



LEGACY

Our Mission: Researching, preserving and promoting the Legacy of Florida Baptists

Vol. 10

May, 2018

No. 5

In the decade of the 1830s, the most significant theological challenge for early Missionary Baptist churches was fighting against the growing anti-missions sentiment that was taking hold of some Baptist churches. Three of the Florida Baptist churches organized during this decade became legacy defenders of the Biblical missionary cause.

The Missions Question

The renewed interest in the Biblical mandate for missions grew out of The Second Great Awakening (1790 to 1836) that followed the American Revolution. In addition to causing large numbers of persons to make professions of faith in Jesus Christ, Baptist Historian Robert Baker noted that the religious movement saw the “initiation of extensive benevolent Christian ministries, such as home and foreign missions, Bible distribution, Sunday school extension, the printing and circulation of Christian tracts, and the organization of many societies for carrying out these Christian benevolences.”

These missionary and benevolent societies soon came under suspicion and verbal attacks by Baptist hyper-Calvinists. “Convinced that if God wanted people converted he need rely upon no human agent, hyper-Calvinists rejected revivalism, missions, denominational bureaucracies and benevolent organizations,” Baptist historian Wayne Flynt explained.

The hyper-Calvinists, who prided themselves as being not formally educated ministers, claimed they could find no scriptural justification for missionary societies or any other man-made organization. They were particularly suspicious of the missionary movement being promoted by the Triennial Convention (officially known as the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States of America for Foreign Missions) which had been organized in 1814.

In the Southeastern states, the anti-missionary sentiment caused the formation of three Georgia Baptist associations that drew together like-minded anti-missionary churches: Ochlocknee, Suwannee River and Alabama River. Each of these associations was comprised of churches located near and along what is referred to as the Georgia wiregrass region and the east and middle regions of the Florida Panhandle.

During the Ochlocknee Association’s October, 1842, annual meeting, messengers approved a proposed new article #13 for the association’s governing decorum (rules of order) document: “It is the duty of this Association to provide for the general union of the churches, and will not fellowship any church, or churches, nor hold them in union, that support any modern Missionary, Bible, Tract, or Sunday School Union Societies, or Theological School either in themselves or in any other persons or any other society that now is or may here-after be constituted, under a pretense of circulating the Gospel of Christ, nor will she correspond with any Association that support or fellowship any of the above named societies.” Within one year, six of the seven Florida churches had withdrawn from affiliation with the association.

First Baptist Church, Jasper, Hamilton County, 1832

One of those pro-missions churches that later withdrew from the Ochlocknee Association was the Concord Baptist Church located in Hamilton County. Its humble beginnings had started in 1832 when a group of Georgians in search of new farm land migrated to Tiger Swamp located in middle Florida’s Hamilton County. Having established a settlement, several of the Baptists, led by Edmund and Unity

Register Mathis, sought the help of the Union Baptist Church of Lanier County, Georgia, to sponsor an “arm” (mission). The group requested the Union Church to provide a ministerial presbytery to help organize and constitute a church. On June 9, 1832, with the assistance of Elders Elias Knight, John Tucker and William B. Cooper, the Baptist Church of Christ Concord as it was then called, was organized. Among the founding members were John Lee, Jesse and Sarah Lee, Perry G. Wall, John L. and Lenora Stewart, Philemon Bryant, Elihu Morgan, William B. Cooper, as well as Edmund and Unity Mathis. The church called Elias Knight to serve as pastor.

Like so many other Baptist churches of the period, the Concord Church in 1839 was confronted by the anti-missions movement. The primary anti-mission proponent was Elder Knight, who was still affiliated with the Union Church in Lanier County, Georgia. Serving as the pro-missionary apologist was Hamilton County probate judge and ordained Baptist minister William B. Cooper. The discussion of the pros and cons of the missionary movement continued over a series of monthly church conferences. Finally, Elder Knight told the congregation that the church would take a vote. He explained that whichever faction was in the majority would grant to the opposing faction letters of dismissal so that the departed members could organize another church. The pro-missions’ faction won the standing vote by a slim majority. The missions’ proponents reportedly voted to provide letters of dismissal to the anti-missions group, sang a song, shook hands with each other and said their good-byes. The anti-missions’ faction departed and eventually organized the Prospect Baptist Church, which subsequently became a Primitive Baptist congregation. [The Primitive Baptist movement embraced many of the theological positions and faith practices of the early hyper-Calvinists.]



First Baptist Church, Jasper, established 1832, was originally called the Baptist Church of Christ, Concord, then shortened to Concord Baptist Church

When the town of Jasper was surveyed and platted, designated land sites were set aside for three churches. The potential for the Concord congregation to re-locate into the Jasper community in the 1850s was greeted with enthusiasm, and to seal the commitment to move, the congregation voted to change its name to the Jasper First Baptist Church. The church is expected to observe its 186th year of ministry in 2018.



Old Providence Baptist Church, Lake Butler, Union County

Old Providence Church, Union County, 1833

The migration of settlers from southeastern states into the Florida Territory (before becoming a state in 1845) continued into the 1830s. Itinerant Georgia preacher John Tucker is credited with helping to organize numerous Missionary Baptist churches in the northeast and north central region of the territory. However, Tucker, who began to preach at age nineteen in 1806, initially spent twenty years’ service as an itinerant Methodist circuit rider in Georgia. By 1828, Tucker experienced a spiritual awakening as his studies of the scriptures most likely caused him to determine that he should be a part of the Baptist faith tradition. He was baptized into his adopted Baptist faith by Elder Jacob King, a Baptist missionary at Thomaston, Georgia. After coming to Florida in 1832, Tucker was ordained as a Baptist minister in 1833.

Following his ordination, Missionary Tucker traveled on horseback to a settlement on the Florida side of the Olustee River then located in Columbia County (now part of present day Union County). Tucker was requested to lead a preaching service in the wilderness home of Henry Beals on April 12 – 13, 1833, where the settlers had agreed to organize a church. They requested Elder Tucker to assemble a presbytery to assist in constituting a church. On July 13, 1833, a constituting service was held and present were ordained ministers John Tucker, Fleming Bates, William A. Knight and Paul B. Colson. The church’s charter members were Theophilus and Ann Weeks, John D. and Martha Osteen, Abraham Colson, John M. and Ezilia Prevatt, Ephraim and Jane Miller, Benjamin Miller, Mary Gaskins and Margaret T. Campbell.

The Providence Baptist Church (or the Church of Christ, Providence, as they originally referred to themselves) initially agreed to adhere to the principles of faith held by the Ochlocknee (Georgia) Association. Soon thereafter the church changed its rules of decorum to reflect its pro-missions' commitment. The church agreed to call John Tucker as their pastor, who would travel through the area once a month. In time, as other churches adopted the name Providence, the church added the prefix "old" to its name to distinguish itself as being the original. Old Providence Church, located in Union County's Lake Butler community, in 2018 is expected to observe its 185th anniversary since founding.



New River Baptist Church, Brooker, Bradford County

New River Church, Bradford County, 1833

Soon after the start of the Old Providence Church, members of the Nassau County-based Pigeon Creek Baptist Church, who had secured letters of dismission, moved to Columbia County (to the present-day community of Brooker, now in Bradford County). The group assembled on July 17, 1833, to organize a new congregation called the New River Baptist Church. The organizing presbytery consisted of Fleming Bates, John

Tucker and Paul B. Colson. The charter members included Isaac and Margaret Ann Carter, Thomas Prevatt, Sarah Prevatt, Elizabeth Prevatt, Levi and Elizabeth Pellam, W. H. Ward, W. M. and Hesther Johns, Lucy Johns, Kisiah Jones, and Mary Tucker.

The new church called John Tucker to serve as pastor for their monthly worship service. Nearly 12 years later the anti-missions issue surfaced within the congregation. In July, 1845, the church passed a resolution to withdraw from cooperating with the Suwannee River Association, which had taken the position not to receive new churches or fellowship with any pro-missions' church. Within fourteen months (January, 1847) the New River Church was again confronted in a regular church conference "to settle the question whether it would become a Missionary Baptist church or whether it would be an anti-missionary Baptist church. It was decided by a small majority to become a Missionary Baptist church," according to a narrative by Essie Crosby. Throughout its 185 years of existence, the church has remained an active Missionary Baptist congregation to the present day.

THE LEGACY OF CELEBRATING ANNIVERSARIES

Church anniversary observances should be an important event in the life of the local church. In the scriptures we read of God's encouragement to His people to remember their history and recall the blessings and provisions which He has provided. ["So, this day shall be to you a memorial; and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord throughout the generations . . ." Exodus 12:15 (NKJV).]

As God's contemporary people, Florida Baptists also should pause to remember how God has blessed their congregation since its founding. These remembrances can take many forms. Some churches designate a Sunday to observe and celebrate a milestone anniversary. Yet other church leaders undertake to collect, write and publish a history of the congregation since its founding. And certainly, at a minimum, it is important for a church to commit to collect and preserve its history and the memorabilia associated with the church's ministry life and development.

The Florida Baptist Historical Society can assist church leaders in planning an anniversary observance, writing a church history, and/or undertake the opportunity to collect and preserve a church's history. For more information, please contact the Society by calling 1-850-360-5179 or send an Email to Society2@floridabaptisthistory.org.