

History Of The Baptists In Virginia

By
ROBERT BAYLOR SEMPLE

Revised and Extended by
G. W. Beale

With an Introduction by
Dr. Joe M. King
Department of Religion, Furman University



ROBERT BAYLOR SEMPLE.

[Reproduced from an oil portrait in possession of the Library of Richmond College.]

CHURCH HISTORY RESEARCH AND ARCHIVES
Lafayette, Tennessee
1976

people were greatly astonished, having never seen things on this wise before. Many mocked, but, the power of God attending them, many also trembled. In process of time some of the natives became converts, and bowed obedience to the Redeemer's sceptre. These, uniting their labors with the chosen band, a powerful and extensive work broke out. From sixteen, Sandy Creek church soon swelled to six hundred and six members, so mightily grew the work of God!

Daniel Marshall, though not possessed of great talents, was indefatigable in his endeavors. He sallied out into the adjacent neighborhoods and planted the Redeemer's standard in many of the strongholds of Satan. At Abbott's Creek, about thirty miles from Sandy Creek, the Gospel prospered so largely that they petitioned the mother church for a constitution and for the ordination of Mr. Marshall as their pastor. Mr. Marshall accepted the call and went to live among them. His ordination, however, was a matter of some difficulty. It required a plurality of elders to constitute a presbytery; Mr. Stearns was the only ordained minister among them. In this dilemma they were informed that there were some Regular Baptist preachers living on Pedee. To one of these Mr. Stearns applied, and requested him to assist him in the ordination of Mr. Marshall. This request he sternly refused, declaring that he held no fellowship with Stearns's party; that he believed them to be a disorderly set, suffering women to pray in public and permitting every ignorant man to preach that chose; that they encouraged noise and confusion in their meetings. Application was then made to Mr. Henry Ledbetter, who lived somewhere in the Southern States, and who was a brother-in-law of Mr. Marshall. He and Mr. Stearns ordained

Mr. Marshall to the care of this new church. The work of grace continued to spread, and several preachers were raised in North Carolina. Among others was James Read,* who was afterwards very successful in Virginia. When he first began to preach he was entirely illiterate, not knowing how to read or write. His wife became his instructor, and he soon acquired learning sufficient to enable him to read the Scriptures.

Into the parts of Virginia adjacent to the residence of this religious colony the Gospel had been quickly carried by Mr. Marshall. He had baptized several in some of his first visits. Among them was Dutton Lane,† who shortly after his baptism began to preach. A revival succeeded, and Mr. Marshall at one time baptized forty-two persons. In August, 1760, a church was constituted under the pastoral care of Rev. Dutton Lane. This was the first Separate Baptist church in Virginia, and, in some sense, the mother of all the rest. The church prospered under the ministry of Mr. Lane, aided by the occasional visits of Mr. Marshall and Mr. Stearns. They endured much persecution; but God prospered them and delivered them out of the hands of all their enemies.

Soon after Mr. Lane's conversion the power of God was effectual in the conversion of Samuel Harriss, a man of great distinction in those parts. Besides being Burgess of the county and colonel of the militia, he held sev-

* Elder Read's labors were highly blessed in the lower part of Mecklenburg county, where he was instrumental in the establishment of Buffalo church, which he served for some years as pastor. He died in 1788, aged seventy-two years. A sketch of his life appears in Taylor's *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, first series, page 26.

† Dutton Lane came to Virginia from the vicinity of Baltimore, where he was born, November 7, 1732. He was baptized by Shubal Stearns in 1758. A sketch of him may be found in *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, first series, page 25.

deed, from the account given by himself, we must either doubt his veracity or admit that his impressions were supernatural.* He declares that respecting his preaching in Virginia, for many weeks he had no rest in his spirit. Asleep or awake, he felt his soul earnestly impressed with strong desires to come to Virginia to preach the Gospel. In his dreams he thought that God would often show him large congregations assembled to hear preaching. He was sometimes heard by his family to cry out in his sleep, *O Virginia, Virginia, Virginia!* Mr. Graves, a member of his church, a good man, discovering his anxiety, and believing his impressions to be from God, offered to accompany him. Just as they were fixing to come off, Mr. Harriss and the three messengers mentioned above came for him to go with them. The circumstances so much resemble Peter's call from Joppa to Casarea, that we can hardly for a moment hesitate in placing implicit confidence in its being a contrivance of divine wisdom.

Mr. Read agreed to go without much hesitation. One of the messengers from Spotsylvania went on to appoint meetings on the way. The two preachers, after filling up some appointments in their own parts, pursued their contemplated journey, accompanied by Mr. Graves and the other two. In about a fortnight they arrived in Orange, within the bounds of Blue Run church as it now stands. When they came in sight and saw a very large congregation they were greatly affected. After a few minutes of prayer and reflection, they recovered their courage and entered upon their great work. They preached with much effect on that day. The next day they preached at Elijah Craig's, where a vast crowd attended. D. Thomas and John Garrard, both preachers

* In a manuscript furnished from his own hand.—*Author's note.*

of the Regular order, were at this meeting. The ministers on both sides seemed desirous to unite, but the people were against it, the larger part siding with the *Separates*. As they could not unite, both parties held meetings the next day, being Sabbath, but a small distance from each other. Baptism was administered by both. These things widened the breach. Messrs. Read and Harriss, however, continued their ministrations. Mr. Read baptized nineteen the first day and more on the days following. They went through Spotsylvania into the upper parts of Caroline, Hanover and Goochland counties, sowing the seed of grace and peace in many places. So much were they inspirited by these meetings that they made appointments to come again the next year. In their second visit they were accompanied by the Rev. Dutton Lane, who assisted them in constituting and organizing the first *Separate Baptist Church** between the Rappahannock and James rivers. This took place on the 20th of November, 1767. The church was called *Upper Spotsylvania*, and consisted of twenty-five members, including all the *Separate Baptists* north of James river. This was a mother to many other churches.

Read and Harriss continued to visit these parts for about three years with wonderful effect. In one of their visits they baptized seventy-five at one time, and in the course of one of their journeys, which generally lasted several weeks, they baptized upwards of two hundred. It was not uncommon at their great meetings for many hundreds of men to camp on the ground, in order to be present the next day. The night meetings, through the great work of God, continued very late. The minis-

* This church sometimes confounded by writers with Lower Spotsylvania, like many others of our early churches, came soon to be called after its pastor, "Craig's"—a title which it still bears.

CHAPTER XXI.

HISTORY OF THE STRAWBERRY ASSOCIATION, INCLUDING
THE SKETCHES OF THE CHURCHES.

It appears from the most authentic documents, that this Association was constituted previous to the dissolution of the General Association, and about the year 1776. For, at a meeting of a General Association in the year 1782, as appears from the minutes, the Strawberry Association corresponded. The entry is made in the following words, viz., "Robert Stockton, a messenger from the Strawberry Association with a letter, was admitted to his seat." And again, towards the close of the minutes, is the following entry: "The clerk is directed to write a letter to the Strawberry Association in answer to theirs, with a copy of our proceedings."

The first laborers in the ministry in this district appear to have been the two Murphers, viz., William and Joseph, Samuel Harriss and Dutton Lane. Soon after the rise of the Baptists in these parts there were several preachers called to the work, the most distinguished and the most useful of whom was Robert Stockton. Through the indefatigable labors of him and others the cause of religion flourished to a considerable extent. The churches from the bounds of this Association met in the General Association until the division in 1776, after which they probably continued as an independent Association and corresponded with the General Association only by messengers sent from the Association.

[340]

When this district first became independent it must have had very few churches, for in 1787 there were only eleven churches and ten ordained preachers. From 1787 to 1793 the increase both of churches and preachers was very great; for, after striking off the New River District, there remained sixteen ordained ministers in Strawberry. In 1798, after Mayo was taken off, there remained twelve churches and eight ordained preachers. In 1808 they had twenty-four churches and sixteen ordained preachers. From which it appears they just doubled their number, both of preachers and churches, in ten years.

While Mr. Stockton was among them he generally acted as moderator. Of late years that office falls sometimes to one and sometimes to another. Richard Stockton is at present their standing clerk.

This Association, when first constituted, included all the churches in Virginia on the south side of James river and above the upper line of Roanoke (then Middle District). When New River was taken off, it was agreed that the Blue Ridge should be the dividing line between that and Strawberry. When Mayo was taken off, it was agreed that the boundary between that and Strawberry should be as follows, viz.: "Beginning at Elder Stephen's church, leaving it on the south side; thence to Smith's river at the mouth of Beaver creek; thence up the said river to the Tarrarat mountain." They have not printed their minutes of late years. This circumstance, added to some other causes, prevented our obtaining as full documents as were necessary in order to give as perfect a relation of her proceedings as of other Associations. The proceedings of the Association, however, as far as we can learn, have been regular and peaceable. We must now proceed to the sketches of churches, beginning with