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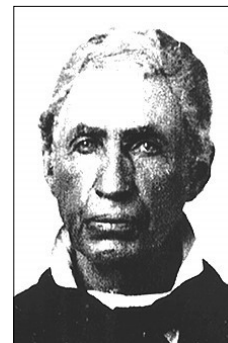
Itinerant Missionaries Brought the Gospel into the Florida Territory – Part 1

Starting this month and featured in the next several editions of *Here and Now* will be some of the pioneer itinerant missionaries who came into the Florida Territory – as it was called prior to Florida's 1845 admission to statehood – and undertook the challenges to share the Gospel in this spiritual and physical frontier wilderness.

JAMES MCDONALD

A pioneer itinerant missionary preacher who roamed the East Florida Territory was James McDonald. He is known for having helped to organize in 1838 the Bethel Baptist Church of Jacksonville, which following the Civil War split into the Anglo congregation of First Baptist Church and the African-descendant congregation that retained the name Bethel. However his most enduring continuous service was nearly ten years as pastor of the Sharon Baptist Church in Nassau County (now known as the First Baptist Church, Callahan), a congregation he started in 1841.

Born in Scotland in 1798, James McDonald came to America in 1818 at the age of 20 and settled in Burke County, Georgia. Reared as a Roman Catholic, McDonald developed a burning desire to read the Bible despite the rules of his church against it. His guilt feelings over the forbidden scripture reading caused him to migrate to Cuba in the hopes of escaping from his troubled mind. No sooner had McDonald landed in Havana than he was arrested for unknown reasons. While in prison, he resumed reading the New Testament and had a profound experience of spiritual conversion. Just as mysterious was his arrest and imprisonment, McDonald was released from prison without explanation. Believing that God had come to his rescue, McDonald pledged to become a missionary.



James McDonald

He returned to Georgia where he was baptized into a Baptist church. Soon thereafter, the Richland Creek Baptist Church, affirming his call of God, voted to license him to preach. Soon thereafter the Georgia Baptist Association, in 1832, called him to serve as a missionary to Burke County and eventually was appointed as an itinerant missionary by the Sunbury Baptist Association. While traveling his ministerial itinerary, McDonald read an article that appeared in the July 7, 1836, issue of *The Christian Index*, the Georgia Baptist news journal. A Baptist layman, Edwin Hart, appealed to preachers of the gospel to come to the Florida Territory. "If there is any country in these United States that stands in need of preaching, it is Florida. We are all most destitute of preachers." It was as if the Spirit of God had issued a "Macedonian" call. Nine months later, McDonald secured the approval of the Sunbury Association for him to travel to East Florida in April, 1837.

On a sultry Saturday afternoon, McDonald and his horse crossed the St. Marys' River and entered the Florida Territory. He rode up to a barn in the middle of a wilderness settlement and decided to hold a revival meeting. Writing about the experience for *The Christian Index*, McDonald recalled, "Some had not heard the gospel in years; others never." On the following Sunday, a large number of people showed up for his preaching and exhortations. The response by the settlers to the movement of the Holy Spirit was emotional and renewing. "Day and night the power and glory of God overshadowed us," he reported after his return to Darien, Georgia. Several months later, McDonald returned to East Florida, preaching at five different settlements. One of those stops was in Jacksonville, where he conducted a two-day preaching meeting. The response was positive, and a delegation of nearly one hundred Anglo and African-descendants asked for prayer and invited him to return in October. McDonald was so impressed by the spiritual

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need and response in East Florida, that he resigned both a pastorate at Darien and his missionary assignment with the Sunbury Association.

Undertaking this new missionary endeavor proved to be a long tenure in Florida for McDonald who carried the gospel faithfully. He traveled extensively and faced the problems of loneliness and danger during the Seminole Indian War. McDonald had great courage and dedication. In his regular correspondence to *The Christian Index*, McDonald related eyewitness accounts of the Indian War casualties. There were burned out homes, abandoned plantations, murdered men, women and children and the moral depravity of soldiers and settlers alike. He told of the challenges he encountered – swamps, glades, the thick pine forests and even the Indians.

Yet despite the hardships, he reported in a November 5, 1838, article that he had managed to start three new churches. One of those congregations was the Bethel Baptist Church in Jacksonville, at which he and Ryan Frier served as the constituting presbytery. Started in July, 1838, the church had six charter members, comprised of four Anglos and two African slaves. In addition to McDonald, were his future wife Teresa Amada Pendarvis, Elias G. Jaudon and his wife, and the two slaves of Jaudon, named Peggy and Baccus.

Within a year, missionary McDonald reported that his preaching circuit involved regularly preaching at 17 congregations, seven of which he served as the pastor. One of those congregations was the Sharon Baptist Church in Nassau County. He helped organize the church in early 1841, with fourteen members. Eventually the town of Callahan grew up around the church, and in 1857 the church changed its name to the Callahan Baptist Church. Although McDonald later served as a missionary for various entities, he traveled regularly to the Sharon Church for ten years to fulfill his pastoral duties.

In 1841, McDonald was appointed by the American Baptist Home Mission Society to work an itinerant preaching circuit in North Florida. But after two years he resigned and accepted a call to serve as missionary for the recently organized Florida Baptist Association for about two years – from 1843 – 1844. With the organization of the newly formed Southern Baptist Convention in 1845, McDonald was appointed by the Convention's Board of Domestic Missions and served as a regional missionary for two years. McDonald often ministered to a mixed and unresponsive population of Spanish Catholics, Universalists, skeptics, moral renegades, and African- descendants. Often he received the greatest response from the African- descendants, whom he baptized freely and admitted to membership in the Anglo majority churches.

McDonald led in establishing the Alachua Baptist Association in 1847, and published in 1848 the first Baptist newspaper in Florida. He called it *The Baptist Telegraph and Florida Emigrant*. Unfortunately the publication lasted for only a few months, but the effort reflected his awareness of the need for a Florida Baptist newspaper to advance the cause of missions. So far as it is known, no copies of his newspaper survived the ravages of time.

Toward the end of his labors in Florida, McDonald lamented that in East Florida, in an area 200 miles long, there were no more than five ministers. In 1853 he reluctantly resigned as pastor of the Sharon Baptist Church in Nassau County and returned to Georgia, where he subsequently died on April 25, 1869, at age 71.

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