

A brief introduction & critique of
THE “LANDMARK BAPTIST” ERROR
(i.e. “*BAPTIST-BRIDE*” beliefs & ecclesiology)¹

GENERAL HISTORY OF THE MOVEMENT:

“[Landmarkism is] a nineteenth-century Baptist movement [begun] in the South (USA) asserting the sole validity and unbroken succession of Baptist churches since the New Testament era. This exclusivistic ecclesiology arose among Baptist churches in the South during the mid nineteenth century and was linked with the concept that the church is always a local and visible institution [i.e. a denial of the biblical concept of the universal church-*mwe*]. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Landmarkism made deep inroads in the Southern Baptist Convention, affecting concepts of missions, ordination, ordinances and even eschatology. Landmarkers refused to be involved in cooperative ventures with other Baptist churches—mission societies included. Their ecclesiology made them question the validity of transferring church membership by letter, a practice common among many Baptist churches but seen as a violation of the rights of the local church by Landmarkers. Most important was the proper baptism by immersion of believers who had confessed their faith. Baptisms by immersion not performed under the auspices of a Baptist church were not true baptisms but ‘*alien immersions.*’ (sic) Access to the Lord’s Supper was protected by the practice of ‘*closed communion,*’ allowing only baptized members of a given local church to participate in its celebration...

“The dominant figure behind the movement was **James R. Graves**, who was perhaps the most influential Baptist clergyman in the nineteenth century South. Graves found two strong allies in **James M. Pendleton** of Kentucky and **A.C. Dayton** of Mississippi. Together the three were known by their followers as the ‘Great Triumvirate.’ Although the movement actually began in the late 1840s with Graves’ appointment as editor of *The Tennessee Baptist*, Pendleton coined the term *Landmark* in an essay he wrote in 1854, which Graves published under the title *An Old Landmark Re-set...*

“Today Landmarkism continues to show residual strength through the localism of many Southern Baptist churches. Shortly after the turn of the present century, the Landmark movement gave rise to a splinter group which is represented today by the American Baptist Association and the Baptist Missionary Association of America.”²

“The **American Baptist Association (ABA) originated in 1924** with men who had left the Southern Baptist Convention as a minority voice of dissent. They are Landmark Baptists, who, in varying degrees, hold to successionist views of Baptist history. According to them, a succession of Baptist churches began with Christ and has continued. They reject any idea of a ‘universal’ church and believe that the only church in the Bible is local. Until 1899, when they established the Baptist Missionary Association of Texas, Landmark Baptists were unorganized. Others, in 1905, organized the General Association of Baptist Churches. Finally, in March 1924, in Texarkana, Texas, the two associations merged to form the American Baptist Association, a loosely knit fellowship of ‘missionary Baptist’ churches, supporting several schools and other ministries.”³

“***Alien Immersion*** (is) a term still used by many Baptists in the South to refer to baptism by immersion administered by non-Baptists. Although the term was used before the rise of the Landmark Movement in the mid-nineteenth century, it came to prominence through the exclusivistic ecclesiastical theories of J. R. Graves, J. M. Pendleton and A.C. Dayton. Landmarkers stressed baptism more than any other issue in their ecclesiology. **Graves and others insisted that since only Baptist churches and ministers are valid, only baptism administered in the context of a local Baptist church is valid...** A similar concept of baptismal exclusivism arose among...leaders of the Churches of Christ (with some) refusing to accept the validity of immersion outside their fellowship. However the term ‘alien immersion’ did not become popular with them.”⁴

¹ Compiled by Rev. Mike Edwards, St. Vincent, West Indies, 2007, revised April, 2012. Note: Parentheses appear as such in the original sources. Material in brackets & all bolding & underlining has been added by me. -*mwe*

² Daniel G. Reid, Coordinating Editor, “*Dictionary of Christianity in America*” (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, 1990), “*Landmark Movement*”, pp. 629-630

³ David O. Beale, “*In Pursuit of Purity*”, (Unusual Publications: Greenville, South Carolina, 1986), p. 362

⁴ Reid, op cit., p. 35

J.R. Graves (1820-1893). “[Graves was a] Southern Baptist preacher, editor and publisher who led to the formation of the Landmark Movement. Born into a Congregational family in Vermont, he joined a Baptist congregation at age fifteen. Growing up in a poor farming family, Graves received little formal education. However, he applied himself diligently to private studies and became a schoolteacher, finding work first in Kingsville, Ohio (1840-42), and then in Jessamine County, Kentucky (1842-1843). In 1842 he was ordained into the Baptist ministry and preached in Ohio for a short period (1843-1845) before taking a teaching position in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1845. Soon after moving to Nashville, Graves became pastor of a church; and by 1848 he was the editor of *The Tennessee Baptist*. His chief contribution to Baptist life and history was through his career in journalism. By the eve of the Civil War, *The Tennessee Baptist* had the largest circulation (13,000 in 1859) of any denominational paper in the South. Not only did it serve the Baptists of Tennessee, it was also the denominational journal for Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas and most of the lower Mississippi Valley. Graves also formed a publishing company which became one of the most influential and prolific religious presses in the South during the second half of the nineteenth century...

“During the decade before the Civil War, Graves became the dominant figure of a developing movement in Baptist life known as **Landmarkism**. In 1851 he convened a meeting at Cotton Grove, Tennessee, that formulated the chief tenets of the movement, **the foundational premise being the sole validity of Baptist churches as true churches of Christ, joined in unbroken succession since the New Testament era**. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, Landmarkism became the most potent force in the Southern Baptist Convention, especially in the old Southwest...Graves’ book *Old Landmarkism: What Is It?* (1880) is a classic pronouncement of this doctrine.”⁵

J. M. Pendleton (1811-1891). “Baptist pastor, professor, and journalist...By the age of seventeen he had joined the Baptist Church and by nineteen (1831) he was licensed and preaching. He was ordained a Baptist minister in 1833, but for several years he taught school and studied theology privately. Pendleton became one of the better-educated Baptist pastors in western Kentucky, and he was the first in his region to enter the professional ministry... (In 1858) he became a joint editor of *The Tennessee Baptist*. Pendleton, along with A.C. Dayton and James Robinson Graves made up the ‘*Great Triumvirate*’ of a Baptist ecclesiological movement known as ‘Landmarkism.’ Pendleton coined the term ‘Landmark’ in 1854 in an article Graves published as a tract entitled ‘*An Old Landmark Re-Set*’ (1854). Both men were alarmed that Baptists were setting aside an old landmark of the faith by participating in pulpit exchanges, union meetings and fraternal relations with other denominations. Pendleton was recognized as the systematist of Landmarkism.”⁶

J.M. Carroll. Author of the very widely distributed booklet “*The Trail of Blood*” (copyright, 1931). This booklet has had a major impact in promoting Landmarkism, particularly due to the large fold-out chart attached in it.

A SERIOUS PROBLEM WITH THE HISTORY PORTRAYED IN “THE TRAIL OF BLOOD”:

A NUMBER OF HISTORICAL GROUPS THAT B.H. CARROLL INCLUDES IN HIS “BAPTIST LINEAGE” IN “THE TRAIL OF BLOOD” EITHER TAUGHT HERETICAL DOCTRINES, HELD TO QUESTIONABLE POSITIONS, or ENGAGED IN ABERRANT PRACTICES.

1. **THE MONTANISTS.** “Montanism emerged in Phrygia after A.D. 155 as an attempt on the part of Montanus to meet the problems of formalism in the church and the dependence of the church on human leadership instead of on the guidance of the Holy Spirit (which were admirable motives-*mwe*). He was opposed to the rise to prominence of the bishop in the local church. This attempt to combat formalism and human organization led him to a reassertion of the doctrines of the Second Advent and the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, as so often happens in such movements, he swung to the opposite extreme and developed fanatical misinterpretations of Scripture. In the development of his peculiar doctrine concerning inspiration, **Montanus contended that inspiration was immediate and continuous and that he was the paraclete or advocate through whom the Holy Spirit spoke to the church as He, the Spirit, had spoken through Paul and the other apostles.** Montanus also had an extravagant eschatology. **He believed that the heavenly kingdom of Christ would soon be set up at Pepuza in Phrygia and that he**

⁵ Reid, et al., op cit., p. 493

⁶ Reid, ibid, p. 880

would have a prominent place in that kingdom. In order that they might be prepared for that coming, he and his followers practiced strict asceticism. There was to be no second marriage if a mate died, many fasts were to be observed, and dry foods were to be eaten. The church reacted against these extravagances by condemnation of the movement. The Council at Constantinople in 381 declared that the Montanists should be looked upon as pagans. But Tertullian, one of the greatest of the church fathers, found the doctrines of the group appealing and became a Montanist. The movement was strongest in Carthage and Eastern lands. It represented the perennial protest that occurs in the church when there is over-elaboration of machinery and lack of dependence on the Spirit of God. The Montanist movement was and is a warning to the church not to forget that its organization and its formulation of doctrine must never be divorced from the satisfaction of the emotional side of man's nature and the human craving for immediate spiritual contact with God."⁷

2. **THE DONATISTS.** "The Donatist controversy developed after 300 as a result of the persecution of the church by (the Roman Emperor) Diocletian. Most of the controversy was centered in North Africa. A churchman named Donatus wanted to exclude Caecilian from his office as bishop of Carthage because Caecilian had been consecrated by Felix, who was accused of being a traitor during the Diocletian persecution. Donatus argued that the failure to remain true during the persecution invalidated the power of Felix to ordain because he had thus committed an unpardonable sin. Donatus and his group elected Majorinus as bishop; and, after the death of Majorinus in 313, Donatus became bishop. When Constantine gave money for the African church, the Donatists complained because they received none. A synod held at Rome decided that the validity of a sacrament does not depend on the character of the one administering the sacrament. Hence the Donatists had no right to any of the aid. Another council of Western bishops, held at Arles in 314, again decided against the Donatist position. This controversy became a matter of some concern to Augustine, and as a result of his concern, he wrote much on the question of the authority of the church."⁸
3. **THE PAULICIANS.** "Gnostic teachings reappeared to some extent in the doctrines of the seventh-century Paulicians, the eleventh-and twelfth-century Bogomils (see below), and the later Albigenses (see below) in southern France."⁹
4. **THE CATHARI/ALBIGENSES.** "New sects will often be revealed as old heresies in a new guise. Christian Science can be understood better after a study of Gnosticism in the early church and the ideas of the Cathari in medieval times. Ignorance of the Bible and the history of the church is major reason why many advocate false theologies or bad practices."¹⁰ "The Cathari, or Albigenses, so-called because they were most numerous around Albi in southern France, used the New Testament as a basis for their ideas; **but the heretical ideas that they formulated resembled the dualistic and ascetic ideas of the Gnostic, Paulician, and Bogomil movements.** The Albigenses believed that there was an absolute dualism between the good God, who made the souls of men, and the bad god, who was given a material body after he was cast out of heaven. Following his expulsion, the bad god made the visible world. Consequently matter is evil, and therefore the Cathari (literally, *the pure*) were opposed to reproduction of the race, to the sacraments, particularly the Mass with its emphasis on the physical presence of Christ in the elements, the doctrines of hell and purgatory, and a physical resurrection. Salvation involved repentance, the rite of *consolamentum*—performed by the laying of hands and the Gospel of John on the head of the candidate—and an ascetic avoidance of marriage, oaths, war, milk, meat, cheese, and eggs [see below for reasoning behind this-*mwe*]. They condemned the use of anything material in worship. The elite, called the *perfecti*, had forgiveness of sins and an assurance of restoration to the kingdom of God. Because flesh cannot inherit heaven, the believers who lacked this rite of *consolamentum* had to receive it before death. The Albigenses, by making the New Testament the authoritative expression of their faith, offered a challenge to the Roman church, which claimed authority, through the lines of popes, from Christ Himself.

⁷ Earle E. Cairns, "*Christianity Through the Centuries*", (Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1964, 1981), p. 102

⁸ Cairns, op cit., pp. 103-104

⁹ Cairns, ibid, p. 100

¹⁰ Cairns, ibid, p.18

Persecution and the Albigensian crusade led by Simon de Montfort and sponsored by Innocent III in 1208 were the answers of the medieval Roman church to this affront to its authority.”¹¹

A FEW GENERAL &/or THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF LANDMARK BAPTIST TEACHING:

A. LANDMARK BAPTISTS DENY THE CLEAR BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH. This is a major error!

Dr. Stewart Custer gives a brief refutation of those who deny the concept of the universal church:

“Although there are a few interpreters who will argue that there is no universal church but only the local church [i.e. Landmark Baptists-*mwe*], the vast majority of believers see both doctrines in Scripture.

1. **The Lord Jesus said, ‘I will build my church’ (Matt. 16:18).** He certainly was not referring to the local church of Caesarea Philippi. He did mention the local church elsewhere (Matt. 18:15-17).
2. **Acts presents the doctrine of the universal church in two passages: Acts 9:31; 20:28.** The local church is also mentioned (8:1).
Acts 9:31: “Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost were multiplied.” (KJV) **Acts 9:31 literal translation:** “Therefore the church throughout Judaea and Galilee and Samaria was having peace, and being edified and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, was being multiplied.”¹² (For a further explanation for the plural vs. singular translation, see footnote below)¹³
3. **Paul gives a very clear presentation of the doctrine:** [a] dividing all mankind into Jews, Gentiles, and ‘the church of God’ (I Cor. 10:32); [b] describing all the gifts that God set in the church (no one church has them all, I Cor. 12:28); [c] sadly admitting that he had persecuted the church of God (far more than a local body, I Cor. 15:9); [d] declaring that God gave Christ to be the ‘head over all things to the church which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all’ (no local church would claim to be this, Eph. 1:22-23); [e] holding that the church manifests to principalities and powers the great wisdom of God (some local churches manifest something very different, Eph. 3:9-10); [f] referring to Christ, the head of the church, and describing how He loves the church, how He will present the church to Himself as a glorious church, etc. (Eph. 5:23-32). **These passages go far beyond the possible fulfillment by any local body.**
4. **The writer to the Hebrews** mentions that believers are come ‘to Mount Zion...to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are in heaven’ (12:22-23). **He is certainly not referring to the local church of heaven.** However, the epistles also teach the local church (I Cor. 1:2; Phil. 1:1, etc.).¹⁴

The denial of the biblical doctrine of the universal church is also refuted by some of the greatest theologians in church history—including Baptist theologians! For instance:

Strong: “The church of Christ, in its largest signification, is the whole company of regenerate persons in all times and ages, in heaven and on earth (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 1:22-23; 3:10; 5:24-25; Col. 1:18; Heb. 12:23)...The church, in this large sense, is nothing less than the body of Christ—the organism to which he gives spiritual life, and through which he manifests the fullness of his power and grace. The church therefore cannot be defined merely in human terms, as an aggregate of individuals associated for social, benevolent, or

¹¹ Cairns, *ibid*, pp. 226-227, italics in the original.

¹² Stewart Custer, “*Witness to Christ-A Commentary on Acts*” (BJUP: Greenville, SC, 2000), p. 131-132

¹³ Regarding the difference in reading between various translations (i.e. singular vs. plural, “churches” vs. “church” in Acts 9:31), Custer observes: “All the earliest manuscripts have the singular, church (P74, X, A, B, C, etc.). The more recent ones (E, 6th century on) have the plural. The singular emphasizes the organic unity of the church; the plural emphasizes the collective experience of the individual churches. Knowing cites the singular: ‘The term is used here markedly of the unified church and in accordance with St. Paul’s own later usage of the word’ (Expos. Greek Test., II, p. 244). For the argument behind the readings see Alford, Greek Test., II, p. 106; Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek NT*, p. 367.”

¹⁴ *ibid*, p. 132

even spiritual purposes. There is a transcendent element in the church. It is the great company of persons whom Christ has saved, in whom he dwells, to whom and through whom he reveals God (Eph. 1:22-23)... **The Scriptures, however, distinguish between this invisible or universal church, and the individual church, in which the universal church takes local and temporal form, and in which the idea of the church as a whole is concretely exhibited...** Besides these two significations of the term ‘church,’ there are properly in the New Testament no others. The word (*ecclesia*) is indeed used in Acts 7:38; 19:32, 39; Heb. 2:12, to designate a popular assembly; but since this is a secular use of the term, it does not here concern us. In certain passages, as for example Acts 9:31, I Cor. 12:28; Phil. 3:6, and 1 Tim. 3:15, (*ecclesia*) appears to be used either as a generic or as a collective term, to denote simply the body of independent local churches existing in a given region or at a given epoch. But since there is no evidence that these churches were bound together in any outward organization, this use of the term (*ecclesia*) cannot be regarded as adding any new sense to those of ‘the universal church’ and ‘the local church’ already mentioned.”¹⁵

Bancroft: “The church is the mystical body of Christ, of which He is the living Head and regenerate believers are the members: ‘*For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit*’ (1 Cor. 12:12-13—cf. Eph. 1:22-23; 3:4-6). The church thus viewed as an organism is ‘*the people for His name*’ which God is now taking out from among the Gentiles, according to Acts 15:14. This is the age of God’s grace and calling, which has for its objective the formation of the body of Christ, which is to be His bride... Whether viewed in its larger aspect as an organism, including all true believers gathered out of the nations between the first and second advents of Christ, or in the local aspect as an organization, including believers in any given community, the church is not to be identified either with the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of God is that sphere or realm in which the sovereignty of God is acknowledged and His will obeyed, including unfallen angels and redeemed men of all ages. The church, however, includes only men who are redeemed in this age, and therefore it is only a part of the kingdom of God... **The church as an organism includes all regenerate believers gathered out of the world between the first and second advents of Christ, while as an organization it includes local believers united for the service of Christ in any given assembly.**”¹⁶

Thiessen: “The universal or true Church is not the product of man’s efforts. It was not ‘organized,’ but ‘born.’ In Heb. 12:23 this Church is called ‘*the church of firstborn ones*’ (*prototokon*, being plural). That is, the new birth is the first condition in the founding of this Church. The second is the baptism of the Spirit: ‘*For in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free, and were all made to drink of one Spirit*’ (1 Cor. 12:13)... The Lord alone can baptize with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8), and He alone can add to this Church (Acts 2:47); cf. 5:14; 11:24). Remember that He said He would build His Church (Matt. 16:18). **Since this is the case, no denomination has the right to claim that it is the one and only true Church. Christ knows His own and His own know Him (John 10:14); but His own do not always recognize each other.**”¹⁷

Additional verses & comments that refute the “Baptist Bride” error of denying a universal church:

Matt. 18:17 & 16:18: “Here [i.e. in Mt. 18:17] and in 16:18 is the only mention of the church in the Gospels. A local congregation is meant here; **in 16:18 [‘I will build my church’] all believers in Christ are in view.**”¹⁸

Acts 7:38: “‘*the church in the wilderness.*’ Lit., the assembly in the wilderness; i.e., the gathering of the people to receive the law. The word translated church (or congregation, assembly, gathering) is used in the NT of four kinds of groups: (1) the children of Israel gathered as a nation; (2) in 19:32, 39, 41, a group of townspeople assembled in a town meeting; (3) in a technical sense, **all believers who are gathered together in the one Body of Christ, the church universal (Col. 1:18)**; and (4) most frequently, in reference to a local group of professing Christians; e.g., the church at Antioch (13:1).”¹⁹

¹⁵ Augustus H. Strong, (Baptist) “*Systematic Theology*” (Fleming H. Revell Company: Old Tappan, New Jersey, 1907, 1976), pp. 887-891
¹⁶ Emery H. Bancroft, (Baptist) “*Elemental Theology*” (Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1932, 1977), pp. 306-307
¹⁷ Henry C. Thiessen, “*Lectures in Systematic Theology*”, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1949), p. 414
¹⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, “*The Ryrie Study Bible*” (KJV), (Moody Press: Chicago, Illinois, 1986, 1994), p. 1451
¹⁹ Ibid, p. 1646, bolding & italicizing added (& so in the following references)

Eph. 1:22-23: “ ‘*the church, which is his body.*’ **The universal church to which every true believer belongs, regardless of local church affiliation.** It is a spiritual organism entered by means of the baptism of the Spirit (I Cor. 12:13). Christ is the risen Head of the church, and its members are subject to Him (Eph. 5:24). Local churches should be miniatures of the Body of Christ, though it is possible to have unbelieving members in local churches who are not, therefore, members of the Body of Christ.”²⁰

Heb. 12:23: “ ‘*church of the firstborn.*’ Lit., church of firstborn ones. NT believers who belong to the church, the Body of Christ.”²¹

Ryrie gives a concise synopsis of the biblical evidence in support of the “universal” church:

“The Meaning and Uses of the Word (‘Church’). **1. Literally, called-out group or assembly.** **2. By usage** the word church may refer to: a) The assembly of the Jewish people (Acts 7:38). b) A heathen assembly (Acts 19:32, 39, 41), c) *The Body of Christ* (Col. 1:18), d) The local assembly (I Cor. 1:2)...

“The Universal Church:

A. **“The Fact of Its Existence (Matt. 16:18; Col. 1:18; Eph. 3:10).**

B. **“The Founding of it.** **1.** Christ was the founder in the sense that He was its teacher, builder, and the sender of the Spirit who actually formed the Body of Christ. **2.** Pentecost was the beginning since the Body of Christ is formed by the baptizing work of the Spirit (I Cor. 12:13) and this was first performed on Pentecost (Acts 1:5; 11:15).

C. **“The Foundation of it—Christ (Matt. 16:18; I Peter 2:4-8).**

D. **“The Figures of it:** **1.** The Shepherd and the sheep (John 10). **2.** The Vine and the branches (John 15). **3.** The Cornerstone and the stones of the building (Eph. 2:19-21). **4.** The High Priest and a kingdom of priests (I Peter 2). **5.** The Head and the Body (I Cor. 12). **6.** The Last Adam and the new creation (Rom. 5). **7.** The Bridegroom and the Bride (Eph. 5).

E. **“The End of the Church Age—at the Rapture (2 Thess. 2; Rev. 3:10-11; I Thess. 1:10).”²²**

B. LANDMARK BAPTISTS DO NOT ACCEPT/RECOGNIZE THE BAPTISM OF ANY BELIEVER—EVEN BY IMMERSION—IF IT WAS NOT PERFORMED BY A BAPTIST PASTOR OR IN A BAPTIST CHURCH!

C. EXTREME LANDMARK BAPTISTS DENY THAT ANYONE OTHER THAN A BAPTIST WILL GET TO HEAVEN! SUCH A POSITION IS NO DIFFERENT THAN THAT OF CULTS & FALSE RELIGIONS! (e.g. Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, etc.).

²⁰ *ibid*, p. 1785

²¹ *ibid*, p. 1870

²² Charles C. Ryrie, “*A Synopsis of Bible Doctrine*” [in “*The Ryrie Study Bible*”], (Moody Press: Chicago, Illinois, 1965), “*The Doctrine of the Church*”, pp. 1980-1981, bolding in the original, italics added.