Chapter I

The driver pointed the automobile bearing the deacon and his pastor eastward from Dayton. As the vehicle slowly moved across the rolling terrain of Greene County, both men were deep in thought.

It had all started casually enough several days earlier. The deacon, Harold Engle, had simply asked his young pastor if he knew of any Regular Baptist schools that were in need of property. His pastor, James T. Jeremiah, responded with a question of his own: “Why?” Engle explained that he had been raised in the tiny Village of Cedarville, located eight miles east of Xenia in Greene County. Many members of the Engle family, including his parents, remained in the rural community. The village was the home of a liberal arts college that had fallen on difficult times.

Cedarville College had been founded by people of Scotch-Irish descent who had settled in the Ohio Valley and formed the General Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America. They were sometimes known as “New Lights” because, unlike the “Old Lights” Reformed Presbyterians, they were willing to participate in civil government. In 1885 the General Synod appointed a committee of five men to find a site for a college in the Cedarville area. Rev. J.F. Morton, Thomas Gibson, R. Park, Hugh McCollum, and H.H. McMillan signed the corporation papers on January 20, and a charter for Cedarville College was granted by the State of Ohio six days later on January 26, 1887.

For a while it seemed the college would never get off the ground. The trustees were frustrated in their attempts to raise support and would have given up had the General Synod permitted it. In late 1891, however, the Cedarville College campus in 1953; the scene which James T. Jeremiah saw on his first visit to the College after hearing of its plight and the possibility of taking it over.
college received a sizeable bequest that enabled the trustees to move toward making the college a reality. A Cincinnati pastor, Dr. David McKinney, was named first president, and Cedarville opened its doors to the first students on September 19, 1894.

Cedarville College remained a Reformed Presbyterian school until 1928 when the General Synod released it to the trustees so the Board could seek financial assistance from the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. The latter body refused to consider support until such a break was made, and then rejected the request anyway! This left the college with no supporting constituency. Other difficulties emerged in the ‘30s, and by late in the decade the trustees dipped into the endowment for a small “loan.” This practice continued in the ‘40s, and by the early ‘50s the modest endowment had been depleted to keep the college alive.

When the endowment was gone, the trustees realized they could no longer continue operation. Because of their great love for the traditions of their college, they looked for another Christian group that would bring new leadership to the struggling school and enable it to continue. Engle indicated to Jeremiah that the trustees of Cedarville College were seeking a merger.

As Engle briefly outlined the plight of Cedarville College, Jeremiah’s mind focused on the Baptist Bible Institute of Cleveland (B.B.I.). This institute had its inception on September 27, 1941, when several Bible-believing pastors attended a Bible conference at the Calvary Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio. These men held a special session to discuss the possibility of establishing an educational institution to train Cleveland area young people for the ministry. The nine pastors attending that initial session were George A. Bates, George G. Nika, Gerald V. Smelser, Gordon Anderson, L.T. Merchant, D.E. Luttrell, Howard Kramer, William S. Ross, and J.F. Guthriell.

They selected Pastors Luttrell and Ross to contact Bible schools in Detroit and Grand Rapids for data that might be helpful in formulating their plans. A second meeting was held on October 20, 1941, at the Russett Cafeteria. George Bates was chosen as chairman, and the nine pastors received the material provided by the Michigan schools. The pastors then entered into a lengthy discussion regarding the feasibility of launching such a project. After reviewing all the data, the decision was to move forward as quickly as possible.1

In less than a year, B.B.I. was ready to function.

By July 1942, a course of study for the first year was adopted and officers were elected. The school was offered the use of the Educational Building of the Hough Avenue Baptist Church for classrooms, and on September 15, 1942, the Baptist Bible Institute opened its doors to Clevelanders. Two hundred and seventy-four enrolled for the first term.2

The initial curriculum was composed entirely of Bible courses, which were offered on Tuesday and Friday nights. The need for a full-time dean was discussed at the October 20, 1941 meeting, but the institute was staffed by pastors who "were required to be graduated from high school, to have Theological Seminary or accredited Bible School training, and to have membership in a fundamental Baptist Church"3 for the first several years.

The first full-time employee of B.B.I. was Rev. Kenneth A. Amsler, who was called to the position of dean and director of promotion. "Under his able leadership, the institute moved forward ... The curriculum was strengthened, the faculty increased numerically and scholastically, the constitution was revised, a new Board of Directors elected and a Board of Reference appointed."4

In January 1946, B.B.I. incorporated in accordance with the laws of the State of Ohio. On June 4 of the same year, the first nine graduates received their diplomas. The following September the day school began with 28 students enrolled. Just one month earlier the institute gained initial government approval for qualified students to receive veterans’ benefits.5 The institute became an approved school of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (G.A.R.B.C.), and in October 1949, was accredited by the Accrediting Association of Bible Institutes and Bible Colleges in its intermediate division. By May 1951, the trustees revised the charter of the institute to permit the granting of theological degrees, and additional courses were added leading to the Bachelor of Religious Education degree. At the same time a Bachelor of Theology degree was approved, and the corporate charter was changed to read:

To conduct a theological school for the teaching and training of ministers, missionaries, and teachers of the Gospel; for the granting of theological degrees and diplomas which have value in religious ecclesiastical fields; to disseminate Christian knowledge and information; to receive, collect, and disperse funds; and to erect, acquire, own, manage or rent property all in furtherance of the above purposes.6
The Executive Committee of the Baptist Bible Institute of Cleveland in 1952: Allan Lewis, President, Leonard Webster, Dean, John Bennett, Registrar, George Milner, Chairman of the Board. These men were instrumental in engineering the many details of Baptist Bible Institute’s move to Cedarville College.

Jeremiah had become aware of B.B.I. while serving as pastor of the Emmanuel Baptist Church in Toledo. In 1949 he left Toledo to become the pastor of the Emmanuel Baptist Church in Dayton, Ohio. By this time his leadership role in the G.A.R.B.C. was reflected in his membership on the Council of Fourteen, the body elected to direct the national fellowship. At the same time he served on the Council of Ten, which led the Ohio Association of Regular Baptist Churches. This kept him abreast of the new school’s activities.

Though he was already a member of the Baptist Mid-Missions Board and the Executive Committee of the Fellowship of Baptists for Home Missions, when B.B.I. invited him to join their Board of Trustees in 1952, he quickly accepted. He had a tremendous burden for education throughout his ministry. Now, the question raised by his deacon focused Jeremiah’s mind on the tremendous needs faced by B.B.I.

“Due to war conditions, long working hours and the general confusion of the times, the first four years of the institute’s life were fraught with difficulties.” The creation of the day school in September 1946 added a significant number of new problems. The Hough Avenue Baptist Church Educational Plant provided all the space needed for classrooms, offices, and library, but with the influx of day school students from out of state, the young school needed dormitories. The only dormitory available was a large, aged mansion in the Western Reserve area of east Cleveland. According to Gerald Smelser, “The boys were on the third floor and the girls were on the second floor and the dining facilities were on the first floor. Well this, of course, was not the greatest idea in the world, so there
was a desire to find another similar mansion.\footnote{8} Smelser’s comments demonstrate that this fundamentalist Bible institute had no desire to lead the trend toward coeducational dormitories! The trustees searched the area for additional dormitory property to no avail. One trustee indicated Western Reserve University “had used up all the fine buildings around their campus, and we were having real problems.”\footnote{9}

As a Board member, Jeremiah was aware of the needs and frustrations the trustees had been encountering. But his eagerness to recommend the Cedarville property was tempered by a series of reservations. He was unsure what the ramification of merger might mean. While the purchase of property was a very clean process, merging raised a series of questions about possible conditions.

At Jeremiah’s request Engle had arranged to meet with representatives of Cedarville College, and that meeting was about to take place! As Jeremiah’s auto turned north along Main Street in Cedarville and approached the campus, the young pastor began making mental notes on the village. It was a clean, pleasant village with a quaint brick paving on the main road. The car moved along Route 72 about one-half mile before Jeremiah got his first glimpse of Old Main, the building that was to be the focal point of his ministry for many years. He remembered:

There was one sidewalk on the campus that led directly to what is now the Development Office at the main building entrance. The doorway faced the east then. We went into the room. The floors were oiled in the fashion that they used to oil old wooden floors in the school houses to keep down the dust.\footnote{10}

As the meeting with the representatives of Cedarville College began, Jeremiah was well aware of the prevailing attitudes in the G.A.R.B.C. The young Association had been founded in 1932 on the concept of biblical separation. A group of fundamentalists in the Northern Baptist Convention agreed it was impossible to purge the Convention of theological liberalism. They were convinced that the only solution was to sever completely their ties with the Convention. Through the years of their infancy, the new Association stood firm in the conviction that complete separation from doctrinal apostasy was a biblical mandate.

Jeremiah remembered when Regular Baptists could not even merge with other Baptists. In 1947 another group of fundamentalists, who had stayed in the Convention when the Regular Baptists left in 1932, decided it was time to leave. A series of discussions were held between the Regular Baptists and the Convention fundamentalists, but the two groups could not agree on the issue of separation. The Regular Baptists remained firm on the principle of ecclesiastical separation,
but the group that would ultimately become the Conservative Baptists preferred to leave the question of affiliation in the hands of the individual churches.

Jeremiah recognized that the theological controversies of the day were very real. He knew the sensitivity of Regular Baptist people to those issues. He realized that a new direction for the Bible institute would require the support of the pastors and people in the G.A.R.B.C. in order to succeed. He was not at all sure that a merger would be supported. His own theological commitment and the commitment of those in the Association he loved were fresh in his mind as the discussion of “merging” began. He leaned toward Harold Engle and whispered, “I don’t think Regular Baptists can merge.” Engle smiled at his young pastor and replied, “Preacher, you had better wait a minute and see what they mean by ‘merge.’”

As the discussion developed, the love that the Presbyterian trustees had for their institution became obvious. They had no desire to bring about a merger for personal or selfish gain. If they had wanted that sort of thing, the property could have simply been sold outright. What they really wanted was a continuation of the school’s ministry in the lives of Christian young people. These men were willing to turn the campus over to someone who had the strength, desire, and burden to carry on for the cause of Christ. Consequently, they devised a plan by which the Presbyterian trustees would gradually resign, allowing representatives from the new group to be elected. By exchanging the Boards in this manner, it would be possible for Cedarville College to continue functioning under its charter, and the ministry could go on uninterrupted.

When he understood the selflessness of the Presbyterian trustees and the wisdom of the plan they had devised, Jeremiah recognized the unique opportunity available to B.B.I. This was clearly a “merger” that even Regular Baptists could accept!

---

5. Ibid.
8. Gerald Smelser, Taped Reflections, October 1985. Smelser was one of the original group of pastors who organized Baptist Bible Institute. He is still an active member of the Cedarville College Board of Trustees.
9. Ibid.
11. Ibid.