

# HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF BAPTISTS IN MÉXICO

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In Mexico, the evangelical work did not arrive until the nineteenth century because the country was dominated by Spain for almost three centuries, and the Roman Hispanic Catholicism with its Inquisition did not permit the entry of evangelicals. In 1821 it was consummated the Independence of Mexico, then the doors for evangelical work were opened, especially with liberal governments, which saw the necessity to diminish the influence of Catholic Church and one way was permitting that other religious groups arrive at the country.

## Antecedents and Controversial Beginnings

There were several important antecedents to the founding of Evangelical work in Mexico. James Thompson, the noted and Baptist colporter of the British Bible Society made two trips to Mexico during the years 1827-30 and again in 1842-43. He never established a permanent work, but he did experience some success in the sale of Bibles in the central and southern regions of the country.<sup>1</sup> Another important aspect was the war between the United States and Mexico. It appears the war awakened interest in sending missionaries to Mexico.<sup>2</sup>

With this context, I want to talk about the first evangelical work and its relationship with the Baptist. This is interesting because it is a controversial issue in Mexico: Which denomination started evangelical work in this country? Who is really the founder of evangelical work in Mexico and what has that to do with the growing missionary presence in the country in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? The question as to the founder of evangelical work in the country is not an easy one to answer. Examining the evidence is sometimes like trying to examine grains of sand, it slips through the finger of the investigator, just as one encounters something of evidence. Our first purpose is to define as much as the historical information allows, who founded evangelical work in the country and what relationship that work had with a growing Baptist presence. The reason to establish this is not just for denominational pride, but to examine, as much as the evidence allows, what the truth is. Then and only then is it possible to define the relationship between the beginnings of Baptist and the continuing work of the last century.

When one examines the history books, there appears a problem not easily resolved. There are many authors who follow completely the book written by an independent missionary, basically a Presbyterian, Melinda Rankin Twenty Years with the Mexicans.<sup>3</sup> This book states that she began the first real work in Mexico, in the city of Monterrey. Others follow the idea that James Hickey was the true founder of not only Baptist work in Mexico, but also of the first evangelical work. The majority of the former authors are not

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<sup>1</sup> Kennet Scott Latourette, A History of the Expansion of Christianity, vol. 5: The Great Century: The Americas, Australasia, and Africa. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publications, Co., 1943), p. 110; Justo González, Historia de las Misiones (Buenos Aires, 1970), pp. 333 ss.; Tomas S. Goslin, Los Evangélicos en América Latina (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, s.f.), pp. 37 ss.

<sup>2</sup> James Garvin Chastain, Thirty Years in Mexico (El Paso, Tx.: Baptist Publishing House, 1927), 98-99, 125.

<sup>3</sup> Melinda Rankin, Veinte Años entre los Mexicanos (México: Casa de Publicaciones "El Faro", 1958).

Baptist. The majority of the latter are Baptist. The first task at hand then is to examine these historical sources.

The first group of historians follows the idea that Rankin began the work, arriving to the border with Mexico in Brownsville in 1852. This began her work “with the Mexicans.” Even Latourette who is usually very meticulous in his investigation notes that Rankin began the work, but that Hickey was the first “notable worker.” He does note that Hickey gathered “... a group of believers.”<sup>4</sup> Goslin mentions the “episcopal work” as being an important beginning. Gonzalez follows this same thought noting that Episcopal Church was first. However, this work should probably be called an indigenous catholic movement rather than an evangelical one. Moreover, Latourette mentions that Rankin established evangelical work, but never mentions Hickey.<sup>5</sup> Wheeler, who is prebyterian, states that Rankin was the first and that Hickey was her employee. The problem with these authors is that they follow only the Rankin book, often ignoring other works.<sup>6</sup>

Cosme Montemayor, former historian of the Mexican Baptist Convention investigated in the documents of the American Bible Society, Hickey’s employer in the years of the founding of the work. Alejandro Treviño in his work on Mexican Baptist History went no further than this to prove Hickey was the founder.<sup>7</sup> Goslin, in a book often cited in the history of missions, mentions that Hickey began the work, but that Rankin was the first “notable worker.” He also stated however that the works of Hickey was a true “Baptist Movement.”<sup>8</sup> Is it that easy to conclude anything? The answer is probably not until all details of the event can be examined.

What the Baptist authors say? They and others are unanimous in recognizing Hickey as the founder of evangelical work in Mexico. The basis for this testimony is usually taken to be the statements of Thomas Westrup about the beginnings of the group in Monterrey. Few people have investigated further than the writings of Westrup however.

Who was James Hickey? From what we know of Hickey he was born in 1800 in Ireland. He arrived in the United States and perhaps became a Baptist after recently immigrating. According to Chastain and others he worked in Bell County in Central Texas, a center of Baptist work at the time. Hickey moved to South Texas for two reasons. First of all, he held abolitionist beliefs. These beliefs alone would have made his work as a colporter of the American Tract Society in Central Texas difficult. Secondly, he possibly already had plans to come to Mexico. He arrived in Brownsville in 1860.

Then the real evangelical work in Mexico begins when James Hickey began his travels to Mexico in 1860. There is an interesting mention made in La Luz that Hickey was

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<sup>4</sup> Latourette, History, p. 110; Latourette does not even use a source other than Rankin. For that reason his paragraph is generally confusing.

<sup>5</sup> Latourette, History, p. 115.

<sup>6</sup> González, Historia de las Misiones, pp. 404-05; Reginald Wheeler, Modern Missions in México, (Philadelphia, Penn.: Westminster Press, 1925), p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> Cosme Montemayor, Hickey El Fundador (México, 1962), p.3; Alejandro Treviño, Historia de Los Trabajos Bautistas en México (El Paso, Tx.: Casa Bautista de Publicaciones, 1939), pp. 34-40.

<sup>8</sup> Goslin, Los Evangelicos, pp. 96-7.

in Mexico in 1853, preaching in the city of Durango. However, the same article says he was born in 1785, a very unlikely date. John Cheavens recorded the incident as told to him by a man in Durango in 1902.<sup>9</sup> Hickey was an agent for the American Tract Society when he began his trips to Mexico. The Tract Society was famous for several anti-catholic tracts they published. He began making trips selling Bibles and tracts in the states of Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas. In October 1862 he made his first contact with a group of “foreign protestants” in the city of Monterrey. He arrived in Monterrey in November of the same year. In January or February of 1863 he was named as an agent of the American Bible Society.<sup>10</sup>

Where was Melinda Rankin at the time? With a careful reading of her book it was possible to draw up a chronological description of her activities. She arrived in Texas in 1849 spending the majority of this time in Huntsville, Texas. She arrived in Brownsville in 1852. She stayed on the northern side of the Rio Grande beginning a school for children. She begins counting her twenty years of work with Mexicans from this point. She was apparently working with citizens of Mexican descent in Brownsville during this time. However, Rankin never learned Spanish and worked through interpreters.

Rankin spent much of her time returning to other states during these years. In 1853-54 she was in New Orleans and Mississippi collecting funds for her work. Finally, in 1862 she did cross the Rio Grande working in a school in Matamoros, Tamps. In March of 1863 she left Brownsville for reasons of the Civil War. It appears she stayed out of the area until January 1864 when she returned to the city. But in the summer-fall of 1864 she left once again for New Orleans. She did not return to South Texas until May of 1865. She arrived for the first time in Monterrey during the same month. She stayed in the city some three months. She left again, and did not return to Monterrey until May of 1866. Analyzing her arrivals and departures from Brownsville-Monterrey in this way explains many of the different dates given for her work in Mexico.<sup>11</sup>

With this analysis it should be obvious that Hickey actually began the work in Monterrey in 1862. The men who invited Hickey to come to Monterrey deserve a mention. Hickey, in a letter to the Bible Society described the men he found there: John Butler was an English man who had worked for the conversion of another man of English descent, Thomas Westrup. Matthew Starr was a citizen of the United States, a hat salesman, who permitted Hickey and his wife to live in their home in Monterrey. Others mentioned in letters or historical descriptions afterwards, were a Mr. Jolly and Mr. Pardee. In 1863 the group of followers formed the “Sociedad Mexicana de Evangelizacion, (The Mexican Evangelization Society) to facilitate and organize the distribution of Bibles. In January 1863 they sent a letter to the Governor of Nuevo Leon asking for the use of a public school for their meetings. The permission was denied.<sup>12</sup> In March of the same year, Hickey began preaching in Spanish in the mornings and in English at night.

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<sup>9</sup> John Cheavens, “Una Entrevista Interesante,” *La Luz Bautista*, (First series), August 21, 1902, p. 124.

<sup>10</sup> John Westrup, ed. *Principios por Tomas Westrup* (Monterrey, N.L., 1948), pp. 4,11,29,37,44; T.M. Westrup, “La Primera Iglesia Bautista en Monterrey,” *La Luz Bautista*, (First series), December 7, 1893, p. 194.

<sup>11</sup> Rankin, *Veinte Años*, pp. 60-61, 87-111; Latourette, *History*, p. 112; González, *Historia*, p. 406.

<sup>12</sup> Montemayor, *Hickey el Fundador*, p. 20.

In late 1863, early 1864 there was an event that troubled the group of “protestants” that had gathered together. In December of 1863 the group “became disturbed ... by the fact that the Uranga brothers were soon to be baptized.”<sup>13</sup> This decision on the part of Hickey and the new believers was to change the nature of the group. On January 30 1864, Hickey baptized Westrup and the Uranga brothers. That evening they formed “The Christian Church,” in Monterrey. Hickey ordained Westrup who became the first pastor of the church.<sup>14</sup>

The question of what kind of group was formed however is not as easy to answer. The historical evidence is at best questionable. The actors themselves at times left contradictory evidence. The letters from Hickey to American Bible Society do not explain much about the work. However all of the people involved identify Hickey as a “Baptist minister.” Evidently, the majority of this information comes from the testimony of Thomas Westrup. But, the work that began in Monterrey did not carry the Baptist name. This would have been obvious since Hickey, as an agent of a non-denominational Bible Society, could not begin a “partisan” work. It appears Hickey worked more for these agencies than for any Baptist one. If he was a Baptist his convictions about Baptist faith and practice would be clear. This is what one finds studying the reports of the people involved. Hickey baptized the new converts by immersion. He believed in closed communion. When the first society is undone and Thomas Westrup and the Uranga brothers are baptized, a church is organized, and there is more credence given to the position.

When Rankin arrived in Monterrey in 1865, she saw the young group as “ripe unto harvest.” Patterson states that she really wanted to take the field not just harvest it.<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to judge motives at this distant date but it is obvious in her book that she did not like the nature of the work began by Hickey and Westrup. She disliked the idea of not having a permanent building for the congregation. When one examines what she actually thought, it was obvious that she was concerned more with the building of a church building than any other point. She recognized that a congregation had already been formed, what they lacked was a building. Rankin did possibly “build the first church building” in Mexico, but she did not establish the work or establish the first congregation.<sup>16</sup>

She also did not like the idea that these new converts had already developed ideas about the ordinances, particularly baptism and the Lord’s Supper. She stated that ... “my objective was to bring people to Christ in Mexico, and as they chose the manner of Baptistm, I had little to say about the matter.” She also stated that “the believers under her

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-20; Westrup, Principios, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Westrup, Principios, p. 45; Westrup, “La Primera Iglesia Bautista,” p. 194; Montemayor, Hickey el Fundador, pp. 21-22; Treviño, Historia, p. 26

<sup>15</sup> Frank W. Patterson, A Century of Baptist Work in Mexico (El Paso, Tx.: Casa Bautista de Publicaciones, 1979), p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> I believe much of the problem stems from the fact that she wanted to “build the first church.” In Spanish the word “templo” or building is used. In English it would probably be “church,” which can mean either one.

care had abandoned the doctrine of closed communion that Hickey had instituted.”<sup>17</sup> Then the evidence shows however that it did matter to her.<sup>18</sup>

Westrup did try to answer the question of the kind of work any more clearly than others. In several places he clearly identified the work as Baptist in principle if not in name. He could say in 1893 “I became a Baptist” speaking of his own baptism. Or as he said “We became Baptist” after reading several tracts about Baptist beliefs. This last statement was after the intervention of Rankin, possibly in 1869. Westrup was invited by the American Baptist Home Mission Society (ABHMS from Northern Baptist) to come to New York in the same year to officially become their representative in Mexico. Westrup stated that while there he arranged to place everything “in order,” even his own ordination.<sup>19</sup> When he returned to Monterrey in June of 1870, the churches already established in Nuevo Leon joined the Baptist Home Mission Society. However, he admitted that he found the Baptist work diminished by the invasion of Rankin ideas. In fact, the first group in Monterrey had become a mixed one some being baptized as believers and others not, then Westrup had to reorganize the congregation.<sup>20</sup> Westrup has an important place in the beginnings of Baptist work in Mexico and for the Evangelical work in general as outstanding composer and translator of hymns. Unfortunately, due to controversies among leaders, later become a Disciple of Christ and left the Baptist denomination.<sup>21</sup> After being a Baptist for 38 years in the last seven years of his life he denied the Baptist faith, but his contribution is undeniable.

Hickey died on December 10, 1866 in Brownsville Texas. He evidently caught pneumonia on a horseback trip. He was buried in Texas, but facing Mexico. His last words to Tomas Sepulveda his co-worker were “Siga el trabajo” (keep on working.)<sup>22</sup> It is difficult to say if the work established by Hickey was completely a Baptist work or not. However it is obvious that he did begin evangelical work and produced the first evangelical congregation. This work later became a Baptist one in both name and principle. Hickey began the first continual work in Mexico, not just with foreigners in an ethnic church, but winning Mexican people for Christ and baptizing them a New Testament congregation. In fact, since 1870 that church was identified as “Baptist of close communion.” In the building of that church says: “First Baptist Church organized on January 30, 1864 by Rev. James Hickey.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Development of the Baptist Work in Mexico**

In 1881 the Southern Baptists also began work in Mexico. First of all, they started supporting John Westrup (brother of Thomas), but then when he was murdered, they sent William D. Powell in first place to investigate the circumstances of the murder of John Westrup. Later, in 1882 Powell and his wife, were appointed as missionaries to Mexico. They worked very hard, organizing new churches and persuading nationals to dedicate themselves to mission work. Southern Baptists entered to Mexico in an era of expansion. During the government of President Porfirio Diaz (1876-1911) nearly 15,000 miles of rail

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<sup>17</sup> pendiente

<sup>18</sup> Patterson, *A Century*, p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> Patterson, *A Century*, p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Chastain, *Thirty*, p. 102.

<sup>21</sup> Patterson, *A Century*, p. 70.

<sup>22</sup> Miguel McAleer, “Hickey el Fundador.” (México: Seminario Teológico Bautista Mexicano, 1995), p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Patterson, *A Century*, pp. 26-27.

lines were built, connecting the principal cities of Mexico and opening vast areas to settlements. In ten years the FMB of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) sent 26 additional missionaries.

At the turn of the twentieth century Baptist work in Mexico had reached encouraging proportions. In 1901 Northern Baptist reported 43 churches and missions with a total of 721 members. Southern Baptist reported 37 churches, 21 missions, and 1189 members. There were a number of Baptist day schools and Baptist periodical, but denominational organization was limited to three associations. Simultaneously, in 1901, two missionaries and a pastor were convinced the time had come to form a Baptist convention of churches. Thus, on September 13, 1903 forty-two messengers and some twenty Baptist without credentials of 13 churches and one association met at the First Baptist Church of Mexico City to organize a national convention (CNBM).

The period 1903-1910 was marked by territorial expansion. During this period the Pacific Railway built lines along the coast. The Southern Baptist Missions provided workers, both nationals and missionaries to plan work along this rail line and one from Zacatecas north to El Paso. Churches in all parts of Mexico took seriously their responsibility for extending the work in their respective districts. (Map of Chastain)

In 1905, Pablo Rodriguez, president of the Convention, moved that body with a message on "It is Time that the Convention Should Begin Mission Work." The next year a Mission Board began with an offering of \$610 (pesos) to look out a field and worker. A region in the state of Michoacan called "Once Pueblos" (Eleven Villages) was selected as the field, but a worker was not found until 1908, when Antonio Torres was employed, supplied with a horse by the Convention, and began to visit the eleven villages. Due to disruptions caused by the revolution the Convention was forced in 1912 to suspend its home mission work until 1920. Early the CNBM also began foreign mission work, when in 1910, this Convention was invited to cooperate with Brazil and Argentina in evangelizing Chile. The CNBM began a monthly offering for pay the salary of a Chilean missionary. This relation continued until 1913, when the Mexican Revolution forced its suspension.

At the time the Convention was organized in 1903 there were a number of Baptist schools in Mexico, some supported by the ABHMS, and another for the Southern Baptists. Some new schools were established between 1903 and 1910. Some institutions of Theological Education were also started since nineteenth century as the Instituto Zaragoza founded by Powell in Saltillo in 1889 and the Theological School founded by A. T. Watkins in 1901, which was the antecedent of the Mexican Baptist Theological Seminary. Moreover, the desire for a theological school supported by both mission boards was expressed in the conventions of 1903 and 1904. This desire never diminished. But the Mexican Revolution prevented the immediate realization of the establishment of a theological seminary. However it did become a reality a few years later, when in 1917 the Mexican Baptist Seminary was started participating Northern, Southern and Mexican Baptists.

Among the first publications were La Luz Bautista, the denominational newspaper in 1885, and El Expositor Bautista, a Sunday school quarterly, which remain until today.

Moreover, J. E. Davis a missionary journalist, began in 1905 a printer in his home, which is now the Spanish Publishing House.

The Mexican Revolution from 1910 until 1917 had different effects on the Churches. They were weakened by political differences among their members. Broken communication and rail lines left many of them isolated. Moreover, the Revolution brought the destruction of church property in some instances and the death of many innocent persons. However, despite disruption, danger, destruction of property, loss of life and leadership, the churches advanced on two fronts: evangelism and the organization of a few churches.

After Revolution, the Constitution of 1917 brought a new way of life to Mexico. It proclaimed separation of church and state and set out on a course which was socialistic in principle. Until 1940, the Baptist in Mexico lived a reconstruction era under severe restrictions by the government.

From 1940 through 1959 a relaxation by the government on certain church restrictions also favored evangelical expansion. During the first decade of this period both mission boards and the CNBM proceeded with caution. During the second decade there was determined advanced on the part of all.

The decade between 1960 and 1970 was of expansion and evangelism. But by 1965 relations between the Mexico Mission (MM) of Southern Baptists (FMBSBC) and the CNBM, as represented by its executive secretary (who began with ecumenical tendencies) were deteriorating. Moreover, the same man complicated the relationship between the ABHMS (Northern) and the FMBSBC (Southern). Finally, such man left his office. However, that was the beginning of disagreements between the boards and the CNBM, especially of ABHMS, which terminate a relationship it had had with the CNBM since its beginning. The Mexico Mission of the FMBSBC continued to cooperate with the CNBM, but under less than ideal conditions. The Convention had reason for exasperation. Within the Convention there were multiple programs, each with its own leadership. The Convention had its field work, some associations had field missionaries, and the MM had its field work, programs to some extent parallel, but not correlated. However, in 1971, the MM voted an integration program in which, all programs of MM will be surrendered to the CNBM.

With this Integration program, the work was blessed. From 199 churches in 1970 the number of churches doubled twice in a 26 years period, reaching 1,116 in 1995. Moreover, in 1983 the CNBM adopted the challenge of reducing the financial support of FMBSBC (given as subsidy for the programs integrated to the CNBM) in 10% per year. In such a way, the CNBM received the last subsidy in 1992, reaching its self-support. Additionally, the same year the Convention voted the important goal to reach 2000 churches self-supported by 2000 year. From then, during 4 or 5 years the average of growth was the organization of one church per week. However, the rate of growth has not been consistent in such a way that by year 2000 the number of churches reached was only 1,700. Actually, the CNBM has adopted the continental evangelistic program promoted by UBLA called "Hay Vida en Jesús" with emphasis in planting new churches. Now the goal

established is to reach 10,000 churches by 2010. So, in theory the current projects of Baptist work in Mexico are optimistic, the question is how healthy, stable and strong are the churches to accomplish the goals in an integral and positive way.

### **Formation of Mexican Baptists Identity**

Since the beginnings, Baptists in Mexico have had problems to define their identity. As established before, the first church had not the Baptist name since the beginning even though its doctrines and practices were. This happened due to the commitments of the founders such as Hickey and Westrup with non-denominational agencies. Thus, that congregation had to fight for its identity against Presbyterian influence. Later, Westrup himself abandoned the Baptist identity to lead the Disciples of Christ work.

Another difficulty was the conversion of one prominent missionary to the Roman Catholic Church. He was Guillermo H. Sloan, one of the first pastors of the First Baptist Church in Mexico City and founder of the Baptist periodical "La Luz" in 1885. This fact was initially an enormous scandal because the Catholic clergy try to use it to cause discredit to Baptists and Evangelicals in general. However, nobody followed the steps of Mr. Sloan and as time passed by the issue was forgotten. In any case, considering that due to the religious context in Mexico, Catholicism has been the natural opposition to Baptists and all Evangelicals, this event is relevant to be mentioned.

In addition to the natural fight against Catholicism, there was another menace to a health identity for Baptists in Mexico. In this case, it was not the Roman Catholic Church itself, but a movement coming from the USA called "landmarkism" which was brought by some of the missionaries during the first stages of Baptist development. This movement was the Baptist equivalent supporting an ecclesiology of only one true church similar to the Catholic idea. There is evidence of these ideas in the Baptist literature and of their influence even until recent years. This could be considered as another impact of the Catholic context of Mexico on Baptist identity in the sense that they might have adopted a similar concept of the church to oppose the Catholic persecution showing the idea that the real true church was the Baptist one. It would be a Catholic corruption by adoption or assimilation.

Other doctrinal problems have been related to the Ecumenism and Charismatic movement. In relation to the Ecumenical movement it has been mentioned some facts happened in the middle of the twentieth century when some leaders try to involve the CNBM in Ecumenical programs. However, Mexican Baptists have been much more conservative than Baptists in other countries about relationships with Ecumenism. The problem has been that Ecumenical trend as perceived by Baptists in Mexico means a danger to a health ecclesiology because the strong emphasis on local church inherited by the previous influence of landmarkism. In consequence Baptist churches in Mexico have practiced closed communion and close membership. On the other hand, to practice open communion for Baptists in Mexico would mean open the door to the sacramental view of the church, supported by Catholicism its traditional religious opposition. In addition, this position has been reinforced by the experience that when churches have opened membership to people of other denominations the common result is the lost of Baptist identity of those churches.



In relation to the Charismatic movement, the enormous and fast growth of charismatic churches has been impressive for many Baptists in Mexico. Then, in an effort to obtain a similar rate of growth many churches, especially those led by pastors with poor motifs such as only obtain quantitative results, have started to introduce characteristic traits of Charismatic churches such as the worship style, the emphasis in the Holy Spirit doctrine and His gifts, finishing with a change of denominational identity. The problem has been a lack of a healthy teaching about the Holy Spirit and to give priority to the emotions and experiences over the biblical authority on these matters.

Other kind of difficulties have been related to structural and administrative issues. Obviously, these problems have also a doctrinal side but this aspect is less evident, however not less important in special reference to the Baptist identity in Mexico. In general, the doctrinal issue under jeopardy is the sociological principle distinctive among Baptists. There are two aspects derived from this principle which are suffering distortion or deviation of Biblical teachings. In first place, at the local church level, the problem is being expressed in hierarchical and autocratic leadership of many pastors, who in practice if not in words, deny the biblical doctrine of believers' priesthood. Some consequences are the elevation of some leaders over their congregations as privileged clergy claiming special illumination from God and special understanding of the Bible, in such a way that they are practicing a manipulating leadership instead of a servant leadership. In fact, in many churches are giving up the celebration of administrative meetings eliminating the practice of congregational government. In second place, this same trend is being manifested in denominational structures emphasizing the interdependency among churches in detriment of the autonomy of local churches arguing an acritical unity or more precisely a kind of uniformity. Lately, there has been a strong pressure on the churches to adopt the criteria of the leadership instead that the leaders might see themselves as servants of the churches and follow the vision that churches should establish. All of this has produced a lack of interest and cooperation in the denominational structures. In the past few years the number of churches offering and supporting the Conventional work has diminished year by year. Thus, in spite of the optimistic projects mentioned before, the current situation of the CNBM is critical as very few churches are committed to participate because of this lack of taking them into consideration and more importantly because of the sense that the Baptist identity is being deviated or even betrayed.

### **Conclusion**

Even though this work is only a brief sketch of Baptist History and Identity in Mexico, it gives us an idea of the great past of our denomination. Mission work has been a priority since the beginning. Thanks to this emphasis many churches have been organized in all the territory of our country. It has been of special concern the mission work among the ethnic groups. However, it is necessary to intensify missionary efforts because there are still many Mexicans in need of the Gospel message. Another area of great impact at the beginning of the Baptist work in Mexico was in the field of Education. Many schools were supported by the first Baptists being a significant contribution to Mexican society. These efforts were slowly disappearing due to restrictive politics but as new laws in Mexico are being established, this should be an important project for Baptist today or in the near future. Other contributions in the social area have been several hospitals, student homes and university

work as well as agricultural projects to help specially in ethnical and rural areas. However, at the present only one hospital has remained. Therefore, it is necessary to reinforce this kind of projects involving more effectively our professionals in faithful Christian service with impact in the surrounding society and its multiple needs. In the field of Theological Education, the CNBM support partially only two seminaries. However, the institutions and schools to train leaders have multiplied regional and locally. The challenge in this area is that such training meet the minimal standards of health doctrinal teaching, especially with Baptist identity, as well as an integral formation for future leaders in all areas such as spiritual formation, moral character, academic excellence and effective strategies on his/her specific ministry. Finally, another area of challenge at the present is related to the relationships with the Mexican government. The new laws established in 1992 have given legal character to all churches in Mexico. Positive consequences are the possibility that churches may have properties, as well as liberty to establish educative or other social projects and to have access to mass media. However, there are also negative potential results as violations to the principle of separation between the state and the church because now the government require that churches be registered giving all kind of internal information about its members, properties, and financial states. In addition, for Baptists, the way in which the Government relates with churches is contrary to our principles because it is used to Catholic structures, then the authority try to manage all denominations approaching them as hierarchies unknowing our reality of local and autonomous churches. This approach has been a great temptation for some leaders of getting unauthentic power. Then, the challenge is to avoid assimilation by our context rejecting concepts and practices of the cultural system contraries to our Christian identity. Baptists in Mexico need a more transformational approach in order to produce impact and influence changing our society with the Biblical values and the Gospel message full of the God's love.