

The Great Revival of 1838-39  
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In the fall of 1838 when the Union Association of United Baptists met for only its fourth annual meeting at the Unity Meeting House in the Olney community of Pickens County, Alabama, the churches reported only 585 members, a dramatic loss to just more than half of the total reported the previous year. Of these, 146 were newly baptized and transfers from other churches. Another 63 were members in the three new congregations which were joining the association. Altogether, the Union association had only 15 member churches, down from 21 at the previous meeting.

This loss of churches and members was the consequence of a controversy regarding the formation, activity, and financial support of mission boards and benevolence institutions. Its theological basis was the Calvinistic doctrines of predestination and sovereign grace. This controversy was spreading across the Baptist movement in America. In the 1836 meeting of the association the issue was raised as to whether or not support of mission boards would be a “test” of fellowship; i.e., if a church contributed to a mission board, it could not be a member of the association. In 1837 a scant majority rejected this proposal.

Subsequently, the “anti-mission board” member churches withdrew from the association. They took the name Primitive Baptists. By this they were indicating their belief that they were maintaining the historic position of Baptists. Within this movement there seems to have been two primary streams—those who opposed any missionary, revival, or evangelistic effort (commonly referred to as “hardshell,” “absolutists,” or hyper-Calvinist); and those whose opposition was to forming extra-church agencies to hire and pay missionaries for their work (commonly referred to as “anti-board”.)

There were some other issues as well—opposition to Sunday Schools, to financial support for pastors, to formal schooling of pastors, to innovations in music, and to abstinence from alcohol. From a present-day perspective it appears that the Primitive Baptists focused on “defending the traditional ways and doctrines” and the Missionary Baptists focused on carrying out the mandate of the Great Commission, Matthew 28:19-20. This is to say that the one tended to be reactive and the other proactive.

To further set the stage for learning about the great revival of 1838-1839, it is necessary to look at the statistics which indicate just what an impact this split in the Baptist movement had in this part of West Alabama. In 1837 the Union association had had 19 churches in the central and southern portions of Pickens County and northern Greene, with an additional church in southwestern Tuscaloosa County and one more in Perry, for a total of 21. The aggregate membership stood at 1048. Only 12 of these 21 congregations sent messengers (or delegates) to the 1838 annual meeting. Not only was the association weakened in its count of churches, many of the churches that continued to be affiliated were greatly reduced in their membership. A total 154 persons had been dismissed or excluded from their membership. In sum, it appears that of the more than 1,000 members in the churches that comprised the association in 1837, only about 400 continued.

Perhaps the most hopeful sign for those remaining in the Union Association when they gathered in 1838 was that three new churches had come forward to join with them. One was

Oak Ridge in Pickens County, apparently comprised of some of the former members of the Pilgrims Rest church whose pastor, Henry Petty, had been a leader of the anti-board forces. (There may be some irony here in that Petty was among those who formed the Alabama State Baptist Convention in 1823; ironic in the sense that the convention was formed to support mission and benevolent causes.) A portion of the Pilgrims Rest church continued with that name in the Union Association. And a third portion, the anti-board group, also retained the name of Pilgrims Rest. It was led by Henry Petty, and it became the mother church of a Primitive Baptist association which took the name Pilgrims Rest.) The other two new congregations were Pleasant Ridge which probably came out of Serepta and Concord which probably came out of Rehobeth and subsequently became the Clinton Church. Both of these churches were in Greene County.

When the association met again in the fall of 1839, there was surely a season of great rejoicing and thanksgiving. The 15 churches had baptized 361 persons, the most every baptized in a single year in the Union or in its successor the Pickens Association. And 161 persons had transferred their membership to the churches in the association. The membership was swelled to 956. A new church was added, New Hope in Tuscaloosa County.

We wish that we had fuller records of what happened that year. What were the elements that went into this great revival in the churches? (Only one church did not baptize anyone. This was Friendship in Greene County. But in 1840 it reported 29 baptisms.)

\* Prayer?

\*Influx of new settlers? In the 1830s the population of Pickens County grew from 6,000 to 17,000 persons.

\*Ten or more new churches were formed in the county during this decade to serve the new communities.

\*Pastors and people who had committed themselves to missions and evangelism and lived out their commitment by being faithful witness? They took the Great Commission seriously. \* A blessing from God?

\*All of these? Probably.

Imagine what it was like at the old Unity church which baptized 68, received another 11 by letter and ended the year with 105 total members. This figures out to be about four new members for every continuing one. Ebenezer received 38 new members for a total of only 48, or about the same ratio. Big Creek was the largest church then with 138 members, adding 38 of them that year. Liberty added 25 and grew to 38. Fellowship added 19 and grew to 57. Enon, now Aliceville, added 40 and grew to 90. Pilgrim's Rest which would become Springhill in 1842, added 17 to swell its membership to 42. And Oak Ridge, north of Pickensville near where route 14 now crosses into Mississippi, gained 21 for a total of 37 members. In sum, the aggregate gain was 80 percent in membership. One must conclude that the old ministers like Charles Stewart, Richard Wilkins, J. H. Taylor, W. R. Stansel, T. Willingham, M. P. Smith, T. S. Thomas (who lost his pastorate at Salem and at Bethany as a result of the missions conflict), W. Manning, and W. W. Nash must have rejoiced and felt vindicated by this great revival.

God continued to bless the Union Association and its churches. In 1840 new churches Mt. Zion and Hopewell joined the association. Mt. Zion seems to have been the missionary element from the Bethany church. It closed in 1898, but an African American Baptist church, Union Valley, continues to worship in its old building. The other was named Hopewell. It listed King's

Store as its post office. So, it must have been in the Benevola community. The total membership in the churches of the association had grown to 1,090, more than had been members before the split.

The following year the South Carolina church, now Ethelsville, and the Hebron church joined the association. Hebron was a new church north of Carrollton. South Carolina was an older church, formed in 1824. It joined from the Columbus Association. Prudently, given the fact that some members of the churches were not strongly in favor of missions, the association decided rather than to support mission efforts in West Alabama directly it would set up a society to support mission work that would be an auxiliary to the association.

In 1842 the Grants Creek Church from Tuscaloosa County joined the Union Association. It came from the old Cahaba Association which had tilted toward the anti-missions side. This church was one of the oldest churches in West Alabama. It had operated a Sunday School since 1828 when it was founded. It had ordained Thomas Banes, the great-grandfather of President Lyndon Banes Johnson. It was also the home church of the Foster family. John Collier Foster came to the association with a missions agenda. He promoted Sunday Schools. He led the association into affiliation with the state convention and later with the Southern Baptist Convention when it formed in 1845. He promoted the planting of new churches within the bounds of the association. And he promoted evangelism and Bible study among the slave population. Across the next 40 years he served 24 as the moderator of the Union Association. And in 1851 his kinsperson, Martha Foster Crawford was appointed by the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board as a missionary to China. She served there until 1909. In 1845, when the Union Association, (today Pickens), celebrated its tenth anniversary, it had 24 congregations in the fellowship with a total membership of 1,472 persons. Four of the churches were in Greene, four in Tuscaloosa, and 16 in Pickens County. There were several other missionary Baptist churches in northern Pickens county at this time—Providence, Mt. Tabor, Zion, and, perhaps Salem, just north of today's New Salem. But most of these churches were members of the Tuscaloosa association.

At the end of the decade of the 1840s it would hive off most of the Greene County churches to a new association being formed over there, and issues related to the freedom of one's will and the involvement of a person in the process of salvation would become an issue in some of the churches. Long time pastor Ellis Gore and the Mt. Moriah church would be the well-spring of the Free Will Baptist movement in West Alabama.

The anti-mission board Baptist churches here formed an association of their own in 1837. It seems to have begun with ten churches and nearly 600 members. Across the years these numbers declined. The last records that I have been able to find date from the 1930s. Then there were but four Primitive Baptist churches in the association, including one in Tuscaloosa County, and but a handful a members.

In the history of the Union/Pickens Association there have been other blessed seasons of revival and harvesting of the saved. Some have impacted one or just a few churches at a time. Others, like the revival of 1838-1839 spread across the association. Many of us pray for such a time today. I want to look at other seasons of revival in subsequent articles. If you have information about the early churches and/or their pastors, please share it with us. For example, in this article I mention Hopewell church. Where was it? And I mention several pioneer pastors.

Where did they come from? Where did they live? Where are they buried?