

## A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE MUD CREEK BAPTIST ASSOCIATION ON ITS SESQUICENTENNIAL ANNIVERSARY: 1871-2021

Thank you all for affording me this opportunity of addressing you with a brief commemoration of this Association's 150th anniversary. Though I may not be well known to most of you, I have deep ties to the Association, which I mention only in passing, but which give me a great deal of satisfaction in making this small contribution to the Association.

My affection for this association is bound up in the people of it; family, those I have known, those known by my parents and grandparents whose names I read with interest and reverence in the one hundred and fifty years of records. The lives of those old saints are the true history of the Mud Creek Baptist Association, and a true wondrous work of God.

My presentation is more commentary on a few formative events rather than an attempt at a comprehensive history of the Association. For the information contained in today's presentation I am indebted to Mr. W. B. Parsons, who wrote a history of the association through 1957; the *History of Mud Creek Church* by my father, Fred Kitchens, and the *History of Mud Creek Church* prepared by my wife, Jane, for the 175th Anniversary of Mud Creek Baptist Church, and to the wealth of information contained in the files of the Association.

Perhaps it is inevitable that those formative events arose out of conflict, for the Association was born in conflict and has been buffeted by them since. But in each conflict, we can see God working, and each storm weathered led to a brighter period in our history. I do want to make plain that these conflicts were over church polity, not core church doctrine.

A voluntary union of independent churches for mutual support, for mutual accountability, and for united endeavor in the Great Commission is an almost uniquely Baptist institution; and felt by Baptists, in general, to be the best, and most scriptural church polity. It is something the pioneers brought with them, and finding a wilderness, it was something they had liberty to build. Church founding in the wilderness was the first step in our history, forming an association was the inevitable second step towards a settled and civilized community.

Canaan Baptist Church was the mother church of most of the early Baptist churches in this area, and the Canaan Association the first association. Mud Creek Church was a mission church of Canaan, established in 1837. All the churches in the association were, at that time, frontier churches with similar problems and similar attitudes toward meeting those problems; and there seemed to be, based upon the scant records of those times, a wonderful fellowship between the churches.

But time, and rapid social, economic, and technological changes began to segregate the churches into urban and rural. Perhaps, ideally, such changes should not have affected church missions and relationships, but they did. Then too, the Landmark Controversy<sup>1</sup> was percolating throughout the south, and which would blow up the Association years later. Nevertheless, the Association weathered those early stresses only to be consumed in the greatest tragedy to afflict our country...to date: the Civil War.

There is no point in trying to describe the devastation of the war; a look at the rows of crosses in Arlington National Cemetery will give an impression of the battlefield losses; but a look in most any old rural cemetery at the numbers of short graves dated to the War and Reconstruction periods gives a better impression of it.

The Mud Creek Baptist Association was born in that tragic period. Mr. Parson's widely circulated history of the Association states of its founding:

"By the year 1870 Dr. Wood said, "The feeling in the Canaan Association had developed that the urban churches and those of the rural districts did not have a common interest." The statement meant that the churches in rural districts did not believe in missions and education. Therefore, in the same year, the following churches were dismissed at their own request from the Canaan Association: Roupes Valley, Pleasant Grove (Tusc. Co.), Mud Creek, and Big Creek.

In 1871, the other churches in the western part of Jefferson County, the eastern section of Tuscaloosa County and the southern part of Walker County withdrew to form a new association."

That new association met and formed at Mud Creek Church, which was said to be the "leading and strongest church in the new field." Although the new association did pass a resolution "*opposing missions, education, and Sunday Schools*" (of which I could not find a copy), I believe we need to look more closely at the context to properly place its founding in perspective, and not jump to the conclusion that it was primarily a Landmark association. It was only a few years after the close of the Civil War, and in the middle of the Reconstruction period. The rural south was just recovering from absolute destitution; money was tight, and feelings ran high against "Carpetbaggers". Jane delved into the times in her *History of Mud Creek Church*:

A brief history of the Reconstruction years by the Author may help explain the formation of the Mud Creek Association, and their resolution opposing missions, education, and Sunday Schools. The following information is taken from *The Southern Baptist Convention and Its People*, by Robert A. Baker.

During the Reconstruction years, 1865 to 1877, the American Baptist (Northern) Home Mission Society of New York, whose authority came

from the United States Senate, was in control of every aspect of missions and the publications for the southern churches, their Sunday Schools, and the education of their pastors. By using agents they collected mission funds of which approximately 50% went to administration costs. Many of the rural churches had a feeling of mistrust of the larger organizations. They severed relations with them and formed their own associations.

I believe we can see from that perspective that a repudiation of missions, education and Sunday Schools, *per se*, may not have been quite what they had in mind. That conclusion is supported by subsequent actions of the Association. Indeed, a hand written summary of the Oct. 26-28, 1872 meeting, not available at the time of Mr. Parson's History, records that they established committees on devotion, finance, nominations, Sunday School, and temperance.

A further description of that meeting records that the Constitution contained 19 Articles, the Rules of Decorum contained 16 Articles, and the Abstract of Principles contained 12 principles. Churches and pastors are listed as follows:

1st District (Jefferson County)  
Big Creek .....Elder J. M. Kent  
Mud Creek ... " " " "  
Black Warrior ... " " " "  
Prude's Creek ... Elder B. S. Thompson

2nd District (Tuscaloosa County)  
Big Hurricane ...no report  
Davis Creek ... Elder T. A. Norwood  
Pleasant Grove ... " " " "  
Hepzibah ... " " " "  
Mt. Carmel ... " " " "

A couple of things about this list are interesting to note. A majority of the churches in the Association were in the 2nd District which apparently was Tuscaloosa County. Later there would be a 3rd District with Walker County churches. More recently, we have been relegated to Jefferson County with the loss of many of those old faithful member churches.

Also, there seemed to be an acute shortage of pastors, with, presumably, services only one Sunday a month on a rotating basis. That arrangement was common among the churches for many years, often, in the earlier days, with the preachers walking between churches and staying with residents along the way. That shortage of preachers, especially educated preachers (evidence is that a good many of the early preachers and pastors were only semi-literate at best) could be a factor in the split. It was all very well for relatively well-off urban churches to promote an educated pastorate and Sunday Schools, but if poor and isolated churches couldn't get them, they couldn't get them. Then, too, it would have been unfair to true, dedicated, men of God who faithfully served these rural

areas to deprive them of their ministry because of lack of educational opportunity. A few words of explanation are in order here, about education and Sunday Schools.

One of the great and tragic divisions that plagued this country in its early years was the education gap. The Puritan ethic of the New England states and those areas later settled by their descendants put a high priority on public education. Almost as soon as the crops were planted and the churches planted, "common schools" were founded. In the aristocrat dominated south, however, common education was not encouraged. Private education turned out an elite class who ruled, politically and economically, by virtue of their superior education.

It was only after the Civil War and Reconstruction that public education became a 'common entitlement'. Sunday Schools in the mid-Nineteenth Century were not like our modern ones, they were designed to provide basic education to those who had no access to public schools; like in the south where there were few or none, and in the north for those who worked all day six days a week. God provided a day for them and a method for them to receive a basic education. We will see that development in the history of our Association.

I am going to skip ahead now to the 1875 Associational meeting with Davis Creek Church; the first meeting for which we have a complete report. There were seventeen churches in the Association by then, a majority with a full time pastor. Several things about this meeting shed light on the driving concerns of the Association, and go a long way to supporting a more favorable view of our founding.

There is a Resolution by the Centenary Committee: "That we, as Baptists of Alabama, feel it no less a patriotic, than a Christian duty and privilege, in common with the denomination throughout the United States to observe the approaching Centenary(1876), becoming alike to our patriotism and Christianity." To that end they pledged their financial support, quite a serious commitment only a decade after the devastation wrought by troops of that same United States.

The wounds of the Civil War were healing, America was becoming one nation again. On the national level, it was called "The era of good feeling." But there was still rancor about the denominational situation.

There was the report on Sunday Schools: "That the Scriptures be our only literature". This could very well be a rejection of denominational literature provided by the American Baptists, and/or by the non-denominational American Sunday School Union. The latter was a worthy organization that produced a huge volume of Christian oriented readers, spellers, math, history, geography, and other subject matter for Sunday Schools, but they would not have been sympathetic to the Confederate cause.

There was an even more pointed rejection in the Home and Foreign Missions report:

"We your committee, report and recommend that this Advisory Council advise the churches to adopt the scriptural plan of missionary operations, which is so plain that a wayfaring man, though, a fool, need not err therein; that instead of raising money in fairs, balls, suppers, lotteries, pledges, subscriptions, etc., to pay men to lord it over God's heritage by bossing those who are preaching the Gospel, that every member lay by him in store, upon the first day of the week, as the Lord has prospered him, and that they bestow their gifts upon the ministers who are actually preaching the Word. The Bible says if they minister unto us spiritually, we ought to minister unto them carnal things."

This seems a reaction by simple country folks to the temptation, and the pressure, of what they considered worldly, and therefore improper, ways of supporting mission work. It does not appear to me to be a denunciation of missions in general as was later the case with the "Landmark Movement". And it was not the last time Mud Creek Baptist Association decided to send mission contributions directly to the missionaries.

There also was a resolution "That an adequate endowment of Howard College, an institution that belongs to the Baptists of Alabama, which proposes to furnish to our youths the advantages of a through education, and most especially to young men preparing for the ministry, presents claims upon us, as a denomination, as worthy of being selected as the object to receive our benefactions." Such a conviction seems to me adequate proof that the Association did not oppose an educated ministry on principle.

By 1885, Mud Creek Baptist Association was getting really behind education, forming a board of trustees to establish a school in their district. The 1886 minutes record that they had funded an eight month school to instruct students "with all necessary instructions, together with Christian principles"; but had made no provision for the next term. The Report of the Committee on Education recommended "that this Association begin working at home to establish a permanent school in he bounds for the purpose of educating our children and our ministers who may desire to educate themselves in order to advance God's cause and Kingdom here on earth. Second, we further recommend that there be a permanent school established by this Association, and that said school be located at Oak Grove Church, as we deem it nearest the center of the Association, also a suitable and healthy location." It was established, and another school at Mud Creek Church followed.

A great change was happening in our part of Alabama; a change from agricultural to industrial dominance, and that called for better education. Coal and iron ore mines, and limestone quarries, coke oven batteries, iron foundries, steel mills, rail roads and other industrial works sprang up all over the district, creating new communities, and new churches which joined Mud Creek

Association. Already Birmingham and Bessemer had established public schools. Jefferson County, however, did not establish a school system until 1896, at which time they took over the Association's schools. So Mud Creek Association had the sacred responsibility of educating its children for several years and contributing to the establishment of a public school system for rural areas.

The Mud Creek Baptist Association met the social and economic challenges of those years, but theological issues were beginning to heat up, we can infer that from the change in the name of the Association in 1890 to The Mud Creek Missionary Baptist Association. Despite the best efforts to keep the lid on, it boiled over in 1915. The minutes of the 1914 meeting list 23 churches in the Association. There were ringing endorsements education, and of foreign missions, but notably ambiguous about co-operative efforts, and no mention of the Southern Baptist Conventions or boards.

When we arrive at the end of October, 1915, there were two Mud Creek Missionary Baptist Associations and even the records are confused. The meeting of October listed 24 churches in the Association, but 10 were not represented, possibly a factor in ensuing events. The minutes contain this resolution:

"Resolved, That the Mud Creek Association withdraw all support from the Southern Baptist Convention, the State Convention of Alabama and their boards, on the ground that the Convention and its work is unscriptural.

Liberty, Oak Grove and Mud Creek asked for letters of dismissal and they were granted."

On November 12 and 13, 1915 the dismissed churches and Parson's Chapel met at Mud Creek Church in a rival Association meeting. The Minutes of the proceedings state that: "The original Mud Creek Missionary Baptist Association met this day in its Forty-fourth Annual Session in the Church House of Mud Creek Church at 11: o'clock a.m. Brother M. K. Thornton preached the introductory sermon from Matt. 12:19". The same reports were given again from the committees, then it was resolved:

"Whereas, on the 14th day of October, 1915, a part of the Mud Creek Missionary Baptist Association passed a resolution separating themselves from the convention system of missionary work, which we have supported for these many years;

Whereas, We believe the organized is the best way and most progressive way of supporting the missionary movement.

Therefore be it resolved, That we, the Mud Creek, Oak Grove and Liberty Missionary Baptist Churches ignore the asking of letters of dismissal from that part of the Association that has departed from all the progressive movements pertaining to the spirit of missionary

work which we have maintained for several years. We believe it right to be missionaries in the broadest sense of the term.

We declare that the Landmark faction of the Mud Creek Missionary Baptist Association did on the 14th day of October, 1915, by adopting a resolution offered by one Verdo Norris, who was not a messenger to the Association, the legality of which act the Landmark faction did not question, separate themselves from the principles which we have supported or contended. Said resolution put a lock on the organized missionary work for all time to come. We denounce such reactionary movements as being detrimental to the missionary cause.

Therefore, upon the foregoing acts of Landmarkers we do hereby declare ourselves separated from them, and do further announce and continue as the (original) Mud Creek Missionary Baptist Association in her forty-fourth annual session.

Signed:  
D.W. Howton, A.L. Nichols, W.P. Parsons  
Committee on Resolutions

There were dual meetings for several years following, with most churches sitting on the sidelines for awhile then drifting back into one camp or the other. It was not until 1922 that full unity was restored in the Association, but not with all its earlier members. It can be said that the original Mud Creek Missionary Baptist faction triumphed in the end. But the Landmarkers were not entirely wrong, I think, and continuance with conventions and boards is still a voluntary matter for independent congregations to weigh, and should never be considered automatic and unconditional.

I am going to have to close now, although there is so much more I would like to add. Thank you all for your patience and attention. God Bless,

Bill Kitchens, Nov. 3, 2021

1. After considerable study, I decided that the Landmark Controversy is far too complex for me to understand fully, much less explain concisely. Opposition to "missions and education" is an obvious reference to it, but hardly a definition. It involved a reaction against theological liberalism, ecumenism, acceptance of baptism from non-Baptist churches, opposition to cooperative missionary efforts, and any encroachment on local church authority. It is sometimes called hyper-Calvinistic, and declared to protect the "authentic Baptist doctrines" by supporters, and to introduce 'alien theology' into Baptist doctrine by opponents. What is certain, is that it created hard feelings, split off many churches nationwide into new denominations, and almost destroyed the Mud Creek Baptist Association.