

Western Baptist College

Claudia Green
EDFL690

April 29, 2003

Western Baptist College

Depending upon who is asked, Western Baptist College started in the 1930's or the 1940's, and had its first campus either in Phoenix, Arizona, or in Oakland, California. This paper will look at the earliest history of the college, allowing the reader to understand the dispute concerning the origins of the school. Because the college's history has been closely tied to the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, a brief overview of the founding of this group will also be addressed.

In the early part of the 1900's, Baptists in the United States were generally affiliated with either the Northern Baptist Convention or the Southern Baptist Convention. The determining factor for affiliation was the location of a church in relation to the Mason-Dixon Line. In 1919 the Northern Baptist Convention joined with other denominations to begin a program known as the New World Movement. Many fundamentalist pastors in the Northern Baptist Convention had grave concerns about this movement, and urged the Convention to reconsider its participation in it. These pastors joined together to form a permanent body, calling themselves the "National Federation of Fundamentalists of the Northern Baptists".¹ In addition to the concerns about the New World Movement, these men were increasingly aware of modernism in the colleges and seminaries supported by the Northern Baptist Convention. For several years the fundamentalist pastors tried to work within the structure of the

Northern Baptist Convention to fight liberalism. By 1923 it had become clear it was a losing battle. The decision was made to form an organization that would “be designed to effectuate the cooperation of Bible-believing Baptists throughout the entire nation (not just the north) against the forces of liberalism”.² First known as the Baptist Bible Union of America, by 1932 this group would become the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (GARBC or GARB). The first president outlined the objectives of the GARBC. Included in the objectives were the following ideas:

...to re-affirm the truths of Scripture historically believed by Baptists and expressed by the Baptist Confession of faith of London 1689 or the New Hampshire Confession of Faith or the Philadelphia Confession of Faith or the Baptist Bible Union Confession of Faith or any such which enunciates the same truths though in other words....It also proposes to assist churches secure safe, sound and satisfactory pastors for the proclamation of the Gospel and the work of the ministry.³

It took three years for the organizational structure of this new association of churches to be established. When completed, the GARBC was a fellowship of churches, “committed to a separatist position in which liberals would have not voice...and (with a) commitment to

¹ J. Murray Murdoch, *Portrait of Obedience: The Biography of Robert T. Ketcham* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1979), 76.

² *Ibid.*, 95.

doctrinal purity.”⁴ Clearly, the liberal colleges and seminaries of the Northern Baptist Convention would not have a part in the future of the GARBC.

In 1935, a new, interdenominational Bible institute was started in Phoenix, Arizona. Leland B. Entrekin, an evangelist, and Roy O. Bancroft, a pastor-teacher, founded Phoenix Bible Institute. Entrekin’s focus was to be directing the school while Bancroft was to recruit students and raise funds. In 1938 Entrekin left to found the Bible and Missionary Training Institute in Los Angeles, which would later be known as Westmont. Bancroft continued working with the Institute, although it struggled to stay open.

In January of 1943, a group of Regular Baptist pastors met in Los Angeles. One piece of business before them concerned the Phoenix Bible Institute. According to the minutes from that meeting, Mr. Bancroft met with the pastors and expressed “his willingness to receive the endorsement of the Independent Baptists.”⁵ The pastors agreed to pursue the matter by looking at the “doctrine, principles and practices, and financial set-up”⁶ of the Institute. In addition, it was decided that three men should be appointed to “investigate the Phoenix Bible Institute with a view to our fellowshiping them in their great work for God.”⁷

³ Ibid., 131.

⁴ Ibid., 134.

⁵ Minutes of Pastors’ Meeting, Calvary Baptist Tabernacle, Los Angeles, CA, January, 1943, p. 4.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Upon returning to Phoenix, Mr. Bancroft sent a letter to the pastors following up on his request:

Be it hereby known that I, Roy O. Bancroft, believing that the Phoenix Bible Institute would make better progress by being backed up by a group of fundamental churches and recognizing the sound, uncompromising stand taken by the Independent Baptist churches connected with the G. A. R. B., I have gladly requested that they assume the future leadership of the Phoenix Bible Institute, this action also being in accord with all members of the Board of Directors of the Phoenix Bible Institute. I therefore, in view of their acceptance, do gladly turn over the headship and responsibilities connected with the Phoenix Bible Institute to my successors, the Independent Baptist Board of Directors, comprised of Messrs. Wood, Mercado, Vander Linden and Peterson, this being entirely a voluntary act on my part without any compulsion on the part of the new board. I...shall be glad to cooperate in any way advisable for the future progress of the Institute and pray God's blessing upon the brethren now in charge.⁸

Based upon this letter and the meeting in Los Angeles, another meeting was arranged for April 13-15, 1943, at the Phoenix Bible Institute in order to "plan for the future of the school and to set up a

complete Board of Directors and officers.”⁹ Thirteen men attended this meeting. After the meeting was opened with prayer, the board members of the school made a motion:

Be it resolved that the board of directors of the Baptist Bible Institute, formerly Phoenix Bible Institute, urgently request the brethren of the Independent Baptist Churches of California and Arizona, now assembled in council in Phoenix, assume full responsibility and take over complete control of the reorganization, and conduct and open the school under their endorsement the fall of 1943.¹⁰

The members of the board present passed this motion. Immediately after this, a motion was made by Frank Prewitt that “the brethren in council accept the responsibility and assume complete control of the Bible Institute as offered by the school board, and invite the other Regular Baptist Brethren not present to share this responsibility.”¹¹ This motion carried unanimously. Election of officers and nominations for Board of Directors followed this action. Arthur Woods was elected as the President, Harrison Vander Linden was appointed Dean, and Leonardo Mercado was elected Secretary-Treasurer. These men were also members of the new Board of Directors, along with Eugene Eymann,

⁸ Roy O. Bancroft, letter to “Fellow Pastors (sic) in Association of Regular Baptist Churches”, February 1, 1943.

⁹ Leonardo S. Mercado, letter to “Pastors of the California, Arizona Fellowship”, March 17, 1943.

¹⁰ Minutes of Meetings of Regular Baptist Pastors of California and Arizona, assembled at Phoenix Baptist Bible Institute, April 14 and 15, 1943, p. 1.

Willard Riggs, Paul Jackson, Henry Poole, Frank Prewitt, and Walter Rizor. Except for the elected officers, all of the Board members were from California.

Several other pieces of business were addressed during the two-day meeting. One important matter was that of a new name for the Institute. Prewitt made a motion that the new name be Phoenix Baptist Bible Institute. The motion carried unanimously. Peterson then made a motion that a request be made to the GARBC for their recognition of the Phoenix Baptist Bible Institute at their national meeting in May 1943. An interesting piece of business was a motion made by Mercado that “divorced prospective students will not be admitted to the school.”¹² The minutes of the meeting noted that “(a)fter earnest prayer by Riggs, and Scriptural deliberation (sic), the motion was unanimously carried.”¹³ The minutes did not contain any discussion on this matter. Was this a carry-over reaction from the days of affiliation with the liberal colleges and seminaries of the Northern Baptist Convention? The recorded documents shed no light on this. With regards to the school’s finances, Mercado suggested a “monthly budget of \$750 for the employment of one full-time teacher,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. p. 3.

¹³ Ibid.

an office secretary, building caretaker, running expenses, etc.”¹⁴ After a recess for deliberation, the suggested budget was accepted.

There is no available record of when school opened for the 1943/1944 school year. Existing records do show there were at least decision-making meetings held in July and August of 1943. A meeting on July 21, 1943 introduced Dr. H.O. VanGilder, then chairman of the GARBC Council of Fourteen (a decision-making body) to the advisory council of the Phoenix Baptist Bible Institute. History shows that Dr. VanGilder played a significant role in the story of Western Baptist College. The August meetings addressed a number of operating matters. One item of interest to college faculty was the matter of pay. It was suggested to “pay teachers something, \$1.00 a lesson or \$1.00 day, to pay incidentals and make teachers feel more responsible.”¹⁵

The second August meeting, held August 19th, addressed, among other items, the idea of “love gifts” to be paid “to those serving after caring for the regular expenses.”¹⁶ This particular item would be the root of some future problems. Wisely, the board decided “...no office of the school receiving remuneration (sic) shall be elected to serve on the board of trustees.”¹⁷ Vander Linden, therefore, needed to be replaced on the trustee board. Mr. Carl Hoos was elected as the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Minutes from Meeting of Pastors, August 9, 1943.

¹⁶ Minutes of P.B.B.I. Advisory Council, August 19, 1943, p. 1.

replacement. During this meeting, the board thanked "...Bro. Vander Linden and Woods for their splendid work in preparing the school's curreculum (sic),"¹⁸ and heartily endorsed their work. Vander Linden also presented forms, application blanks, schedules, and dorm rules which had been prepared for the coming school year. Everything was now ready for the new school year to begin.

The Institute opened under its new organization with about 30 students. One focus of the Institute was the training of missionaries to serve in Latin America.¹⁹ There is no record available of how the school year progressed from an academic standpoint. There are records that indicate all was not well from an administrative perspective.

The Directors met again in April 1944, this time in Ceres, CA. Both Mr. And Mrs. Woods had been experiencing health problems, and Woods had left the school mid-year for this reason. He sent a letter to the meeting asking that a man from outside of Phoenix be asked to serve as President.²⁰ If someone from outside of Phoenix could not be found, Woods suggested Mercado for consideration for the position. At this meeting it also became apparent that Vander Linden was not completely happy with how things were being done.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁹ Minutes from Meeting of Pastors, August 9, 1943

²⁰ Minutes of Directors' of Phoenix Baptist Bible Institute held at Ceres, CA, April 14, 1944, p. 1.

He sent a letter in which he set forth "...some of his grievances of the past year. He complained that there were some Love Gifts in arrear (sic) due him."²¹ Minutes of the meeting held in June indicated there was a "...sad lack of harmony between brother Woods and brother Vander Linden."²² Part of this was due to the fact that some contended that the church pastored by Woods was not a Baptist church. It was generally believed that the differences around this matter would be resolved, given time.

Several men were asked to consider becoming president of PBBI. Among these were Henry Thiesen, author of a systematic theology text, and board member Paul Jackson. Eugene Eymann, another board member was also asked. Eymann objected, saying he did not have "...assurance from the Lord to make such a move."²³ Despite this, Eymann was nominated, and though he again objected, he was overruled and unanimously elected president. Board member W. W. Riggs was unanimously elected vice-president. There was also discussion about Woods returning to the Institute:

Questions by Aagard: How does brother Woods feel about coming back, and what will his relationship be to the Church, and how will (he) feel towards the school?

²¹ Ibid.

²² Minutes of Directors' Meeting for Phoenix Bible Institute June 15, 1944, p. 1.

²³ Ibid.

Answer (Riggs): Not sure about all this. Mrs. Woods is the greater problem. She seems to be quite temperamental, but she has done a good work in voice training.²⁴

In spite of this cautious response, and provided he would sign the Institute's statement of faith, Woods was nominated for the office of Treasurer. Vander Linden was again unanimously voted to be Dean. It appeared that administratively, the school was ready for its second year.

On June 17, the pastors were still assembled for a Fellowship meeting, when a phone call was received from Phoenix. Riggs informed those assembled that under the present set up (the one agreed upon by the Board of Directors two days previously), he "...would rather have nothing to do with the school. Brother Vander Linden also said over the phone that he too must be counted out of the picture under this set-up."²⁵ At a hastily convened meeting, Vander Linden's election as Dean was rescinded, and Woodrow Young was elected to that position. No other changes in leadership occurred. Finally, the administration was ready to lead the school into the 1944/1945 school year.

At this time, Phoenix Baptist Bible Institute advanced itself as an independent, fundamental, and premillennial institution. Even though the name included "Baptist", Baptist viewpoints and practices were taught, and the Board of Directors and teaching faculty were Baptists (or at least of Baptist conviction), students did not have to hold to Baptist

²⁴ Ibid., p. 2.

positions in order to be admitted. The transition from an interdenominational school to a Baptist institution was in process. The school was growing and needed additional facilities. A dormitory was available with rooms renting for \$3.50 per week. Dining facilities were not available on campus, but reduced rates were offered at a local cafeteria.²⁶

The board met again on April 4, 1945. One recommendation before the board was "...that we strike from article eight of our constitution under entrance requirements 'No divorced person accepted.' Motion carried."²⁷ Fred Brock was one of the men elected to fill vacancies on the board. Dr. Brock's long association with Western Baptist College had begun. Woodrow Young introduced an item of business:

Woodrow T. Young brought up the question of uniting P.B.B.I. and the Los Angeles Baptist Seminary. The consensus of opinion was in favor of maintaining the P.B.B.I. in Phoenix with the warmest of Christian fellowship with the seminary.²⁸

In October of 1945, the Council of Seven of the Regular Baptist Churches of California also suggested moving the Institute to the same campus as the Los Angeles Baptist Theological Seminary. The Board was willing to consider this, suggesting a meeting be arranged with the

²⁵ Report of meeting with Dr. Griffith, dated June 19, 1944.

²⁶ Notes from David Miller, compiled 1998, on file in the President's Office, WBC, p. 4.

²⁷ Minutes of Council Meeting, Phoenix Baptist Bible Institute, April 4, 1945.

trustees of the seminary. At the same time, they were looking into buying property in the Phoenix area. No commitments were made to a move or to remaining in Phoenix.

Arrangements for a meeting between the two schools came together in December 1945. Every person present at the meeting was allowed time to state their view on a possible move. Arguments were offered on both sides of the issue. The growth of PBBI from seven students to 55 was noted as evidence of God's blessing on the school while under the leadership of the GARB. On the other side, it was stated that the move would allow for greater possibilities for establishing new churches. At the end of three days of discussion, a poll of the participants was taken. Of the 15 people present, five were opposed to the move, two undecided, seven favored the move, and one abstained. The meeting adjourned with an agreement to commit the matter to prayer. For the time being, the school would remain in Phoenix.²⁹

When the matter of a move was next discussed at the board meeting on March 6, 1946, at Mercado's Mexican Bible Institute in Tempe, Arizona, Los Angeles was no longer a possible destination. Attention had been turned to the Oakland-San Francisco Bay area. Mercado understood the desire of the California churches to have PBBI relocate to California, and agreed that the Bay area had many advantages. Woods, however, noted the advantages of the Phoenix area,

²⁸ Ibid.

including the proximity to the Mexican Bible Institute and Mexico, as well as work that was being done with the Indian population. Mercado urged the board to "...by all means investigate the Bay area,"³⁰ but also stated that "...some brethren in Phoenix (were) interested in maintaining a school there and that he would help and that we should not be surprised if another school was started."³¹ It was decided to approach pastors in the Bay area to get their written response to the proposed move. Those present must have been fairly confident the move would take place as names for a new president were submitted.³²

Less than a month later, on April 2, 1946, a special meeting was called in Santa Maria, California. Frank Prewitt reported that he had been able to contact twenty-one pastors in the Bay area since the March meeting. He reported, "... that everywhere the response of both pastors and laymen was enthusiastic in favor of the proposed move."³³ With this support given, Hoos suggested the men present spend some time in prayer "...in earnest petition that the Lord might give us His mind and lead us plainly in His will in the decision before us."³⁴ Following this time of prayer, a decision was made:

Motion made by Fred Brock and seconded by Carrel Aagard
that we transfer the operations of the hitherto Phoenix Baptist

²⁹ Minutes of Directors' Meeting, December 18, 1945.

³⁰ Minutes of Directors' Meeting, March 6, 1946.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Minutes of Directors' Meeting, March 7, 1946, p. 1.

³³ Minutes of Directors' Meeting, April 2, 1946.

³⁴ Ibid.

Bible Institute from Phoenix, Arizona to the San Francisco-Oakland Bay area, trusting under God to find adequate facilities to carry on the work. Motion carried.³⁵

The property of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church at 33rd and Telegraph in Oakland, California was suggested. The next day, the trustees made a quick trip to Oakland, inspected the building, and made a motion on the spot to purchase the church for \$37,000, subject to granting of permits to use the building for Bible school purposes.³⁶ It appeared all was set for the school to make a smooth transition from Arizona to California.

However, back in Phoenix, things were not so smooth. Both President Eymann and Mercado were unhappy with the decision. When Eymann announced the decision to the student body, it was reported that he presented it "...to the students unfairly and unwisely, and that as a result the student body had not shown...proper respect for this action or the authority upon which it stood."³⁷ Mercado spoke to the student body the day after Eymann did:

You students might as well know that the California Brethren have hindered the school here for the past two years. First,

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Minutes of Board of Directors, April 3, 1946.

³⁷ Minutes of the Board of Directors, May 15, 1946.

they wanted to move it to Los Angeles and now to the Bay Area.³⁸

Mercado did not confine his comments to the student body. He also made a report to the GARB's Council of Education, a subcommittee of the Council of Fourteen. Based on Mercado's report, the Council proposed to "...drop the move to Oakland and retrieve all monies possible."³⁹ Further, "...approval of P.B.B.I. and of any school in Oakland was withheld pending an overall educational program of the G.A.R.B."⁴⁰ It was decided by the Board of Directors to put the move to Oakland on hold until the Institute's Council could be consulted and offer advice. At this same meeting, President Eymann resigned.⁴¹

The Council met in Los Angeles on June 3, 1946, less than two weeks after the meeting in Phoenix. They determined "...that the Council of Fourteen had not been well informed of all the circumstances and that they would like to appear before the Council in their December meeting."⁴² A motion was made to endorse the move to Oakland and the purchase of the property. Of the twenty-two men in attendance, twenty voted in favor, two declined.⁴³ The move to Oakland would proceed as soon as possible after graduation ceremonies at the Phoenix campus.

³⁸ Miller

³⁹ Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors of the Phoenix Baptist Bible Institute, May 15, 1946, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴² Miller, p. 6.

⁴³ Ibid.

On June 25, 1946, the Board of Directors of the Phoenix Baptist Bible Institute met for the last time. Various financial matters needed to be resolved. Fred Brock moved to change the name of the school to Western Baptist Bible College. The motion carried.

The Phoenix chapter of the school came to a close. There was still discussion as to whether Western started in 1935 with the opening of the Phoenix Bible Institute, in 1943 with the involvement of the GARBC and change of name to Phoenix Baptist Bible Institute, or whether 1946 was the true starting point, with a completely new name and location. Whichever date is used, Western has continued to grow and thrive through two more moves and another name change. The focus of the school remains the educating of Christians for service wherever God should lead. Names and locations may change; the purpose remains.

Notes of Interest:

The people who chose to remain in Phoenix did indeed reorganize. They renamed PBBI Arizona Bible Institute. Eymann stayed as President. Mercado was a faculty member, as were both Mr. and Mrs. Woods. I could not find if the school is still open.

Of the men mentioned through this paper, several had long affiliations with Western:

Farrar was the first President at the Oakland campus, and taught classes. The presidency was a part-time position. A residence hall is named for him.

Van Gilder was the first full-time president for the college. A residence hall is named for him.

Brock was on faculty, and later became president.

Aagard served in faculty and staff positions. A residence hall is named for him.

Prewitt was on faculty for many years. His legacy is an archeological museum, currently housed in the college library.