

The Separate Baptist Revival  
*And Its Influence in the South*

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The Separate Baptists took their origin in Connecticut. Valentine Wightman was a grandson of Edward Wightman, the last man burned at the stake in England in 1612. Valentine Wightman was born in 1681 and raised in Rhode Island. He was saved and became a member of the North Kingstown Baptist Church. In 1705, he moved to Groton Connecticut and founded the first Baptist church in that state. He pastored there for 42 years and was succeeded by his son, Timothy Wightman. In 1743, Valentine Wightman and his church began a mission church at North Stonington Connecticut. Waitt Palmer was the first pastor. It was just at this time that the Great Awakening had come to prominence. In Tolland Connecticut in 1745 a Congregationalist named Shubal Stearns, under the influence of the Great Awakening, withdrew from his church and organized a Separate Congregational Church. By 1751, he became convinced, by contact with Waitt Palmer, that infant baptism was not scriptural and became a Baptist. Palmer baptized Stearns at night in the Willamantic River because of great opposition to his views. He then organized a Baptist church in Tolland.

Before Stearns was saved Daniel Marshall had been saved in 1726 at age 20, before Jonathan Edwards' revival of 1736 and before the appearance in 1740 of George Whitfield, and served as a deacon for 20 years in a Congregational Church in Windsor, Connecticut. But by 1744, he had made himself "odious" to that church because he had become opposed to infant baptism. By 1750, before Stearns was baptized, Marshall was probably attending a Baptist church in Windsor but had not been immersed for lack of a minister to administer the ordinance. In 1744, Marshall's first wife died in childbirth and, at a graveside service, the Congregational minister and his people left and dispersed, so that Marshall had to bury his wife himself. In 1747, Marshall married Martha Stearns, a sister of Shubal Stearns.

Because of Congregational opposition to Baptists, Marshall decided in 1754 to become a missionary to the Mohawk tribe of Indians in New York. But the French and Indian War made his labors here impossible, and he moved to Opequon, near

Winchester, VA. He and his family joined Mill Creek Baptist Church where the pastor, Samuel Heaton, baptized Marshall. A warm, old-fashioned revival broke out and Marshall was soon licensed to preach.

In the Fall of 1754, Stearns and his family and five couples related to him by blood or marriage, left Tolland and joined Marshall at Cacapon Creek 30 miles west of Winchester, where they built shelters and began to preach. This area was also unsafe because of hostile Indians, and in June of 1755 Stearns received a letter from North Carolina from some New England friends who had gone there. They told of a need for preaching and an eagerness to hear it.

Stearns, Marshall, and their families, 16 people in all, left Cacapon and traveled down the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road through the Shenandoah Valley. In Virginia and the Carolinas, it was actually only a trail through the wilderness and an Indian trading path. In Roanoke County, VA, they went through a gap in the Blue Ridge into Franklin County. From here, they traveled the trail, close to the present U.S. Highway 220, until they came to Sandy Creek, near Liberty, in Randolph County, North Carolina. Here they acquired land, built homes, and organized Sandy Creek Separate Baptist Church on November 22, 1755.

The Separate Baptists were dedicated to the same old time religion that has characterized the Greer Baptist Campmeeting and Pelham and Tabernacle Baptist Churches. They preached a whosoever will gospel with strong gestures and tears and altar calls during which the preachers left the platform and went through the congregation exhorting sinners to come forward to be saved. They preached the new birth just as we do. The entire congregation (there were no choirs or special songs) sang the gospel in folk tunes such as Amazing Grace was later set to. They rattled the rafters with their songs and were free to testify in church, to say "amen" or "glory," and to run or shout if they were moved by the Holy Ghost. One of the reasons the Separate Baptists kept clear of the Regular and Particular Baptists was that these other Baptists

held more "orderly" or "dignified" services. But a few Regular Baptists, such as the Chappawomsick Church in Virginia, pastored by Davis Thomas and Daniel Fristoe, also got in on the "new light" revival and held services that were much like those of the Separates. The other reason the Separate Baptists kept that name until after the American Revolution was their obedience to 2 Corinthians 6:17: "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you."

Within a space of 17 years after its organization, Sandy Creek had planted 42 daughter churches, from which 125 preachers had been called. Within 50 years, it had 1000 daughter churches. Shubal Stearns organized the first daughter churches into the Sandy Creek Baptist Association. When Stearns died in 1771 his church had 606 members, and on his monument at Sandy Creek are the words:

On this site in November-December 1755 Rev. Shubal Stearns, his wife, and those who came with him, seven other families, sixteen souls in all, built their first meeting house where they administered the Lord's supper. "It is a mother church, nay a grandmother and a great grandmother. All the Separate Baptists sprang hence: not only eastward towards the sea, but westward towards the great river Mississippi, but northward to Virginia and southward to South Carolina and Georgia. The Word went forth from this Sion. And great was the company of them who published it in so much that her converts were as drops of morning dew."

The Baptist historian, Morgan Edwards of the Philadelphia Association, said of the Separate Baptists:

"I believe a preternatural and invisible hand works in the assemblies of the Separate Baptists, bearing down the human mind, as was the case in primitive churches."

Daniel Marshall organized Abbot's Creek Baptist Church in what is now Winston-Salem and was ordained there. He also organized Horn's Creek and Big Stephen's Creek near Edgefield, SC and Kiokee Baptist Church in Appling, Georgia, near Augusta. A convert of Stearns, Philip Mulkey, organized Fairforest Baptist Church near Union, SC, the first Baptist church in upstate South Carolina. Just before Stearns' death, in 1771, the Sandy Creek Association was divided into the Broad River Association in North Carolina, the Congaree Association in South Carolina, and the Virginia Association.

The Battle of Alamance took place May 16, 1771. Here the Regulators, mostly Baptists with some Quakers, were attempting to regulate the behavior of Governor William Tryon and his appointed agents who ruled the colony of North Carolina. The state church of the colony was the Episcopalian church. Tryon had imposed unjust taxation on the frontier settlers. The officials of the state were corrupt enough to pocket a large portion of the excessive taxes they collected. There was a 10 to 1 under representation, per capita, of the frontier counties in the legislature at New Bern. The government regarded Baptists and Quakers as enemies of Anglican order and, because of the success of their evangelism, a hindrance to the growth of the Episcopal Church. The frontier regulators organized resistance to these injustices and confronted Tryon's select militia, which was mostly Presbyterian and Episcopal, at Alamance Battleground, not far from Sandy Creek. Tryon's militia attacked the poorly armed and poorly led Regulators and defeated them. After the battle, Tryon hanged 12 of the Regulators and laid waste to many Baptist plantations in the area. Sandy Creek dropped from 606 members to 14 within a year of the battle. But in the providence of God, the Baptists were spread by this defeat to Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, and to what is now Tennessee.

The majority of the Sandy Creek refugees went to the junction of the Watauga and Holston rivers near Gray, Tennessee and there established Buffalo Ridge Baptist Church, formally constituted in 1778, the first church in Tennessee. Its first pastor was Tidence

Lane. Many relatives and descendants of these refugees from Sandy Creek became "Overmountain Men" who left their families exposed to Indian attack and came, 1040 strong, over the Blue Ridge Mountains to lead the effort which whipped Patrick Ferguson's British and Tories at the Battle of Kings Mountain in 1780, just 9 years after Alamance. Tidence Lane and 9 of his sons were present at Kings Mountain. They exacted just revenge for the Baptist defeat at Alamance. There were 1040 Overmountain Men of a total of 1800 American soldiers. They made the difference with their long rifles, their ability to shoot, and their use of tactics borrowed in battles with the Indians. Kings Mountain was the turning point of the Revolutionary War in the South.

Many North Carolina Baptists fled to Virginia. Samuel Harris, the "apostle of Virginia," Dutton Lane, John Waller, and Lewis and Elijah Craig were prominent among them. Harris was baptized by Daniel Marshall at Dan River Baptist Church. In 1773, there were 34 Baptist churches and 3195 members in Virginia. In 1774, there were 51 churches and 3954 members. In 1775, the Baptists in Virginia sent a notice to the state convention, a revolutionary legislature which was considering independence from England, and offered to allow Baptists to enlist in the colonial army and to allow Baptist ministers to serve as chaplains. By 1783 at the close of the Revolution, there were 10,000 Baptists in Virginia, mostly Separate Baptist. In 1790, when the last colony to ratify, Rhode Island, accepted the Constitution, there were 65,233 Baptists in the 13 states, and 35,324 of these were in the South.

Many Baptist preachers, Samuel Harris, John Waller, Elijah Craig, and others, were imprisoned or harmed bodily by the officials of Virginia, where the state church was Episcopal. Baptists in Virginia refused to accept licenses to preach from the Episcopal government. Patrick Henry rode 60 miles to defend Lewis and Joseph Craig and Aaron Bledsoe, who were imprisoned for preaching without a license. He said to the court:

"From that period, when our fathers left the land of their nativity for settlement in these American

wilds, for liberty, for civil and religious liberty, for liberty of conscience, to worship their Creator according to their conceptions of Heaven's revealed will, from the moment they placed foot on the American continent, and in deeply imbedded forests sought an asylum from persecution and tyranny, from that moment despotism was crushed; for fetters of darkness were broken, and Heaven decreed that man should be free-free to worship God according to the Bible. Were it not for this, in vain have been the efforts and sacrifices of the colonists; in vain were all their sufferings and bloodshed to subjugate this new world, if we, their offspring, must still be oppressed and persecuted.

But may it please your worships, permit me to inquire once more, for what are these men about to be tried? This paper says 'for preaching the Gospel of the Son of God.' Great God! For preaching the Gospel of the Savior to Adam's fallen race. What law have they violated?"

The men were set free.

Elijah Craig was imprisoned in Orange County, VA in 1768 but simply kept preaching out through the bars of his cell, attracting large crowds. James Madison, then a boy, and his father heard imprisoned Baptists preaching from the jail windows. This is confirmed in an article from the Annual Report of the American Historical Society for 1901, written by Gaillard Hunt of the U. S. Department of State. Madison was moved by hearing Elijah Craig, became a proponent of religious liberty, and later introduced the Bill of Rights. The First Amendment prohibited Congress from establishing an official state church.

John Leland came from western Massachusetts, first to South Carolina and then to Virginia, was ordained in 1777, and established several Baptist churches. He knew Elijah Craig and John Waller and Samuel Harris and was a neighbor of James

Madison in Orange County. Madison, more than any other man, was responsible for the Constitution. The Baptists of Virginia, including Leland, were opposed to ratification of the Constitution without a Bill of Rights, which would specifically limit the powers of the central government. Leland was a candidate from Orange County for election to the state convention, which would debate, and vote on ratification. If he had been elected, and it appeared that he would be, he and Patrick Henry, who was also opposed, might have prevented ratification by Virginia. This would have had serious consequences for the formation of a stable and lasting central U. S. government, which would have been so disjointed without Virginia that there would have been no union. Many of the first and greatest leaders of the country, Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Patrick Henry, and George Mason, were from Virginia. Jefferson was the author of the Virginia Statute for Religious Liberty.

In the providence of God, James Madison got a letter from Joseph Spencer in March, 1788 telling him that Leland was likely to win election as a delegate from Orange County. He asked Madison to visit Leland to discuss the election. Madison came to John Leland's home on the eve of the election, and Leland obtained a promise from Madison that a Bill of Rights, including the first amendment, which prevented the establishment of an official state church in this country, would be introduced in the First Congress. Leland was satisfied and reassured and so withdrew from the election and advised his Baptist constituents in Orange County to vote for Madison. This news may well have passed to other Virginia counties. Madison and Gordon won election from Orange County. Two delegates from each county were chosen for the state convention. The convention ratified the constitution by 187 to 168, a thin margin of 19 votes out of 355 cast. If Leland had been there with Patrick Henry to argue against ratification, the vote might have been against. I believe Leland would have prayed about his withdrawal, perhaps he prayed at the close of his meeting with Madison. I believe he was led of the Lord to withdraw, having peace in his heart that there would be a Bill of Rights.

There are two witnesses who confirm that such a meeting took place. One was George Nixon Briggs, a Baptist and governor of Massachusetts, who spoke with Leland in 1837 about the matter after Leland had retired to Massachusetts, and the other was John Strode Barbour, a native of Orange County. These witnesses are named in an article by Samuel Chiles Mitchell, Professor at the University of Richmond, which appeared in the Religious Herald of October 18, 1934. This paper was published for years in Richmond in association with the University of Richmond, which was the Baptist School for Virginia. The article is entitled "JAMES MADISON AND HIS CO-WORKER, JOHN LELAND." Mr. Mitchell's article was a transcript of an address he gave at the Bicentennial of Orange County on September 26, 1934 in the Grove at Gum Spring on the site of John Leland's home. The meeting of Briggs and Leland is also recounted in the biography of Leland in the Annals of the American Pulpit. A stone monument with a bronze bust of Leland was placed at Gum Spring by the Sons of the American Revolution of Berkshire County, Massachusetts, the home of John Leland. The Gum Spring monument is on Virginia State Highway 20, a few miles Northeast of Charlottesville, not far from Jefferson's home at Monticello and even closer to Madison's home, Montpelier.

The Separate Baptist revival, in which Shubal Stearns and Daniel Marshall served so faithfully, had as one of its consequences the winning of many converts in Virginia and the establishment of many Baptist churches. Without it those relatives of Jefferson who were Baptist, and taught him the purest form of democracy he had ever seen, might not have inspired him, James Madison would not have been affected by hearing the unjustly imprisoned Elijah Craig preach out the windows of the Orange County jail, and John Leland might not have been able to exert such an important influence on the Bill of Rights.

May God grant that our independent Baptist churches, which are slowly forgetting their heritage and getting away from old time religion, going after strange new contemporary ways, dropping the name Baptist for community church or even calling themselves

worship centers, will think on these things and honour the landmarks their Separate Baptist fathers have set.

Research by James H. Sightler, M.D. for Sightler Publications. This summary of the story of the Separate Baptists is taken from Dr. Sightler's course in Baptist History at Tabernacle Baptist College, where he has taught this subject since 1990. He also gave a series of lectures on the history of Baptists, including the Separates, at Carolina Bible College in Concord, NC on May 22-23, 1997 and on March 4-5, 1999.

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