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Itinerant Missionaries Brought the Gospel into the Florida Territory – Part 8

This issue of *Here and Now* continues the featured series on some of the pioneer itinerant missionaries **and committed Baptist laypersons** 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.

Nancy Hagin – An Advocate for Missions Who Challenged Anti-missions Forces

Nancy “Ann” Cone Hagin (also spelled Hagan) was a pioneer Florida settler and resolute Baptist who sought excommunication from her Primitive Baptist church rather than yield to the growing anti-missionary sentiment that afflicted many Baptist churches in the early nineteenth century.

The struggle of conscience experienced by Nancy Hagin exemplified some of the growing and maturing pains that challenged Baptist life between 1800 and 1840. But how individual Baptists and their churches reacted reflected their understanding of New Testament imperatives. Their chosen commitment to missions and the benevolent societies of the time set the tone for the development of pro-Missionary Baptists who would rally together to become the Florida Baptist State Convention in 1854.

A “sturdy” pioneer woman, Hagin (1782 – 1846), whose husband John had died in 1822, decided to leave her Camden County, Georgia, homestead and moved to the much rumored fertile lands in the Florida Territory. The average widow of that era would likely have not even considered leaving kinfolk and neighbors to move to a place that was foreign to them. But Nancy Hagin, like so many other people who migrated to Middle Florida in the early 1800s, understood that finding new opportunity required taking risks. She sold her 400-acre farm with the hopes of having sufficient funds to finance the purchase of some land which was selling for \$1.25 per acre in the Florida Territory.

During the final meeting with her fellow Baptists at the Sardis Baptist Church of Camden County, Georgia, Nancy Hagin read a poem that was part farewell, part doxology and part assurance for herself and all God's people:

Finally, the fateful moving day in April, 1825, came. Hagin, in the company of five of her six children and relatives Lewis and Martha Cone and neighbor Benjamin Hagan (not related), “loaded up oxcarts, herded live- stock and children, and dragged unwilling slaves from spouses” and began the move South.

The road from Georgia led to a Middle Florida settlement near Lake Miccosukee, within Leon County. With her meager resources, Nancy Hagin purchased eighty acres of land that provided a livelihood for the next thirteen years. During the ensuing years, Nancy Hagin endured Indian raids, the death of friends and drowning of children. To help relieve the emotional stress, Nancy Hagin expressed her thoughts and profound faith through poems contained in two small notebooks written in her own handwriting. Some of the poems drew religious and moral lessons from contemporary events.

In that sparsely populated wilderness which eventually became organized as Leon County, Nancy Hagin was able to develop strong interpersonal relationships with her neighbors and newly made friends. Many of those settlers held to a religious faith, being either of the Methodist or Baptist persuasion. Although they did not yet formally have a church as such, the Baptists gathered regularly in different family homes or barns or in brush arbors for prayer and worship.



Nancy Hagin
This illustration is an artist's
rendition and is not based on
any historical information

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Finally this group of Lake Miccosukee-area Baptists gathered on Saturday, July 18, 1829, to organize the Indian Spring [sic] Baptist Church. Two visiting preachers – Theophilus Hardie and Henry Milton – serving as the presbytery reviewed the personal qualifications of each prospective member. Nancy Hagin and the ten other Baptists present had to show evidence that he or she had been “duly immersed, doctrinally sound, morally responsible, and able to obtain a letter recommending them from their home churches...”



Indian Springs Baptist Church

Once the church had been constituted, Nancy Hagin during the next nine years served as a source of encouragement and spiritual leadership to her fellow Baptists. She was the cord that helped bind together the Baptist community of faith.

By 1837, Nancy Hagin had moved west across the Leon County line to Jefferson County and joined the Mount Moriah Baptist Church. But by then a spirit of anti-missions had taken hold in some Baptist churches and associations in Georgia and Alabama. One such association was the Georgia-based Ochlocknee Baptist Association. During its October, 1842 annual meeting, the sentiments of the anti-mission delegates were strong. The delegates approved a revision to their rules of order that declared the association would not have fellowship with any church that supported missionary societies, Sunday school societies or any similar benevolent groups.

Among the seven Florida churches affiliated with the Georgia association, Mount Moriah in Jefferson County learned from their delegate about the action taken by the association. A majority of the Mount Moriah members agreed that their Calvinistic views made no accommodation for Christian missionary activities. Despite the protestations of a few members, such as Nancy Hagin, the majority of the church members supported the action of the Ochlocknee Association and agreed to have nothing to do with Missionary Baptists.

Hagin, a zealous Missionary Baptist, was not happy by the action taken by her church. Being the independent woman she had grown to be, Hagin enlisted the help of seven other like-minded Baptists to organize a new Missionary Baptist church across the Georgia line (in Thomas County) near Grooverville. The church was organized August 19, 1843, and named Liberty Baptist Church. In constituting the Liberty Church, Nancy Hagin proposed the name. “It ought to be named Liberty, because it means liberty to work for the Master and for the propagation of His glorious gospel and for the salvation of sinners.”

In true Baptist tradition, Nancy Hagin requested a letter of dismissal (transfer) from the Mount Moriah Church. But Hagin was told that because her new congregation was not of “like faith and order” by being pro-missionary, a letter of dismissal would not be given. Nancy Hagin likely discussed her options in conversations with the Mount Moriah pastor, Elder Henry Milton, who was present at the annual meeting and supportive of the action by the Ochlocknee Association. Although no record exists, it is likely that the issue of her actions in organizing another Baptist church, particularly a pro-missionary church, had brought “dishonor” upon the theological integrity of the Mount Moriah congregation. In those days, the public actions of a church member could be called into accountability by the church body.

It is likely that Elder Milton, being a true Calvinist, warned Sister Hagin that her action bordered on heresy. And unless she repented of her actions, the church had every right to excommunicate her. In the church conference typically held on the Saturday prior to the monthly Sunday service, the actions of Nancy Hagin were brought before the congregation. Sister Hagin neither wavered nor sought forgiveness. “In maintenance of the cause, she prepared a poem, beautiful in diction and strong in argument and read the same to her brethren and by the aid of God’s spirit carried conviction to the minds of those who heard her and virtually settled the controversy,” Georgia historian Robert Harris recorded. The church members were unmoved by Sister Hagin’s defense. The vote was unanimous and Sister Hagin was excommunicated “for joining a church of the missionary faith and order.” As was the custom for exclusion the Mount Moriah members probably did not acknowledge her presence, let alone speak to Sister Hagin as she exited the church building.

Probably from Nancy Hagin’s perspective the excommunication was neither persecution nor public humiliation. Rather it became a public occasion for her to emphasize in her own humble way the “rightness” of her understanding of the New Testament scripture. It was an understanding that formed a personal theology that held strongly that a Baptist church must be missionary. Historian Robert Harris later observed, that “Mrs. Hagan [sic] was a woman of unusual mentality and force of character. In the early history of foreign missions in this country she espoused the cause of foreign missions, and with a clear mind and correct knowledge of the Savior’s injunction on this subject, she led the fight, maintaining the fury of Baptists to send the gospel to the nations beyond.”

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