

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

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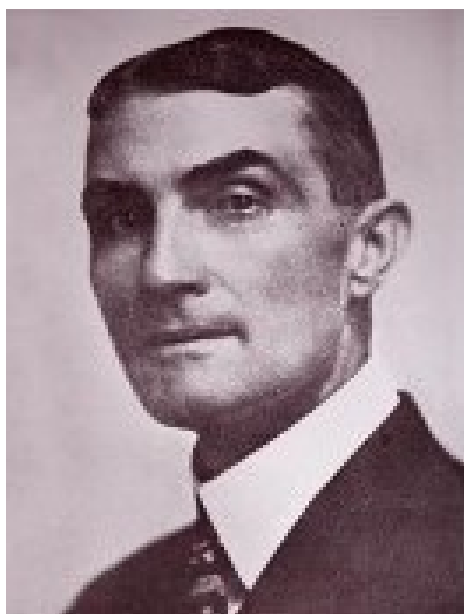
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LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the legacy forged by the people and events in Florida Baptist history. During 2024, the LEGACY's monthly issues will feature brief personal profiles of selected Florida Baptist men and women, who through their Christian commitment, have demonstrated Legacy Leadership in their ministry service on the Florida Baptist mission field. These persons, could join with the Apostle Paul, in declaring as "God's fellow workers" they have "laid a foundation" for God's kingdom on earth and upon which "someone else is building" [II Corinthians 3:9-10NIV].

**Charles B. Williams:
Pastor, Greek Scholar, Professor**

"I wanted the butcher, the cowboy, the cab driver, the housewife to have the New Testament in the English expressions they know and use every day," Charles B. Williams once said of his renown Biblical translation.

In the last several decades of the twentieth century, there were several inter-denominational committees that sought to re-translate the Bible, with the aim to produce a version that was in simple, easy to understand contemporary English. Among those efforts were: New International Version (NIV) (1984); New Jerusalem Bible (1985); New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) (1989); Contemporary English Bible (CEB) (1995); and The Modern English Version (MEV) (2014). [Gaye Strathearn](#) explained that "each of these versions was commissioned to some extent to replace the King James Bible" while being anchored to that seventeenth century translation.



However, a Florida pastor and professor, was an early pioneer in the translation of scripture into modern, contemporary English. **At the age of 68, and after 20 years of painstaking research and translating the Greek New Testament into contemporary English, Charles Bray Williams (b. 1869; d.1952) in 1937 released for publication a Bible portion titled, *The New Testament Translation In the Language of the People*.** [The original version was published by Moody Press. A 50th anniversary edition of the Williams translation was re-printed in 1987 by Holman Bible Publishers.]

Scripture in "Practical Everyday Words"

In the foreword to his New Testament translation, Williams said, "Our aim is to make this greatest book in the world readable and understandable by the plain people." He went on to describe how in his translation, "we have tried to use good, smooth English. Elsewhere we use simple everyday English which reproduces the

everyday Greek which the writers used.” As a result, Williams summarized, “we have used practical everyday words to replace many technical religious and theological terms.”

Biblical expositor Warren W. Wiersbe in his 1974 book *Which Bible Can you Trust* said, “For accuracy in translation of the Greek verbs [the Williams New Testament] stands head and shoulders above the others.”

Williams’ Early Years

Charles Bray Williams was born (January 15, 1869) and reared in Shiloh, N.C., where he made a profession of faith in Christ at the historic Shiloh Baptist Church (org. 1727). In 1890 the same church, recognizing Williams’ call to the ministry, ordained him. To prepare himself for ministry Charles Williams subsequently attended and graduated from: Wake Forest College (B.A., 1891); Crozer Theological Seminary (B.D., 1901); and the University of Chicago (M.A. 1908; PhD, 1909).

After graduating from Wake Forest College, he served as pastor of the Winton (N.C.) Baptist Church for five years. During this time, he met and married (1897) his first wife Alice Julia Owen. The couple had a son, Charles Weston (1899), and a daughter, Eunice Lois (1902).

Subsequently Williams served as pastor to churches in Pennsylvania, Texas, Tennessee, and North Carolina. Williams’ academic career began in 1905.

Transition from Pastor to Professor

While serving as a pastor of the Stephenville (Texas) Baptist Church, B. H. Carroll (b. 1843; d. 1914), founder of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, in 1905, invited Williams to teach Greek New Testament and interpretation at Baylor University located in Waco. **In 1910 when the fledgling Fort Worth seminary opened, Williams made the transition with Carroll, serving until 1919.** In addition to teaching Greek New Testament, Williams also served as the seminary’s first dean and librarian.

In 1919 Williams pursued a new career path by accepting the presidency of Howard College (now Samford University) in Birmingham, Alabama. However, during the next two years, he became embroiled in a controversial proposal to relocate the college campus. So great was the opposition to the relocation proposal, Williams abruptly resigned.

Subsequently, for the next four years (1921 – 1925), he taught at Mercer University. In 1925 his wife Alice died. Seeking to rebound from the grief and loneliness of Alice’s death, Williams allowed himself to commit to another marriage within one year. That relationship with Mrs. Lucile Adams Bruner lasted about seven years and in 1932 ended in divorce.

The Translator’s Decades

By now Williams was well into his teaching tenure at Tennessee’s Union University that had begun in 1925, and where he served as a professor of Greek and ethics. This final teaching service ended with his retirement at age 70 in 1939. **As had been his life-long practice, Williams served small churches while maintaining a full-time teaching career.** In 1933, while serving as a

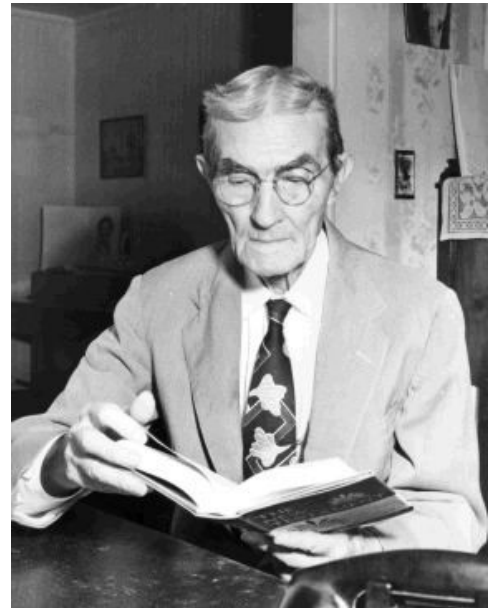
part-time pastor of a rural church in Friendship, Tenn., Williams met Edith Stallings, a young English teacher. They were married in 1934 and the following year the couple's only child Charlotte was born.

C.B. Williams, who undertook his in-depth study of the Greek New Testament while a Ph.D. student at the University of Chicago, was a lifelong student of Greek and Latin. **That love and interest in the ancient languages led to on-going endeavor on perfecting his translation of the Greek New Testament into readable and more understandable English.** The Williams' version – written in "the language of the people" – is not a word-for-word translation. Rather it's a translation of the thoughts of the original Biblical writers with a reproduction of their diction and style. During much of his career at Union University, Williams devoted his free time to finally complete in 1937 his 20-years effort translating the New Testament. He retired in 1939.

First “Working” Retirement in Florida

Following the completion of his most notable translation achievement, and a teaching career spanning thirty-five years, Williams relocated to retire in Tampa, Florida. There the family joined First Baptist Church. Unfortunately, during those years following the Great Depression, Williams did not have sufficient funds to just sit in the sunshine and enjoy his old age retirement. **His “working retirement” – lasting from 1939 to 1941 – required doing pulpit supply in churches all over the Tampa Bay and the Central Florida gulf coast areas.**

For at least one year he taught at the Florida Bible Institute at Tampa (now Trinity Bible College in Dunedin) and, according to his daughter Charlotte Williams Sprawls, Williams taught a young student named Billy Graham. Interestingly, years later, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association acquired rights to re-print portions of Williams' New Testament translation for use in pamphlets explaining sin and salvation through Jesus Christ.



Following his three-year effort at a “working retirement” and the coming of World War II, the Williams family moved to North Carolina where he served as a pastor.

A Return to Florida

In the summer of 1946, following the end of World War II, Williams at age 77 decided to retire again.

On that occasion, he and Edith moved to the Central Florida village of Pierson just north of Deland. **Williams served as a guest lecturer and part-time professor at Stetson University.** In 1948 the family moved to Lakeland, where his spouse, Edith Stallings Williams, secured a better paying teaching job.

Given his teaching background, **at age 80, Williams was enlisted to teach part-time, at the recently established Baptist Bible Institute (B.B.I.) in Lakeland [the forerunner to the Baptist University of Florida]. He and Edith taught at B.B.I. for about two years (1949-1950)** until heart problems forced Williams into bed rest. Although he spent a few months in a local nursing home he eventually was able to continue his recuperation at home.

The medical setback did not dampen his need to research and write a few hours each day. In what became his final manuscript, titled *A Commentary on the Pauline Epistles*, **Williams continued writing until his May 4, 1952 death at age 83 in Lakeland, Florida.** The commentary, published posthumously by Moody Press in 1953, brought to 12 the number of books Williams wrote in his lifetime.

[RESOURCES: Charlotte Williams Sprawls, “Charles Bray Williams: Greek Scholar, Professor, Writer, Pastor and Preacher 1869-1952, Translator of *The New Testament In the Language of the People*,” a monograph, 2008, by the Florida Baptist Historical Society; Charlotte W. Sprawls, “My Father – Charles Bray Williams,” *Baptist History and Heritage*, Spring 2007, No. 7; Charles B. Williams, *The New Testament in the Language of the People*, (reprint 1950); Gaye Strathearn, “Modern English Bible Translations,” in *The King James Bible and the Restoration*, ed. Kent P. Jackson, (2011); Robert Baker, “Charles Bray Williams,” *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*, Vol. II, (1958); J. S. Ramond, *Among Southern Baptists*, (1936).]