49. The Baptist record: slavery, segregation and abuse

Baptists have a shorter institutional history than the older churches, no central authority to issue decrees, and for their first two centuries were more often persecuted than persecuting, so their record is shorter and different in kind. But it is not empty. The largest Baptist body in the world was founded to protect slaveholding, white Baptist churches were pillars of segregation, and the handling of sexual abuse in Baptist churches has drawn charges of cover-up. This chapter uses the same format as every record chapter on this site: what happened, the criticism, the Baptist response, and whether it was corrected.

The criticism

- **"By their fruits."** If a church's sins count against its claims, Baptist sins count against Baptist claims (Matt 7:15–20).
- **Private interpretation did not prevent error.** Baptists read the Bible without a binding creed or teaching office and concluded that it permitted slavery. Scripture read alone did not protect them from the moral consensus of their region.
- **Congregational autonomy has its own failure mode.** With no bishop to remove a pastor, abusers moved from church to church, and the convention said it had no power to act.
- **Founding matters.** The Southern Baptist Convention was founded in 1845 to keep slaveholders eligible as missionaries.

How Baptists answer

- **Baptists never claimed infallibility.** A fellowship of churches that calls itself a fallible gathering of believers expects its members to sin; it claims no promise that its leaders will not err.
- **The record is double-sided.** The same Baptist faith that defended slavery produced the Black Baptist churches and the civil rights movement; the body that resisted integration apologized in 1995 and elected a Black president in 2012.
- **Persecuted, not persecutors,** on religious liberty: Baptists were jailed in Virginia and imprisoned in England, and were among the first in English to argue for liberty of conscience for all (Helwys, 1612; Williams, 1644).
- **Reform from the pews.** The abuse investigation of 2022 was ordered by the convention's own messengers within three years of the press reports, against the resistance of its officials.

Summary

1. Defending slavery from Scripture

Period: 1820s–1865

Status: ACKNOWLEDGED AND APOLOGIZED FOR

Key correction: SBC apology (1995); Southern Seminary report (2018)

2. The founding of the Southern Baptist Convention

Period: 1845

Status: APOLOGIZED FOR; THE BODY REMAINS

Key correction: 1995 resolution; Fred Luter (2012)

3. Segregation and resistance to civil rights

Period: 1890s–1970s

Status: PARTLY CORRECTED

Key correction: 1995 apology; 2017 resolution

4. Protestant clergy and the Ku Klux Klan

Period: 1915–1930s

Status: ENDED

Key correction: Collapse of the Klan (late 1920s)

5. Anti-Catholic violence and propaganda

Period: 1830s–1850s

Status: ENDED

Key correction: Nativist violence ended

6. Opposing Catholic candidates

Period: 1928, 1960

Status: CORRECTED

Key correction: Vatican II (1965); evangelical–Catholic cooperation

7. Sexual abuse and its cover-up in Southern Baptist life

Period: 1990s–present

Status: ONGOING

Key correction: Guidepost report (2022); abuser database proposed, on hold since 2025

8. Abuse in Independent Fundamental Baptist churches

Period: 1970s–present

Status: ONGOING

Key correction: Star-Telegram investigation (2018)

9. The Baptist Foundation of Arizona

Period: 1999

Status: PROSECUTED

Key correction: Convictions (2006)

10. Bailey Smith and "the prayer of a Jew"

Period: 1980

Status: RETRACTED

Key correction: Apology (1980)

11. Westboro Baptist Church

Period: 1991–present

Status: DISOWNED

Key correction: Universally repudiated

12. Baptist missions and Native American boarding schools

Period: 1870s–1960s

Status: PARTLY ACKNOWLEDGED

Key correction: Interior Department reports (2022, 2024)

Close all

A. Slavery and race 4

1. Defending slavery from Scripture 1820s–1865 ACKNOWLEDGED AND APOLOGIZED FOR
2. The founding of the Southern Baptist Convention 1845 APOLOGIZED FOR; THE BODY REMAINS
3. Segregation and resistance to civil rights 1890s–1970s PARTLY CORRECTED
4. Protestant clergy and the Ku Klux Klan 1915–1930s ENDED

B. Anti-Catholicism 2

5. Anti-Catholic violence and propaganda 1830s–1850s ENDED
6. Opposing Catholic candidates 1928, 1960 CORRECTED

C. Abuse and scandal 3

7. Sexual abuse and its cover-up in Southern Baptist life 1990s–present ONGOING
8. Abuse in Independent Fundamental Baptist churches 1970s–present ONGOING
9. The Baptist Foundation of Arizona 1999 PROSECUTED

D. Other episodes 3

10. Bailey Smith and "the prayer of a Jew" 1980 RETRACTED

11. Westboro Baptist Church 1991–present DISOWNED

12. Baptist missions and Native American boarding schools 1870s–1960s PARTLY ACKNOWLEDGED

Persecution by the Protestant state churches is set out in the Lutheran, Reformed and Anglican records.

Across the traditions

Slavery and race: what each major tradition has acknowledged about its own past, from its own documents.

Catholic

In the US bishops' words, Nicholas V's bull *Dum Diversas* (1452) gave apostolic permission to buy and sell Africans, setting the stage for the slave trade; Gregory XVI's *In supremo apostolatus* (1839) forbade any Catholic to defend it. Georgetown's Jesuits sold 272 enslaved people in 1838, for which the Society of Jesus apologized on 18 April 2017. In *Open Wide Our Hearts* (2018) the US bishops acknowledged that some bishops owned slaves and parishes were segregated, and asked forgiveness.

Sources: Gregory XVI, In supremo apostolatus (1839) (papalencyclicals.net); USCCB, Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love (approved November 2018), "Acknowledging Sin"; Jesuit Conference, "Society of Jesus Apologizes for the Sins of Jesuit Slaveholding at Georgetown University Liturgy" (18 April 2017, jesuits.org).

Orthodox

In the Romanian principalities Orthodox monasteries held Roma as slaves until monastic slaves were freed in 1844 (Moldavia) and 1847 (Wallachia); the last privately held slaves were freed in 1855–56. On the 160th anniversary of emancipation (19 February 2016) Patriarch Daniel recalled that Moldavian bishops had forbidden the separation of Roma families in 1766 and that Orthodox clergy worked for emancipation, and pointed to the Church's present aid to Roma. The Council of Crete (2016) rejects discrimination by skin colour, race or ethnicity (E.2), and the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America (31 May 2020) rejected racism in any form.

Sources: Patriarch Daniel of Romania, message on the 160th anniversary of the emancipation of the Roma (19 February 2016), "Roma minority from slavery to freedom and hope" (basilica.ro); V. Achim, *Transylvanian Review* 19 (2010) (dates of emancipation); Holy and Great Council of Crete, The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World (2016) E.2; Holy Synod of the OCA, statement of 31 May 2020 (oca.org).

Lutheran

Reformed

Under apartheid some white Lutheran churches in southern Africa organized their life on a "whites only" basis. The Lutheran World Federation declared the situation in southern Africa a status confessionis at Dar es Salaam (1977), and its Budapest Assembly (1984) suspended two such churches. In June 2019 the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America adopted a Declaration to People of African Descent, presented at the Churchwide Assembly on 6 August 2019, apologizing for the church's complicity in slavery and its perpetuation of racism.

Sources: Lutheran World Federation, Sixth Assembly (Dar es Salaam, 1977), resolution on southern Africa, as quoted in U. Duchrow, Stellenbosch Theological Journal 9/4 (2023); Lutheran World Information, 8 November 2006 (1984 Budapest suspensions); ELCA, Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent (Church Council, June 2019), reported in Living Lutheran, October 2019.

Reformed churches in South Africa and America were divided by race. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches declared apartheid a heresy (Ottawa, 1982), and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church adopted the Belhar Confession against it in 1986; the PC(USA) added Belhar to its Book of Confessions in 2016 by 540 votes to 33. That year the Presbyterian Church in America (861–123) confessed that some of its founding leaders and churches had worked against racial reconciliation in the civil-rights era, including segregated worship and membership.

Sources: U. Duchrow, Stellenbosch Theological Journal 9/4 (2023) (WARC, Ottawa 1982); PC(USA) News, "Belhar added to PC(USA)'s Book of Confessions" (23 June 2016); PCA 44th General Assembly (2016), Overture 43, "Pursuing Racial Reconciliation and the Advancement of the Gospel," reported in Christianity Today, 24 June 2016.

Anglican

The Church's missionary society (SPG, now USPG) owned the Codrington estates in Barbados from 1710, where an estimated 600 to 1,200 people lived and died enslaved before 1838, and Queen Anne's Bounty invested heavily in the slave-trading South Sea Company. The General Synod apologized to the descendants of the enslaved on 8 February 2006 (238–0). The Church Commissioners' research (2022) led to a £100 million fund announced in January 2023, and USPG pledged about £7 million in Barbados in September 2023.

Sources: General Synod vote of 8 February 2006, reported in The Alabama Baptist; USPG, "The Codrington Project" (uspg.org.uk, announced 8 September 2023); Church Commissioners, research into

Methodist

John Wesley's *Thoughts upon Slavery* (1774) urged, "Give liberty to whom liberty is due." Yet racism led Black Methodists to form the AME, AME Zion and CME churches, and in 1844 the Methodist Episcopal Church divided after suspending Bishop James O. Andrew, who held slaves through marriage; southern delegates organized the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, at Louisville in May 1845. On 4 May 2000 the United Methodist General Conference held an Act of Repentance for Racism, and its Social Principles (2024) condemn racism.

Sources: John Wesley, Thoughts upon Slavery (1774) V.6 (Wesley Corpus, corpus.historyofmethodism.com); United Methodist Church, "Division in America and Expansion Overseas (1844–1860)" (umc.org); United Methodist News Service report of 6 May 2000 on the

Queen Anne's Bounty and transatlantic chattel slavery (2022–23), reported by Al Jazeera, 11 January 2023.

Act of Repentance (archive.wfn.org); UMC Revised Social Principles (2024), The Social Community, L. Racism, Ethnocentrism and Tribalism.

Baptist

The Southern Baptist Convention was organized at Augusta, Georgia, in May 1845, when Baptists in the South separated from northern Baptists over slavery; all four founding professors of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary were, in its president's words, deeply complicit in slavery. In June 1995 the convention resolved to "lament and repudiate historic acts of evil such as slavery" and apologized to African-Americans for condoning and perpetuating racism. Southern Seminary published its report on slavery and racism in its history in December 2018.

Sources: SBC, Resolution on Racial Reconciliation on the 150th Anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention (Atlanta, June 1995) (sbc.net); Baptist Press, 8 May 2020 (founding at Augusta, 8 May 1845; separation over slavery); R. Albert Mohler Jr., letter of 12 December 2018 releasing the Report on Slavery and Racism in the History of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (sbts.edu).

The other records: Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Methodist. See also From the Reformation to the Baptists.

1. Defending slavery from Scripture 1820s–1865

ACKNOWLEDGED AND APOLOGIZED FOR

WHAT HAPPENED

In the South, Baptist leaders produced some of the most influential biblical defenses of slavery. Richard Furman, the leading Baptist of South Carolina, wrote to the governor in 1822, after the Denmark Vesey conspiracy, that "the right of holding slaves is clearly established in the Holy Scriptures." The Virginia Baptist pastor Thornton Stringfellow's *Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery* (1841, expanded 1856) was the most widely circulated of these arguments. Basil Manly Sr., a Baptist

pastor and president of the University of Alabama, drafted the Alabama Resolutions of 1844 demanding that slaveholders be eligible as missionaries, and gave the prayer at Jefferson Davis's inauguration as Confederate president in 1861.

The criticism

The churches that claimed to read Scripture plainly, without tradition, read it to permit owning human beings. Baptists had no magisterium to blame; critics see this as the fruit of private interpretation shaped by economic interest. Leading Baptist divines defended slavery from Philemon and Leviticus 25 until the Civil War.

Baptist response

Baptists in the North (the Triennial Convention majority), in England and Jamaica (William Knibb) were abolitionists, and Black Baptists built their own churches out of the same faith. The proslavery reading was a regional and economic captivity of the churches, not Baptist doctrine, and Baptists have said so publicly.

Was it corrected? Acknowledged and apologized for. Ended by emancipation (1865). The SBC's 1995 Resolution on Racial Reconciliation acknowledged that its founders "defended the right to own slaves," repudiated slavery as a "deplorable sin," and apologized to African Americans for racism. Southern Seminary's 2018 report documented its founders' slaveholding and proslavery teaching.

2. The founding of the Southern Baptist Convention 1845

APOLOGIZED FOR; THE BODY REMAINS

WHAT HAPPENED

In 1844 Georgia Baptists proposed a slaveholder, James Reeve, as a home missionary to test the national Baptist mission board; the board declined to act. Alabama Baptists then asked the foreign mission board directly whether a slaveholder could be appointed; the board answered that it would never appoint one. Southern delegates met at Augusta, Georgia, in May 1845 and organized a separate convention so that slaveholders could serve as missionaries. The Southern Baptist Convention, now the largest Protestant body in the United States, exists because of that dispute.

The criticism

The SBC was not merely a body some of whose members held slaves: it was founded for the specific purpose of protecting slaveholding. Its flagship seminary was founded by four slaveholders who

defended slavery from Scripture; its later leaders embraced the Lost Cause and opposed Black political rights during Reconstruction.

Baptist response

The SBC has not hidden this. Its 1995 resolution, adopted on the convention's 150th anniversary, stated that "our relationship to African-Americans has been hindered from the beginning by the role that slavery played in the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention," and asked forgiveness. The convention elected its first African American president, Fred Luter, in 2012, and its ethics commission has repeatedly condemned racism.

Was it corrected? Apologized for. The convention's name and continuity were retained; a 2012 proposal to adopt "Great Commission Baptists" as an optional alternative name passed, but the legal name is unchanged.

3. Segregation and resistance to civil rights 1890s–1970s

PARTLY CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

After emancipation, white Baptist churches in the South were segregated by custom and often by rule, and most supported the Jim Crow order. The SBC's national leadership was sometimes ahead of its churches: the 1954 convention endorsed the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision as "in harmony with… Christian principles of equal justice and love for all men." But many pastors and congregations resisted. W. A. Criswell of First Baptist Dallas, the convention's most prominent preacher, told a South Carolina audience in 1956 that integration was "a thing of idiocy and foolishness" and that those who opposed it were "spiritual" people. In the 1960s "kneel-in" campaigns, Black worshippers were turned away at the doors of white churches across the South, Baptist churches among them; Tattnall Square Baptist Church in Macon, Georgia, voted in September 1966 to bar Black worshippers, turned away Sam Oni, a Ghanaian convert of Baptist missionaries, and the next day dismissed all three of its ministers for having welcomed him. Jerry Falwell, an independent Baptist, preached against integration in 1958 and against civil rights clergy in 1965, and his church founded a Christian academy (opened 1967) that the local paper had announced in 1966 as "a private school for white students." Many Baptist churches sponsored "segregation academies."

The criticism

The denomination that produced the country's most famous biblical defenses of slavery went on to resist the civil rights movement led by Black Baptist pastors, while the most prominent voice for racial

justice in American religion, Martin Luther King Jr., was a Baptist whom white Baptists largely ignored or opposed.

Baptist response

Baptist leadership was divided, and the moderate Christian Life Commission pushed for integration through the 1950s and 1960s. Criswell publicly renounced his segregationist views in his first sermon as SBC president (1968), and Falwell later disavowed his. The civil rights movement itself was overwhelmingly Baptist in its leadership (King, Ralph Abernathy, Fred Shuttlesworth), and Black Baptist conventions, formed partly in response to white exclusion, are among the largest Christian bodies in America.

Was it corrected? Partly corrected. Formal segregation ended with the civil rights laws (1964–65) and the 1995 apology covered "the failure of many Southern Baptists to support, and in some cases to oppose, legitimate initiatives to secure the civil rights of African-Americans." In 2017 the SBC adopted a resolution denouncing "alt-right white supremacy," after an initial refusal to consider it drew public outcry. Racial division in Baptist life remains a live issue.

4. Protestant clergy and the Ku Klux Klan 1915–1930s ENDED

WHAT HAPPENED

The second Ku Klux Klan (founded 1915) presented itself as the defender of white Protestant America against Catholics, Jews, immigrants and Black Americans, and recruited through churches. Many Protestant ministers, Baptists and Methodists prominent among them, joined, preached for it, served as its chaplains ("Kludds") or accepted robed Klansmen's donations during services; the Klan claimed tens of thousands of ministers as members, a figure that cannot be verified. Its anti-Catholic campaigns included attacks on parochial schools (Oregon's 1922 school law, struck down in 1925) and the defeat of Catholic candidates.

The criticism

The Klan was, in its own words, a Protestant movement, and Baptist pulpits lent it respectability.

Baptist response

No Baptist convention endorsed the Klan, and some Baptist editors and leaders condemned it. Membership collapsed after 1925 under scandal.

Was it corrected? Ended. No modern Baptist body defends it; the SBC's 1995 and 2017 resolutions repudiate white supremacy by name.

5. Anti-Catholic violence and propaganda 1830s–1850s ENDED

WHAT HAPPENED

Protestant mobs burned the Ursuline convent at Charlestown, Massachusetts (August 11, 1834); the Philadelphia Bible Riots (May and July 1844), sparked by a dispute over which Bible to read in public schools, killed about twenty people and destroyed two Catholic churches. Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures* (1836), a fabricated account of sexual abuse and infanticide in a Montreal convent, sold hundreds of thousands of copies and is still reprinted. The Know-Nothing movement of the 1850s organized nativist politics around anti-Catholicism.

The criticism

The violence and lies of this period were Protestant, often clerical, and aimed at Catholics' churches, schools and nuns.

Baptist response

This was broadly Protestant and nativist rather than specifically Baptist, and Baptists, as a historically persecuted minority, were among the strongest supporters of religious liberty for all.

Was it corrected? Ended. Anti-Catholic violence disappeared in the United States by the twentieth century.

6. Opposing Catholic candidates 1928, 1960 CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

When Al Smith, a Catholic, ran for president in 1928, prominent Baptists including the Texas fundamentalist J. Frank Norris campaigned against him on religious grounds. In 1960 the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution, softened in committee and again on the floor, that treated a candidate bound by a church that does not accept religious freedom as a legitimate concern for voters; W. A. Criswell preached at First Baptist Church, Dallas, on 3 July 1960 that "the Roman Catholic institutional hierarchy is not only a religion, it is a political tyranny," and that Kennedy's election would "spell the death of a free church in a free state"; and Protestant opposition to John F. Kennedy, in which Baptists were prominent, prompted his Houston speech on church and state.

The criticism

Baptists who insisted on separation of church and state used religion as a test for office.

Baptist response

Baptists feared, on the basis of papal teaching of the time, that a Catholic president would be subject to Rome; Kennedy's assurances and Vatican II's declaration on religious liberty (1965) answered that fear.

Was it corrected? Corrected. Baptist anti-Catholicism at this level has largely disappeared; Southern Baptist leaders have cooperated with Catholics on moral issues since the 1970s, and Catholic candidates draw Baptist votes.

7. Sexual abuse and its cover-up in Southern Baptist life

1990s–present ONGOING

WHAT HAPPENED

In February 2019 the *Houston Chronicle* and *San Antonio Express-News* reported that about 380 Southern Baptist church leaders and volunteers had faced allegations of sexual misconduct over twenty years, with more than 700 victims, and that abusers had moved between churches. Survivors had been asking the convention to act since 2007. An independent investigation by Guidepost Solutions (May 2022) found that the SBC Executive Committee's leaders had resisted reforms, treated survivors with hostility, and kept a private list of some 700 accused ministers while telling churches that the convention could not maintain such a list. The report also found a former SBC president, Johnny Hunt, credibly accused of sexual assault. The Department of Justice opened an investigation in 2022. Paul Pressler, an architect of the convention's conservative turn, was sued for sexual abuse of a young man; the case was settled in 2023. In 2018 Paige Patterson was removed as president of Southwestern Seminary (May 23) and then stripped of his emeritus title (May 30) after a 2000 recording surfaced in which he advised an abused wife to return to her husband, and after trustees found he had counseled a rape victim at Southeastern (2003) not to go to the police and had sought to meet a Southwestern rape victim (2015) alone in order to "break her down."

The criticism

Congregational autonomy has its own failure mode: with no bishop to remove a pastor, an accused minister can simply move to another church, and the convention claimed it had no power to stop him.

Baptist response

Baptists have pointed out that the convention has no authority over local churches, so the kind of central response a hierarchy can make was not available; and the 2022 investigation was itself commissioned by the convention's messengers over the Executive Committee's resistance.

Was it corrected? Ongoing. The 2022 convention created an abuse reform task force and approved a "Ministry Check" database of credibly accused ministers. The task force ended its work in 2024 with no names yet on the database, and in early 2025 convention leaders said the database was no longer a focus and put it on hold, though training materials were issued and a staff position created. SBC attorneys said in March 2025 that the Department of Justice had closed its investigation; the only related conviction was of a seminary administrator for lying to the FBI.

8. Abuse in Independent Fundamental Baptist churches

1970s–present ONGOING

WHAT HAPPENED

The *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* (December 2018) documented 412 allegations of sexual misconduct in 187 Independent Fundamental Baptist churches and institutions, with a pattern of pastors protecting one another and shaming victims. Jack Schaap, pastor of First Baptist Church of Hammond, Indiana, one of the largest IFB churches, was sentenced in 2013 to twelve years for sexual contact with a 16-year-old he was counseling; his predecessor and father-in-law, Jack Hyles, had faced allegations for decades.

The criticism

Churches with no denominational structure at all, answerable to no one, proved the least able to protect children.

Baptist response

IFB churches are independent by definition and do not represent the Baptist conventions; some have since adopted outside accountability.

Was it corrected? Ongoing. No central reform is possible in a movement without a center.

9. The Baptist Foundation of Arizona 1999 PROSECUTED

WHAT HAPPENED

The Baptist Foundation of Arizona, affiliated with the Arizona Southern Baptist Convention, collapsed in 1999 owing about $590 million to roughly 11,000 investors, many of them elderly Baptists who had invested on the strength of its church connection. It was then the largest nonprofit bankruptcy in American history. The foundation had hidden real-estate losses in a web of affiliated companies. Its auditor, Arthur Andersen, paid $217 million to settle claims (2002), and the foundation's president and general counsel were convicted of fraud in 2006.

The criticism

A ministry of the state convention used its church connection to raise money from about 11,000 Baptists, many of them elderly, and hid its losses from them.

Baptist response

This was fraud by individuals, prosecuted by the state and condemned by the convention.

Was it corrected? Prosecuted. Investors recovered a portion of their funds through litigation and the sale of assets.

10. Bailey Smith and "the prayer of a Jew" 1980 RETRACTED

WHAT HAPPENED

In August 1980, at a religious-right rally in Dallas, the newly elected SBC president Bailey Smith said that "God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew." The remark drew national condemnation.

The criticism

The convention's president voiced, in public, a contempt for Jewish prayer, and gave it the weight of the largest Protestant denomination in the United States.

Baptist response

Smith met with Jewish leaders and apologized for the offense; Southern Baptists have generally been strongly supportive of Israel and the Jewish people, and the SBC later adopted resolutions condemning antisemitism.

Was it corrected? Retracted.

11. Westboro Baptist Church 1991–present DISOWNED

WHAT HAPPENED

Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, founded by Fred Phelps in 1955, became notorious from the 1990s for picketing with signs such as "God Hates Fags," including at the funerals of Matthew Shepard (1998) and of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan; the Supreme Court upheld its right to do so in *Snyder v. Phelps* (2011).

The criticism

Critics of Baptists sometimes cite Westboro as if it represented them.

Baptist response

Westboro is an independent congregation of a few dozen members, mostly one family, affiliated with no Baptist body; the Baptist World Alliance and the Southern Baptist Convention have disavowed it. The fairness point cuts both ways: it is as unfair to judge Baptists by Westboro as to judge Catholics by their worst priests.

Was it corrected? Disowned by the Baptist conventions.

12. Baptist missions and Native American boarding schools 1870s–1960s PARTLY ACKNOWLEDGED

WHAT HAPPENED

Baptist mission societies, like those of other Protestant churches, ran schools for Native American children under the federal assimilation policy, including about a dozen schools that the U.S. Interior Department's investigation (2022; final report 2024) lists under Baptist bodies, among 417 federal Indian boarding schools at which at least 973 children died. Baptist education among the tribes also included Indian University (now Bacone College), begun in Indian Territory in 1880 with support from the American Baptist Home Mission Society.

The criticism

Baptist missions took part in a federal policy of forced assimilation that took Native children from their families, languages and religions.

Baptist response

Baptist schools were generally smaller and less coercive than the large federal institutions, and some Baptist missionaries defended Native land rights.

Was it corrected? Partly acknowledged. Some Baptist bodies have issued statements; there has been no denomination-wide apology comparable to Pope Francis's in 2022.