

THE NEED FOR, THE PROSPECTUS, AND THE OBJECT OF THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

From the early settlement of our country by the Puritans in New England, and the Church of England in the Southern colonies, whose religious supremacy was established by law in their several localities, the Baptists, and indeed all other dissenting orders, suffered great opposition by proscription and oppression from the dominant parties. The Baptists, perhaps, more than any other, were violently treated, and suffered the most cruel persecution. Disfranchisement as citizens, fines, confiscation of property, incarceration in prisons, and banishment for nonconformity, to which was added corporal punishments, public whippings at the stocks, cropping of ears, boring their tongues through with hot irons, tying their heads and feet together, and torturing them in the most barbarous manner for days and nights, and in many cases they were put to death for their persistent and inflexible adherence to the faith and order of the gospel by which they were distinguished from all other orders. In those days of trial there were no worldly inducements offered to attract the worldly-minded to connect themselves with our churches, and there was harmony of sentiment and uniformity of practice among the Baptist churches throughout the whole breadth of our country.

It is true that in those trying times, the general principles of the doctrine of the gospel were not so clearly and fully preached and understood as at earlier and later periods in the history of Apostolic Baptists. As the bible doctrine and order of baptism held by them was the most objectionable to their adversaries, they were constantly called to defend the truth in relation to that ordinance against the assaults of their opponents. And when the violence of persecution began to abate, and by the interposition of the British Crown, and subsequently by the prevalence of more liberal views which were entertained by the patriots of the Revolution, the powers of the Puritans in the East, and of the Episcopalians in the South were so far curtailed as to prevent farther corporal severities; still for many years after the establishment of our federal and state governments, the Puritans of the New England States were patronized by their state legislatures, and allowed to collect their parish taxes from all within their parish limits. Afterwards dissenters, by procuring certificates from religious denominations to which they belonged, certifying that they were paying to their own respective orders, were released from the burden of the parish taxes, and finally the whole legal distinction in favor of the Puritans was abolished. Under all the trials and persecutions thus far experienced, the Baptists were a humble, meek, loving and harmoniously-united people throughout our country. But as soon as this oppressive yoke was broken, Satan was ready with other elements of discord to bring trouble and divisions into our churches.

No sooner were the Baptists of America relieved from the galling yoke of Puritanic and Episcopalian priestcraft than the doctrines of Andrew Fuller were introduced, with the professed design to raise up the Baptists from the dung-hill, to rank respectably with other religious denominations. All who were inclined to the doctrine of Arminianism, with many others who had been led but sparingly into an understanding of the cardinal doctrine of salvation alone by grace, were ready to embrace the plausible and deceptive views of Fuller, and became at once ambitious for the promised elevation.

At this period, which is still fresh in the recollection of the editor of the "Signs of the Times," there was not known among the Baptists of America a single organized institution in connection with, or under the patronage of the Baptists. Theological seminaries, on a very small scale, then began to be talked of, and a small school of this kind was started in Philadelphia, under the direction of Dr. Staughton, to give some grammar lessons to a few of our illiterate young preachers, and soon a college was founded in Washington City, and another educational and theological institution at Hamilton, N.Y., and similar schools began to spring up in various directions. Simultaneously with these, missionary enterprises were set on foot, both domestic and foreign, and Sabbath-schools and Sabbath-school unions, in which various anti-christian denominations were recognized as hand and glove with Baptists in building up these unscriptural *nurseries for the church*, as they were modestly called. Then followed Bible Societies, to give a semblance of piety to the whole system of religious machinery, followed in turn by Tract Societies, Temperance Societies, Mite Societies, Magdaline Societies, Dorcas Societies, and a host of other equally unscriptural institutions under the name of Benevolence and Religion, until,

to bring up the rear, the Abolition Society, which had for a time been struggling into life and power under the patronage of a few New England fanatics, was with due ceremony let in and adopted as a pet institution.

While these innovations were being made upon the faith and order of the Baptists, true enough, the Baptists began to rise, according to the prediction of Andrew Fuller, and soon came to be regarded as unsound and as respectable as any other of the worldly churches of this degenerate age. The Baptists were now no longer obliged to pray the Lord of the harvest to furnish preachers; they could supply themselves with a more refined and educated class from their own schools. Converts could now be made to order, and the churches supplied with members from their *nurseries* and other institutions. Their machinery was now so complete that grace was no longer needed to make their members orderly; for they were supplied with societies to keep them sober and benevolent; and if perchance many of them should lose their piety, their machinery was so ingeniously geared that they could be run through again, and re-converted and re-constructed as often as might be thought advisable.

It was during the prevalence of these abominations that the "Signs of the Times" was commenced. The new order of Baptists had many religious newspapers in the field, which without an exception advocated the institutions named in the foregoing, and the general impression was entertained that there were no churches or preachers left that had not enlisted in this new enterprise for worldly popularity and respectability. A few were found here and there, isolated and despised, who sighed and groaned on account of the prevailing abominations. Yet few as we were, and far between, we were denounced violently as illiberal, inert, slothful, behind the spirit of a progressive age, and enemies to the spread of the gospel, and opposed to all that is good.

Feeling deeply the need of a medium of correspondence, and excluded from the columns of the so-called Baptist papers, after much deliberation it was concluded to attempt to make ourselves heard by our brethren scattered abroad, by publishing a paper devoted to the cause of truth, and through which we could enter our solemn protest against all the innovations, new theories and new institutions which, under the name of Baptist, had so greatly prevailed. With these objects in view, in the year 1832, we issued the following prospectus, viz:

Proposal for publishing a semi-monthly paper, to be called the "Signs of the Times," devoted exclusively to the Baptist cause, maintaining inviolably the following scriptural sentiments:

1. The Existence, Sovereignty, Immutability, Omnipotence and Eternal perfections of the Great Jehovah – the Revelation which God has given of himself, as Father, Son and Holy Ghost. "These Three are One." – 1 John 5:8.

2. The Absolute Predestination of all things.

3. Eternal, Unconditional Election.

4. The Total Depravity and just condemnation of fallen man.

5. That the Atonement and Redemption of Jesus Christ are for the Elect only.

6. The Sovereign, Irresistible, and in all cases, Effectual work of the Holy Spirit, in Regenerating and Quickening the Elect of God.

7. The final Preservation and Eternal Happiness of all the sons of God, by grace.

8. The Resurrection of the dead, and Eternal Judgment.

9. That the Church of Christ is composed exclusively of Baptized Believers – that to her are given able ministers of the New Testament, that the Scriptures are the only divinely authorized Rule of Faith and Practice for the saints of God.

10. That there is no connection between Church and State, and as touching the proposition for a marriage between them, the Hon. R.M. Johnson, in his report on the Sabbath Question, has expressed our faith.

The "Signs of the Times" will be decidedly opposed to Bible Tract and Missionary Societies, Theological Seminaries, Sabbath Schools, &c., &c., making war with the Mother, Arminianism, and her entire brood of institutions.

The violent opposition manifested by the New Order of Baptists, when our Prospectus appeared, was overruled to our advantage. Immediately on its appearing the batteries of our opponents were opened against us, through both the pulpit and the press. The papers of the New School sounded the alarm and warned the people to beware of the forthcoming paper; and in the Minutes of many Associations the churches were warned to withhold their support and countenance from us. In the ardor of their zeal portions of our Prospectus were copied to show that we were hostile to their newly-invented institutions; and by this means, instead of retarding, as they designed, their efforts were of great service in letting those who were imprisoned among them know that such a paper was about to be published. The response to our Prospectus from all directions was liberal, so that we were able to proceed with our work..

Our brethren of the Old School of Christ will bear in mind that this humble sheet is devoted to the Baptist cause, as we believe the Baptist cause to be the cause of God and that its columns are designed to be used as a medium for the circulation of bible doctrine and general information.

The dear people of God who remain steadfast and unshaken in the apostles' doctrine are at this day greatly scattered through the country, and in many instances where one or more of them are found they are supposed to be the only ones remaining of the same faith and order. Indeed, they are often themselves driven to the conclusion of Elijah: "They have digged down thine altars and killed thy prophets, and I am left alone and they seek my life." In their scattered situation it affords them peculiar pleasure to hear from one another. "As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country." Prov. XXV. 25.

It is certainly good news to the scattered pilgrims to hear of the numbers in different parts of the land who still adhere to the doctrine and practice of the primitive church. In the days of old, "they that feared the Lord spake often to one another;" and the exhortation of the apostle is, that we "exhort one another, and so much the more as we see the day approaching."

From a conviction in our own mind that well written discussions, in a spirit of kindness, on various subjects, will contribute to the interest and usefulness of the 'Signs', we have concluded to ask the indulgence of such of our brethren as do not see with us the propriety of such a course, while we will promise, on our part, to reject all such communications on controverted points as are written in an ill-natured or unbecoming spirit or style. Why should we be afraid to discuss what we hold to be the truth? Nothing but error can suffer from investigation; the more closely the truth is scrutinized, the more brilliantly it will shine.

Elder G. Beebe