

Arminian Baptists Then and Now:
An Introduction to the History and Distinctives of the Free Will Baptists

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Preface

Ever since I became a Christian it has been my pursuit to seek the Church that the New Testament described. From my own personal studies and comparisons, I have determined that the Baptist tradition is the closest if not the very exact apostolic Church that the early Christians enjoyed, however, I had a huge problem, which one? That's why there has been a long wait for me to study and conduct research regarding the origins and theology of the historical Baptists. Through the years of ministering and teaching, as an individual believer and as a pastor, I have read, written, and taught a number of times what I have gathered regarding a biblical Baptist polity, leadership and ministries, even completing a whole year series on what a healthy congregational local church looks like back in 2021. However, I have never had the real chance and the luxury of time to write an exhaustive academic paper about the beginning, distinctives, and present state and development of the first Baptists.

I thank my instructor Pr. Jhonn Mojica for choosing this topic for me, and the patience that he has shown in guiding me and the whole Expository Teaching 3rd year class on how to properly complete this article in between other subject requirements, ministerial functions, and family responsibilities. I also thank CBSIS for accommodating my out-of-campus educational needs by taking the initiative to subscribe and maintain our *Perlego* paid student subscriptions. The online program and curriculum of this institution have been a total game-changer for my faith, my ministry, and even my wallet!

Kidding aside, let me just say that the intention of this undergraduate report is not to present a new interpretation of Baptist history, or antagonize those who hold to a nuanced perspective, but to relay an honest and as much as it was possible, accurate overview of the origins, beliefs, and development of a tradition that branched-out from the Separatist movement into its own unique yet ironically a more primitive expression of Christianity compared to its Protestant contemporaries. By looking at key figures, events, and doctrinal stances particularly of the General Baptists (no pun intended), this paper aims to sketch a clearer picture of how history and theology work together in the life of the churches within the Reformed Arminian Baptist persuasion. My goal for this final paper is to help Christian readers, both laymen and experts alike, understand and dispel misconceptions on how the early Baptist commitment to Scripture, church purity, and salvation shaped what later became the National Association of Free Will Baptists. Lastly, I intend to do a more exhaustive follow up on this subject matter in the distant future if the Lord permits.

Christian Levin B. Advincula
Philippines, December 2025

Historical Beginnings of the English General Baptists: From Puritanism, Separatism, Anabaptism, to Baptists

John Smyth (c.1570-1612)

John Smyth may have grown up in Sturton-le-Steeple, Nottinghamshire, but the first clear record of him is at Christ's College, Cambridge, where he earned a BA in 1590 and an MA in 1597. One of his tutors was the Separatist *Francis Johnson* (c.1562-1617).¹ In 1594, the Anglican Church ordained him a minister², left Cambridge to get married in 1598.³ From 1600, Smyth served as "city lecturer" in *Lincoln* but was dismissed in 1602. A skilled theologian and writer, he published *The Bright Morning Starre* (1603) and *A Paterne of True Prayer* (1605). By 1606, living in Gainsborough, he broke completely with the Church of England, joined a *Separatist* group as a minister, and later led his congregation to Holland as religious refugees.⁴ John Smyth moved from being an Anglican to a Puritan, then Separatist, Baptist, and finally tried to join the Mennonites. After his death, most of his followers joined the Mennonite Church.⁵ Smyth embraced Arminianism and strongly defended religious liberty. He wrote books and a confession of faith that shaped the first Baptists. He died in Amsterdam and was buried at the Nieuwkerk.⁶ While he was still alive, John often had to defend his separation from the Church of England. In his writings, he counterargued that separated churches restored New Testament practices in worship, doctrine, and leadership. A strict separatist, he claimed the Church of England was false and that true Christians had to leave it, at the same time detailing how separated churches handled worship, governance, finances, and ministry.⁷ Leon Mcbeth comments that "[Smyth's] most basic concern was not for baptism, but for a pure church".⁸

¹ H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (B&H Academic, 1987), under "*The Rise of General Baptists: John Smyth*", chap. 1

² Nathan A. Finn Anthony L. Chute, *The Baptist Story, 2nd Edition*, 2nd ed. (B&H Academic, 2025), 50-53

³ William H. Brackney, *The A to Z of the Baptists*, 1st ed. (Scarecrow Press, 2009), 530

⁴ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*.

⁵ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*.

⁶ Brackney, *The A to Z of the Baptists*.

⁷ H. Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (B&H Books, 1990).

⁸ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*.

Thomas Helwys (c.1570-1616)

Helwys was born in Bilbrough, England, and was the son of a wealthy landowner named Edmund Helwys.⁹ He was admitted to Gray's Inn in London on January 29, 1593, a school for lawyers and judges. He was a lawyer and lay leader in the congregation, married to Joan Ashmore, and had seven children.¹⁰ Together, they opened their home at Broxtowe Hall in Nottinghamshire for meetings led by John Smyth around 1605. In about 1607, Helwys cared for Smyth while he was recovering in Basford and likely helped pay for the group of Separatists to move to Amsterdam in 1608.¹¹ He also helped form the first Baptist congregation in England that same year at Spitalfields, near London.¹² In 1612, Helwys published *The Mystery of Iniquity*, the first English work arguing for full religious freedom, and addressed it to King James I. He also wrote *A Short and Plaine Prooffe by the Word and Workes of God That God's Decree Is Not the Cause of Any Man's Sinne or Condemnation and That All Men Are Redeemed By Christ*, defending the view that God's decree does not cause sin or condemnation and that Christ redeemed all people.¹³ Helwys may have been imprisoned in Newgate for unknown reasons, but he likely did not die there. Recent research suggests he died in 1614 or early 1615 (Kreitzer, Thomas Helwys and His World, 2019, p. 268).¹⁴

The English General Baptists

Under the Act of 1534, meeting for worship outside the state church could lead to imprisonment or exile. So, after the Church of England discovered the Gainsborough gathering, persecution began, and the group decided to move to Amsterdam. Without official permission, Smyth and fewer than fifty members secretly traveled through rivers to the sea and then to the Netherlands, hoping to worship freely and grow in their faith with other English exiles.¹⁵ From 1607–1608, the Smyth group was persecuted by the government and decided to leave England for Amsterdam.

⁹ William H. Brackney, *Historical Dictionary of the Baptists*, 3rd ed. (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2021), 285

¹⁰ David Lytle and Charles Cook, *Arminian Baptists: A Biographical History of Free Will Baptists* (Randall House, 2022), 7-18

¹¹ Brackney, *The A to Z of the Baptists*; Brackney, *Historical Dictionary of the Baptists*, 275

¹² Anthony L. Chute, *The Baptist Story*, 2nd Edition, 53-56

¹³ Lytle and Cook, *Arminian Baptists: A Biographical History of Free Will Baptists*.

¹⁴ Brackney, *Historical Dictionary of the Baptists*.

¹⁵ William H. Brackney, *The Baptists*, 1st ed. (Praeger, 1994), 5-6

In 1609, Smyth came to believe that only believers should be baptized, not infants. He thought that if the Church of England was not a true church, then its baptism was not valid either. Since he believed there was no true church left to baptize him, he baptized himself and then baptized his congregation.¹⁶ Smyth was most likely baptized by pouring water, since immersion did not become common among General Baptists until later.¹⁷ However, within a few months, Smyth believed that true baptism had to come from someone who already had it. Because of this, he changed his views again and asked the church to reject their baptism, just as he rejected his own. (Henry Martyn Dexter, *The True Story of John Smyth*, p. 36.)¹⁸ Smyth's critics noted, rather than practicing se-baptism, he could just have been baptized by the Waterlander Mennonites in the Netherlands. Seeing the Waterlanders as true Christians, he felt his self-baptism had been premature and, with forty-two others, applied to join their church. By then, he had adopted Arminian beliefs like conditional election, resistible grace, and Christ dying for all.¹⁹

Disagreement broke-out within the congregation between Smyth and his group and another group led by Thomas Helwys who refused to join the Waterlander church ending up with Helwys and his small band regretfully and lovingly excommunicating Smyth and his followers.²⁰ After a time of not being able to enter the membership of the Waterlanders and severe Tuberculosis, Smyth died on August 20, 1612, ending his days without membership in any organized church. After his death however, the remnant of his followers was received into Mennonite fellowship on January 21, 1615.²¹ Helwys and his group on the other hand kept the beliefs they learned under Smyth and became known as General Baptists, they returned to England in 1612.²²

Soon after Helwys had begun pastoring his Baptist congregation in Spitalfields, East London, he was put in the "clink". Even so, his small church survived and became what historians agree to be the first General Baptist church in England. After Helwys' death *John Murton* was appointed leader. A native of Gainsborough who has been with Smyth and Helwys from the very start. He too suffered for his faith, spending some years in prison where he died in 1626.²³ The *Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam* drawn up in 1611 confirms that the Helwys group continued to adhere to the Baptist principles earlier announced and then

¹⁶ Anthony L. Chute, *The Baptist Story*, 2nd Edition.

¹⁷ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*.

¹⁸ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*.

¹⁹ Anthony L. Chute, *The Baptist Story*, 2nd Edition.

²⁰ Lytle and Cook, *Arminian Baptists: A Biographical History of Free Will Baptists*.

²¹ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*.

²² Lytle and Cook, *Arminian Baptists: A Biographical History of Free Will Baptists*.

²³ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*.

abandoned by Smyth (William L. Lumpkin, ed., *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, pp. 116-123.)²⁴ By 1626, they had churches in several cities with about 150 members. In the 1640s the General Baptists growth was steady and local associations were started and by 1650s the General Assembly of General Baptists was formed with at least forty-seven known churches, and several confessions of faith and doctrinal statements were drawn and brought together such as *The Faith and Practice of Thirty Congregations* (1651) and *The True Gospel Faith* (1654).²⁵ In 1660 the *Standard Confession* authored by the most outstanding General Baptist theologian *Thomas Grantham* had been the widely used confession in England and for the Free Will Baptists in Southern America until it was condensed and revised 1812. It was even delivered King Charles 2nd on the 26th of July, 1660.²⁶

The English Reformation sparked a search for a church that truly followed the Bible, leading to movements like Puritanism and Separatism. Some Separatists concluded that only believers should be baptized. The English Reformation sparked a search for a church that truly followed the Bible, leading to movements like Puritanism and Separatism. Some Separatists concluded that only believers should be baptized. The Baptists emerged from this left wing of the English Reformation, mostly influenced by British ideas, though some continental Anabaptist ideas may have played a minor role.²⁷ The Baptist denomination, as we know it today, grew out of the English Separatist movement, and historical evidence strongly supports this origin. No major scholar in the past fifty years has disputed it.²⁸ The original historical Baptists were influenced by *Jacob Arminius*' teachings, emphasizing free will and general atonement, hence their name. John Smyth and Thomas Helwys were the main founders.²⁹ Smyth recovered believer's baptism, but it was Helwys that continued the Baptist beginnings.³⁰

²⁴ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*.

²⁵ J. Matthew Pinson, *A Free Will Baptist Handbook: Heritage, Beliefs, Ministries*, 2nd ed. (Randall House, 2022), 1-6

²⁶ Pinson, *Free Will Baptist Handbook*.

²⁷ McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*.

²⁸ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*; Anthony L. Chute, *The Baptist Story, 2nd Edition*.

²⁹ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*.

³⁰ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*.

Free Will Baptists in North America: Palmer Movement in the South and the Randall Movement in the North & West

Paul Palmer (c.1680-1742)

Paul Palmer settled in Perquimans Precinct around 1720 and married *Johanna Peterson*, the widow of *Thomas Peterson* and stepdaughter of *Benjamin Laker*. As a respected landowner and political figure, he was able to begin preaching in 1726 and start a General Baptist church in Chowan County by 1727. By 1729, he owned 964 acres and for over 25 years, Palmer and his followers—*William Surginer*, *Josiah Hart*, and *Joseph Parker*—founded more than twenty General Baptist churches, and the movement grew quickly. He is considered to be the pioneer of General Baptists in the Carolinas.³¹

Benjamin Randall (c.1749-1808)

Benjamin Randall was born in New Castle, New Hampshire, worked as a sailor, and served in the Revolutionary War. He was converted in 1773 after remembering a sermon by *George Whitefield* and joined a congregational church. Disagreeing with infant baptism, he left in 1775 and joined a Calvinistic Baptist church in Berwick, Maine, in 1776, advocating free will and Christ's universal atonement. Criticized and excommunicated for his Arminian beliefs, he was invited to New Durham, New Hampshire, in 1778 and founded the first Free Will Baptist church in the North in 1780. He preached across New Hampshire and Maine, helping organize conferences and plant churches in Vermont, Massachusetts, and other parts of New England. He is well known to be a church organizer and ecclesiastical authority.³²

The American Free Will Baptists

In the 1800s, the derogatory term “Free-willers” or simply Free Will Baptists became commonly used, though they were still sometimes called General Baptist. By the 1830s, Southern Free Will Baptists in the Carolinas had over 2,000 members, and North Carolina's annual conference grew large enough to split into two (Bethel and Shiloh). During the Civil War, membership dropped sharply, with only 125 new baptisms in 1861 and 53 in 1862. Membership rebounded after the war, with 425 new members in 1864, 275 in 1865, about 300 in 1866, and 315 in 1867, continuing steady growth through the rest of the century.³³ Simultaneously by 1827, the Northern Free Will Baptist General Conference included nearly 300 churches and 16,000 members and

³¹ Lytle and Cook, *Arminian Baptists: A Biographical History of Free Will Baptists*, 95-106

³² Lytle and Cook, *Arminian Baptists: A Biographical History of Free Will Baptists*, 129-141

³³ Pinson, *Free Will Baptist Handbook*, 6-15

began moving west. By the 1830s, they supported schools, a printing press, a national periodical, and established Foreign and Home Mission Societies. Membership also grew to over 33,000, and the denomination founded several colleges. The general conference was active in the Second Great Awakening, leading revivalism, social reform, and the abolition of slavery. The Free Baptist churches that remained were spread from Texas to Ohio, those in the Southwest joined with western churches from the Palmer Movement to form the Co-operative General Association, while the churches in Southern Ohio took part in the Triennial Free Will Baptist General Conference.³⁴

The National Association of Free Will Baptists Today

The Co-operative General Association was founded in 1916, combining southern Palmer churches and Northern Free Baptist remnants. Attempts to merge with the General Conference in 1918-1919 failed, but from 1932-1934 both groups agreed to cooperate under the new National Association while keeping their separate identities. The first National Association meeting was on November 5, 1935, in Nashville, with delegates from 14 states and observers from Arkansas. By 1940, it had 1,185 churches and 102,000 members, growing to over 2,400 churches and 213,716 members by 1995, and 2,035 churches with 132,631 members in 2019.³⁵

Free Will Baptist International Missions

The Northern Free Will Baptists officially developed their foreign missions program from 1901 to 1949, after forming the National Association. *Miss Laura Belle Barnard* to India and *Miss Bessie Yeley* to Venezuela were the first official missionaries, followed by the *Wileys* to Panama and Cuba. By the 1950s, mission work expanded to Japan, Ivory Coast, and Brazil, establishing permanent churches in five countries by 1960. Over 86 years, the Board of International Missions (IM, INC.) laid the foundation for a strong global ministry.³⁶

The International Fellowship of Free Will Baptist Churches, Inc.

In 1992, with approval from the National Association of Free Will Baptists, Executive Secretary Melvin Worthington worked with Foreign Missions to explore forming an international Free Will Baptist organization. In July 1992, a meeting was held at Cresta del Mar in Panama with representatives from Brazil, Canada, Japan, Mexico, Panama, the U.S., and Uruguay, resulting in the Panama Declaration, a doctrinal statement and plan to organize. In 1995, delegates met in

³⁴ Pinson, *Free Will Baptist Handbook*, 23-36

³⁵ Pinson, *Free Will Baptist Handbook*, 211-214

³⁶ Pinson, *Free Will Baptist Handbook*, 215-220

Brazil and officially established the International Fellowship of Free Will Baptist Churches, Inc., setting up a triennial general assembly with *John Poole* (Brazil) as president and *Daniel Dorati* (Panama) as vice president. The IFFOWBC is a global community of Bible-believing churches that seeks to unite Free Will Baptist churches for fellowship, encouragement, and mutual support. Its purpose is to help churches work together in evangelism and church planting among all peoples. The IFFOWBC also serves as a center for sharing information and discussing ethical, practical, social, and doctrinal issues, while promoting evangelism and developing theological training in each country.³⁷

In August 2020, *Pr. Christian Levin Advincula* first met *Dr. Kenneth Eagleton*, Director of IM-Global Partnerships, starting a one-year monthly online discipleship. This led to the consolidation of their bible study groups and covenanting into a Free Will Baptist Church on the 19th of December, 2021. Communication continued, between Pr. Christian and Dr. Kenneth, and by August 2025, Missions Bible Ministry & Church was invited to participate the International Fellowship of Free Will Baptist Churches general assembly in Ivory Coast, Africa, as the only recognized member from the Philippines, with Pr. Christian as the official delegate. Presently, Pr. Christian and MBMC are fervently ministering the Gospel for the sake of planting churches nationwide, and seeking like-minded and like-faithed Christians to build the first ever Freewill Baptist association in the Philippines.³⁸

Reformed Arminian Baptist: The Soteriological & Ecclesiastical Distinctives of the Natl. Assoc. of Free Will Baptists and the Intl. Fellowship of Free Will Baptist Churches, Inc. Taken from the 2023 NAFWB Treatise and Explicated through the Works of Robert E. Picirilli, Leroy F. Forlines, and Jacob Arminius

On Divine Government and Providence

ARTICLE III – God exercises a providential care and superintendence over all His creatures, and governs the world in wisdom and mercy, according to the testimony of His Word. God has endowed man with power of free choice, and governs him by moral laws and motives; and this power of free choice is the exact measure of man’s responsibility. All events are present with God from everlasting to everlasting; but His knowledge of them does not in any sense cause them, nor does He decree all events which He knows will occur.³⁹

³⁷ IM Global Partnerships Dir. Dr. Kenneth Eagleton, *About the IFFOWBC*, Internal Email

³⁸ Pr. Christian’s personal account and recollection

³⁹ *A Treatise of the Faith and Practices of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, Inc.*, 21st ed. (The Executive Office of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, Inc., 2023), 4

Here four important topics require explanation; sovereignty, providence, omniscience, and freedom:

Sovereignty is having nothing outside of God to limit Him. Only His own nature guides His actions, and He freely acts according to His will. God governs moral agents like man through moral laws and motivations. Reformed Arminians adhere to a high view of sovereignty, knowing that God not only created everything but also directs all events and creatures according to His plan. Thus, Free Will Baptists believe that God's sovereign plan included the free choices of humans, and has foreseen what they will freely choose. Such a view likens God to chess master, emphasizing His omniscience knowing all true possibilities, and His omnipotence overseeing genuinely free actions so that everything unfolds according to His plan without the need for exhaustive micromanaging. Picirilli carefully notes that God knows all events eternally, but His foreknowledge does not cause them, nor does He predetermine everything He foresees. In short, nothing escapes God's reign, yet humans still make real choices between true alternatives.⁴⁰

Whenever we talk about God's sovereignty, the topic of *Providence* comes next. Providence means "foresight" in Latin, and refers to God's wise care and guidance over the world. Through the act of providence, He upholds, governs, and guides all creation toward the purposes He has appointed, and nothing happens outside His care (Romans 8:28).⁴¹ Often when we hear people say God is in "control" or "Everything is under God's control", majority of Christians, including Free Will Baptists in actuality do not mean that God causes or enjoys every action. Moreover, Classical Arminians recognize that God allows evil to exist, however nothing that God does makes sin necessary; sin always involves a person's own choice and intention to do wrong. The sin lies in the sinner's will, not in God's actions.⁴² Indeed, a person cannot act at all without God's providence, but sin comes from the wicked intentions of moral agents, not from the physical acts that God upholds through natural laws. God enables people to make choices, but He does not make those choices for them. Human freedom is important for Free Will Baptists for the very reason that sin happens in the will. God's providence may include the circumstances that tempt us, but He also provides a way to resist sin in every situation (1 Corinthians 10:13).⁴³

Omniscience in Reformed Arminian theology is God knowing all possible outcomes and choosing what will be. Thus, Free Will Baptists affirm that God knows all future events as certain and within His plan, yet many of these are truly contingent—free acts that could go more than one way. Such events are both certain (they will happen) and contingent (they didn't have to

⁴⁰ Robert E. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism* (Randall House Publications, 2002), chap. 3

⁴¹ Robert E. Picirilli, "Toward a Non-Deterministic Theology of Divine Providence," *Journal for Baptist Theology & Ministry* Vol. 11, no. No. 1 (2014): 38–61, 40-41

⁴² Picirilli, "Toward a Non-Deterministic Theology of Divine Providence.", 42-44

⁴³ Picirilli, "Toward a Non-Deterministic Theology of Divine Providence.", 44-45

happen that way). God's foreknowledge includes all things, good or evil, free or necessary, but His knowing them is non-causative.⁴⁴ Picirilli explains further that:

*The free acts of morally responsible persons are contingent. A contingency is anything that really can take place in more than one way... Certainty relates to the "factness" of an event, to whether it will be or not; contingency relates to its nature as free or necessary. The same event can be both certain and contingent at the same time... Events that can transpire in just one way, that must inevitably be the way they are, are said to be necessary*⁴⁵

Therefore, Free Will Baptists believe that God has full knowledge of the future, yet the future itself is not fixed or predestined. People's moral choices are certain in God's awareness, but they are not determined; each person could make a different decision. In short, God's complete foreknowledge and human freedom can both be real.⁴⁶

On man's *freedom of the will*, it is only fair that we provide suffice space to explain what Free Will Baptists believe on the matter since they carry in their identity the very same name. From the time of its founders, Free Will Baptists have held to the notion that our freedom is "free from necessity" however, they have also eagerly rejected the idea that mankind are capable apart from divine grace to choose what is good.⁴⁷ Thus, Free Will Baptists are confident to say that the choices we make are truly open, uncoerced or restricted by outside influences, past conditions or experiences, while still accounting into the equation our human nature, yet differentiating capacity from circumstances. In his analysis of *Luther* and *Calvin*, concerning human freedom, depravity and the grace of God, this is what Picirilli had to say:⁴⁸

As depraved as one is, he is still a person, a human being in the image of God... [human will] is a corrupted will, a will in bondage to sin, but it is a will yet. And the grace of God enables a decision that would otherwise be impossible.

⁴⁴ Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism*.

⁴⁵ Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism*, under "Areas of disagreement", chap. 3, par. 10-12

⁴⁶ Robert E. Picirilli, "Foreknowledge, Freedom, and the Future," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43, no. 2 (2000): 259-71, 270-271

⁴⁷ J. Matthew Pinson, *40 Questions About Arminianism* (Kregel Publications, 2022), 152

⁴⁸ Picirilli, *Free Will Revisited: A Respectful Response to Luther, Calvin, and Edwards*, chap. 8

Reformed Arminians are precise to remember the close relationship of human will to our “beingness”. That it is “closely associated with, and its meaning is involved with, other words like desire, purpose, intention, determination, and decision.” and “to say that a person has a will is to say that a person experiences purpose, intends things, and makes decisions.”⁴⁹ Differentiating those that are necessary, from things that are definite, and those that are conditional is a key to grasping the Free Will Baptist concept of the freedom of the will.⁵⁰ Forlines insists that it is our God-given capacity as image-bearers to make decisions between several options, and that “the choices we call free are not merely random but are rational or reasoned”, hence, “there is no will apart from the mind of a self”⁵¹. In other words, the dynamic ought to be between “influence and response, not cause and effect”.⁵²

On Creation, Primitive State of Man, and His Fall.

ARTICLE IV, SECTION 2: Primitive Man, and His Fall - Our first parents, in their original state, were upright. They naturally preferred and desired to obey their Creator, and had no preference or desire to transgress His will until they were influenced and inclined by the tempter to disobey God’s commands. Previous to this, the only tendency of their nature was to do righteousness. *In consequence of the first transgression, the state under which the posterity of Adam came into the world is so different from that of Adam that they have not that righteousness and purity which Adam had before the fall; they are not willing to obey God, but are inclined to evil. Hence, none, by virtue of any natural goodness and mere work of their own, can become the children of God,* but they are all dependent for salvation upon the redemption effected through the blood of Christ, and upon being created anew unto obedience through the operation of the Spirit; both of which are freely provided for every descendant of Adam.⁵³

Regarding Adam’s fall, we focus on the section of the fourth article of the treatise where it refers to the “...*consequence of the first transgression*”. Adam and Eve were originally righteous and naturally inclined to obey God until they were tempted and fell into sin. After their fall, all humanity inherited a nature inclined toward evil rather than obedience. Therefore, no one can become a child of God through natural goodness or works but must be redeemed by Christ’s

⁴⁹ Robert E. Picirilli, *Free Will Revisited: A Respectful Response to Luther, Calvin, and Edwards* (Wipf and Stock, 2017), chap. 1

⁵⁰ J. Matthew Pinson, *40 Questions About Arminianism* (Kregel Publications, 2022), 153

⁵¹ Picirilli, *Free Will Revisited: A Respectful Response to Luther, Calvin, and Edwards*.

⁵² Leroy F. Forlines, *Classical Arminianism: A Theology of Salvation* (Randall House Publications, 2011), under “*The Meaning of the Freedom of the Will*”, chap. 1

⁵³ *A Treatise of the Faith and Practices of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, Inc.*, 5

blood and regenerated by the Holy Spirit—gifts offered freely to all of Adam’s descendants. In Arminius’ own words:

*“In this state, the free will of man towards the true good is not only wounded, maimed, infirm, bent, and weakened; but it is also imprisoned, destroyed, and lost. And its powers are not only debilitated and useless unless they be assisted by grace, but it has no powers whatever except such as are excited by Divine grace.”*⁵⁴

Hence, to everyone’s surprise, Free Will Baptists zealously defend to the doctrine of *Total Depravity*. Because of the totality of human depravity, man's will is no longer free to choose God without the Spirit's work. Left alone, no one can or will trust in Christ for salvation. This condition affects all of man leaving him powerless (i.e., Total Inability) to do true good before God. Thus, man is unable to do any good that justifies him before God or counts as absolute good. Nonetheless, man is not just a fallen creature but a personal being made in God's image, with a real “will” of his own. Although subordinate to God, this “will” allow for genuine, contingent choices. To be perfectly clear, man's volition is not absolute like God's rather it is limited, shaped by God's design, and further weakened by the fall. What man could do in theory, he often cannot in practice.⁵⁵ According to Picirilli:

*“... all human beings inherit from the original parents a corrupt nature, as inclined toward evil now as Adam and Eve were toward good before the fall. In consequence of this condition, man’s will is no longer naturally free to choose God apart from the supernatural work of the Spirit of God. Therefore, left to himself, no person either can or will accept the offer of salvation in the gospel and put saving faith in Christ. This condition may rightly be called total depravity...”*⁵⁶

Moreover, Total Depravity doesn't mean people can't do good or have a conscience, it means their good can't save them, and their conscience is flawed by the fall. It also doesn't mean people commit every sin or sin as much as possible. Unbelievers may show decency in society, but sin

⁵⁴ James Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius, Vol. 1*, vol. 1 (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002), par. 7, 311-312, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/arminius/works1.html>.

⁵⁵ Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism*, under “*The Concept of Man*”, chap. 2, under “*Arminian Doctrine of Election*”, chap. 3, under “*Man After the Fall*”, chap. 8

⁵⁶ Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism*, under “*Arminians and Total Depravity*”, chap. 9

still makes them unrighteous before God and in need of the new birth.⁵⁷ Forlines is right when he calls our attention to the disqualification of all men, and the necessity of regeneration, stating that:

*“It is possible and sometimes happens that unbelievers reach a measure of decency and uprightness in society... The presence of sin in their lives still renders them unrighteous before a holy God. The power of sin in their lives makes them stand in need of the new birth.”*⁵⁸

The Gospel Call

ARTICLE VIII – The call of the Gospel is *co-extensive with the atonement to all men*, both by the word and strivings of the Spirit, so that salvation is rendered equally possible to all; and if any fail of eternal life, the fault is wholly his own.⁵⁹

Narrowing down on the co-relation between the evangelism and salvation, Free Will Baptists affirm that the Gospel call extends to all people, just as Christ's atonement was made for all. Through the Word and the Spirit, salvation is made equally possible for everyone, and anyone who is lost is solely responsible for rejecting it. This essentially refers to *General Atonement*, and intrinsically points to universal resistible Prevenient Grace. Free Will Baptists believe God did not purpose that the atonement should save everyone as Universalists wrongfully claim. Rather, Christ's death makes salvation available to all. “The Arminian position is that He did” and “that Christ died to provide equally for the elect and those who will certainly be eternally damned.”⁶⁰ Astoundingly, Picirilli offers nine biblical arguments⁶¹ backed up with Scriptural references for coherence:

1. *Implied in the doctrine of conditional salvation or election, as dealt with in the earlier section on “The Plan of Salvation.”*

⁵⁷ Forlines, *Classical Arminianism: A Theology of Salvation*, chap. 1

⁵⁸ Forlines, *Classical Arminianism: A Theology of Salvation*, under “*The Impossibility of Fallen Man's Attaining a Right Standing Before God by His Own Effort*”, chap. 1

⁵⁹ *A Treatise of the Faith and Practices of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, Inc.*, 10

⁶⁰ Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism*, under “Introduction: The Point at Issue”, chap. 6

⁶¹ Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism*, under “*Arminian Argument 1-9*”, chap. 6

2. *Matches the plain Biblical assertion that God wills the salvation of all. An atonement that did not provide for all would be inconsistent with this and self-defeating (2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:4)*
3. *The New Testament plainly asserts that Jesus died redemptively for all, and this includes passages where the “all” is distinguished from the saved (1 John.2:2; 1 Timothy 2:6; Hebrews 2:9; John 3:16-18; 2 Corinthians 5:14,19; Romans 5:18; Titus 2:11)*
4. *Implied in Scriptural references to the perishing of some for whom Christ died. If redemption was provided for some non-elect in the atonement, then there is no reason to limit it at all (1 Corinthians 8:11; Romans 14:15; 2 Peter 2:1)*
5. *Clearly implied in the fact that the truly saved may apostatize and eternally perish (Hebrews 6:4-6; 2 Peter 2:18-22; Hebrews 10:29)*
6. *The view that best accords with the bona fide gospel offer of salvation to all, and correlatively with the command to preach that gospel to all.*
7. *The view that best accounts for the blame attached to men for rejection of Christ*
8. *Strongly supported by the Scriptural indication that the provision is as broad as the sin (Romans 3:22-25; Romans 10:11-12; Acts 15:9)*
9. *Accords best with the fact that “God is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11; Deuteronomy 10:17)*

Besides the Freedom of the Will, nothing is more distinct to Reformed Arminians than the extent of Christ’s death. What Free Will Baptists traditionally call General Atonement is when the Bible commands to look to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In a very straight-forward and plain manner, Free Will Baptists believe that divine Scripture testified of God freely sending the Lord Jesus Christ into the world out of his great love for humanity, and Christ freely giving himself as a ransom for all (1 Timothy 2:5–6) and tasting death for every person (Hebrews 2:9).⁶² God does not want anyone to be lost but wants everyone to turn to Him and know the truth so they can be saved (2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:4). Christ commanded that the good news of forgiveness be shared with everyone (Mark 16:15). People do not end up in eternal punishment because Christ did not die for them, but because they reject Him or refuse to believe in His name (2 Peter 2:1; John 3:18).⁶³ According to 1 John 2:2 Jesus is the atoning sacrifice not only for believers, but for the whole world. Simply put, because all people are guilty of sin, Christ died for all; otherwise, there would be no real sacrifice for them. Thomas Grantham candidly exclaims:

Are they all become guilty per force (except Adam) and have none to justify them? Where is then the Lamb? Behold here is Fire, the Wood, and the Knife, but where is the Sacrifice, may many say, if indeed the Lamb of God died not for them?... He is the

⁶² Thomas Grantham, “Standard Confession,” 1660, Art. III

⁶³ Grantham, “Standard Confession.”, Art. IV

Propitiation for our Sins, and not for ours only, but also for the Sins of the whole World (Grantham, Christianismus Primitivus, Book 2, part 1, 63.)

Prevenient Grace means grace that goes before regeneration. Classical Arminians use it to describe the Spirit's enabling work that, unless finally resisted, leads to new birth. For Pinson, the current president of Welch College, "Prevenient grace is not a substance one possesses.", he emphatically states in his book *40 Questions About Arminianism* that "it is the gracious, enabling influence of the divine person on a human person in a relational dynamic—a back-and-forth, influence-and-response, relational movement."⁶⁴ Other Free Will Baptists also call it "enabling" or Pre-regenerating Grace. Picirilli describes it to be the Spirit of God overcoming our spiritual inability by a direct and adequate work on the heart, to enable the unregenerate person so that he or she may understand the truth of the Gospel, to desire God, and to willingly exercise saving faith.⁶⁵ He distinguishes the elements of Prevenient Grace into three basic categories⁶⁶:

1. *Conviction* – the Spirit's work of opening the blinded mind (2 Corinthians 4:4), convincing the sinner of sin, guilt, condemnation, and Christ's offer of redemption.
2. *Persuasion* – makes the Gospel appealing, drawing the will toward assent and faith.
3. *Enabling* – is the Spirit's pre-regenerating work that makes saving faith possible for the otherwise unable sinner.

Pre-regenerating grace describes the Spirit's work in the unregenerate heart, opening it to the Gospel (Acts 16:14), enabling understanding, desire for God, and faith. It overcomes man's inability by a direct, sufficient work. This grace can also be called conviction or convincement (John. 6:44). Actually, Reformed Arminians and non-Reformed Arminians both acknowledge Prevenient Grace (Lat. *gratia praeveniens*); the disagreement is over its scope and effectiveness. Like the majority of Christians, Free Will Baptists read in Scripture unambiguously that everyone is illuminated (John 1:9), persuaded (John 16:8), and pulled (John 12:32) by God's grace (Titus 2:11), and that grace may be resisted, they affirm a pre-regenerating grace that is both universal (Lat. *gratia universalis*) and resistible (Lat. *gratia resistibilis*).⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Pinson, *40 Questions About Arminianism*, 196

⁶⁵ Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism*, under "The Arminian Doctrine of Election", chap. 3

⁶⁶ Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism*, under "Elements of Pre-regenerating Grace", chap. 9

⁶⁷ Pinson, *40 Questions About Arminianism*, 192

On Faith

ARTICLE X – Saving faith is an assent of the mind to the fundamental truths of revelation, an acceptance of the Gospel, through the influence of the Holy Spirit, and a firm confidence and trust in Christ. The fruit of faith is obedience to the Gospel. *The power to believe is the gift of God, but believing is an act of the creature, which is required as a condition of pardon, and without which the sinner cannot obtain salvation.* All men are required to believe in Christ, and those who yield obedience to this requirement become the children of God by faith.⁶⁸

Following the grace that comes before regeneration is man's *Faith*. With regards to the ability and the act, Saving Faith is the Spirit-influenced acceptance of Gospel truth, involving trust in Christ and resulting in obedience. While the ability to believe is a gift from God, the act of believing is a human responsibility and necessary condition for forgiveness and salvation, still, all people are commanded to believe in Christ, and those who do become God's children through faith. Arminius taught that "That act of faith is not in the power of a natural, carnal, sensual, and sinful man," and "no one can perform this act except through the grace of God."⁶⁹ Arminius saw faith as God's gift, produced by grace through means God provides, not as something forced or imparted apart from human response. Be that as it may, faith remains to be personal, that is, it's the believer's own act of mind and will, not an object to be possessed or credited to anyone else.

In addition to this, saving faith goes beyond intellectual assent (Lat. *assensus*); it involves a willful decision to entrust oneself to God in Christ (Lat. *fiducia*). The "believing" itself can finally be done by no one other than the person who is called on to believe, and that "will" to believe savingly is the free decision of the individual. Free Will Baptists reject any meaning that call faith "the gift of God" yet depreciates this since in the first place it is not a term that we find in Scripture. Picirilli instead gives us five biblical ways to think of faith as a "gift of God"⁷⁰:

1. *The capacity to believe is from God*
2. *The possibility of believing is from God*
3. *The content of belief—the gospel truth—is from God*
4. *The persuasion of truth which one believes is from God*
5. *The enabling of the individual to believe is from God*

⁶⁸ *A Treatise of the Faith and Practices of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, Inc.*, 10-11

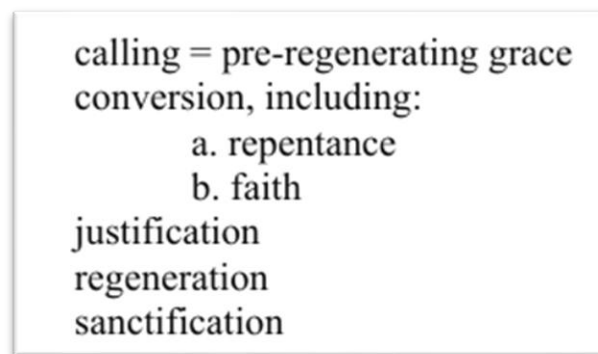
⁶⁹ James Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius, Vol. 2*, vol. 2 (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids, MI, n.d.), *Disputation XLI.II*, 77, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/arminius/works2.html>.

⁷⁰ Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism*, under "Faith as the Gift of God", chap. 9

On Regeneration

ARTICLE XI – *As man is a fallen and sinful being, he must be regenerated in order to obtain salvation.* This change is an instantaneous renewal of the heart by the Holy Spirit, whereby the penitent sinner receives new life, becomes a child of God, and is disposed to serve Him. This is called in Scripture being born again, born of the Spirit, being quickened, passing from death unto life, and a partaking of the divine nature.⁷¹

Forlines sketches the Classic Arminian salvation order (Lat. *ordo salutis*) beginning with calling all the way to sanctification⁷²



Regeneration is the instantaneous work of the Holy Spirit that gives new life to the repentant sinner, making him a child of God and inclined to serve Him. Scripture describes this transformation as being born again, born of the Spirit, quickened, and partaking of the divine nature. When Classical Arminians pertain to the necessity of being regenerated, we indicate the sinfulness of man and so therefore he must be made a new creation to be saved.

Regarding the question “Does regeneration precede faith?”, the space reserved to discuss *Prevenient Grace*, *Freedom of the Will*, and *Faith*, provides ample response and need not to be reiterated here. Succinctly, regeneration logically must succeed repentance and belief if we understand that salvation is freely and truly provided for all men to be received by grace-enabled, willing faith.

⁷¹ *A Treatise of the Faith and Practices of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, Inc.*, 11

⁷² Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism*, under “Order of Salvation”, chap. 9

On the Perseverance of the Saints

ARTICLE XIII – There are strong grounds to hope that the truly regenerate will persevere unto the end, and be saved, through the power of divine grace which is pledged for their support; *but their future obedience and final salvation are neither determined nor certain, since through infirmity and manifold temptations they are in danger of falling*; and they ought, therefore, to watch and pray lest they make shipwreck of their faith and be lost.⁷³

Believers have strong reason to hope in perseverance through God's sustaining grace, but the final state of their faith is not guaranteed. Because of human weakness and temptation, they remain in danger of falling and must remain vigilant in faith and prayer to avoid being lost. This is further clarified in the appendix adopted July 1969.

APPENDIX TO ARTICLE XIII – We believe that *salvation is a present possession by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior, and that a person's eternal destiny depends on whether he has this possession*. This we hold in distinction from those who teach that salvation depends on human works or merit. We believe that *a saved individual may, in freedom of will, cease to trust in Christ for salvation and once again be lost*. This we hold in distinction from those who teach that a believer may not again be lost. We believe that *any individual living in the practice of sin (whether he be called "backslider" or "sinner") must be judged by that evidence to be lost should he so die in his sins*. This we hold in distinction from those who suggest that pernicious doctrine that a man may live in sin as he pleases and still claim Heaven as his eternal home. We believe that *any regenerate person who has sinned (again, whether he be called "backslider" or "sinner") and in whose heart a desire arises to repent may do so and be restored to favor and fellowship with God*. This we hold in distinction from those who teach that when a Christian sins he cannot repent and be restored to favor and fellowship with God.⁷⁴

Among Arminians, two forms of apostasy are usually recognized. The first is Absolute Apostasy, a rare and serious departure in which a person fully rejects faith and cannot be restored. The second is Temporary Backsliding, the more common type, in which a believer falls into sin but can return to God through repentance.⁷⁵ From the Reformed Arminian stand-point, *Apostasy* is not mere backsliding but a willful turning from saving faith (Hebrews 6:4-6). Salvation is always conditioned on faith and associates the believer with Christ, hence logically, if faith receives

⁷³ *A Treatise of the Faith and Practices of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, Inc.*, 12

⁷⁴ *A Treatise of the Faith and Practices of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, Inc.*, 17

⁷⁵ Pinson, *40 Questions About Arminianism*, 357

salvation, unbelief forfeits it.⁷⁶ In his 60-page booklet, Picirilli discusses the biblical explanation of the possibility of apostasy like this:

*“'[God] embraces no one in Christ, unless he is in Christ. But no one is in Christ, except by faith in Christ, which is the necessary means of our union with Christ. If any one falls from faith, he falls from that union, and consequently, from the favor of God by which he was previously embraced in Christ.' ... All this means, simply, from the Arminian perspective, that one's possession of salvation is, at any time, conditioned on faith.”*⁷⁷

Reformed Arminians teach that faith places a believer in a permanent relationship with Christ. Even if a believer sins, they remain united with Him, and their sins remain covered (as long as they have saving faith). A believer's sins are not counted against them, because Christ's obedience is credited to them through allegiance (1 Peter 1:5). Apostasy only happens when a person entirely abandons Christ, which cannot be reversed (Mark 3:28–30; 1 John 5:16–17). This is acknowledged even by Lutherans.⁷⁸ Free Will Baptists have always affirmed the real possibility that a Christian can fall from grace, and still have genuine assurance by abiding in Christ by aid of God's grace, and grow fruitfully.⁷⁹

On the Church

ARTICLE XV – A Christian Church is an *organized body of believers in Christ who statedly assemble to worship God, and who sustain the ordinances of the Gospel* according to the Scriptures. Believers in Christ are admitted to this church on giving evidence of faith in Christ, obtaining consent of the body, being baptized, and receiving the right hand of fellowship. The Church of God, or members of the body of Christ, is the whole body of Christians throughout the whole world, and none but the regenerate are its members.⁸⁰

Since the search for a pure church have been the core intention of the firsts Baptists since Smyth and Helwys separated from the Anglican church, discussing in brief the essential Free Will Baptist doctrines are on what a Christian church ought to be is in order. First of all, a *Church* is a

⁷⁶ R. Picirilli, *Understanding Assurance and Salvation* (Randall House, 2003), 23-49

⁷⁷ Picirilli, *Understanding Assurance and Salvation*, 11-13

⁷⁸ Pinson, *40 Questions About Arminianism*, 360-362

⁷⁹ Pinson, *40 Questions About Arminianism*, 56

⁸⁰ *A Treatise of the Faith and Practices of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, Inc.*, 13-14

local, organized group of believers who regularly gather for worship and practice the Gospel ordinances as taught in Scripture. Individuals are admitted upon showing faith, receiving baptism, and being welcomed by the congregation. Meanwhile the universal Church of God consists only of truly regenerate believers around the world.

Second, Free Will Baptists believe that the New Testament writings teach and exemplify that a local church is formed when believers freely choose to covenant themselves to one another as they are led by the Holy Spirit. As such, churches are also free to join together voluntarily and cooperate to form a Free Will Baptist association. For this reason, a local assembly runs itself and is not controlled by anyone outside it (or a few people inside it for that matter). In the fourth part of the 2023 NAFWB treatise, in detailing the practices of the broader Free Will Baptists churches, it is said that only the local *ekklesia* is recognized “as the sole source of authority possessed and exercised within the visible church” since it is grounded in the direct teaching of Scripture that the “local congregation of believers is the only visible form of the ‘church’”. In short, only the whole regenerated church membership makes its own decisions, chooses its leaders, accepts and removes members when needed, owns its property, and handles everything related to its internal life.⁸¹

Lastly, *Gospel ordinances* in the Free Will Baptist tradition compose of Baptism, Communion, and Feet-Washing. *Baptism* as most Christians know is the immersion of believers in water as a symbol of Christ’s death and resurrection, the believer’s cleansing from sin, new life, and commitment to serve God. *The Lord’s Supper* is a memorial of Christ’s death using bread and the cup as symbols of His body and blood, expressing the believer’s love, faith, and ongoing loyalty to Christ. However, what makes Free Will Baptists unique is the *Washing of the Saint’s Feet*, which they believe to be an ordinance instituted by Jesus to teach humility and remind disciples of Christ of the need for continual cleansing, and it is the joyful duty of every Christian to observe it.⁸² The eighteenth article of the 2023 NAFWB treatise, taken from John 13:4-8 and 1st Timothy 5:1-10, describes it to be:

*“...a sacred ordinance, which teaches humility and reminds the believer of the necessity of a daily cleansing from all sin. It was instituted by the Lord Jesus Christ, and called an ‘example’ on the night of His betrayal, and in connection with the institution of the Lord’s Supper. It is the duty and happy prerogative of every believer to observe this sacred ordinance.”*⁸³

⁸¹ *A Treatise of the Faith and Practices of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, Inc.*, 37-38

⁸² *A Treatise of the Faith and Practices of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, Inc.*, 15

⁸³ *A Treatise of the Faith and Practices of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, Inc.*

In Foot Washing, Free Will Baptists remember what God has done for us in Christ and how that shows up in everyday sanctified life. It points disciples to Christ's resurrection and the believers new life in Him, their ongoing growth in holiness, and Christ working within. It also reflects the second great commandment: loving others, highlighting the Christian's personal experience of faith and outward, practical relationships with other people.⁸⁴

Conclusion: Arminian Baptists Then & Now

The General Baptist movement began in the early 1600s through the faith and ministry of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys; English Separatists who because of persecution and in the hopes of having freedom to exercise what they believed to be the pure apostolic faith, traveled from England to Holland. During this time, they became convinced from their study of Scripture and pursuit of primitive Christianity, that baptism was for believers only excluding infants, that churches should govern themselves independent from civil governments, and that Christ died for all people. Upon the return of Helwys to London, he and his followers established the first Baptist churches and strongly defended religious freedom under the nose of the king and the Church of England, which eventually led up to his imprisonment and death. Nevertheless, the Baptists persevered, and their valuable sacrifices and prophetic martyrdom became the foundation not just of the Baptist tradition, but of what everyone now commonly understands as "Protestant-Evangelicalism".

Overseas, during the early 1800s, the General Baptists later spread to America, where it developed in different regions. In the South, Paul Palmer led a movement that emphasized evangelism and church planting with the help of the Standard Confession of Free Will Baptists authored by Thomas Grantham. In the North, Benjamin Randall provided strong theological oversight to organize Free Will Baptist churches and maintain doctrinal purity.

These two movements eventually merged to the formation of the National Association of Free Will Baptists. Today, Free Will Baptists are found around the world, and continue to champion distinct historic Baptist beliefs, including Classical Arminian soteriology through the global fellowship of international Free Will Baptist churches. Anyone who has studied and affirms the current Treatise of the Faith and Practices of the National Association, especially those that deal with the subjects of salvation and church, are invited to covenant and fellowship in this biblical and historical Christian tradition.

⁸⁴ J. Matthew Pinson, *The Washing of The Saints' Feet* (Randall House, 2006), 85-87

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