

# HISTORY OF BAPTISTS IN TENNESSEE

**WILLIAM CATHCART**  
(1826-1908)

Tennessee is naturally divided into three sections by the Cumberland Mountains and the Tennessee River, both of which cross the State north and south, known as East, Middle, and West Tennessee, and in this order they were originally settled. The people in these divisions have always been as distinct in their pursuits and interests, and in their social and religious intercourse, as if they lived in different and distant States. In sketching the history of the Baptists it will therefore in some measure be necessary to follow this order, though sometimes their proceedings will appear blended.

## EAST TENNESSEE

Some of the northeastern counties of this section began to be occupied previous to 1770, and among the settlers there were some Baptists, emigrants from North Carolina and Virginia. The country at this time was a wilderness infested with wild beasts, and the settlers were subject to murderous incursions from hostile Indians. Though the Baptists do not seem to have been numerous, they were among the first, if not the first, to proclaim the gospel in Tennessee territory.

In 1781, they had six organized churches holding associated relations with an Association in North Carolina. These, with one or two others, were formed into the Holston Association in 1786. Among the pioneer ministers at this time in the country, and through whose labors the Baptist denomination was established, may be mentioned James Keel, Thomas Murrell, Matthew Talbot, Isaac Barton, William Murphy, and John Chastine from Virginia, and Tidence Lane, Jonathan Mulky, and William Reno from North Carolina. These ministers brought with them many of their brethren, and in one or more instances regular organ-

ized churches.

They generally settled on farms and made their support by tilling



the soil or teaching school, and preached on Sundays or at night  
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# Tennessee Baptists

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in private houses and in school-houses, or in crude buildings improvised for worship, and sometimes under the shade of trees. They were pious, thoroughly read in the Scriptures, and gave evidence that "they had been with Jesus." They lived among the people who heard their messages gladly, and the pleasure of the Lord prospered in their hands.

According to Asplund's "Register" for 1790, the Holston Association had a membership of 889 members, and by the beginning of the next decade they had increased to 37 churches and 2,500 members, keeping pace with the increasing population of the country. In 1802 the Tennessee Association was formed in a central territory immediately surrounding Knoxville, the capital of the new State. Some of the ministers connected with this organization were Duke Kimbrough, Elijah Rogers, Joshua Frost, Amos Hardin, Daniel Layman, William Bellew.

In 1817 it sent out a colony of twelve churches and as many ministers to form the Powell's Valley Association. And again, in 1822 another colony east of the Tennessee River was organized of ten churches, which increased its membership and enlarged its territory until 1830, when it divided and formed the Sweet Water Association, with 17 churches and 1,100 members.

The year 1833 may be regarded as the beginning of a new era in the history and progress of the Baptists of East Tennessee, and the whole state as well. Up to this time they had made a commendable progress, having maintained internal harmony, and kept well up with the growth of the population; but the labor of evangelizing had been voluntarily performed by the ministry at their own convenience and expense. An extensive and general revival of religion, which began about this time and

suggested the importance of a united and reorganized plan for supplying the destitute with the gospel, and extending the influence of their denominational principles.

The initiative of an organization was taken in Middle Tennessee by Elders Garner McConnico, James Whitsitt, and Peter S. Gayle, who called a meeting at Mill Creek, near Nashville, in October, 1833, and organized a Baptist State Convention. Conforming to the peculiar formation of the State, the Convention appointed three boards to conduct its affairs, one in each division of the State. This plan continued for only a year or two, when it was found impracticable

to unite the churches on a General Convention, when the East Tennessee brethren withdrew and organized the General Association of East Tennessee.

The leading ministers engaged in this enterprise were Samuel Love, James Kennon, Elijah Rogers, Charles and Richard H. Taliaferro, Robert Sneed, and William Bellew. This movement, while it caused the secession of a few thousands of anti-mission Baptists, imparted new life to the great body of the churches, and inspired the ministry with a fresh zeal, which gave increased momentum to denominational progress.

In 1847, the Baptists in East Tennessee had increased to 13,390, and 6,573 anti-mission, or those who stood aloof from the General Association, making a Baptist population of 19,963. In 1858 they had increased to 19,103 regulars, and supposing the anti-missionaries to have maintained their strength of 6,573, to an aggregate of 5,676. In 1880, their reports give about 45,000 regular white Baptists, 2,000 colored, and 5,000 anti-mission, or a fraction over 52,000 in East Tennessee. At present the Baptists are numerically much the largest denomination in this section of the State. Although the General Association has contributed much moral, and some pecuniary, support in producing these results, they are due largely to the zeal and voluntary labor of ministers, and to missions supported by Associations.

In 1850 a college was chartered under the patronage of the General Association, known at present as Carson College, located in a beautiful and fertile valley in Jefferson County, near the town of Mossy Creek, on the East Tennessee and Virginia Railroad. It received its name from Hon. James H. Carson, who bequeathed to it \$15,000, the interest of which was to be used in the education of young ministers. Mr. Carson was one of the founders of the institution.

but has maintained its existence for thirty years from the tuition fees, with a regular faculty of four professors. It has trained in whole or in part nearly one hundred young men for the ministry, and has done much in the general cause of education. Eld. N. B. Gofforth is its popular president. There is a female College at Bristol, Eld. D. C. Webster president, which is doing a good work in the education of young ladies. There is also a private institution at Tazewell under the direction of Eld. Manard, that is accomplishing much in the cause of education among the Baptists. A religious paper, THE BAPTIST BEACON, is published at Knoxville, and supported chiefly by the Baptists of this section.

## MIDDLE AND WEST TENNESSEE

The middle division of the State began to be settled in 1780, and, as in the eastern division, among its pioneers there were Baptists and Baptist ministers. The first church known to have been formed was in 1786, on Red River, by Eld. Joseph Grammer, and in 1791 another was founded on the Sulphur Fork of the same river by Eld. Ambrose Dudley and John Taylor, who visited this region as missionaries from Kentucky. The first Association was organized in 1796; but, owing to internal difficulties which sprang up, it was in a few years dissolved, and in 1803 the Cumberland Association was instituted partly of some of its churches. This latter community had for many years considerable prosperity and had also some of the best churches and ablest ministers in the country; but it is now only a small, declining, anti-mission body, a very different organization from the Cumberland Association, with which are connected three of the Nashville churches and the church in Clarksville, of which Eld. A. D. Sears (Continued on page 4, column 3)

Eph. 2:10.

### VERSE 5

"Ye are the children of light, and the children of the day." "What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought, since Jesus came into my heart." "Old things are passed away; behold all things are become new." We are "His workmanship," and He has put light in our houses. He "hath shined in our hearts." His Son has arisen in our sky and we are walking in the light (Eph. 5:8).

"We are not of the night, nor of darkness." When sin entered the universe, it covered the spiritual sun and the world was plunged into total darkness. "The darkness of this world" (Eph. 6:12; Lk. 22:53). Therefore the ungodly are said to be "darkness," and to have the works of darkness, but God's people are not of the world (John 17:16). Both what we are, (light) and what we are not, (not of the night) are reasons for praise and thanksgiving.

### VERSE 6

"Therefore let us not sleep." In Matthew 25:5 we have the expression, "while the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept." In the Garden of Gethsemane after Jesus prayed, He came back and found His disciples sleeping and He asked the question, "What, could ye not watch with Me one hour?"

"As do others." It is to be expected of the world, but we are not to be conformed to this "world" (Rom. 12:2). We are not to look like the world, talk like the world, or walk like the world.

"But let us watch and be sober." How we need to be alert both in connection with the coming of Christ and with the inroads of sin into our own lives and into the churches. How easy it is to be lulled to sleep by the Devil's lullabies; to be blinded by his bright lights of sin; to be distracted by his counterfeits. Therefore we need to "watch unto prayer."

### VERSE 7

"For they that sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night." We are looking at the contrast not merely

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ommenced the publication of THE BAPTIST, which he edited many years, by which he did much in diffusing information, promoting harmony, and furthering the benevolent work of the Convention. The paper thus started still exists, and has had a wide circulation for thirty years, with Eld. J. R. Graves as its editor and proprietor. But it has been removed from Nashville to Memphis, on the western border of the State, and THE BAPTIST REFLECTOR has taken its place at Nashville, with Elds. J. B. Chevis and R. B. Womack as editors and proprietors.

East and West Tennessee having withdrawn from the Convention and formed independent organizations, the Middle Tennessee brethren discontinued the name and substituted for it General Association of Middle Tennessee, and afterwards North Alabama was added. In addition to its evangelical work, the General Association, with the cooperation of the other divisions of the State, established at Murfreesborough Union University, an institution of a high order, and, until wrecked by the exigencies of the civil war, one of the most prosperous denominational institutions of learning in the Southwest. Elder J. H. Eaton had been its popular president from its foundation until his death, a few years before the war, and Eld. J. M. Pendleton, now of Upland, Pa., its excellent theological professor.

After the war the institution was reorganized, and it struggled on for existence for several years, with sunshine and clouds alternately, until it was forced to suspend. A Convention of Baptists of the State was called at Murfreesborough in 1873 to consider what should be done. The result which followed the proceedings of that Convention was its final suspension, and the establishment of the Southwestern Baptist University, at Jackson, in the western part of the State, which has now been in

successful operation for five years. It has a medical department in Memphis. Middle Tennessee Baptists have the Mary Sharpe Female College, at Winchester, which has had for twenty-five years unparalleled prosperity under the administration of Elder Z. C. Graves.

Though West Tennessee began to be settled in 1820, and Baptist churches and Associations were soon after formed, their progress is not marked with any special interest until about 1833. The West Tennessee Convention was formed in 1835, since which the denomination has made good progress, and has had some of the most liberal and progressive brethren in the State. Some of those who may be regarded as their ablest pioneer ministers, nearly all of whom have passed away, are Jerry Burns, Thomas Owen, P. S. Gayle, C. C. Conner, N. G. Smith, — Collins, George N. Young, J. M. Hart, and David Haliburton.

The West Tennessee Convention established the Brownsville Female College, which has done a good work in female education. In 1876 Middle and West Tennessee dissolved their separate organizations, and with some East Tennessee churches again formed a State Convention, which now gives hope of a successful union of the whole denomination in its missionary and educational interests.

The results of the hundred years of labor of the Baptists in the State may be given from official documents, with a few estimates, as follows: East Tennessee, 19 Associations and 45,000 members; Middle Tennessee, 10 Associations and 22,000 members; West Tennessee, 7 Associations and a fraction under 20,000 members; making in the State 87,000 regular Baptists. Besides these, there are estimated to be 8,000 anti-mission Baptists and 20,000 colored Baptists.

#### COLORED BAPTISTS

It is difficult to get correct statistics of the colored Baptists.

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There is an increase of intelligence in their preachers as they become educated in the common schools, access to which they now have all over the State. The excellent institution at Nashville under the direction of Eld. Phillips, established by the American Baptist Home Mission Society, is doing much to give them an educated ministry, the beneficial results of which are already visible. With their present progress, and their desire for improvement, their future, religiously and as citizens, may be regarded as decidedly hopeful. With judicious and intelligent leaders they will become a liberal and progressive people.

(THE BAPTIST ENCYCLOPEDIA, pp. 1140-1143, 1881 edition).

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is moderator.

In 1810, the Concord Association was formed, its territory embracing Nashville as its center. In 1812 there was a very general revival within its wide territory, and it had an increase of over 800 by baptism that year. Its prosperity continued until its territory was divided and the Salem formed, in 1822, with twenty-seven churches. Among the ministers who had borne the heat and burden of the day up to this time may be mentioned Joseph Dorris, Daniel Brown, James Whitsitt, Garner McConnico, John Wiseman, Joshua Lester, John Bond, and Jesse Cox.

About the year 1824 the denomination, which had been harmonious and prosperous, began to meet with reverses from internal discord. The doctrine of election and the extent of the atonement became topics of bitter discussion, and resulted in a division of churches and Associations, and two non-affiliating bodies of Baptists; the seceding party were called Separate Baptists, who built up several flourishing Associa-

tions. The first of these divisions came Alexander Campbell and his so-called reformation. The church in Nashville, which had grown to be a large and flourishing community, with between three and four hundred members, had for its pastor Philip Fall, a talented and popular young pastor, who came under the influence of Mr. Campbell, embraced his sentiments, and carried with him the whole church except twelve or fifteen members, who adhered to the Baptist faith.

Mr. Campbell's influence was felt more or less throughout the denomination in this State, resulting in the loss of other ministers and members, and from bitter controversies gathering much of its force. This was followed in 1833 by the secession of the anti-mission party and renewed strife. But there was compensation for these last divisions in the new zeal inspired by the organization of the Baptist State Convention, and a reconciliation and reunion with the Separate party, who were quite as numerous and more intelligent and progressive than the anti-mission people.

The few brethren who, in the wreck of the church in Nashville, adhered to the Baptist faith reorganized, and had Eld. P. S. Gayle for their pastor, and began again to build up. Mr. Gayle resigning in 1833, Eld. R. B. C. Howell, of Virginia, was called to the pastorate, who with enthusiasm and zeal entered into his work, and with such success that within a few years the Baptists almost regained their lost ground; and from those faithful few, as the germ, the four flourishing churches in the city have grown up.

Mr. Howell also entered enthusiastically into the general interests of the denomination at large,