty until he has the right to vote and be voted for."

This year of 1865 was different. The war was over. Reconstruction had begun. The Association formed a "State of the Country" committee, which gave their report in a stirring, eloquent treatise that takes up more than two pages of the printed minutes. The subject that compelled them to take such bold action? A demand for the right to vote!

[W]e deem it imperative on ourselves as a large and respectable body of colored Baptists, citizens of the United States, met to consider and so far as may be to secure the best interest of our people, temporal and spiritual, to avow as our deliberate judgment, prayerfully arrived at, that unless those whose duty it is to reorganize those States recently in rebellion against the Government, shalt reorganize them upon the

principle of equality of rights under the law to all men, without regard to color, that slavery now believed to be dead and only needing burial, will be found to be as full of vitality as ever....[W]e do demand for the freedman the elective franchise.

...Others again say, we have given the colored people their liberty and that is enough for the present. To this we reply that a man has not got his liberty until he has the right to vote and be voted for.

And again admitting it to be true that the colored man has his liberty, still it is not true that any have given it to him. If he have it, he won it by his own arm.... [S]o that instead of its being true that others have given him his liberty, he has helped largely to preserve to this nation free government.

The Association voted to furnish a copy of the Committee's report to newspapers across the country, including the *Illinois State Journal*, *Chicago Daily Tribune* and *Christian Times*, *Missouri Daily Democrat*, *American Baptist* and *Anglo-African* of New York City, and *Colored Citizen*, of Cincinnati. They also decided to publish 1000 copies in sheet form, and after the sermon by Elder John Anderson from Luke 15:4-6 (The Lost Sheep), they took up a collection of \$12.95 for the purpose.

In the years after 1865, except for the briefest mention that men from their congregations were home from the war, the Association returned to its primary work, supporting one another in the faith.

Something to think about.

1. Read Psalm 46. Why do you think the pastor chose this passage to preach from? What do you hear God saying to you, today, in this psalm?
2. Can you think of other times when American Baptists connected their faith with current events or recent history?
3. Because early Baptists suffered persecution, including being jailed for their beliefs, they insisted on the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, guaranteeing separation of church and state. American Baptists have continued to be active citizens: helping immigrants become citizens, urging church members to study the issues and vote their conscience, even being candidates for school board or the presidency. Can you think of a recent example of Baptists pressing for separation of church and state issues? How does learning about our Baptist legacy affect whether you vote this year?

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