

Historians debate reasons for rise of Landmarkism in 19th century

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All Landmark Baptists believe in church succession, at least to some degree, but not every Baptist holding that position is—or was—a Landmarker, according to Alan Lefever, director of the Texas Baptist Historical Collection.

Neither J.M. Carroll, author of *The Trail of Blood* defense of Landmarkism, nor his more-famous brother, B.H., was a Landmark Baptist in the truest sense, said Lefever, author of Fighting the Good Fight, a biography of B.H. Carroll.

J.M. Carroll was the Texas agent for the Foreign Mission Board, secretary of the Texas Baptist Education Commission and president of Howard Payne College.

B.H. Carroll was the founding president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

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Trail of Blood*
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of
Landmarkism

“If you label them Landmarkers, then you have to call them ‘denominational Landmarkers,’ and that’s an oxymoron,” Lefever said.

The Landmark emphasis on succession was “almost inevitable” for Baptists, considering their consistent desire to replicate the New Testament church, said Doug Weaver, a religion professor at Baylor University and author of the recently published book, *In Search of the New Testament Church: The Baptist Story*.

“Landmarkism built on themes and ideas already present in Baptist history. To say with confidence and biblical certainty that you are restoring the New Testament faith and practice implies what Landmarkism makes specific: We are the embodiment of the New Testament church,” Weaver said.

‘Direct line of dissenters’

“Once you set up a dichotomy of a true church/false church, it becomes easy to identify false churches throughout history. I think that the development of the ‘direct line of dissenters’ occurs, at least in part, to combat an inferiority complex that comes from being a new group with no history or tradition. Thus, the Landmarkers can say: ‘Hey, we are really older than all of you. We aren’t Protestants. And we are the direct descendent of the New Testament, and Catholics are a falling way from our doctrinal and structural polity purity.’”

Lefever disagrees with the notion Landmarkism was historically inevitable. Rather, he sees the Landmark movement as a direct response to Alexander Campbell, who taught baptismal regeneration and trumpeted the desire to restore the New Testament church. Campbell, a former Baptist, founded the movement out of which Disciples of Christ and the Church of Christ developed.

“Landmarkism was a reaction to the Campbellite movement. It was like a vaccine to inoculate Baptists against Campbellite influence,” he said, pointing out that it contained “just enough of the disease” to provide

supposed protection.

"If Alexander Campbell had never come along, we'd never have had Landmarkism. There never would have been a need," Lefever insisted.

Competition with Campbellites

Both Lefever and Weaver explained the relationship between Baptists and the Campbell movement in terms of competition. A so-called Campbellite might say, "We have restored the New Testament church." But a Landmark Baptist could respond, "We are the New Testament church."

Weaver granted Baptists share with Disciples of Christ and Churches of Christ "a hermeneutic of restorationism," and Baptists in the 19th century certainly considered the Campbell-inspired movement a threat. He added the neo-Pentecostal movement of the early 20th century to that same category.

"We claim apostolic authority for our practices ... especially baptism by immersion. But these groups do similar things. The Churches of Christ said, 'No musical instruments because they aren't in the New Testament,' and the Pentecostals say, 'We have the full gospel found in the book of Acts,'" Weaver said.

"Because we have vied for the same mantle with similar methods—biblical hermeneutics—we have raised the stakes in the competition and thus increased tension."

Baptists and Church of Christ leaders have differed publicly, and often bitterly, to a large degree because they are so close in many respects, he added.

"It's sibling rivalry," Weaver said. "When someone is so much like you and you have so much in common, you tend to accentuate the differences."

