



Ready for Reformation?

Issue 44

Spring 2001

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The Founders Journal

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The Founders Journal is a quarterly publication which takes as its theological framework the first recognized confession of faith that Southern Baptists produced, [*The Abstract of Principles*](#).

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[Dr. Tom Nettles is professor of Historical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. He is no stranger to readers of the Founders Journal or to those who have been pursuing reformation within the SBC and beyond for the last twenty years. Through his teaching, preaching and writing Dr. Nettles has been greatly used of God to fan the flames of theological renewal in our day. He serves as guest editor for this issue of the journal. -Ed.]

Retracing Our Steps

Thomas J. Nettles

The question of identity always poses difficulties for Christian denominations. The Bible ultimately defines what we are, but historical development plays a variety of roles in giving shape to the revelatory raw material. Eastern Orthodoxy is happy to accept an authoritative role to historical development through the seventh ecumenical council in 787. Roman Catholicism sees revelatory material virtually as fixed in the New Testament era, but some of the authoritative material was written and some was spoken. In both cases that revelatory material gradually comes to light in the authoritative teaching office of the papacy. Protestantism adopted the principle of *sola scriptura* but valued the insights into Scripture given to the church through a variety of teachers throughout history.

The earliest Baptists saw themselves as Protestants. They saw themselves as working on the same principles that drove the sixteenth-century leaders of Protestantism in seeking doctrine and church in conformity to Scripture. Moreover, they saw themselves as pressing to a purer state both their obedience to Scripture (in opposition to that which was demonstrably non-scriptural) and their form of the church. They were heirs of much but they dissented conscientiously at strategic points. Had they not believed in the necessity of absolute obedience to Scripture and that Scripture did prescribe an ecclesiology for all times and places, then there would be no such people as Baptists today. They would never have suffered loss of goods, status, income, and civic freedom for that which was negotiable in terms of time and culture. They recognized that many people, people of great stature and scholarship, disagreed with them; but they saw that as no reason to conclude that gaining a clear understanding of the church was impossible.

Our visitation of historical precedents in Baptist development, therefore, does not betray a prejudice for a golden age, or infallible interpreters, in Baptist life. It does say that we take seriously the biblical convictions for which they suffered and in accordance with which they preached the gospel. It does say that we recognize that our present generation has contours shaped by practices, ideas, and relationships, for good or ill, from prior generations. If we pursue certain practices or ideas, thinking that they are both Baptist and biblical, when in fact they are neither, perhaps correcting the historical misperception can help drive home the biblical truth with power. If we find in our predecessors deep concerns for which we manifest no zeal, perhaps we will conclude they were mistaken or overly punctilious, or perhaps we will discover an omission in our generation of something vital to a full biblical witness.

A visit with John Spilsbury, therefore, will give us a glimpse of the importance of confession of propositional truth for the ecclesiology of the first generation of Particular Baptists. A theological look at Shubal Stearns will give a feel for the theological and practical overlap that marked the Regular and Separate Baptists in the beginning of the nineteenth century and struck an enduring impression on the Baptist character. Josh Powell, an M Div student at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, provided the form, the driving idea, and much of the research and text for that article. I have added and edited freely but the story line and conclusion are his. Baptists have been a people who have gloried in salvation by grace through faith. Understanding the freeness, sovereignty, and unmerited essence of grace has gradually slipped away in the twentieth century. Perhaps a reclaiming of biblical truth will prompt a new concern for a grace-centered theology. The article on that subject tries to point out what is at stake in turning aside from grace. *Polity*, edited by Mark Dever, is [reviewed and recommended](#) as the most direct path to serious reflection on biblical church life. [This review appears in [FJ 45](#).]

Though many aspects of the past remain hidden, we nevertheless look instinctively for lessons. The value of such instruction depends on how accurately we unfold the issues and how wisely we adduce applications. When our generation is studied, will it be largely for warning as to missed opportunities and the dangers of superficiality, or will investigators see that we learned our lessons well and sought to live more purely to the glory of God?



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Ready for Reformation?

Thomas J. Nettles

Is the work now done? Well entrenched in leadership positions at seminaries, mission boards, and other strategic agencies and organizations, can Southern Baptists conclude that the egg is hatched? Inerrantists are everywhere. Perhaps even some who were not inerrantists now genuflect to the term, if not the idea, and desire a non-confrontive peaceful co-existence with the new regime. There are still pockets of strength for *the way we were* working feverishly to impede if not destroy the growing hegemony of the inerrancy party, but for the most part they must settle for much less than they want.

A greater danger, however, than the guerrilla warfare of the deposed looms menacingly near. The ongoing conflict with the world, the flesh, and the devil challenges every Christian with the daily need for growth. External reformation may be destroyed or rendered meaningless unless it provokes us to "cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Corinthians 7:1). A profession that has a form of godliness but denies its power to make alive and make holy just as clearly detracts from the glory of God as does heresy. The gravitational pull of our flesh into the mire of unrighteousness constantly seeks to seize us either personally or systemically. The call of gospel grace still is "now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life" (Romans 6:22). External reform might help promote, but never substitutes for, holiness.

External reform, nevertheless, must proceed. Truth still cries aloud in the street for those who will buy her and sell her not. Initial success in foundational repair does not suffice for the whole. A candid recognition that other issues call for attention, however, only highlights the remarkable shift of direction. Recovery of the authority of the Word calls for celebration (Ezra 3:10-13). Many lamented the spiritual devastation they experienced and observed when their instructors placed personal freedom and preference above the biblical text. Even this much gain, to them, seems to be an indescribable blessing. And it is! The difference between believing or not believing in a divinely inspired Bible is substantial. The former determines that the text rules because God has spoken; the latter subjects the text to the reader's experience, because the text itself is purely the product of, thus never rising above, human experience. On that basis the redefinition of Christianity in general and Baptist life in particular has proceeded. If allowed to go forward unchallenged and unabated such a process will produce something totally other than either.

But at just the right time, the challenge occurred. Paul informed Timothy that God would protect his deposit of truth until "that day." The most likely translation of 2 Timothy 1:12, contextually considered, is "I am convinced that He is able to guard my deposit, that is, the deposit He entrusted to me, until that day." He then admonished Timothy, in that confidence, to retain the standard of sound words and guard through the Holy Spirit the treasure entrusted to him. God will not allow his deposited treasure to

disappear either in authority or content. It is possible that we live in a time of the merciful providence of God in which that deposit has been reclaimed.

The task of reclaiming, however, is not complete. If only the acceptance of the divine *authority* of the deposit gains adherence but the *content* of the treasure itself lies dormant, the recovery is a sham. For recovery or reformation to be full, the content of the revelation must be also rediscovered and proclaimed without reduction. Upon the rediscovery of the Law under Ezra and Nehemiah, the people of Israel immediately celebrated the Feast of Booths, ignored since the time of Joshua. In addition, they vowed to make provision for the faithful adherence to all religious festivals and sacrifices (Ezra 8:13-18; 10:28-39). In Ezra 3, when the foundation of the temple had been restored, the rejoicing could hardly be discerned from the crying from those who had seen the first temple. How tragically the glory had departed came home to them as they realized how far a foundation is from a completed temple. Even so, after a systematic razing of a historic doctrinal edifice, the restoration of the foundation evokes praise and weeping. The beauty of what was stands no more; but a foundation for its restoration now stands firmly in place.

The full shining of truth after its eclipse brings to light many breaches in the wall in need of repair. Neither Baptist evangelism nor ecclesiology can stand in isolation from the rest of Christian truth. For an ecclesiology built on regeneration and its fruits to be coherent, the whole revealed counsel of God must be taken into account. In defending it, Baptists must be able to give answer how their views of the church arise from the whole system of biblical truth. A reformation of Baptist identity will involve a serious re-engagement of several biblical teachings historically prominent among Baptists. A healthy confessionalism, the integrity of the work of evangelism, confidence in the power of truth in proclamation, the complementarity of Law and Gospel, a Christocentric Trinitarian theology, and an integrated theology of holiness and divine leadership, are among the serious doctrinal challenges to which Baptists must give attention. Even when fully restored, however, conscious attention to these ideas must necessarily continue. They are not truths to be pursued only in times of decline and emergency, but ongoing elements of Christian profession always worthy of vigilant practice.

Insinuated throughout these issues as vital connective tissue runs the theme of grace. We can perceive nothing either in revelation or redemption apart from God's grace. Continued recovery of church life and witness depends on a recovery of a grace-centered theology.

Recovery of a Grace-Centered Theology

Evangelism, preaching, relationship between law and gospel, the ability to formulate and confess truths about God, and the pursuit of vital holiness all assume the presence of divine intervention and condescension--grace. Grace flows to sinners from the triune God and heightens the importance of holding a trinitarian understanding salvation. Paul speaks of the "Grace which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began" (1 Timothy 1:9). This is the same grace that in Ephesians 1:3-14 Paul unfolds in terms of the Father's election of persons before the foundation of the world and predestination of them to adoption. He reminds us that his beloved Son already stands as the covenantal guarantee of the certainty of these blessings and that in eternity the glory of this grace will be an object of praise.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. *[All of these spiritual blessings promised by the Father and secured by the blood, burial, and bodily resurrection of the Son, and which now reside in Him to be obtained by union with him, and which form the substance of the preaching of the gospel certainly became yours when]* you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of Promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of *God's own* possession.

The full range of the gracious operations of the Trinity come to the fore again when Paul reminds Titus that we are "justified by His grace" (Titus 3:7).

He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:5-7).

Also, to the Ephesians he wrote "By grace are ye saved through faith and that not of yourselves" (Ephesians 2:8). Peter reminded the church at Jerusalem, "We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are" (Acts 15:11). To encourage Timothy in ministry, Paul gives a concentrated look at the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ as peculiarly related to the salvation of hardened sinners. Christ sets men in the ministry to preach the gospel, for it is certain that those he came to save will hear it and repent. This explains the patience of Christ, gives warrant for confidence and perseverance in ministry, justifies prayer for all men all over the world, and justifies his own ministry to the Gentiles (1 Timothy 1:12-2:7). In all of this Paul can say the "grace of our Lord was more than abundant."

With numerous other direct assertions of the grace-centeredness of salvation, no Christian group denies that sinners are saved by grace. The willingness of all historic Christian bodies to confess this has been made clear in ecumenical dialogues of recent years. On October 31, 1999, a number of Lutheran bodies signed a Joint Declaration with the Pontifical Council for the Unity of Christians. Years of discussion, writing, and rewriting preceded that historic event. One sentence, affirmed by both groups, shows that disagreements on salvation are not differences in which one group accepts grace and another group shuns grace. The sentence states: "By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works."[\[1\]](#)

Such mere ascription to grace hardly says it all, however, as should be plain for all to see. Controversy

on this issue concerns the manner and locus of the operation of grace. Roman Catholicism locates grace within the sacraments to be distributed by the church. In addition, humans may contribute to their standing in justification by meritorious works done under the power of grace; that is, they assist their own justification by "freely assenting to and cooperating with" the "predisposing grace of God." Also, baptism is called the instrumental cause of justification "without which no man was ever justified." In addition, justification consists of the sanctification and renewal of the inward man by the infusion of faith, hope and love. This justification may be lost; in that event, penance, the second plank after shipwreck, provides grace for recovery of justification. All of this, of course streams from the "merit of his [Christ's] passion." Christ's work of satisfaction on the cross procures a body of grace in which sinners may participate by obedient submission to the church. "The meritorious cause is his most beloved only begotten, our Lord Jesus Christ, who, ... merited for us justification by his most holy passion on the wood of the cross and made satisfaction for us to God the Father." [2]

Protestantism, on the other hand, in general, locates grace, not in the sacrament as an instrumental cause, but in the direct action of God upon the mind and affections when a sinner hears the gospel. Such grace, in a Protestant as well as a Roman Catholic understanding of Scripture, flows from the triune God--the Father in election, the Son in living and dying, the Spirit in the washing of regeneration. Within Protestantism, however, disagreement comes over the point at which human involvement enters the fabric of salvation. This can be illustrated at every point of the doctrine.

Election defined as a choice built on foreknowledge as mere prescience intrudes human decision even into the counsels of eternity. God elects by choosing a method of operation that will save as many as possible. Human freedom, sin, and the complexities of spiritual and moral growth in history impede God's desire to save all (2 Peter 3:19). God knows all the hindering factors and therefore settles on a plan and method of operation that will save as many as possible given these conditions. Grace operates not as an undeserved favor giving life to the dead but as a servant to human will. This view held by many Baptists today shares common ground with the Molinist theology of the Roman Catholic Jesuits. The grace of the Father arises only from precognition of human action and, thus, even in eternity "awaits" the permission of humanity to act.

Another view which accommodates a synergistic arrangement of election formed the substance of the doctrinal sermon preached in Georgia, USA, at the annual meeting of the Georgia Baptist Convention. [3] A highly influential conservative pastor, Nelson Price, selected Ephesians 1:4-6 as his text. He describes "election" in a series of provocative statements burdened by their concern to protect human autonomy. "Election speaks of God in His sovereignty making a choice related to salvation to be made available to human kind." "Election is not coercive, we may freely respond; but if God had not chosen us, we could not have chosen Him." "People are not lost because they are not elected but because by them Christ has been rejected." "Basically election means God has taken the initiative in His purpose to save man. Apart from that initiative no one can be saved. However, it does not imply fatalism." In election God has set a table of salvation. The table is set because of his sovereign prerogative and no one deserved for the banquet of salvation to be provided. But God's election, according to this view, does not mean that God has placed sovereign favor on one individual over any other individual. We must still choose to partake of that which God has sovereignly elected to provide in order to make election work.

The efficacy of the Father's election, therefore, hangs on human will in time.

Some take a view consistent with Rome in giving human cooperation a measure of efficacy in regeneration. Grace precedes, and perhaps even predisposes, but has no final efficacy apart from the permission of the human will, according to this view. Many Baptists, though professedly grace-centered, have retreated from their confessionally, and biblically, Reformed view of the power of regeneration by embracing what is essentially a Roman Catholic view of human will in response to the work of the Spirit. The grace of the Spirit who strives with the sinner must await the readiness of the human will.

The effect of an increasingly decision-centered, and thus man-centered, view of salvation has twisted the historic Baptist views of church membership and church discipline and created greater carnality in the churches. Views of holiness and sanctification have been altered, that is, diminished, accordingly; doctrinal latitudinarianism thus meshes conveniently into the churches. The sense of subjectivity, the autonomous self, at the heart of theological moderatism finds a soul mate in the man-centered decision-oriented view of regeneration prominent in many a conservative pulpit. Schleiermacher's liberal subjectivism, while rejected on the issue of inerrancy, still holds court in the arena of spiritual experience.

Recovering the historic commitment to a unilateral, monergistic view of grace would do much to purify both the churches and the theology. A rediscovery of the necessity and mystery of regeneration carries purifying power in its wake. "The washing of regeneration," as Paul calls it, is not baptism but the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit in his incipient saving work on the heart of enmity. Without the new birth, one cannot see the kingdom of God; in the new birth the eyes are opened along with the heart to see, and to taste the goodness of, the excellence of Jesus Christ and his righteousness. Regeneration as a gracious work of the Spirit precedes justification and produces the change of heart and perspective that eschews one's own works for those of Christ. Better, the sinner flees from the vengeance-deserving unworthiness of his own ungodliness to gain Christ and his righteousness. When one is justified by faith in Christ, therefore, Scripture teaches that purifying grace both precedes and follows the faith by which sinners are justified. "Do not be deceived," Paul wrote the Corinthians. "Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God." This is exactly what they were prior to hearing the gospel. Both the penalty of their sin and the polluting power of it, however, have come under the transforming power of the gospel. "Such were some of you," he was unafraid to remind them, "but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:10, 11). Only the sovereign, effectual, transforming work of the Spirit of God in harmony with the perfect righteousness of the Savior makes such a change.

A grace-centered theology highlights not only the sovereignty of the Spirit's work, but it also rejoices in the completeness of Christ's work. The Roman Catholic view affirms the sacrificial and propitiatory aspects of the death of Jesus. Many contemporary Baptists, like the Roman Catholics, view this as rendering forgiveness possible for those who take advantage of the offer. No certain effectuality, however, flows from the wounds of Christ; instead, so they say, this stream produces a reservoir of grace from which people may draw if they so choose. That is, we cannot be absolutely certain that anyone will

gain salvation from the death of Christ. As Nelson Price, our representative preacher, told a congregation of Baptist ministers and laymen, "In love God extended himself on the cross on behalf of every person. God in love has exhausted His every effort to make salvation available to every person." Herschel Hobbs affirms this: "God in Christ has done all that even God can do to provide redemption for a lost humanity. But each person through faith in His redeeming Son must receive it for himself."^[4] Since God has extended himself so and views every single individual from eternity with the same will to save them, as Price proclaimed, "The determining issue is what do people think."

But we must argue to the contrary. The determining issue is "For whom is God's effectual grace operative?" If even one for whom Christ has performed this work fails to receive its benefits, both the justice of God and the efficacy of Christ's work may be challenged. If, indeed, millions for whom Christ has died, perhaps even the majority, never receive the benefits he has suffered to obtain for them, how ineffective must his gracious work be? Can it truly be said, "When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hands" (Isaiah 53:10 KJV)? Did Jesus really know what he was talking about when he said "All that the Father gives me shall come to me" (John 6:37)? The particularity and certainty of that confidence presents problems for the view of optional atonement when we realize how Jesus continues in his concern for those the Father gave Him. For those very ones whom the Father gave him he set himself apart to the cross: "For their sakes I sanctify myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth" (John 17:19).

A recovery of grace-centeredness crosses the gap from possibility to actuality. By the obedient, sacrificial shedding of His blood Christ has wrought reconciliation, redemption, and forgiveness and by his perfectly obedient life he is the one in whom his people are accounted as righteous (2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Romans 4:25; 5:17-19; Galatians 3:21-25; Philippians 3:9). His propitiatory sacrifice has fully satisfied the wrath of God. His life has fully satisfied the Law of God. Now God will be just in justifying the sinner whose sins have been cleansed; none in the whole world may be justified apart from this propitiatory work and righteous, resurrected life.

Faith, therefore, has no reality of its own apart from its object. Faith is a condition of the mind and affections produced in conjunction with a true understanding of one's own deserved misery in sin and the supreme exclusive excellence of Christ's righteousness. The Father's pleasure in the Son, along with the display of the Son as the Savior, engenders a longing for the knowledge of Him and his benefits. Faith is that act of pressing to union with Christ, the first benefit of which is justification. Justification does not consist of inward renewal but in the imputation of Christ's own obedience. His death, purposefully embraced for the glory of God's law, procures our forgiveness; and his perfect obedience to the law constitutes justifying righteousness. Apart from this, no sinner can ever justly be acquitted from the verdict of eternal death. By the same token, because of his death in conformity with the Father's grace and good pleasure, sinners certainly will be acquitted and declared righteous.

When one ignores the particularity of the grace of all three persons of the Triune God, he is poised for theological disaster. The doctrine of universal atonement relativizes the grace of the Son in dying and suspends the operations of that grace on the thread of human will. Leveling the operations of the Spirit

to be the same with all persons, thus eliminating any doctrine of effectual calling, results in a power-impoverished Spirit pushed finally into subjection to the sinner's will. Chiseling away the rough edges of the Father's particular and unconditional election into the election of pre-cognition or the election of universal provision might relieve our sensitivities to a sense of "fair play" temporarily. The smoothed-out product, however, stands before us in humanistically refined grandeur as a most unbiblical and unattractive picture of God the Holy Father and Creator/Redeemer in eternal or temporal subservience to the will of man the creature/sinner.

Reformation of Baptist identity will be unretrieved to the degree that a grace-centered theology remains unrecovered. If the work of salvation hangs on human will, then so must the work of revelation and inspiration. The vital organ of inerrancy can not survive in the absence of the nutrition of grace.

Footnotes:

¹ Avery Dulles, "Two Languages of Salvation: the Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration" in *First Things*, (December 1999), 26.

² See *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, the "Decree Concerning Justification" chapters 5, 6, 7, 14.

³ Report of this sermon appeared in the *Christian Index* following the 1999 meeting of the Georgia Baptist Convention.

⁴ Herschel Hobbs, "God's Sovereignty, Man's Free Will," in *Baptist Messenger*, June 1, 1995, p. 5.



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Recovery of a Grace-Centered Theology

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Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind

intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. *[All of these spiritual blessings promised by the Father and secured by the blood, burial, and bodily resurrection of the Son, and which now reside in Him to be obtained by union with him, and which form the substance of the preaching of the gospel certainly became yours when]* you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of Promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of *God's own* possession.

The full range of the gracious operations of the Trinity come to the fore again when Paul reminds Titus that we are "justified by His grace" (Titus 3:7).

He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:5-7).

Also, to the Ephesians he wrote "By grace are ye saved through faith and that not of yourselves" (Ephesians 2:8). Peter reminded the church at Jerusalem, "We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are" (Acts 15:11). To encourage Timothy in ministry, Paul gives a concentrated look at the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ as peculiarly related to the salvation of hardened sinners. Christ sets men in the ministry to preach the gospel, for it is certain that those he came to save will hear it and repent. This explains the patience of Christ, gives warrant for confidence and perseverance in ministry, justifies prayer for all men all over the world, and justifies his own ministry to the Gentiles (1 Timothy 1:12-2:7). In all of this Paul can say the "grace of our Lord was more than abundant."

With numerous other direct assertions of the grace-centeredness of salvation, no Christian group denies that sinners are saved by grace. The willingness of all historic Christian bodies to confess this has been made clear in ecumenical dialogues of recent years. On October 31, 1999, a number of Lutheran bodies signed a Joint Declaration with the Pontifical Council for the Unity of Christians. Years of discussion, writing, and rewriting preceded that historic event. One sentence, affirmed by both groups, shows that disagreements on salvation are not differences in which one group accepts grace and another group shuns grace. The sentence states: "By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works."[\[1\]](#)

Such mere ascription to grace hardly says it all, however, as should be plain for all to see. Controversy on this issue concerns the manner and locus of the operation of grace. Roman Catholicism locates grace within the sacraments to be distributed by the church. In addition, humans may contribute to their standing in justification by meritorious works done under the power of grace; that is, they assist their own justification by "freely assenting to and cooperating with" the "predisposing grace of God." Also, baptism is called the instrumental cause of justification "without which no man was ever justified." In

addition, justification consists of the sanctification and renewal of the inward man by the infusion of faith, hope and love. This justification may be lost; in that event, penance, the second plank after shipwreck, provides grace for recovery of justification. All of this, of course streams from the "merit of his [Christ's] passion." Christ's work of satisfaction on the cross procures a body of grace in which sinners may participate by obedient submission to the church. "The meritorious cause is his most beloved only begotten, our Lord Jesus Christ, who, ... merited for us justification by his most holy passion on the wood of the cross and made satisfaction for us to God the Father."[\[2\]](#)

Protestantism, on the other hand, in general, locates grace, not in the sacrament as an instrumental cause, but in the direct action of God upon the mind and affections when a sinner hears the gospel. Such grace, in a Protestant as well as a Roman Catholic understanding of Scripture, flows from the triune God--the Father in election, the Son in living and dying, the Spirit in the washing of regeneration. Within Protestantism, however, disagreement comes over the point at which human involvement enters the fabric of salvation. This can be illustrated at every point of the doctrine.

Election defined as a choice built on foreknowledge as mere prescience intrudes human decision even into the counsels of eternity. God elects by choosing a method of operation that will save as many as possible. Human freedom, sin, and the complexities of spiritual and moral growth in history impede God's desire to save all (2 Peter 3:19). God knows all the hindering factors and therefore settles on a plan and method of operation that will save as many as possible given these conditions. Grace operates not as an undeserved favor giving life to the dead but as a servant to human will. This view held by many Baptists today shares common ground with the Molinist theology of the Roman Catholic Jesuits. The grace of the Father arises only from precognition of human action and, thus, even in eternity "awaits" the permission of humanity to act.

Another view which accommodates a synergistic arrangement of election formed the substance of the doctrinal sermon preached in Georgia, USA, at the annual meeting of the Georgia Baptist Convention. [\[3\]](#) A highly influential conservative pastor, Nelson Price, selected Ephesians 1:4-6 as his text. He describes "election" in a series of provocative statements burdened by their concern to protect human autonomy. "Election speaks of God in His sovereignty making a choice related to salvation to be made available to human kind." "Election is not coercive, we may freely respond; but if God had not chosen us, we could not have chosen Him." "People are not lost because they are not elected but because by them Christ has been rejected." "Basically election means God has taken the initiative in His purpose to save man. Apart from that initiative no one can be saved. However, it does not imply fatalism." In election God has set a table of salvation. The table is set because of his sovereign prerogative and no one deserved for the banquet of salvation to be provided. But God's election, according to this view, does not mean that God has placed sovereign favor on one individual over any other individual. We must still choose to partake of that which God has sovereignly elected to provide in order to make election work. The efficacy of the Father's election, therefore, hangs on human will in time.

Some take a view consistent with Rome in giving human cooperation a measure of efficacy in regeneration. Grace precedes, and perhaps even predisposes, but has no final efficacy apart from the permission of the human will, according to this view. Many Baptists, though professedly grace-centered,

have retreated from their confessionally, and biblically, Reformed view of the power of regeneration by embracing what is essentially a Roman Catholic view of human will in response to the work of the Spirit. The grace of the Spirit who strives with the sinner must await the readiness of the human will.

The effect of an increasingly decision-centered, and thus man-centered, view of salvation has twisted the historic Baptist views of church membership and church discipline and created greater carnality in the churches. Views of holiness and sanctification have been altered, that is, diminished, accordingly; doctrinal latitudinarianism thus meshes conveniently into the churches. The sense of subjectivity, the autonomous self, at the heart of theological moderatism finds a soul mate in the man-centered decision-oriented view of regeneration prominent in many a conservative pulpit. Schleiermacher's liberal subjectivism, while rejected on the issue of inerrancy, still holds court in the arena of spiritual experience.

Recovering the historic commitment to a unilateral, monergistic view of grace would do much to purify both the churches and the theology. A rediscovery of the necessity and mystery of regeneration carries purifying power in its wake. "The washing of regeneration," as Paul calls it, is not baptism but the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit in his incipient saving work on the heart of enmity. Without the new birth, one cannot see the kingdom of God; in the new birth the eyes are opened along with the heart to see, and to taste the goodness of, the excellence of Jesus Christ and his righteousness. Regeneration as a gracious work of the Spirit precedes justification and produces the change of heart and perspective that eschews one's own works for those of Christ. Better, the sinner flees from the vengeance-deserving unworthiness of his own ungodliness to gain Christ and his righteousness. When one is justified by faith in Christ, therefore, Scripture teaches that purifying grace both precedes and follows the faith by which sinners are justified. "Do not be deceived," Paul wrote the Corinthians. "Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God." This is exactly what they were prior to hearing the gospel. Both the penalty of their sin and the polluting power of it, however, have come under the transforming power of the gospel. "Such were some of you," he was unafraid to remind them, "but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:10, 11). Only the sovereign, effectual, transforming work of the Spirit of God in harmony with the perfect righteousness of the Savior makes such a change.

A grace-centered theology highlights not only the sovereignty of the Spirit's work, but it also rejoices in the completeness of Christ's work. The Roman Catholic view affirms the sacrificial and propitiatory aspects of the death of Jesus. Many contemporary Baptists, like the Roman Catholics, view this as rendering forgiveness possible for those who take advantage of the offer. No certain effectuality, however, flows from the wounds of Christ; instead, so they say, this stream produces a reservoir of grace from which people may draw if they so choose. That is, we cannot be absolutely certain that anyone will gain salvation from the death of Christ. As Nelson Price, our representative preacher, told a congregation of Baptist ministers and laymen, "In love God extended himself on the cross on behalf of every person. God in love has exhausted His every effort to make salvation available to every person." Herschel Hobbs affirms this: "God in Christ has done all that even God can do to provide redemption for a lost humanity. But each person through faith in His redeeming Son must receive it for himself."^[4]

Since God has extended himself so and views every single individual from eternity with the same will to save them, as Price proclaimed, "The determining issue is what do people think."

But we must argue to the contrary. The determining issue is "For whom is God's effectual grace operative?" If even one for whom Christ has performed this work fails to receive its benefits, both the justice of God and the efficacy of Christ's work may be challenged. If, indeed, millions for whom Christ has died, perhaps even the majority, never receive the benefits he has suffered to obtain for them, how ineffective must his gracious work be? Can it truly be said, "When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hands" (Isaiah 53:10 KJV)? Did Jesus really know what he was talking about when he said "All that the Father gives me shall come to me" (John 6:37)? The particularity and certainty of that confidence presents problems for the view of optional atonement when we realize how Jesus continues in his concern for those the Father gave Him. For those very ones whom the Father gave him he set himself apart to the cross: "For their sakes I sanctify myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth" (John 17:19).

A recovery of grace-centeredness crosses the gap from possibility to actuality. By the obedient, sacrificial shedding of His blood Christ has wrought reconciliation, redemption, and forgiveness and by his perfectly obedient life he is the one in whom his people are accounted as righteous (2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Romans 4:25; 5:17-19; Galatians 3:21-25; Philippians 3:9). His propitiatory sacrifice has fully satisfied the wrath of God. His life has fully satisfied the Law of God. Now God will be just in justifying the sinner whose sins have been cleansed; none in the whole world may be justified apart from this propitiatory work and righteous, resurrected life.

Faith, therefore, has no reality of its own apart from its object. Faith is a condition of the mind and affections produced in conjunction with a true understanding of one's own deserved misery in sin and the supreme exclusive excellence of Christ's righteousness. The Father's pleasure in the Son, along with the display of the Son as the Savior, engenders a longing for the knowledge of Him and his benefits. Faith is that act of pressing to union with Christ, the first benefit of which is justification. Justification does not consist of inward renewal but in the imputation of Christ's own obedience. His death, purposefully embraced for the glory of God's law, procures our forgiveness; and his perfect obedience to the law constitutes justifying righteousness. Apart from this, no sinner can ever justly be acquitted from the verdict of eternal death. By the same token, because of his death in conformity with the Father's grace and good pleasure, sinners certainly will be acquitted and declared righteous.

When one ignores the particularity of the grace of all three persons of the Triune God, he is poised for theological disaster. The doctrine of universal atonement relativizes the grace of the Son in dying and suspends the operations of that grace on the thread of human will. Leveling the operations of the Spirit to be the same with all persons, thus eliminating any doctrine of effectual calling, results in a power-impoorished Spirit pushed finally into subjection to the sinner's will. Chiseling away the rough edges of the Father's particular and unconditional election into the election of pre-cognition or the election of universal provision might relieve our sensitivities to a sense of "fair play" temporarily. The smoothed-out product, however, stands before us in humanistically refined grandeur as a most unbiblical and

unattractive picture of God the Holy Father and Creator/Redeemer in eternal or temporal subservience to the will of man the creature/sinner.

Reformation of Baptist identity will be unretrieved to the degree that a grace-centered theology remains unrecovered. If the work of salvation hangs on human will, then so must the work of revelation and inspiration. The vital organ of inerrancy can not survive in the absence of the nutrition of grace.

Footnotes:

¹ Avery Dulles, "Two Languages of Salvation: the Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration" in *First Things*, (December 1999), 26.

² See *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, the "Decree Concerning Justification" chapters 5, 6, 7, 14.

³ Report of this sermon appeared in the *Christian Index* following the 1999 meeting of the Georgia Baptist Convention.

⁴ Herschel Hobbs, "God's Sovereignty, Man's Free Will," in *Baptist Messenger*, June 1, 1995, p. 5.



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John Spilsbury and His Confession

[Thomas J. Nettles](#)

John Spilsbury enters the Baptist story through the records of the Jacob-Lathorp-Jessey church.^[1] Vigorous discussion on the issues of the proper subjects and the proper mode of baptism had occupied the church for several years when, in 1638, a note records, "Mr. Tho. Wilson, Mr. Pen, & H. Pen, & more being convenced that Baptism was not for Infants, but professed Believers joyned wth Mr. Jo. Spilsbury ye Churches favour being desired therein."^[2] From that point Spilsbury grabbed ecclesiological issues by the theological throat and helped construct a vigorously argued foundation for Particular Baptists.

From Spilsbury's pastoral doctrine, two issues, expansively developed, received forceful treatment: the constitution of a Christian congregation and the invincible efficacy of Christ's work for His people. He published in 1643 *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme* which he reissued in a second edition in 1652, "Corrected and enlarged by the Author." In 1646 he issued *God's Ordinance, The Saints Priviledge*. Benjamin Coxe transcribed and enlarged the second part of this work.

Spilsbury's presentation of believer's baptism by immersion of necessity engaged covenantal theology. He approved covenant theology and built his doctrine of the church on the infallible certainty of the eternal covenant of grace; he argued, however, that the spirituality of the new covenant in Christ eliminated the possibility of an infant's participation in it. The issue of the salvation of infants dying in infancy he treated as an area of mystery. One's answer to that question does not affect the revealed qualifications for those who may legitimately receive new covenant ordinances. Though the visible perpetuity of the old covenant included the circumcision of male infants, the exclusion of infants from the sign of the new does not mean that the new is less encouraging in its privileges than the old. All participation in the positive provisions of the old covenant was only a shadow of the spiritual reality of the new. An infant's exclusion from the positive ordinance of baptism forbids to him, or her, no spiritual blessing. The new covenant assumes the effectual working of the Spirit to create a believing community justified by faith in Christ and employs new positive ordinances as the symbols of its character. Believer's baptism, not infant baptism, corresponds to the nature of the new covenant, stands alone as enjoined by the Lord's authority, and alone is practiced by the apostles. Any other baptism is not baptism at all but a faulty cornerstone that will bring down the church. Protestants, therefore, who retain infant baptism keep themselves in the company of antichrist. They must return to Rome or go forward to the true constitution of the church.^[3]

Spilsbury's first work, *The Lawfull Subject of Baptisme*, dealt at length with the particular task of fitting and preparing the matter, that is how sinners are made fit for constituting a church. In the final analysis, Spilsbury sees four elements that merge in the constituting of a New Testament church. First, must come the Word of God "which is to fit and prepare the matter for the form." The preaching of the Word

assaults the pride of man, smooths his "hard and rough turbulent" spirit, aligns his "crooked and Serpent-like nature," and brings him humbly to embrace the "low and mean condition of Christ upon His cross."

Second, this same Word so convinces the sinner of its truth that it leaven "seasons and sweetens the whole man." The Word operates like a "fire that breaks forth and discovers itself" with such clarity in "such as have it," that they delineate specific truths from that Word. A confession of faith consisting of particular doctrines naturally develops. Others so prepared "come to one and the same mind and judgment in it."

This leads to the third "constituting cause" of a church. The believers so fitted by the Word now covenant to be a body of believers joined by "free and mutual consent and agreement upon the practice of that truth so by God revealed, and by faith received." This voluntary covenant precedes the ordinances. The fourth cause follows, the Spirit's work in knitting and uniting their hearts together in truth. A corporate witness to propositional truths provides the only clear evidence that such a work of the Spirit has, in fact, occurred.

Their practical subjection to Christ in the said truth, by them received and agreed upon as aforesaid, and this is the Covenant that forms the Church, which ever goes in order before the external administration of any other ordinance than the matters agreement together for orderly practice; for persons must be informed of the truth in judgment, and bound by the same in conscience, and agree upon the practice, before the same can orderly be put into execution.[\[4\]](#)

Once such agreement in conversion and truth is ascertained and the "matter," converted and convinced persons, so constituted has covenanted with fully informed conscience to be the people of God, this covenant is sealed with baptism. "Thus being in Covenant with God by faith in Jesus Christ, in which their state consists, and so the agreement made, and the covenant passed between them, now the seal is set to. Which is the outward ordinance of Baptism, to confirm the same."[\[5\]](#)

The point must be made clearly and without equivocation that the earliest Particular Baptists, as well as General Baptists, established their churches by agreement to a confession of faith. Spilsbury considered this as necessary, not just convenient and for the well-being of the church, but for the being of the church. Spilsbury declared in no uncertain terms that saving faith must be manifest in the hearty approval and assertion of a body of propositional truths. No church, and thus no baptism, could exist apart from submission to orthodox evangelicalism embodied in a confession of faith. Submission to such constituted the covenantal agreement necessary before baptism in Spilsbury's doctrine of the church. This union must first exist before communion in any other privileges may be enjoyed for the "comfort and well being" of the body. He summarizes the content of a true "confession of Christ" in part one of *Gods Ordinance the Saints Priviledge*. The confession of Christ, including all the biblical truths about him, must be culminated in baptism.

The confession that Christ requires of men so believing, is to confesse him in his Name

and Titles that his Father hath honoured him with, and set him out by, *viz.* To be a sufficient and onely Saviour, and the Mediatour of the new Testament; as King, Priest, and Prophet. A Priest to redeeme and purchase his people; a Prophet to teach and instruct that people; and a King to protect and defend the said people in their obedience to the truth, revealed by him as a Prophet, and by him as a King commanded to be obeyed; And as this is to be knowne and believed of such as expect life by him: even so it is to be confessed, by a professed subjection to him in the same. The Rule of which professed subjection and confession, is the instituted order and administration of Christ's Testament; for no other confession doth he approve of but that which holds him forth to be Jesus Christ, the Sonne of God, come in the flesh, dead, and risen againe, ascended, and exalted at Gods right hand, to the throne of his Father *David*; and so to be Lord of Lord, and King of Kings. And submission to the instituted order and administration of Christ's Testament, is an ordained confession of this believing in him, in a professed subjection to him. This confession doth Christ therefore require of such as believe in him, and ownes no believing unto salvation in his new Testament, once confirmed by his death, where this is refused.... If there be no baptizing into Christ, then is there not confession of Christ, according to his appointment, then no faith to salvation by Christ, expresly owned.[\[6\]](#)

A truly orthodox confession, arising from true faith, would, according to Spilsbury, certainly culminate in true baptism. Refusal to submit to this ordinance meant the absence of true profession and true faith, "expresly owned." Spilsbury might be excluding from salvation anyone who does not go on to believer's baptism. Probably the meaning of "expresly owned" is that, apart from volitional submission to the established ordinance, the *public* confession whereby one says, "I have faith in Christ alone as Savior" is absent. Spilsbury's arguments for the rightness of believer's baptism found virtually no detractors from within Baptist ranks; its necessity as a public owning of Christ became common doctrine. On the other hand, if one applies the statement rigorously, that apart from believer's baptism there is no saving faith, few if any followers can be found in subsequent Baptist history. Perhaps this ambiguity gave rise to article XVI of the appendix to the 1646 edition of the London confession written by Mr. Spilsbury's friend and co-laborer, Benjamin Cockes (Cox).

Although a true believer, whether baptized, or unbaptized, be in the state of salvation, and shall certainly be saved: Yet in obedience to the command of Christ every believer ought to desire baptism, and to yield himself to be baptized according to the rule of Christ in His word: And where this obedience is in faith performed, there Christ makes this His ordinance a means of unspeakable benefit to the believing soul, Acts 2:38, 22:16; Rom. 6:3, 4; 1 Pet.3:21. And a true believer *that here sees the command of Christ lying upon him*, cannot allow himself in disobedience thereunto, Acts 24:16.[\[7\]](#) [emphasis added]

The personal confession of ten articles Spilsbury submitted for the "Godly reader to judge, what difference there is between him and me, in the main, that men should be so incensed against me, as to seek my life, as some have done." Spilsbury wanted to disarm those who cast "reproachful clamors... upon all without exception, that seem to be of my judgment about baptism" by declaring "a word of my faith, what I believe and hold to be truth, and desire to practice the same." One year later, Spilsbury

would join with the other Particular Baptist churches in London in publishing and signing the First London Confession.

1. I do believe that there is only one God, who is distinguished in 3 persons; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost; yet but one in nature, or essence, without divisions, and incommunicable, who made the world, and all things therein, by the word of his power, & governs them by his wise providence.
2. I believe that God made man in his own Image, an upright and perfect creature, consisting of soul and body: which body God framed of the earth, and breathed into the same the breath of life, and man became a living soul. To whom God gave a law, upon his keeping of which depends all his happiness, and upon the contrary attended his misery, which took effect; for he breaking that law, he fell under the curse, and wrath of God lay upon him and all his posterity. By which fall man lost the knowledge of God, and utterly disabled himself of all ability ever to recover the same again.
3. I believe God out of the counsel of his will, did, before he made the world, elect and choose some certain number of his foreseen fallen creatures, and appointed them to eternal life in his Son, for the glory of his grace: which number so elected shall be saved, come to glory, & the rest left in sin to glorify his justice.
4. I believe that God in the fullness of his own time, did send his son, the 2d. person, who in the womb of the virgin Mary, assumed mans nature, and in the same he suffered death upon the cross, only as he was man, to satisfy his Fathers justice, for the sins of his elect, & that he lay 3 days and 3 nights in his grave, from whence he arose the third day by the power of his Godhead, for the justification of all for whose sins he died, and that in the same body Christ died, he arose from the death, and afterwards ascended into heaven, the place of glory, where he was before, and there to remain until he comes at the last day to judge the world in righteousness.
5. I believe that God of his grace, in his own time, effectually calls such as shall be saved to the knowledge of the truth, who is said, of his own will to beget us by the word of truth: in which work of grace, nature is as passive, as a child in the parents begetting of it; and so God by His Spirit works faith in the hearts of all such to believe in Christ, and his righteousness, only for justification. And thus they are made righteous before God in Christ, and so conformable to the will of God the Father through the Son; and also made holy through the work of regeneration, and the holy Spirit of grace dwelling in them; yet all such have still, as long as they live here in the flesh, remaining in them, an old man, that original corruption, the flesh that wars against the spirit, which hinders them in their obedience both to God and to man, and many times draws them to that which is evil, and contrary to their intentions; yet all of them shall through Christ overcome, and safely be brought to glory at last.

6. I believe the holy Scriptures to be the word of God, and have the only authority to bind the conscience to the obedience of all therein contained, and are the all sufficient rule, by the Spirit of God to guide a man in all his obedience both to God and man.

7. As for the absence of original sin, and power in the will to receive and refuse grace and salvation being generally offered by the Gospel, and Christ dying for all persons universally, to take away sin that stood between them and salvation, and so laid down his life for a ransom for all without exception, and for such as have been one in God's love, so as approved of by him in Christ for salvation, and in the Covenant of Grace, and for such to fall so as to be damned eternally, and all of the like nature, I do believe is a doctrine from beneath, and not from above, and the teachers of it from Satan, and not from God, and to be rejected as such that oppose Christ and his Gospel.

8. I do believe the resurrection of the dead, that all shall rise and come to judgment, and every one give account of himself to God, and receive according to the things done in their bodies, whether they be good or bad; therefore no conscience ought to be forced in the matters of Religion, because no man can bear out another in his account to God, if in case he should cause him to sin.

9. I do believe the powers that are, as the civil Magistrates, and so, are of God, to whom God hath committed the Sword of justice, for the punishing of evil doers, and for the good of such as do well, in which respect they ought to be honored, obeyed, and assisted by all men, and of Christians especially, and that out of conscience to God, whose ordinance and ministers they are, and bear not the sword in vain, Rom. 13, I Pet. 2, Tit. 3.

And lastly, I do believe that there is an holy and blessed communion of Saints, that God of his grace calls such as belong to life by election, unto the fellowship of his Son by the Gospel, of which matter, God by his word and Spirit joins them together in his Covenant of grace, and so constitutes his Church, as I have before showed: And as God hath thus built for himself an holy habitation of such pure matter, and also after so holy a manner, even so hath he provided a way of preservation and safety for the same; as Isa. 26:1. We have a strong City, salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks: which City is said to have a wall both great and high, and built upon twelve foundations; great, that none shall break through, and high, that none shall overtop or get over, and strong in the foundation, that nothing shall shake it, and God hath said, that he will be a wall of fire round about, and the glory in the midst of it, and that he will keep it, and watch over it by night and by day, that nothing shall hurt it; and as God hath built himself a house after his own mind, and is a guard to the same; even so he is also said to beautify the same with salvation, and to make the place of his feet glorious, and that he will lay all her stones with fair colors, and her foundations with Sapphires, and her windows of Agars, and her gates of Carbuncles, and all her borders of pleasant stones, and all her children taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of her children. And as Christ does thus signify unto us the nature of his church both in respect of her matter, her form, her grace, and comely

order in him her head; even so he holds forth his love to her, and delight in her, by these and the like expressions of comfort and solace. The Lord hath chosen Zion, &c. Pas. 132.13,14; Eph. 2:21,23. Pas. 87.2,3; Gal. 4:26,31. Isa. 2.2; Isa. 62. 1,12, Ezek. 48:35. Rev. 21. 12,14, Zech. 2.5, Isa. 26.3, Isa. 4. 11,12,13. Rev. 21. 11,18,21, Cant. 4.7, Psal. 45.13.

Footnotes:

¹ One of the most thorough and earliest discussions of this important church and the historical source, the so-called "Kiffin Manuscript," from which we derive our knowledge of it is found in *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society* 7 vols (London: Baptist Union Publication Department, 1908/09-20/21) 1:202-256. Hereinafter, *TBHS*. White, in the work cited above, engages the discussion of the authorship of the manuscript. W. T. Whitley argues that Kiffin did not write the manuscript, but Henry Jessey did. White counters that Kiffin could well have been the author though it is by no means certain.

² *TBHS* 1:231.

³ John Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull subject of Baptisme*, (London: Printed and are to be sold by Henry Hills in Fleet-Yardover against the Prison, 1652) [p.?] The text used for this article was taken from a version on the internet produced by The Old Faith Baptist Church Rt. 1, Box 517 Magazine, Arkansas, 72943, copyright, 1993. np

⁴ Spilsbury, *Lawfull* [?].

⁵ Spilsbury, *Lawfull* [?].

⁶ Spilsbury, *Gods Ordinance, the Saints Priviledge* (London: Printed by M. Simmons, 1646), 26, 27.

⁷ *The First London Confession with an Appendix by Benjamin Cox* (Rochester: Backus Book Publishers, 1981), 31.



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John Spilsbury enters the Baptist story through the records of the Jacob-Lathorp-Jessey church.^[1] Vigorous discussion on the issues of the proper subjects and the proper mode of baptism had occupied the church for several years when, in 1638, a note records, "Mr. Tho. Wilson, Mr. Pen, & H. Pen, & more being convenced that Baptism was not for Infants, but professed Believers joyned wth Mr. Jo. Spilsbury ye Churches favour being desired therein."^[2] From that point Spilsbury grabbed ecclesiological issues by the theological throat and helped construct a vigorously argued foundation for Particular Baptists.

From Spilsbury's pastoral doctrine, two issues, expansively developed, received forceful treatment: the constitution of a Christian congregation and the invincible efficacy of Christ's work for His people. He published in 1643 *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme* which he reissued in a second edition in 1652, "Corrected and enlarged by the Author." In 1646 he issued *God's Ordinance, The Saints Priviledge*. Benjamin Coxe transcribed and enlarged the second part of this work.

Spilsbury's presentation of believer's baptism by immersion of necessity engaged covenantal theology. He approved covenant theology and built his doctrine of the church on the infallible certainty of the eternal covenant of grace; he argued, however, that the spirituality of the new covenant in Christ eliminated the possibility of an infant's participation in it. The issue of the salvation of infants dying in infancy he treated as an area of mystery. One's answer to that question does not affect the revealed qualifications for those who may legitimately receive new covenant ordinances. Though the visible perpetuity of the old covenant included the circumcision of male infants, the exclusion of infants from the sign of the new does not mean that the new is less encouraging in its privileges than the old. All participation in the positive provisions of the old covenant was only a shadow of the spiritual reality of the new. An infant's exclusion from the positive ordinance of baptism forbids to him, or her, no spiritual blessing. The new covenant assumes the effectual working of the Spirit to create a believing community justified by faith in Christ and employs new positive ordinances as the symbols of its character. Believer's baptism, not infant baptism, corresponds to the nature of the new covenant, stands alone as enjoined by the Lord's authority, and alone is practiced by the apostles. Any other baptism is not baptism at all but a faulty cornerstone that will bring down the church. Protestants, therefore, who retain infant baptism keep themselves in the company of antichrist. They must return to Rome or go forward to the true constitution of the church.^[3]

Spilsbury's first work, *The Lawfull Subject of Baptisme*, dealt at length with the particular task of fitting and preparing the matter, that is how sinners are made fit for constituting a church. In the final analysis, Spilsbury sees four elements that merge in the constituting of a New Testament church. First, must come the Word of God "which is to fit and prepare the matter for the form." The preaching of the Word

assaults the pride of man, smooths his "hard and rough turbulent" spirit, aligns his "crooked and Serpent-like nature," and brings him humbly to embrace the "low and mean condition of Christ upon His cross."

Second, this same Word so convinces the sinner of its truth that its leaven "seasons and sweetens the whole man." The Word operates like a "fire that breaks forth and discovers itself" with such clarity in "such as have it," that they delineate specific truths from that Word. A confession of faith consisting of particular doctrines naturally develops. Others so prepared "come to one and the same mind and judgment in it."

This leads to the third "constituting cause" of a church. The believers so fitted by the Word now covenant to be a body of believers joined by "free and mutual consent and agreement upon the practice of that truth so by God revealed, and by faith received." This voluntary covenant precedes the ordinances. The fourth cause follows, the Spirit's work in knitting and uniting their hearts together in truth. A corporate witness to propositional truths provides the only clear evidence that such a work of the Spirit has, in fact, occurred.

Their practical subjection to Christ in the said truth, by them received and agreed upon as aforesaid, and this is the Covenant that forms the Church, which ever goes in order before the external administration of any other ordinance than the matters agreement together for orderly practice; for persons must be informed of the truth in judgment, and bound by the same in conscience, and agree upon the practice, before the same can orderly be put into execution.[\[4\]](#)

Once such agreement in conversion and truth is ascertained and the "matter," converted and convinced persons, so constituted has covenanted with fully informed conscience to be the people of God, this covenant is sealed with baptism. "Thus being in Covenant with God by faith in Jesus Christ, in which their state consists, and so the agreement made, and the covenant passed between them, now the seal is set to. Which is the outward ordinance of Baptism, to confirm the same."[\[5\]](#)

The point must be made clearly and without equivocation that the earliest Particular Baptists, as well as General Baptists, established their churches by agreement to a confession of faith. Spilsbury considered this as necessary, not just convenient and for the well-being of the church, but for the being of the church. Spilsbury declared in no uncertain terms that saving faith must be manifest in the hearty approval and assertion of a body of propositional truths. No church, and thus no baptism, could exist apart from submission to orthodox evangelicalism embodied in a confession of faith. Submission to such constituted the covenantal agreement necessary before baptism in Spilsbury's doctrine of the church. This union must first exist before communion in any other privileges may be enjoyed for the "comfort and well being" of the body. He summarizes the content of a true "confession of Christ" in part one of *Gods Ordinance the Saints Priviledge*. The confession of Christ, including all the biblical truths about him, must be culminated in baptism.

The confession that Christ requires of men so believing, is to confesse him in his Name

and Titles that his Father hath honoured him with, and set him out by, *viz.* To be a sufficient and onely Saviour, and the Mediatour of the new Testament; as King, Priest, and Prophet. A Priest to redeeme and purchase his people; a Prophet to teach and instruct that people; and a King to protect and defend the said people in their obedience to the truth, revealed by him as a Prophet, and by him as a King commanded to be obeyed; And as this is to be knowne and believed of such as expect life by him: even so it is to be confessed, by a professed subjection to him in the same. The Rule of which professed subjection and confession, is the instituted order and administration of Christ's Testament; for no other confession doth he approve of but that which holds him forth to be Jesus Christ, the Sonne of God, come in the flesh, dead, and risen againe, ascended, and exalted at Gods right hand, to the throne of his Father *David*; and so to be Lord of Lord, and King of Kings. And submission to the instituted order and administration of Christ's Testament, is an ordained confession of this believing in him, in a professed subjection to him. This confession doth Christ therefore require of such as believe in him, and ownes no believing unto salvation in his new Testament, once confirmed by his death, where this is refused.... If there be no baptizing into Christ, then is there not confession of Christ, according to his appointment, then no faith to salvation by Christ, expresly owned.[\[6\]](#)

A truly orthodox confession, arising from true faith, would, according to Spilsbury, certainly culminate in true baptism. Refusal to submit to this ordinance meant the absence of true profession and true faith, "expresly owned." Spilsbury might be excluding from salvation anyone who does not go on to believer's baptism. Probably the meaning of "expresly owned" is that, apart from volitional submission to the established ordinance, the *public* confession whereby one says, "I have faith in Christ alone as Savior" is absent. Spilsbury's arguments for the rightness of believer's baptism found virtually no detractors from within Baptist ranks; its necessity as a public owning of Christ became common doctrine. On the other hand, if one applies the statement rigorously, that apart from believer's baptism there is no saving faith, few if any followers can be found in subsequent Baptist history. Perhaps this ambiguity gave rise to article XVI of the appendix to the 1646 edition of the London confession written by Mr. Spilsbury's friend and co-laborer, Benjamin Cockes (Cox).

Although a true believer, whether baptized, or unbaptized, be in the state of salvation, and shall certainly be saved: Yet in obedience to the command of Christ every believer ought to desire baptism, and to yield himself to be baptized according to the rule of Christ in His word: And where this obedience is in faith performed, there Christ makes this His ordinance a means of unspeakable benefit to the believing soul, Acts 2:38, 22:16; Rom. 6:3, 4; 1 Pet.3:21. And a true believer *that here sees the command of Christ lying upon him*, cannot allow himself in disobedience thereunto, Acts 24:16.[\[7\]](#) [emphasis added]

The personal confession of ten articles Spilsbury submitted for the "Godly reader to judge, what difference there is between him and me, in the main, that men should be so incensed against me, as to seek my life, as some have done." Spilsbury wanted to disarm those who cast "reproachful clamors... upon all without exception, that seem to be of my judgment about baptism" by declaring "a word of my faith, what I believe and hold to be truth, and desire to practice the same." One year later, Spilsbury

would join with the other Particular Baptist churches in London in publishing and signing the First London Confession.

1. I do believe that there is only one God, who is distinguished in 3 persons; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost; yet but one in nature, or essence, without divisions, and incommunicable, who made the world, and all things therein, by the word of his power, & governs them by his wise providence.
2. I believe that God made man in his own Image, an upright and perfect creature, consisting of soul and body: which body God framed of the earth, and breathed into the same the breath of life, and man became a living soul. To whom God gave a law, upon his keeping of which depends all his happiness, and upon the contrary attended his misery, which took effect; for he breaking that law, he fell under the curse, and wrath of God lay upon him and all his posterity. By which fall man lost the knowledge of God, and utterly disabled himself of all ability ever to recover the same again.
3. I believe God out of the counsel of his will, did, before he made the world, elect and choose some certain number of his foreseen fallen creatures, and appointed them to eternal life in his Son, for the glory of his grace: which number so elected shall be saved, come to glory, & the rest left in sin to glorify his justice.
4. I believe that God in the fullness of his own time, did send his son, the 2d. person, who in the womb of the virgin Mary, assumed mans nature, and in the same he suffered death upon the cross, only as he was man, to satisfy his Fathers justice, for the sins of his elect, & that he lay 3 days and 3 nights in his grave, from whence he arose the third day by the power of his Godhead, for the justification of all for whose sins he died, and that in the same body Christ died, he arose from the death, and afterwards ascended into heaven, the place of glory, where he was before, and there to remain until he comes at the last day to judge the world in righteousness.
5. I believe that God of his grace, in his own time, effectually calls such as shall be saved to the knowledge of the truth, who is said, of his own will to beget us by the word of truth: in which work of grace, nature is as passive, as a child in the parents begetting of it; and so God by His Spirit works faith in the hearts of all such to believe in Christ, and his righteousness, only for justification. And thus they are made righteous before God in Christ, and so conformable to the will of God the Father through the Son; and also made holy through the work of regeneration, and the holy Spirit of grace dwelling in them; yet all such have still, as long as they live here in the flesh, remaining in them, an old man, that original corruption, the flesh that wars against the spirit, which hinders them in their obedience both to God and to man, and many times draws them to that which is evil, and contrary to their intentions; yet all of them shall through Christ overcome, and safely be brought to glory at last.

6. I believe the holy Scriptures to be the word of God, and have the only authority to bind the conscience to the obedience of all therein contained, and are the all sufficient rule, by the Spirit of God to guide a man in all his obedience both to God and man.

7. As for the absence of original sin, and power in the will to receive and refuse grace and salvation being generally offered by the Gospel, and Christ dying for all persons universally, to take away sin that stood between them and salvation, and so laid down his life for a ransom for all without exception, and for such as have been one in God's love, so as approved of by him in Christ for salvation, and in the Covenant of Grace, and for such to fall so as to be damned eternally, and all of the like nature, I do believe is a doctrine from beneath, and not from above, and the teachers of it from Satan, and not from God, and to be rejected as such that oppose Christ and his Gospel.

8. I do believe the resurrection of the dead, that all shall rise and come to judgment, and every one give account of himself to God, and receive according to the things done in their bodies, whether they be good or bad; therefore no conscience ought to be forced in the matters of Religion, because no man can bear out another in his account to God, if in case he should cause him to sin.

9. I do believe the powers that are, as the civil Magistrates, and so, are of God, to whom God hath committed the Sword of justice, for the punishing of evil doers, and for the good of such as do well, in which respect they ought to be honored, obeyed, and assisted by all men, and of Christians especially, and that out of conscience to God, whose ordinance and ministers they are, and bear not the sword in vain, Rom. 13, I Pet. 2, Tit. 3.

And lastly, I do believe that there is an holy and blessed communion of Saints, that God of his grace calls such as belong to life by election, unto the fellowship of his Son by the Gospel, of which matter, God by his word and Spirit joins them together in his Covenant of grace, and so constitutes his Church, as I have before showed: And as God hath thus built for himself an holy habitation of such pure matter, and also after so holy a manner, even so hath he provided a way of preservation and safety for the same; as Isa. 26:1. We have a strong City, salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks: which City is said to have a wall both great and high, and built upon twelve foundations; great, that none shall break through, and high, that none shall overtop or get over, and strong in the foundation, that nothing shall shake it, and God hath said, that he will be a wall of fire round about, and the glory in the midst of it, and that he will keep it, and watch over it by night and by day, that nothing shall hurt it; and as God hath built himself a house after his own mind, and is a guard to the same; even so he is also said to beautify the same with salvation, and to make the place of his feet glorious, and that he will lay all her stones with fair colors, and her foundations with Sapphires, and her windows of Agars, and her gates of Carbuncles, and all her borders of pleasant stones, and all her children taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of her children. And as Christ does thus signify unto us the nature of his church both in respect of her matter, her form, her grace, and comely

order in him her head; even so he holds forth his love to her, and delight in her, by these and the like expressions of comfort and solace. The Lord hath chosen Zion, &c. Pas. 132.13,14; Eph. 2:21,23. Pas. 87.2,3; Gal. 4:26,31. Isa. 2.2; Isa. 62. 1,12, Ezek. 48:35. Rev. 21. 12,14, Zech. 2.5, Isa. 26.3, Isa. 4. 11,12,13. Rev. 21. 11,18,21, Cant. 4.7, Psal. 45.13.

Footnotes:

¹ One of the most thorough and earliest discussions of this important church and the historical source, the so-called "Kiffin Manuscript," from which we derive our knowledge of it is found in *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society* 7 vols (London: Baptist Union Publication Department, 1908/09-20/21) 1:202-256. Hereinafter, *TBHS*. White, in the work cited above, engages the discussion of the authorship of the manuscript. W. T. Whitley argues that Kiffin did not write the manuscript, but Henry Jessey did. White counters that Kiffin could well have been the author though it is by no means certain.

² *TBHS* 1:231.

³ John Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull subject of Baptisme*, (London: Printed and are to be sold by Henry Hills in Fleet-Yardover against the Prison, 1652) [p.?] The text used for this article was taken from a version on the internet produced by The Old Faith Baptist Church Rt. 1, Box 517 Magazine, Arkansas, 72943, copyright, 1993. np

⁴ Spilsbury, *Lawfull* [?].

⁵ Spilsbury, *Lawfull* [?].

⁶ Spilsbury, *Gods Ordinance, the Saints Priviledge* (London: Printed by M. Simmons, 1646), 26, 27.

⁷ *The First London Confession with an Appendix by Benjamin Cox* (Rochester: Backus Book Publishers, 1981), 31.



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Shubal Stearns and the Separate Baptist Tradition

[Josh Powell](#)

This article was written in collaboration with Tom Nettles. Dr. Nettles has expanded and edited this material further for inclusion in The Baptists, Vol. 2.

The year was 1758 and God had richly blessed the gospel strategy of the Separate Baptists in North Carolina. Just three years before, a group led by Shubal^[1] Stearns had settled at Sandy Creek and constituted a church. Within those short three years with "a few churches having been constituted, and these having a number of branches which were fast maturing for churches,"^[2] Stearns thought it would be a good idea to start an association. The Separates' remarkable personalities, novel practices, and fiery style of worship and preaching prompted some special attention from the Particular Baptists. Because some gave credit to disturbing reports about these ecclesiological kin, John Gano, who had been commissioned to his work in North Carolina by the Philadelphia Association, attended the 1759 meeting of the Sandy Creek Association. "He was sent, it seems, to inquire into the state of these *New Light Baptists*."^[3] Robert Baylor Semple reports the visit in this way:

He was received by Stearns with great affection. But the young and illiterate preachers were afraid of him, and kept at a distance. They even refused to invite him into their Association. All this he bore patiently, sitting by while they transacted their business. He preached also every day. His preaching was in the Spirit of the Gospel. Their hearts were opened, so that before he left they were greatly attached to him.... This Association was also conducted in love, peace and harmony. When Mr. Gano returned to his own country, being asked what he thought of these Baptists, he replied, that "*doubtless the power of God was among them; that although they were rather immethodical, they certainly had the root of the matter at heart.*"^[4]

What made the Separates "rather immethodical," and what did Gano mean by "the root of the matter"? At least part of the answer is found in the magnetic life and thought of Shubal Stearns.

Biographical Information

Stearns was born on January 28, 1706, in Boston. His parents' names were Shubal and Rebecca Larriford Stearns.^[5] Early in his life his parents moved to Tolland, Connecticut, where they joined the Congregational church. Stearns remained a Congregationalist until 1745 when he heard the evangelist George Whitefield preach. Stearns was converted and adopted the New Light understanding of revival and conversion. William G. McLoughlin summarizes the dynamic: "Religious zeal spilled over into very bitter quarrels about doctrine, church government, and ritual. By the end of the 1740's many fervent New

Lights were ready to conclude that it was impossible for them to reform established churches from within." They must, therefore, start new churches. Their favorite verse was 2 Corinthians 6:17--"Come out from among them, and be ye separate"--from which they received the stigma of "come-outers" or "Separates."[\[6\]](#) Stearns followed suit and subsequently separated from the main stream, or Old Light, Congregational church.[\[7\]](#) David Benedict states:

Soon after these reformers, who were first called New-Lights, and afterward Separates, were organized into distinct Societies, they were joined by Shubael Stearns, a native of Boston, (Mass.) who, becoming a preacher labored among them until 1751....[\[8\]](#)

In 1751 Stearns' church became troubled with the pedobaptist-antipedobaptist controversy.[\[9\]](#) In rapid succession, Stearns rejected infant baptism, received baptism from Reverend Wait Palmer, minister of Stoneington,[\[10\]](#) and by March 20, 1751 was ordained into the Baptist ministry. Palmer and Joshua Morse, the pastor of New London conducted the ordination.[\[11\]](#) The epithet "separate" remained with those that moved to the Baptist position, thus denominating them the Separate Baptists. The Separates brought with them the zeal and spirit of first leader, George Whitefield. By emulating his example, a fast growing body of Separate Baptists, fervent in evangelism and strong in heart-felt religion, began in New England. They were immensely different from established Baptist churches in New England.[\[12\]](#) Stearns ministered as a missionary preacher to New England until the year 1754.[\[13\]](#)

Three years after his adoption of the Baptist beliefs, Stearns moved South (1754), believing that the Spirit urged him to do so. He, along with several of his members, moved to Opekon, Virginia.[\[14\]](#) Here Stearns joined Daniel Marshall who in 1748 had married Stearns' sister, Martha, and already had become active in the Baptist church there.[\[15\]](#) While in Virginia, Stearns and Marshall preached with such warmth and demonstrated such zeal, that some members took offense and lodged a complaint with the Philadelphia Association against them as disorderly ministers. This charge eventually was judged as groundless and those who dissented were charged "rather to nourish than complain of such gifts."[\[16\]](#)

Impatient because he had not met with the success that he had desired, Stearns decided to leave Virginia. He received information from some friends in North Carolina about the need for a preacher in that area. That was enough to convince him to move further south on November 22, 1755. "He and his party once more got under way, and, traveling about two hundred miles, came to Sandy Creek, in Guilford county North Carolina."[\[17\]](#) The group consisted of eight men, along with their wives, the majority of which were Stearns' relatives.[\[18\]](#) Not long after arriving at Sandy Creek the group constituted as a church under the same name. Benedict states:

As soon as they arrived, they built them a little meetinghouse, and these 16 persons formed themselves into a church, and chose Shubael Stearns for their pastor, who had, for his assistants at that time, Daniel Marshall and Joseph Breed, neither of whom were ordained.[\[19\]](#)

Stearns remained pastor there until his death and it was from this "meetinghouse" that the revival in the South spread. The church grew from 16 to 606 in a short period. Church members spread into other areas and started other churches, and then in 1758 the Sandy Creek Association was formed. The Association grew rapidly causing Morgan Edwards to exclaim that, "in 17 years, [Sandy Creek] has spread its branches westward as far as the great river Mississippi; southward as far as Georgia; eastward to the sea and Chesopeck[sic] Bay; and northward to the waters of the Pottowmack[sic]; it, in 17 years, is become mother, grandmother, and great grandmother to 42 churches, from which sprang 125 ministers." [20]

A description of Stearns is necessarily dependent upon Morgan Edwards who passed through Sandy Creek in 1772, the year after Stearns' death. From people that knew and loved Stearns dearly he developed this description.

Mr. Stearns was but a little man, but a man of good natural parts and sound judgment. Of learning he had but a small share, yet was pretty well acquainted with books. His voice was musical and strong, which he managed in such a manner as, one while, to make soft impressions on the heart, and fetch tears from the eyes in a mechanical way; and anon, to shake the very nerves and throw the animal system into tumults and perturbations.... His character was indisputably good, both as a man, a Christian and a preacher. [21]

Although there are no extant sermons from Stearns, the doctrine of the new birth appeared to be central to his preaching. This doctrine was new to his hearers in the central part of North Carolina. Although they had been raised in the Christian religion, the people "were grossly ignorant of its essential principles." [22] Hearing that religion was much more than outward signs seemed very odd.

The preaching style of the Separates was "much more novel than their doctrines." [23] Stearns was the figure to which all the Separate preachers looked. In fact, Edwards claimed that "all the Separate ministers copy after him in tones of voice and actions of body." [24] The group had "acquired a very warm and pathetic address, accompanied by strong gestures and a singular tone of voice" [25] described by some as a "holy whine." Stearns' message was always the simple gospel, which was "easily understood even by rude frontiersmen" [26] particularly when the preacher himself felt overwhelmed with the importance of his subject. Most of the frontier people of North Carolina had never heard such doctrine or observed such earnest preaching.

Stearns labored in this area until 1771. Just two years before his death, Stearns had a vision that he related to many friends. In turn, these friends passed it on to Edwards to procure Stearns' legacy. Edwards relates it accordingly:

The time was Sep. 7, 1769 memorable for a great storm. As he was ascending a hill in his way home he observed in the horizon a white heap like snow; upon his drawing near he perceived the heap to stand suspended in the air 15 or 20 feet above ground. Presently it fell to the ground and divided itself into three parts; the greatest part moved northward; a

less towards the south; and the third, which was less than either but much brighter, remained on the spot where the whole fell; as his eyes followed that which went northward, it vanished; he turned to look at the other, and found they also had disappeared. While the old man pondered what the phantom division [sic], and motions of it meant this thought struck him, "The bright heap is our religious interest, which will divide and spread north and south, but chiefly northward; while a small part remains at Sandy-creek."[\[27\]](#)

Through the efforts of Stearns, the Great Awakening spread deep into the South. Looking back Stearns' explanation of the vision was proven true.

"Rather Immethodical"

In an attempt to understand what John Gano meant by saying that the Separates were immethodical, one does not have to look far. Gano was a Particular (Calvinistic) Baptist from New Jersey that had been petitioned by the Philadelphia Association to minister at the Jersey Settlement close to Sandy Creek. He was educated and extremely polished, as were many of the Particular Baptist ministers. It was no wonder that the "illiterate ministers" were afraid of him. The methods that he would refer to as "immethodical" were then compared to those of the Philadelphia Association, as well as orthodox church practices. Their deep impressions of the Spirit, practice of nine rites, and allowance of women preaching were without a doubt in the front of Gano's mind when he made his statement.

Stearns and the rest of the Separates following him made much of their "instructions from heaven." Benedict states that they "had strong faith in the immediate teachings of the Spirit."[\[28\]](#) Those who earnestly sought God were given tokens of his will. Following these tokens one would "inevitably be led to the accomplishment of the two great objects of a Christian's life--the glory of God and the salvation of men."[\[29\]](#) While in New England, Stearns felt impressed that God wanted him to move South for a great work for the gospel. Seven other families believed in Stearns' vision "in which God bade him to take as many of his flock as would join him, and journey to the South where a great work should be done in extending His Kingdom."[\[30\]](#) Virginia did not hold promise of fulfilling the work he had envisioned. Friends informed him that in North Carolina settlers would ride forty miles to hear gospel preaching. This was his opportunity. He and his party picked up and moved two hundred miles to Sandy Creek in Guilford County, North Carolina. In retrospect Stearns' vision appeared to be verified by the great work accomplished at Sandy Creek.[\[31\]](#) Although Stearns maintained that these visions were "not contrary to reason" and one must still lean "in every step upon the same wisdom and power by which they were first actuated,"[\[32\]](#) Gano would advise great caution in adopting this understanding of divine leadership.

Another method that would have been considered "immethodical" was the practice of nine rites. These nine rites were baptism, the Lord's Supper, love feasts, laying on of hands, washing feet, anointing the sick, the right hand of fellowship, kiss of charity, and devoting children.[\[33\]](#) Little information can be found concerning the origin of these rites in the Separate tradition. Even among the Separate Baptists not all churches practiced these. These rites went far beyond the two ordinances of the Philadelphia

Confession and beyond Gano who believed that the Bible only ordained two; nine must have seemed excessive. This probably made other Baptist groups look in contempt toward the Separates because they believed that several of these rites were not scriptural.

The associational structure of Sandy Creek lacked the form and order of the Philadelphia Association. They elected no moderator, but waited on God to direct one of the messengers to take the lead in exercises. Such an "immethodical" meeting would have been remarkable to Gano from his highly ordered context. In addition, the Separates took less resolute action in deciding on the appropriateness of actions of church members. In 1758 they resolved that "dancing in the spirit," though unusual and perhaps trying to some pious persons, should be tolerated "because there was a genuine work of grace among the people."[\[34\]](#)

Edwards also claims that in addition to elders, Sandy Creek Church also had elderesses and deaconesses.[\[35\]](#) The allowance of women to have such a prominent role was without a doubt a practice that Gano would have frowned upon. The Philadelphia Association affirmed that women had the right, even the obligation, to speak in church on many occasions. In matters of discipline when they either accused others or defended themselves, and when called on to give testimony of a work of grace women must speak. "Hence the silence, with subjection, enjoined on all women in the church of God, is such a silence as excludes all women whomsoever from all degrees of teaching, ruling, governing, dictating, and leading in the church of God."[\[36\]](#) Martha Marshall, the wife of Daniel Marshall and sister of Stearns, became famous for her exhortations. Although little is known of her youth, it is possible that she started exhorting in New England.[\[37\]](#) Quoting Semple, Catherine Brekus states, "Marshall was 'a lady of good sense, singular piety, and surprising elocution' who frequently 'melted a whole concourse into tears by her prayers and exhortations.'" Knowing that this would bring great criticism from his readers, Semple shields them by stating that in her exhorting, Marshall never "usurped authority over the other sex."[\[38\]](#)

The Separate Baptists that settled at Sandy Creek and were led by Stearns lived in the spirit of the First Great Awakening and often conducted themselves as those in reaction against the severe criticisms of many who opposed the revival. J. M Cramp has set these practices in context.

They were not all suitably qualified for the work, as we should now judge; mistakes were committed and measures of doubtful propriety adopted, in some places; but such things might be expected in times of great spiritual excitement. It cannot be denied that the laborers were generally men of God, "full of the Holy Ghost and of faith." They had deep convictions of the evil of sin and the peril of a rebellious state. The love of God in Christ overpowered their souls. Their views of the solemn realities of another world were vivid and heart-affecting.... Their earnest appeals made the stout-hearted tremble, awed many a reprobate into silence, and wrung tears from daring and hardened offenders. Tens of thousand bowed before the majesty of truth.... We need not be surprised at some oddities.... If the churches composing the Sandy Creek Association in North Carolina were tenacious of the kiss of charity, the laying on of hands upon members, the appointment of elderesses, and such things;... and if, in some respects, the fervency of

New Light feelings got the better of discretion and decorum, we must bear in mind the peculiarities of the times. After a long season of cold and drought, the Lord "poured water upon him that was thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground;" the spiritual vegetation sprang up thick and strong, requiring skillful cultivators; and some detriment was experienced for want of care in pruning and training. In the course of a few years these wants were supplied, and suitable arrangement constituted. Surely we ought to prefer a revival of religion, though dished with some irregularities, to the death-like coldness of mere orthodoxy and form.[\[39\]](#)

In light of these methods, the Separates were held in suspicion at the time. The respected Gano's statement did much to help relations between his group and the Separates.[\[40\]](#)

"Root of the Matter"

When Gano affirmed that the Separate Baptists had the "root of the matter" he meant they had a genuine understanding of conversion and a theology to support it. Terry Wolever judges that Gano, "did not see so much of a *doctrinal* problem with the Separates," and in this "he reflected the general sentiment of the Particular Baptists towards the Separates."[\[41\]](#) This is certainly true of William Fristoe of the Kettocton Association where Stearns first made his appearance in the South.[\[42\]](#) Their doctrine, in Gano's opinion, was the "root of the matter" and formally differed little from the doctrine of the Philadelphia Confession.

Historical precedence makes this judgment virtually certain. Benjamin Miller's visit to Opekon, Virginia, in 1754 provides a clear test of the doctrinal content of the preaching of Stearns and his brother-in-law Daniel Marshall. As mentioned above, members had complained to the Philadelphia Association about supposed irregularities in the church, particularly under the influence of Daniel Marshall. Because he had been instrumental in the reformation of the church just years earlier, the Association sent Benjamin Miller to observe and judge if the complaints had any substance.

Miller had served faithfully as a pastor, an active member of the Philadelphia Association, and as an itinerant preacher. His name first appears in the Association minutes in 1747, a year in which the messengers gave a spirited defense of the church's duty to "call and prove their candidates for ministry" and the correlative duty of such candidates to wait with "self denying meekness, humbleness, and lowliness of mind to a further approbation from the churches."[\[43\]](#) They zealously sought to exclude those who had an indication of "a heavy, self-willed, obstinate, and ungovernable temper" and assure that the churches sufficiently tested for "the steady sound, and orthodox principles and regular behaviour" of those they would ordain to office.[\[44\]](#) They had affirmed, using the ministry of Paul and Barnabas in Antioch as an example, that persons not ordained might still function as teachers if so gifted. "What reason can be given why there may not be in churches men of useful gifts, and profitable to teach all the days of their life without ordination?"[\[45\]](#) Daniel Marshall would have been viewed in such a light at the time of Miller's in 1754 visit for, though not ordained, he had been licensed to preach by the church. His son's biographical narrative of Mr. Marshall states:

Here he became acquainted with a Baptist church belonging to the Philadelphia Association; and as the result of a close, impartial examination of their faith and order, he and my dear mother were baptized by immersion, in the forty-eighth year of his life. He was now called, as a licensed preacher, to the unrestrained exercise of his gifts; and though they were by no means above mediocrity, he was instrumental in awakening attention, in many of his hearers, to the interest of their souls.[\[46\]](#)

In 1752 the Philadelphia Association considered a query "Whether a person denyng unconditional election, the doctrine of original sin, and the final perseverance of the saints, and striving to affect as many as he can, may have full communion with the church?" The answer returned to and approved by the assembly stated that such a notion "opposeth the absolute sovereignty of God over his creatures contrary to express scriptures." They went on to affirm the three parts of the query by asserting and arguing from Scripture that "personal election is the truth of God,...That we are originally sinful or partakers of the first sin of human nature [and]...are justly shut out of our native happiness...unless our title be restored by the second Adam...by being effectually called in time." The word to the churches that followed this underscored the seriousness of their commitment to these principles.

Upon which fundamental doctrines of Christianity, next to the belief of an eternal God, our faith must rest; and we adopt, and would that all the churches belonging to the Baptist Association, be well grounded in accordance to our Confession of faith and catechism, and cannot allow that any are true members of our churches who deny the said principles, be their conversation outward what it will.[\[47\]](#)

Two years later, 1754, the Opekon and Kettocton churches in Virginia were received into the Association. Benjamin Miller, in attendance when both statements mentioned above were approved, made his investigative trip to Virginia apparently during the few months that Marshall, and then Stearns, were with them. Robert B. Semple describes the event charmingly.

They were very zealous, had much preaching, and were remarkable warm in their religious exercises, and more particularly so after Mr. Daniel Marshall came among them. They went to such lengths that some of the more cold-hearted lodged a complaint in the Philadelphia Association. Mr. Miller was sent to see what was the matter. When he came he was highly delighted with the exercises, joined them cordially, and said if he had such warm-hearted Christians in his church he would not take gold for them. He charged those who had complained rather to nourish than complain of such gifts.[\[48\]](#)

What can we conclude from these events and the very positive judgment rendered by Miller? Would Miller give such cordial approval to "exercises" or teaching inconsistent with the clear judgments recently rendered by the Association in which he was an active participant and whose integrity he was determined to uphold? Should we conclude that he cared little about the doctrinal and experiential orthodoxy of a church that he so recently had labored in to set right in these matters? When the church was "new-modeled...upon the Calvinistic plan,"[\[49\]](#) more was at stake than the simple imposition of a

new confessional form on the church. John Gano recalled that only three of the original church could "give an account of experiencing a work of Grace." Six others who visited with them professed faith in Christ and so were baptized. A number of the old members expressed to John Gano "their deplorable state" and said that they had been misled and hoped that the ministers, including Miller, would not blame them. Gano comforted them and spoke to them from the words, "They being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God." Several of those were converted and became zealous members of the church.

[\[50\]](#)

Unless Miller was completely without discernment (very unlikely, as he was appointed to tasks that required careful and compassionate discernment) or had shaken off the former convictions of his soul concerning the truth and the character of gospel ministry (also highly unlikely in light of his continued work and responsible leadership in the Philadelphia Association), we may be justified in concluding several things concerning the Stearns/Marshall tandem.

First, their giftedness in proclamation and teaching appeared adequate in content and edifying in effect. Whether Miller heard either Marshall or Stearns is not clear. The "impartial examination" of Marshall's faith and his exercising among them, however, would certainly be consistent with what Miller observed.

Second, their spirit, though exuberant, did not come under censure as arrogant, prideful, or improperly enthusiastic but as warmly spiritual. The Regular Baptists of the Philadelphia Association had experienced their share of overwhelming conviction and knew that both despair and joy can periodically overwhelm and alter physical strength. The warmth of the exercises was a delight, not an offense.

Third, their theology supported the strength of the exercises. Miller accepted the judgment of the Association that it "cannot allow that any are true members of our churches who deny the said principles" of total depravity, unconditional election, effectual calling, and the certain perseverance of God's elect. Had the theology been error cloaked in zeal, he would never have admonished the petitioners to nourish rather than complain of such gifts. Morgan Edwards confirms this judgment in his chronicle of the Separate Baptists in Virginia. "These are called Separates," he wrote, "not because they withdrew from the Regular-baptists but because they have hitherto declined any union with them." He then made this doctrinal observation: "The faith and order of both are the same, except some trivial matters not sufficient to support a distinction, but less a disunion; for both avow the *Century-Confession* and the annexed discipline."[\[51\]](#)

These considerations combined with the extant doctrinal statements should leave little doubt about the views of truth that drove Shubal Stearns and the Separate Baptists.

Robert Devin includes the covenant of the Sandy Creek church in his history of the Grassy Creek church, founded under the influence of Daniel Marshall. The preamble establishes doctrinal parameters for their union.

Holding believers baptism; the laying on of hands; *particular election of grace by the predestination of God in Christ; effectual calling by the Holy Ghost*; free justification through the imputed righteousness of Christ; progressive sanctification through God's grace and truth; the final perseverance of the saints in grace; the resurrection of these bodies after death, at that day which God has appointed to judge the quick and the dead by Jesus Christ, by the power of God, and by the resurrection of Christ; and life everlasting. Amen.[\[52\]](#)

The explicit Calvinism of the preamble has given some historians pause as to whether it actually reflects the original work of Stearns. A documentary trail, however, makes the denial highly problematic from a historian's standpoint. According to George Walsh Paschall, Stearns wrote the document around 1757, [\[53\]](#) that is, everything "omitting the Calvinism, reflects the views of Stearns."[\[54\]](#) Paschall so judges because of his inveterate hostility to Calvinism. He was glad that the evangelization of North Carolina did not depend on the Regular Baptists of the Philadelphia Association because "their rigid Calvinism would have kept them from prosecuting missionary labors with success." The blame for the lack of dominance in Eastern North Carolina, in fact, lies at the feet of the Philadelphia Association: Paschall argued, "With ministers schooled in the rigid Calvinism of the Philadelphia Confession, the wonderful progress of the Baptists of eastern North Carolina was at its end."[\[55\]](#) He claims that Stearns's ministry provided "the indispensable corrective to the blight of hyper-Calvinism which the ministers of the Philadelphia Association imposed on the General Baptist churches on their transformation to Particular Baptist churches."[\[56\]](#)

The narrative and commendation of the evangelistic fervor of Stearns and the Separate Baptists cannot be contradicted. That fact is not under dispute. Nor can one deny that different levels of adherence to preaching the central tenets of Calvinistic theology can be observed among them. Some dug deeply for doctrinal diamonds and waded to the chin into the counsels of God and built the exhortation directly on truths thus derived. Others felt less confident in their abilities in that kind of delivery but exhibited true zeal in their exhortations to faith in a crucified and risen savior and the necessity of the new birth. Some deemed zealous and effective tended more toward Arminianism. Semple gives insight into the attitude of the Separates toward this reality at the time of the union between the Separates and Regulars in Virginia in 1787. A large majority believed "as much in their confession of faith [the Philadelphia Confession] as they [the Regulars] did themselves," but "if there were some among them who leaned too much towards the Arminian system they were generally men of exemplary piety and great usefulness in the Redeemer's kingdom." They were willing to bear with some diversity than to break with such amiable Christians who had borne "the brunt and heat of persecution" and whose labors God had blessed; exclusion of such as these "would be like tearing the limbs from the body."[\[57\]](#)

Paschall's zeal against Calvinism is unjustified, therefore, and his reasonings proceed on two misleading assumptions. The operations of these assumptions mar his presentation and that of others who have employed his line of thinking. One is that the Baptists of the Philadelphia Association were hyper-Calvinists. That simply is not the case; such an accusation shows a misjudgment of the ministers of the churches in that association and a misunderstanding of hyper-Calvinism. Accordingly, the Regulars'

action toward the General Baptist churches is maligned, even though, similar to what happened in Virginia, the burden of concern was true conversion and the affirmation of the doctrines of the new birth and justification by faith among them.

A second is that the Separates must not have been serious Calvinists since they were evangelistic. Again this is a historical misjudgment. Huggins goes so far as to suggest that Stearns was Arminian,[\[58\]](#) but most prefer the safer term "modified" Calvinist. Lumpkin claims that "most Separates were modified Calvinists"[\[59\]](#) by which he means that, though they avoided some of the deleterious tendencies of some Arminians, "they either rejected or had little to say about the doctrines of predestination, limited atonement, and election of Calvinism."[\[60\]](#) James Mosteller tries to demonstrate this theological middlemanship. "They sailed an even, middle course," he reasons, "between the Scylla of hyper-Calvinism and the Charybdis of extreme Arminianism, the former of which dried up the Particular Baptists and the latter had watered down the General Baptists."[\[61\]](#)

The documents, as well as their own testimony, point in a different direction. One can conclude that they had little to say only by ignoring the documents that proclaim their beliefs. Their trust in sovereign grace injected their spirits with courage and confidence. John Leland captures this poetically in musing about the eternal counsel concerning the Separate Baptist preacher John Waller: "Waller is not ordained to wrath,/ But to employ his vital breath/ In the Redeemer's praise;/ His sins, thro' Christ, shall be forgiv'n, / and he shall ever reign in heav'n/ Thro' free and sov'reign grace." He pictures Waller himself, who suffered much at the hands of hostile authorities pleading for mercy for his hearers: "Father, forgive the stubborn race/ Subdue their hearts to sov'reign grace,/ That they may be forgiv'n."[\[62\]](#)

Putting prejudice aside, therefore, the paper trail still confronts us. If Stearns wrote the covenant of the Grassy Creek Church, as Devin claimed, he was indisputably a Calvinist. David Morgan admits, "The covenant could hardly express a more rigid Calvinist position than when it affirms a belief in 'particular election of grace by the predestination of God in Christ,' and 'the final perseverance of the saints in grace.'"[\[63\]](#) Apart from the pejorative overtones of "rigid," Morgan does not permit his non-Calvinist preference to obscure his historical conclusion. His severe misgivings at the "lack of consistency between what he believed and what he practiced,"[\[64\]](#) and the difficulty in understanding "how Stearns, or for that matter Whitefield and Edwards before him, could have reconciled an advocacy of unrestricted evangelism with a belief in particular election,"[\[65\]](#) succumbed to the evidence of the documents.

The "Principles of Faith" adopted by the Sandy Creek Association in 1816, coincide with the doctrinal statements in the covenant. Articles III and IV read:

III. That Adam fell from his original state of purity, and that his sin is imputed to his posterity; that human nature is corrupt, and that man, of his own free will and ability, is impotent to regain the state in which he was primarily placed.

IV. We believe in election from eternity, effectual calling by the Holy Spirit of God, and justification in his sight only by the imputation of Christ's righteousness. And we believe that they who are thus elected, effectually called, and justified, will persevere through

grace to the end, that none of them be lost.[\[66\]](#)

Members in 1816 would hardly have agreed to such strongly worded doctrines had they not been in agreement with them from the beginning. Further confirmation of this judgment is available in the "Abstract of the Article of Faith and Practice of the Kiokee Church of the Baptist Denomination." This church, established around 1771-2, embodied the mature convictions of Daniel Marshall, its founder as well as the founder of the Grassy Creek church from whose minutes the original covenant of Sandy Creek is taken. The unity of doctrine and language in all these documents is striking and bears witness to the authenticity of their convictions and gives a synopsis of their preaching.

According to God's appointment in his word, we do hereby in his name and strength covenant and promise to keep up and defend all the articles of Faith, according to God's word, such as the great doctrine of Election, effectual calling, particular redemption, Justification by the Imputed righteousness of Christ alone, sanctification by the spirit of God, Believers Baptism by immersion, the saints absolute final perseverance in Grace, the resurrection of the dead, future rewards and punishments...denying the Arian, Socinian, & Arminian errors, & every other principle contrary to the word of God.[\[67\]](#)

As already noted, it seems that these historians have made an assumption built upon a particular bias and the evidence of exceptional cases. If someone is Calvinistic, then he cannot be evangelistic. The reasoning, however, places them in a peculiar position against the sources themselves. Edwin Gaustad has claimed that "the theology of the Great Awakening was Calvinism."[\[68\]](#) Morgan places Stearns directly in this tradition.

The Baptist historian William Whitsitt summarized this influence in his unpublished book *Baptists in America*. His remark about the "New Divinity" is slightly anachronistic and perhaps his use of "all" in the first sentence does not take into account some rare but notable exceptions; his understanding, however, of the dominant theological framework is demonstrably true.

These Separate Baptists were all of them Calvinists by persuasion. They were not Calvinists of the stern old type that formerly had prevailed but rather Calvinists of the school of Jonathan Edwards and adherents of the New Divinity. On that account they were often described as New Lights. For the main part their sympathies and cooperation were given to the Calvinistic brethren in New England and against the Arminian Baptists. Thus by the agency of Mr. Whitefield a change was produced almost in the twinkling of an eye by means of which the Calvinistic Baptists gained ascendancy in the New England colonies. Nothing could have been more extraordinary or unexpected than such a transformation. Arminianism had been steadily growing in New England for several decades; making progress not only in the Baptist community as has been shown but likewise in the established order. Jonathan Edwards rose up to stem the tide and to stay the progress of defection, and by the aid of Whitefield accomplished a revolution. This revolution, however, was more apparent among the Baptists than in the ranks of the

Established Church. It altered the whole aspect of affairs.[\[69\]](#)

Whitsitt goes on to say that Whitefield's influence was not confined to New England. Calling them "Whitefieldian Baptists," he traces the influence into the South.

It was but a short season before one of these Separate Baptists from Connecticut, Shubael Stearns by name was set loose in the forests of North Carolina, where he started a fire that swept back into Virginia and forward into South Carolina and Georgia and took the whole South for the Baptists. Nine tenths of our denominational strength in the southern states is derived from Whitefield through the agency of Stearns and his co-laborer Daniel Marshall.

[\[70\]](#)

Whitsitt only states the obvious in pointing to the influence of Whitefield, a theme continued by David Morgan when he summarizes the Whitefieldian trajectory--"actually the Separates took up where Whitefield had left off, and when on his seventh trip to America he died at Newburyport, Massachusetts, on September 30, 1770, the Separate Baptists, more so than any other religious group were at that very moment, far to the south, carrying on in the Whitefield spirit of the 1740's."[\[71\]](#)

Distinctions urged between Stearns and the Separate Baptists on the one hand and the Philadelphia/Charleston Regular Baptists on the other are artificial. Their doctrine was the same as was their concern for gospel preaching and Holy Spirit-induced conversion. After their union at the end of the eighteenth through the first of the nineteenth century, the influence of one can hardly be distinguished from that of another. The growth of Baptists in the South comes from the strengths shared by both groups. Any dichotomy between Calvinism and evangelism in this union betrays a basic misunderstanding. The followers of Stearns helped bring into practice the evangelistic convictions of the Regulars; the confessional detail of the Regulars helped give expression to the theological convictions of the Separates. The union was not an incongruous mixture of incompatibles. That which Paschal rightly ascribes to Stearnes must be seen as the impact of one who shared the doctrinal convictions of his Regular brethren.

One who will try to come to a full understanding of the character, work and influence of Shubal Stearns, will, I think, become convinced that he is one of the great religious leaders of all time. Certainly the influence of no other American Baptist has been so great or far reaching as his...It has been given to few others to have followers and successors who have carried on their work with like zeal and spirit and success, as the followers and successors of Shubal Stearns have done, with the result that the Baptists of the South... today far outnumber all the other Baptists of the world.[\[72\]](#)

Conclusion

It is a deep regret that the Separate Baptists were not methodical enough to keep more records. Though they probably would have considered such recording a sacrilege, would not contemporary Baptists

benefit from a bold amanuensis daring to smuggle a verbatim of sermons by Stearnes? Solemn aspects of the story, in light of this absence, "have been only vaguely apprehended by Baptist historians."^[73] This fact is quite unfortunate. Despite the lack of sources, a fair assessment of what is already known would enhance our understanding of the Baptist foundation.

Gano's statement was a perfect description of the Separate Baptists. As noted before, he said that, "doubtless the power of God was among them; that although they were rather immethodical, they certainly had the root of the matter at heart." As their methods have been briefly examined, one can understand why Gano said what he did. Despite this, Gano assured his fellow Baptists that the Separates had their doctrine correct. Overarching all of this, he proclaimed that, "*doubtless the power of God was among them.*"

As for Stearns, "he was zealous but also sane, and his followers have been such; he knew how to gather, and knew how to conserve; he built upon a solid foundation, Jesus Christ, and his work abides."^[74] Charles Taylor concludes:

He was undoubtedly one of the greatest ministers that ever presented Jesus to perishing multitudes. Had he been a Romish priest, he would long since have been canonized and declared the patron saint of Carolina. Fervent supplications would have ascended and stately churches would have been dedicated to the holy and blessed saint Shubael Stearns, the apostle of North Carolina and the adjacent states.^[75]

Footnotes:

¹ "The correct spelling of Mr. Stearns' name seems to be that given by Edwards, 'Shubal.' Mr. Stearns himself so spelled it in signing four petitions in favor of men accused as Regulators, *Colonial Records*, IX, 27ff. The same spelling was used by Semple in his *History of Virginia Baptists*. The spelling 'Shubael,' a Scripture name, was used by Backus in his *Abridgment*, 250, in the year 1804, and later by Benedict and other writers." quoted in George Walsh Paschal, *History of North Carolina Baptists* (Raleigh, NC: The General Board, North Carolina Baptist Convention, 1930) , 228.

² David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World* (Boston: Lincoln & Edmands, 1813; reprint, Gallatin, TN: Church History Research & Archives, 1985) , II, 49 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

³ Robert Baylor Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia* revised and extended by G. W. Beale(originally published 1810, rev edition in 1894; reprint, Lafayette, Tenn.: Church History Research and Archives, 1976), 65. (page citations are to the reprint edition).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

⁵ William Latane Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations in the South* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1962), 21.

⁶ William G. McLoughlin, *Soul Liberty* (Hanover: Brown University Press, 1991) 105-6.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Benedict, *The Baptist Denomination*, II, 37.

⁹ Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 21.

¹⁰ Morgan Edwards, "Materials Towards the History of the Baptists in the Provinces of Maryland Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia," 19, Special Collections, James P. Boyce Centennial Library, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY. Also available as *Materials Towards a History of the Baptists*, prepared for publication by Eve B. Weeks and Mary B. Warren, 2 vols (Danielsville, GA: Heritage Papers) 1984. This was copyrighted by Mary B. Warren and thus will be referred to as "Warren." 2:93.

¹¹ Benedict, *The Baptist Denomination*, II, 37.

¹² Charles Curtis Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740-1800* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1962), 206-207.

¹³ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1972), 319.

¹⁴ Benedict, *The Baptist Denomination*, II, 38.

¹⁵ Robert Baylor Semple, *Baptists in Virginia*, 13n.

¹⁶ Semple, 376.

¹⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹⁸ The men of the group were Shubal Stearns, Peter Stearns, Ebenezer Stearns, Shubal Stearns, Jr., Daniel Marshall, Joseph Breed, Enos Stimpson, and Jonathan Polk. Semple, *Baptists in Virginia*, 14n. Morgan Edwards claims that while Stearns was married to Sarah Johnston he "left no issue." Edwards, *Materials*, 19. If this is the case, it can only be assumed that Shubal Stearns, Jr. would be his brother and not his son. The author can find no other reference to the family of Stearns.

¹⁹ Benedict, *The Baptist Denomination*, II, 38.

²⁰ Edwards, "Materials," 18. Warren, 2:92.

²¹ Ibid., 19. Warren, 2:93

²² Semple, *Baptists in Virginia*, 15.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Edwards, "Materials," 19. Warren, 2:93.

²⁵ Semple, *Baptists in Virginia*, 15.

²⁶ Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 31.

²⁷ Edwards, "Materials," 20. Warren, 2:94

²⁸ Benedict, *The Baptist Denomination*, II, 37.

²⁹ Semple, *Baptists in Virginia*, 13.

³⁰ Rufus W. Weaver, "The Invasion of the South by the Sainted Baptist Yankees," *The Chronicle* vol. XII no.4 (Oct. 1944) : 164-166.

³¹ Semple, *Baptists in Virginia*, 14.

³² Ibid., 13.

³³ Edwards, "Materials", 16. Warren, 2:91.

³⁴ George W. Purefoy, *A History of the Sandy Creek Association* (New York: Sheldon and Company Publishers, 1859) 75 as cited in Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 230.

³⁵ Edwards, "Materials," 16; Warren, 2:91.

³⁶ *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association from A. D. 1707 to A. D. 1807*, ed. A. D. Gillette (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851) 53. Hereinafter referred to as "Gillette."

³⁷ Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 62.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ J. M. Cramp. *Baptist History* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, nd) 535, 536, 545.

⁴⁰ Terry Wolever, *The Life and Ministry of John Gano* (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 1998), I, 304.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² William Fristoe, *A Concise History of the Kettocton Baptist Association* (Staunton: Printed by William Gilman Lyford, 1808), 21-23. Fristoe, deeply aware of the doctrinal stewardship of a minister [p. 35], said that "upon a more intimate acquaintance [and] upon close conversation and frequently hearing each other preach, it was found that they agreed in sentiment, held forth the gospel ordinances in the same manner, and of course children of the same family, the difference being only in name." (21, 22).

⁴³ Gillette, 55.

⁴⁴ Gillette, 52.

⁴⁵ Gillette, 51.

⁴⁶ Abraham Marshall, "Daniel Marshall" in *Lives of Virginia Baptist Ministers* Ed. J. B. Taylor, 2 vols (Richmond: Yale & Wyatt, 1837), 1:19.

⁴⁷ Gillette, 69.

⁴⁸ Semple, 376

⁴⁹ Semple, 376

⁵⁰ "Biographical Memoirs of John Gano" in Wolever, 1:46, 47.

⁵¹ Edwards [Warren], 2:43.

⁵² Robert I. Devin, *A History of Grassy Creek Baptist Church, From its Foundation to 1880, with Biographical Sketches of its Pastors and Ministers* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards, Broughton & Co., 1880), 43. See also James Donovan Mosteller, *A History of the Kiokee Baptist Church in Georgia* (Ann Arbor, MI:

Edwards Brothers, Inc., 1952), 267-269. This covenant should be compared to the covenant of the Kiokee church which was founded by Daniel Marshall. The statements are strikingly similar in wording, both decidedly Calvinistic, bringing more validity to the authorship of the Grassy Creek church covenant.

⁵³ George Walsh Paschal, *History of North Carolina Baptists* (Raleigh, NC: The General Board, North Carolina Baptist Convention, 1930), 401.

⁵⁴ Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, 403.

⁵⁵ George W. Paschal, "Shubal Stearns," *Review and Expositor* XXXVI (1939): 44.

⁵⁶ Paschal 270-71 as cited in Mosteller, 32, 34.

⁵⁷ Semple, 100.

⁵⁸ M. A. Huggins, *A History of North Carolina Baptists 1727-1932* (Raleigh, NC: The General Board, Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, 1967), 66.

⁵⁹ Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 62.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Mosteller, *Kiokee Baptist*, 22.

⁶² John Leland, *The Writings of John Leland*, ed. L. E. Greene (n.p., 1833; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), 413, 414.

⁶³ David T. Morgan, Jr., "The Great Awakening in North Carolina, 1740-1775: the Baptist Phase," *North Carolina Historical Review* vol. XLV, no.3 (July 1968): 272.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Morgan, "The Great Awakening in North Carolina," 272.

⁶⁶ William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969 [rev. ed]), 358.

⁶⁷ Included in Mosteller as "Appendix B," 267.

⁶⁸ Edwin S. Gaustad, "Baptists and the Great Awakening in New England," *The Chronicle* vol. XV no. 1

(Jan. 1952): 41.

⁶⁹ William Heth Whitsitt, "Baptists in America," handwritten ms, Special Collections, James P. Boyce Centennial Library, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Morgan, "The Great Awakening in North Carolina," 283.

⁷² Paschal, "Shubal Stearns," 57.

⁷³ Paschal, "Shubal Stearns," 43.

⁷⁴ Paschal, "Shubal Stearns," 57.

⁷⁵ Charles E. Taylor, "Elder Shubael Stearns," *North Carolina Baptist Historical Papers* vol. II no. 2 (Jan. 1898): 105. The author quotes from someone that he only identifies as "a more recent historian."



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Journal
Issue 44

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Founders Journal • Spring 2001 • pp. 16-31

Shubal Stearns and the Separate Baptist Tradition

Josh Powell

This article was written in collaboration with Tom Nettles. Dr. Nettles has expanded and edited this material further for inclusion in The Baptists, Vol. 2.

The year was 1758 and God had richly blessed the gospel strategy of the Separate Baptists in North Carolina. Just three years before, a group led by Shubal^[1] Stearns had settled at Sandy Creek and constituted a church. Within those short three years with "a few churches having been constituted, and

these having a number of branches which were fast maturing for churches,"[2] Stearns thought it would be a good idea to start an association. The Separates' remarkable personalities, novel practices, and fiery style of worship and preaching prompted some special attention from the Particular Baptists. Because some gave credit to disturbing reports about these ecclesiological kin, John Gano , who had been commissioned to his work in North Carolina by the Philadelphia Association, attended the 1759 meeting of the Sandy Creek Association. "He was sent, it seems, to inquire into the state of these *New Light Baptists*." [3] Robert Baylor Semple reports the visit in this way:

He was received by Stearns with great affection. But the young and illiterate preachers were afraid of him, and kept at a distance. They even refused to invite him into their Association. All this he bore patiently, sitting by while they transacted their business. He preached also every day. His preaching was in the Spirit of the Gospel. Their hearts were opened, so that before he left they were greatly attached to him.... This Association was also conducted in love, peace and harmony. When Mr. Gano returned to his own country, being asked what he thought of these Baptists, he replied, that "*doubtless the power of God was among them; that although they were rather immethodical, they certainly had the root of the matter at heart.*" [4]

What made the Separates "rather immethodical," and what did Gano mean by "the root of the matter"? At least part of the answer is found in the magnetic life and thought of Shubal Stearns.

Biographical Information

Stearns was born on January 28, 1706, in Boston. His parents' names were Shubal and Rebecca Larriford Stearns. [5] Early in his life his parents moved to Tolland, Connecticut, where they joined the Congregational church. Stearns remained a Congregationalist until 1745 when he heard the evangelist George Whitefield preach. Stearns was converted and adopted the New Light understanding of revival and conversion. William G. McLoughlin summarizes the dynamic: "Religious zeal spilled over into very bitter quarrels about doctrine, church government, and ritual. By the end of the 1740's many fervent New Lights were ready to conclude that it was impossible for them to reform established churches from within." They must, therefore, start new churches. Their favorite verse was 2 Corinthians 6:17--"Come out from among them, and be ye separate"--from which they received the stigma of "come-outers" or "Separates." [6] Stearns followed suit and subsequently separated from the main stream, or Old Light, Congregational church. [7] David Benedict states:

Soon after these reformers, who were first called New-Lights, and afterward Separates, were organized into distinct Societies, they were joined by Shubael Stearns, a native of Boston, (Mass.) who, becoming a preacher labored among them until 1751.... [8]

In 1751 Stearns' church became troubled with the pedobaptist-antipedobaptist controversy. [9] In rapid succession, Stearns rejected infant baptism, received baptism from Reverend Wait Palmer, minister of

Stoneington,[\[10\]](#) and by March 20, 1751 was ordained into the Baptist ministry. Palmer and Joshua Morse, the pastor of New London conducted the ordination.[\[11\]](#) The epithet "separate" remained with those that moved to the Baptist position, thus denominating them the Separate Baptists. The Separates brought with them the zeal and spirit of first leader, George Whitefield. By emulating his example, a fast growing body of Separate Baptists, fervent in evangelism and strong in heart-felt religion, began in New England. They were immensely different from established Baptist churches in New England.[\[12\]](#) Stearns ministered as a missionary preacher to New England until the year 1754.[\[13\]](#)

Three years after his adoption of the Baptist beliefs, Stearns moved South (1754), believing that the Spirit urged him to do so. He, along with several of his members, moved to Opekon, Virginia.[\[14\]](#) Here Stearns joined Daniel Marshall who in 1748 had married Stearns' sister, Martha, and already had become active in the Baptist church there.[\[15\]](#) While in Virginia, Stearns and Marshall preached with such warmth and demonstrated such zeal, that some members took offense and lodged a complaint with the Philadelphia Association against them as disorderly ministers. This charge eventually was judged as groundless and those who dissented were charged "rather to nourish than complain of such gifts."[\[16\]](#)

Impatient because he had not met with the success that he had desired, Stearns decided to leave Virginia. He received information from some friends in North Carolina about the need for a preacher in that area. That was enough to convince him to move further south on November 22, 1755. "He and his party once more got under way, and, traveling about two hundred miles, came to Sandy Creek, in Guilford county North Carolina."[\[17\]](#) The group consisted of eight men, along with their wives, the majority of which were Stearns' relatives.[\[18\]](#) Not long after arriving at Sandy Creek the group constituted as a church under the same name. Benedict states:

As soon as they arrived, they built them a little meetinghouse, and these 16 persons formed themselves into a church, and chose Shubael Stearns for their pastor, who had, for his assistants at that time, Daniel Marshall and Joseph Breed, neither of whom were ordained.[\[19\]](#)

Stearns remained pastor there until his death and it was from this "meetinghouse" that the revival in the South spread. The church grew from 16 to 606 in a short period. Church members spread into other areas and started other churches, and then in 1758 the Sandy Creek Association was formed. The Association grew rapidly causing Morgan Edwards to exclaim that, "in 17 years, [Sandy Creek] has spread its branches westward as far as the great river Mississippi; southward as far as Georgia; eastward to the sea and Chesopeck[sic] Bay; and northward to the waters of the Pottowmack[sic]; it, in 17 years, is become mother, grandmother, and great grandmother to 42 churches, from which sprang 125 ministers."[\[20\]](#)

A description of Stearns is necessarily dependent upon Morgan Edwards who passed through Sandy Creek in 1772, the year after Stearns' death. From people that knew and loved Stearns dearly he developed this description.

Mr. Stearns was but a little man, but a man of good natural parts and sound judgment. Of learning he had but a small share, yet was pretty well acquainted with books. His voice was musical and strong, which he managed in such a manner as, one while, to make soft impressions on the heart, and fetch tears from the eyes in a mechanical way; and anon, to shake the very nerves and throw the animal system into tumults and perturbations.... His character was indisputably good, both as a man, a Christian and a preacher.[\[21\]](#)

Although there are no extant sermons from Stearns, the doctrine of the new birth appeared to be central to his preaching. This doctrine was new to his hearers in the central part of North Carolina. Although they had been raised in the Christian religion, the people "were grossly ignorant of its essential principles."[\[22\]](#) Hearing that religion was much more than outward signs seemed very odd.

The preaching style of the Separates was "much more novel than their doctrines."[\[23\]](#) Stearns was the figure to which all the Separate preachers looked. In fact, Edwards claimed that "all the Separate ministers copy after him in tones of voice and actions of body."[\[24\]](#) The group had "acquired a very warm and pathetic address, accompanied by strong gestures and a singular tone of voice"[\[25\]](#) described by some as a "holy whine." Stearns' message was always the simple gospel, which was "easily understood even by rude frontiersmen"[\[26\]](#) particularly when the preacher himself felt overwhelmed with the importance of his subject. Most of the frontier people of North Carolina had never heard such doctrine or observed such earnest preaching.

Stearns labored in this area until 1771. Just two years before his death, Stearns had a vision that he related to many friends. In turn, these friends passed it on to Edwards to procure Stearns' legacy. Edwards relates it accordingly:

The time was Sep. 7, 1769 memorable for a great storm. As he was ascending a hill in his way home he observed in the horizon a white heap like snow; upon his drawing near he perceived the heap to stand suspended in the air 15 or 20 feet above ground. Presently it fell to the ground and divided itself into three parts; the greatest part moved northward; a less towards the south; and the third, which was less than either but much brighter, remained on the spot where the whole fell; as his eyes followed that which went northward, it vanished; he turned to look at the other, and found they also had disappeared. While the old man pondered what the phantom division [sic], and motions of it meant this thought struck him, "The bright heap is our religious interest, which will divide and spread north and south, but chiefly northward; while a small part remains at Sandy-creek."[\[27\]](#)

Through the efforts of Stearns, the Great Awakening spread deep into the South. Looking back Stearns' explanation of the vision was proven true.

"Rather Immethodical"

In an attempt to understand what John Gano meant by saying that the Separates were immethodical, one does not have to look far. Gano was a Particular (Calvinistic) Baptist from New Jersey that had been petitioned by the Philadelphia Association to minister at the Jersey Settlement close to Sandy Creek. He was educated and extremely polished, as were many of the Particular Baptist ministers. It was no wonder that the "illiterate ministers" were afraid of him. The methods that he would refer to as "immethodical" were then compared to those of the Philadelphia Association, as well as orthodox church practices. Their deep impressions of the Spirit, practice of nine rites, and allowance of women preaching were without a doubt in the front of Gano's mind when he made his statement.

Stearns and the rest of the Separates following him made much of their "instructions from heaven." Benedict states that they "had strong faith in the immediate teachings of the Spirit."[\[28\]](#) Those who earnestly sought God were given tokens of his will. Following these tokens one would "inevitably be led to the accomplishment of the two great objects of a Christian's life--the glory of God and the salvation of men."[\[29\]](#) While in New England, Stearns felt impressed that God wanted him to move South for a great work for the gospel. Seven other families believed in Stearns' vision "in which God bade him to take as many of his flock as would join him, and journey to the South where a great work should be done in extending His Kingdom."[\[30\]](#) Virginia did not hold promise of fulfilling the work he had envisioned. Friends informed him that in North Carolina settlers would ride forty miles to hear gospel preaching. This was his opportunity. He and his party picked up and moved two hundred miles to Sandy Creek in Guildford County, North Carolina. In retrospect Stearns' vision appeared to be verified by the great work accomplished at Sandy Creek.[\[31\]](#) Although Stearns maintained that these visions were "not contrary to reason" and one must still lean "in every step upon the same wisdom and power by which they were first actuated,"[\[32\]](#) Gano would advise great caution in adopting this understanding of divine leadership.

Another method that would have been considered "immethodical" was the practice of nine rites. These nine rites were baptism, the Lord's Supper, love feasts, laying on of hands, washing feet, anointing the sick, the right hand of fellowship, kiss of charity, and devoting children.[\[33\]](#) Little information can be found concerning the origin of these rites in the Separate tradition. Even among the Separate Baptists not all churches practiced these. These rites went far beyond the two ordinances of the Philadelphia Confession and beyond Gano who believed that the Bible only ordained two; nine must have seemed excessive. This probably made other Baptist groups look in contempt toward the Separates because they believed that several of these rites were not scriptural.

The associational structure of Sandy Creek lacked the form and order of the Philadelphia Association. They elected no moderator, but waited on God to direct one of the messengers to take the lead in exercises. Such an "immethodical" meeting would have been remarkable to Gano from his highly ordered context. In addition, the Separates took less resolute action in deciding on the appropriateness of actions of church members. In 1758 they resolved that "dancing in the spirit," though unusual and perhaps trying to some pious persons, should be tolerated "because there was a genuine work of grace among the people."[\[34\]](#)

Edwards also claims that in addition to elders, Sandy Creek Church also had eldersesses and deaconesses.

[35] The allowance of women to have such a prominent role was without a doubt a practice that Gano would have frowned upon. The Philadelphia Association affirmed that women had the right, even the obligation, to speak in church on many occasions. In matters of discipline when they either accused others or defended themselves, and when called on to give testimony of a work of grace women must speak. "Hence the silence, with subjection, enjoined on all women in the church of God, is such a silence as excludes all women whomsoever from all degrees of teaching, ruling, governing, dictating, and leading in the church of God." [36] Martha Marshall, the wife of Daniel Marshall and sister of Stearns, became famous for her exhortations. Although little is known of her youth, it is possible that she started exhorting in New England. [37] Quoting Semple, Catherine Brekus states, "Marshall was 'a lady of good sense, singular piety, and surprising elocution' who frequently 'melted a whole concourse into tears by her prayers and exhortations.'" Knowing that this would bring great criticism from his readers, Semple shields them by stating that in her exhorting, Marshall never "usurped authority over the other sex." [38]

The Separate Baptists that settled at Sandy Creek and were led by Stearns lived in the spirit of the First Great Awakening and often conducted themselves as those in reaction against the severe criticisms of many who opposed the revival. J. M Cramp has set these practices in context.

They were not all suitably qualified for the work, as we should now judge; mistakes were committed and measures of doubtful propriety adopted, in some places; but such things might be expected in times of great spiritual excitement. It cannot be denied that the laborers were generally men of God, "full of the Holy Ghost and of faith." They had deep convictions of the evil of sin and the peril of a rebellious state. The love of God in Christ overpowered their souls. Their views of the solemn realities of another world were vivid and heart-affecting.... Their earnest appeals made the stout-hearted tremble, awed many a reprobate into silence, and wrung tears from daring and hardened offenders. Tens of thousand bowed before the majesty of truth.... We need not be surprised at some oddities.... If the churches composing the Sandy Creek Association in North Carolina were tenacious of the kiss of charity, the laying on of hands upon members, the appointment of elderesses, and such things;... and if, in some respects, the fervency of New Light feelings got the better of discretion and decorum, we must bear in mind the peculiarities of the times. After a long season of cold and drought, the Lord "poured water upon him that was thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground;" the spiritual vegetation sprang up thick and strong, requiring skillful cultivators; and some detriment was experienced for want of care in pruning and training. In the course of a few years these wants were supplied, and suitable arrangement constituted. Surely we ought to prefer a revival of religion, though dished with some irregularities, to the death-like coldness of mere orthodoxy and form. [39]

In light of these methods, the Separates were held in suspicion at the time. The respected Gano's statement did much to help relations between his group and the Separates. [40]

"Root of the Matter"

When Gano affirmed that the Separate Baptists had the "root of the matter" he meant they had a genuine understanding of conversion and a theology to support it. Terry Wolever judges that Gano, "did not see so much of a *doctrinal* problem with the Separates," and in this "he reflected the general sentiment of the Particular Baptists towards the Separates."^[41] This is certainly true of William Fristoe of the Kettocton Association where Stearns first made his appearance in the South.^[42] Their doctrine, in Gano's opinion, was the "root of the matter" and formally differed little from the doctrine of the Philadelphia Confession.

Historical precedence makes this judgment virtually certain. Benjamin Miller's visit to Opekon, Virginia, in 1754 provides a clear test of the doctrinal content of the preaching of Stearns and his brother-in-law Daniel Marshall. As mentioned above, members had complained to the Philadelphia Association about supposed irregularities in the church, particularly under the influence of Daniel Marshall. Because he had been instrumental in the reformation of the church just years earlier, the Association sent Benjamin Miller to observe and judge if the complaints had any substance.

Miller had served faithfully as a pastor, an active member of the Philadelphia Association, and as an itinerant preacher. His name first appears in the Association minutes in 1747, a year in which the messengers gave a spirited defense of the church's duty to "call and prove their candidates for ministry" and the correlative duty of such candidates to wait with "self denying meekness, humbleness, and lowliness of mind to a further approbation from the churches."^[43] They zealously sought to exclude those who had an indication of "a heavy, self-willed, obstinate, and ungovernable temper" and assure that the churches sufficiently tested for "the steady sound, and orthodox principles and regular behaviour" of those they would ordain to office.^[44] They had affirmed, using the ministry of Paul and Barnabas in Antioch as an example, that persons not ordained might still function as teachers if so gifted. "What reason can be given why there may not be in churches men of useful gifts, and profitable to teach all the days of their life without ordination?"^[45] Daniel Marshall would have been viewed in such a light at the time of Miller's in 1754 visit for, though not ordained, he had been licensed to preach by the church. His son's biographical narrative of Mr. Marshall states:

Here he became acquainted with a Baptist church belonging to the Philadelphia Association; and as the result of a close, impartial examination of their faith and order, he and my dear mother were baptized by immersion, in the forty-eighth year of his life. He was now called, as a licensed preacher, to the unrestrained exercise of his gifts; and though they were by no means above mediocrity, he was instrumental in awakening attention, in many of his hearers, to the interest of their souls.^[46]

In 1752 the Philadelphia Association considered a query "Whether a person denyng unconditional election, the doctrine of original sin, and the final perseverance of the saints, and striving to affect as many as he can, may have full communion with the church?" The answer returned to and approved by the assembly stated that such a notion "opposeth the absolute sovereignty of God over his creatures contrary to express scriptures." They went on to affirm the three parts of the query by asserting and arguing from Scripture that "personal election is the truth of God,...That we are originally sinful or partakers of the first sin of human nature [and]...are justly shut out of our native happiness...unless our

title be restored by the second Adam...by being effectually called in time." The word to the churches that followed this underscored the seriousness of their commitment to these principles.

Upon which fundamental doctrines of Christianity, next to the belief of an eternal God, our faith must rest; and we adopt, and would that all the churches belonging to the Baptist Association, be well grounded in accordance to our Confession of faith and catechism, and cannot allow that any are true members of our churches who deny the said principles, be their conversation outward what it will.[\[47\]](#)

Two years later, 1754, the Opekon and Kettocton churches in Virginia were received into the Association. Benjamin Miller, in attendance when both statements mentioned above were approved, made his investigative trip to Virginia apparently during the few months that Marshall, and then Stearns, were with them. Robert B. Semple describes the event charmingly.

They were very zealous, had much preaching, and were remarkable warm in their religious exercises, and more particularly so after Mr. Daniel Marshall came among them. They went to such lengths that some of the more cold-hearted lodged a complaint in the Philadelphia Association. Mr. Miller was sent to see what was the matter. When he came he was highly delighted with the exercises, joined them cordially, and said if he had such warm-hearted Christians in his church he would not take gold for them. He charged those who had complained rather to nourish than complain of such gifts.[\[48\]](#)

What can we conclude from these events and the very positive judgment rendered by Miller? Would Miller give such cordial approval to "exercises" or teaching inconsistent with the clear judgments recently rendered by the Association in which he was an active participant and whose integrity he was determined to uphold? Should we conclude that he cared little about the doctrinal and experiential orthodoxy of a church that he so recently had labored in to set right in these matters? When the church was "new-modeled...upon the Calvinistic plan,"[\[49\]](#) more was at stake than the simple imposition of a new confessional form on the church. John Gano recalled that only three of the original church could "give an account of experiencing a work of Grace." Six others who visited with them professed faith in Christ and so were baptized. A number of the old members expressed to John Gano "their deplorable state" and said that they had been misled and hoped that the ministers, including Miller, would not blame them. Gano comforted them and spoke to them from the words, "They being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God." Several of those were converted and became zealous members of the church.[\[50\]](#)

Unless Miller was completely without discernment (very unlikely, as he was appointed to tasks that required careful and compassionate discernment) or had shaken off the former convictions of his soul concerning the truth and the character of gospel ministry (also highly unlikely in light of his continued work and responsible leadership in the Philadelphia Association), we may be justified in concluding several things concerning the Stearns/Marshall tandem.

First, their giftedness in proclamation and teaching appeared adequate in content and edifying in effect. Whether Miller heard either Marshall or Stearns is not clear. The "impartial examination" of Marshall's faith and his exercising among them, however, would certainly be consistent with what Miller observed.

Second, their spirit, though exuberant, did not come under censure as arrogant, prideful, or improperly enthusiastic but as warmly spiritual. The Regular Baptists of the Philadelphia Association had experienced their share of overwhelming conviction and knew that both despair and joy can periodically overwhelm and alter physical strength. The warmth of the exercises was a delight, not an offense.

Third, their theology supported the strength of the exercises. Miller accepted the judgment of the Association that it "cannot allow that any are true members of our churches who deny the said principles" of total depravity, unconditional election, effectual calling, and the certain perseverance of God's elect. Had the theology been error cloaked in zeal, he would never have admonished the petitioners to nourish rather than complain of such gifts. Morgan Edwards confirms this judgment in his chronicle of the Separate Baptists in Virginia. "These are called Separates," he wrote, "not because they withdrew from the Regular-baptists but because they have hitherto declined any union with them." He then made this doctrinal observation: "The faith and order of both are the same, except some trivial matters not sufficient to support a distinction, but less a disunion; for both avow the *Century-Confession* and the annexed discipline."[\[51\]](#)

These considerations combined with the extant doctrinal statements should leave little doubt about the views of truth that drove Shubal Stearns and the Separate Baptists.

Robert Devin includes the covenant of the Sandy Creek church in his history of the Grassy Creek church, founded under the influence of Daniel Marshall. The preamble establishes doctrinal parameters for their union.

Holding believers baptism; the laying on of hands; *particular election of grace by the predestination of God in Christ; effectual calling by the Holy Ghost*; free justification through the imputed righteousness of Christ; progressive sanctification through God's grace and truth; the final perseverance of the saints in grace; the resurrection of these bodies after death, at that day which God has appointed to judge the quick and the dead by Jesus Christ, by the power of God, and by the resurrection of Christ; and life everlasting. Amen.[\[52\]](#)

The explicit Calvinism of the preamble has given some historians pause as to whether it actually reflects the original work of Stearns. A documentary trail, however, makes the denial highly problematic from a historian's standpoint. According to George Walsh Paschall, Stearns wrote the document around 1757, [\[53\]](#) that is, everything "omitting the Calvinism, reflects the views of Stearns."[\[54\]](#) Paschall so judges because of his inveterate hostility to Calvinism. He was glad that the evangelization of North Carolina did not depend on the Regular Baptists of the Philadelphia Association because "their rigid Calvinism would have kept them from prosecuting missionary labors with success." The blame for the lack of

dominance in Eastern North Carolina, in fact, lies at the feet of the Philadelphia Association: Paschal argued, "With ministers schooled in the rigid Calvinism of the Philadelphia Confession, the wonderful progress of the Baptists of eastern North Carolina was at its end."[\[55\]](#) He claims that Stearns's ministry provided "the indispensable corrective to the blight of hyper-Calvinism which the ministers of the Philadelphia Association imposed on the General Baptist churches on their transformation to Particular Baptist churches."[\[56\]](#)

The narrative and commendation of the evangelistic fervor of Stearns and the Separate Baptists cannot be contradicted. That fact is not under dispute. Nor can one deny that different levels of adherence to preaching the central tenets of Calvinistic theology can be observed among them. Some dug deeply for doctrinal diamonds and waded to the chin into the counsels of God and built the exhortation directly on truths thus derived. Others felt less confident in their abilities in that kind of delivery but exhibited true zeal in their exhortations to faith in a crucified and risen savior and the necessity of the new birth. Some deemed zealous and effective tended more toward Arminianism. Semple gives insight into the attitude of the Separates toward this reality at the time of the union between the Separates and Regulars in Virginia in 1787. A large majority believed "as much in their confession of faith [the Philadelphia Confession] as they [the Regulars] did themselves," but "if there were some among them who leaned too much towards the Arminian system they were generally men of exemplary piety and great usefulness in the Redeemer's kingdom." They were willing to bear with some diversity than to break with such amiable Christians who had borne "the brunt and heat of persecution" and whose labors God had blessed; exclusion of such as these "would be like tearing the limbs from the body."[\[57\]](#)

Paschal's zeal against Calvinism is unjustified, therefore, and his reasonings proceed on two misleading assumptions. The operations of these assumptions mar his presentation and that of others who have employed his line of thinking. One is that the Baptists of the Philadelphia Association were hyper-Calvinists. That simply is not the case; such an accusation shows a misjudgment of the ministers of the churches in that association and a misunderstanding of hyper-Calvinism. Accordingly, the Regulars' action toward the General Baptist churches is maligned, even though, similar to what happened in Virginia, the burden of concern was true conversion and the affirmation of the doctrines of the new birth and justification by faith among them.

A second is that the Separates must not have been serious Calvinists since they were evangelistic. Again this is a historical misjudgment. Huggins goes so far as to suggest that Stearns was Arminian,[\[58\]](#) but most prefer the safer term "modified" Calvinist. Lumpkin claims that "most Separates were modified Calvinists"[\[59\]](#) by which he means that, though they avoided some of the deleterious tendencies of some Arminians, "they either rejected or had little to say about the doctrines of predestination, limited atonement, and election of Calvinism."[\[60\]](#) James Mosteller tries to demonstrate this theological middlemanship. "They sailed an even, middle course," he reasons, "between the Scylla of hyper-Calvinism and the Charybdis of extreme Arminianism, the former of which dried up the Particular Baptists and the latter had watered down the General Baptists."[\[61\]](#)

The documents, as well as their own testimony, point in a different direction. One can conclude that they

had little to say only by ignoring the documents that proclaim their beliefs. Their trust in sovereign grace injected their spirits with courage and confidence. John Leland captures this poetically in musing about the eternal counsel concerning the Separate Baptist preacher John Waller: "Waller is not ordained to wrath,/ But to employ his vital breath/ In the Redeemer's praise;/ His sins, thro' Christ, shall be forgiv'n, / and he shall ever reign in heav'n/ Thro' free and sov'reign grace." He pictures Waller himself, who suffered much at the hands of hostile authorities pleading for mercy for his hearers: "Father, forgive the stubborn race/ Subdue their hearts to sov'reign grace,/ That they may be forgiv'n."[\[62\]](#)

Putting prejudice aside, therefore, the paper trail still confronts us. If Stearns wrote the covenant of the Grassy Creek Church, as Devin claimed, he was indisputably a Calvinist. David Morgan admits, "The covenant could hardly express a more rigid Calvinist position than when it affirms a belief in 'particular election of grace by the predestination of God in Christ,' and 'the final perseverance of the saints in grace.'"[\[63\]](#) Apart from the pejorative overtones of "rigid," Morgan does not permit his non-Calvinist preference to obscure his historical conclusion. His severe misgivings at the "lack of consistency between what he believed and what he practiced,"[\[64\]](#) and the difficulty in understanding "how Stearns, or for that matter Whitefield and Edwards before him, could have reconciled an advocacy of unrestricted evangelism with a belief in particular election,"[\[65\]](#) succumbed to the evidence of the documents.

The "Principles of Faith" adopted by the Sandy Creek Association in 1816, coincide with the doctrinal statements in the covenant. Articles III and IV read:

III. That Adam fell from his original state of purity, and that his sin is imputed to his posterity; that human nature is corrupt, and that man, of his own free will and ability, is impotent to regain the state in which he was primarily placed.

IV. We believe in election from eternity, effectual calling by the Holy Spirit of God, and justification in his sight only by the imputation of Christ's righteousness. And we believe that they who are thus elected, effectually called, and justified, will persevere through grace to the end, that none of them be lost.[\[66\]](#)

Members in 1816 would hardly have agreed to such strongly worded doctrines had they not been in agreement with them from the beginning. Further confirmation of this judgment is available in the "Abstract of the Article of Faith and Practice of the Kiokee Church of the Baptist Denomination." This church, established around 1771-2, embodied the mature convictions of Daniel Marshall, its founder as well as the founder of the Grassy Creek church from whose minutes the original covenant of Sandy Creek is taken. The unity of doctrine and language in all these documents is striking and bears witness to the authenticity of their convictions and gives a synopsis of their preaching.

According to God's appointment in his word, we do hereby in his name and strength covenant and promise to keep up and defend all the articles of Faith, according to God's word, such as the great doctrine of Election, effectual calling, particular redemption, Justification by the Imputed righteousness of Christ alone, sanctification by the spirit of God, Believers Baptism by immersion, the saints absolute final perseverance in Grace, the

resurrection of the dead, future rewards and punishments...denying the Arian, Socinian, & Arminian errors, & every other principle contrary to the word of God.[67]

As already noted, it seems that these historians have made an assumption built upon a particular bias and the evidence of exceptional cases. If someone is Calvinistic, then he cannot be evangelistic. The reasoning, however, places them in a peculiar position against the sources themselves. Edwin Gaustad has claimed that "the theology of the Great Awakening was Calvinism." [68] Morgan places Stearns directly in this tradition.

The Baptist historian William Whitsitt summarized this influence in his unpublished book *Baptists in America*. His remark about the "New Divinity" is slightly anachronistic and perhaps his use of "all" in the first sentence does not take into account some rare but notable exceptions; his understanding, however, of the dominant theological framework is demonstrably true.

These Separate Baptists were all of them Calvinists by persuasion. They were not Calvinists of the stern old type that formerly had prevailed but rather Calvinists of the school of Jonathan Edwards and adherents of the New Divinity. On that account they were often described as New Lights. For the main part their sympathies and cooperation were given to the Calvinistic brethren in New England and against the Arminian Baptists. Thus by the agency of Mr. Whitefield a change was produced almost in the twinkling of an eye by means of which the Calvinistic Baptists gained ascendancy in the New England colonies. Nothing could have been more extraordinary or unexpected than such a transformation. Arminianism had been steadily growing in New England for several decades; making progress not only in the Baptist community as has been shown but likewise in the established order. Jonathan Edwards rose up to stem the tide and to stay the progress of defection, and by the aid of Whitefield accomplished a revolution. This revolution, however, was more apparent among the Baptists than in the ranks of the Established Church. It altered the whole aspect of affairs.[69]

Whitsitt goes on to say that Whitefield's influence was not confined to New England. Calling them "Whitefieldian Baptists," he traces the influence into the South.

It was but a short season before one of these Separate Baptists from Connecticut, Shubael Stearns by name was set loose in the forests of North Carolina, where he started a fire that swept back into Virginia and forward into South Carolina and Georgia and took the whole South for the Baptists. Nine tenths of our denominational strength in the southern states is derived from Whitefield through the agency of Stearns and his co-laborer Daniel Marshall. [70]

Whitsitt only states the obvious in pointing to the influence of Whitefield, a theme continued by David Morgan when he summarizes the Whitefieldian trajectory--"actually the Separates took up where Whitefield had left off, and when on his seventh trip to America he died at Newburyport, Massachusetts,

on September 30, 1770, the Separate Baptists, more so than any other religious group were at that very moment, far to the south, carrying on in the Whitefield spirit of the 1740's." [71]

Distinctions urged between Stearns and the Separate Baptists on the one hand and the Philadelphia/Charleston Regular Baptists on the other are artificial. Their doctrine was the same as was their concern for gospel preaching and Holy Spirit-induced conversion. After their union at the end of the eighteenth through the first of the nineteenth century, the influence of one can hardly be distinguished from that of another. The growth of Baptists in the South comes from the strengths shared by both groups. Any dichotomy between Calvinism and evangelism in this union betrays a basic misunderstanding. The followers of Stearns helped bring into practice the evangelistic convictions of the Regulars; the confessional detail of the Regulars helped give expression to the theological convictions of the Separates. The union was not an incongruous mixture of incompatibles. That which Paschal rightly ascribes to Stearnes must be seen as the impact of one who shared the doctrinal convictions of his Regular brethren.

One who will try to come to a full understanding of the character, work and influence of Shubal Stearns, will, I think, become convinced that he is one of the great religious leaders of all time. Certainly the influence of no other American Baptist has been so great or far reaching as his...It has been given to few others to have followers and successors who have carried on their work with like zeal and spirit and success, as the followers and successors of Shubal Stearns have done, with the result that the Baptists of the South... today far outnumber all the other Baptists of the world. [72]

Conclusion

It is a deep regret that the Separate Baptists were not methodical enough to keep more records. Though they probably would have considered such recording a sacrilege, would not contemporary Baptists benefit from a bold amanuensis daring to smuggle a verbatim of sermons by Stearnes? Solemn aspects of the story, in light of this absence, "have been only vaguely apprehended by Baptist historians." [73] This fact is quite unfortunate. Despite the lack of sources, a fair assessment of what is already known would enhance our understanding of the Baptist foundation.

Gano's statement was a perfect description of the Separate Baptists. As noted before, he said that, "doubtless the power of God was among them; that although they were rather immethodical, they certainly had the root of the matter at heart." As their methods have been briefly examined, one can understand why Gano said what he did. Despite this, Gano assured his fellow Baptists that the Separates had their doctrine correct. Overarching all of this, he proclaimed that, "*doubtless the power of God was among them.*"

As for Stearns, "he was zealous but also sane, and his followers have been such; he knew how to gather, and knew how to conserve; he built upon a solid foundation, Jesus Christ, and his work abides." [74] Charles Taylor concludes:

He was undoubtedly one of the greatest ministers that ever presented Jesus to perishing multitudes. Had he been a Romish priest, he would long since have been canonized and declared the patron saint of Carolina. Fervent supplications would have ascended and stately churches would have been dedicated to the holy and blessed saint Shubael Stearns, the apostle of North Carolina and the adjacent states.[\[75\]](#)

Footnotes:

¹ "The correct spelling of Mr. Stearns' name seems to be that given by Edwards, 'Shubal.' Mr. Stearns himself so spelled it in signing four petitions in favor of men accused as Regulators, *Colonial Records*, IX, 27ff. The same spelling was used by Semple in his *History of Virginia Baptists*. The spelling 'Shubael,' a Scripture name, was used by Backus in his *Abridgment*, 250, in the year 1804, and later by Benedict and other writers." quoted in George Walsh Paschal, *History of North Carolina Baptists* (Raleigh, NC: The General Board, North Carolina Baptist Convention, 1930) , 228.

² David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World* (Boston: Lincoln & Edmands, 1813; reprint, Gallatin, TN: Church History Research & Archives, 1985) , II, 49 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

³ Robert Baylor Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia* revised and extended by G. W. Beale(originally published 1810, rev edition in 1894; reprint, Lafayette, Tenn.: Church History Research and Archives, 1976), 65. (page citations are to the reprint edition).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

⁵ William Latane Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations in the South* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1962), 21.

⁶ William G. McLoughlin, *Soul Liberty* (Hanover: Brown University Press, 1991) 105-6.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Benedict, *The Baptist Denomination*, II, 37.

⁹ Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 21.

¹⁰ Morgan Edwards, "Materials Towards the History of the Baptists in the Provinces of Maryland Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia," 19, Special Collections, James P. Boyce Centennial Library, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY. Also available as

Materials Towards a History of the Baptists, prepared for publication by Eve B. Weeks and Mary B. Warren, 2 vols (Danielsville, GA: Heritage Papers) 1984. This was copyrighted by Mary B. Warren and thus will be referred to as "Warren." 2:93.

¹¹ Benedict, *The Baptist Denomination*, II, 37.

¹² Charles Curtis Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740-1800* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1962), 206-207.

¹³ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1972), 319.

¹⁴ Benedict, *The Baptist Denomination*, II, 38.

¹⁵ Robert Baylor Semple, *Baptists in Virginia*, 13n.

¹⁶ Semple, 376.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸ The men of the group were Shubal Stearns, Peter Stearns, Ebenezer Stearns, Shubal Stearns, Jr., Daniel Marshall, Joseph Breed, Enos Stimpson, and Jonathan Polk. Semple, *Baptists in Virginia*, 14n. Morgan Edwards claims that while Stearns was married to Sarah Johnston he "left no issue." Edwards, *Materials*, 19. If this is the case, it can only be assumed that Shubal Stearns, Jr. would be his brother and not his son. The author can find no other reference to the family of Stearns.

¹⁹ Benedict, *The Baptist Denomination*, II, 38.

²⁰ Edwards, "Materials," 18. Warren, 2:92.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 19. Warren, 2:93

²² Semple, *Baptists in Virginia*, 15.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Edwards, "Materials," 19. Warren, 2:93.

²⁵ Semple, *Baptists in Virginia*, 15.

²⁶ Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 31.

²⁷ Edwards, "Materials," 20. Warren, 2:94

²⁸ Benedict, *The Baptist Denomination*, II, 37.

²⁹ Semple, *Baptists in Virginia*, 13.

³⁰ Rufus W. Weaver, "The Invasion of the South by the Sainted Baptist Yankees," *The Chronicle* vol. XII no.4 (Oct. 1944) : 164-166.

³¹ Semple, *Baptists in Virginia*, 14.

³² *Ibid.*, 13.

³³ Edwards, "Materials", 16. Warren, 2:91.

³⁴ George W. Purefoy, *A History of the Sandy Creek Association* (New York: Sheldon and Company Publishers, 1859) 75 as cited in Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 230.

³⁵ Edwards, "Materials," 16; Warren, 2:91.

³⁶ *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association from A. D. 1707 to A. D. 1807*, ed. A. D. Gillette (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851) 53. Hereinafter referred to as "Gillette."

³⁷ Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 62.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ J. M. Cramp. *Baptist History* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, nd) 535, 536, 545.

⁴⁰ Terry Wolever, *The Life and Ministry of John Gano* (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 1998), I, 304.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² William Fristoe, *A Concise History of the Kectocon Baptist Association* (Staunton: Printed by William Gilman Lyford, 1808), 21-23. Fristoe, deeply aware of the doctrinal stewardship of a minister [p. 35],

said that "upon a more intimate acquaintance [and] upon close conversation and frequently hearing each other preach, it was found that they agreed in sentiment, held forth the gospel ordinances in the same manner, and of course children of the same family, the difference being only in name." (21, 22).

⁴³ Gillette, 55.

⁴⁴ Gillette, 52.

⁴⁵ Gillette, 51.

⁴⁶ Abraham Marshall, "Daniel Marshall" in *Lives of Virginia Baptist Ministers* Ed. J. B. Taylor, 2 vols (Richmond: Yale & Wyatt, 1837), 1:19.

⁴⁷ Gillette, 69.

⁴⁸ Semple, 376

⁴⁹ Semple, 376

⁵⁰ "Biographical Memoirs of John Gano" in Wolever, 1:46, 47.

⁵¹ Edwards [Warren], 2:43.

⁵² Robert I. Devin, *A History of Grassy Creek Baptist Church, From its Foundation to 1880, with Biographical Sketches of its Pastors and Ministers* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards, Broughton & Co., 1880), 43. See also James Donovan Mosteller, *A History of the Kiokee Baptist Church in Georgia* (Ann Arbor, MI: Edwards Brothers, Inc., 1952), 267-269. This covenant should be compared to the covenant of the Kiokee church which was founded by Daniel Marshall. The statements are strikingly similar in wording, both decidedly Calvinistic, bringing more validity to the authorship of the Grassy Creek church covenant.

⁵³ George Walsh Paschal, *History of North Carolina Baptists* (Raleigh, NC: The General Board, North Carolina Baptist Convention, 1930), 401.

⁵⁴ Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, 403.

⁵⁵ George W. Paschal, "Shubal Stearns," *Review and Expositor* XXXVI (1939): 44.

⁵⁶ Paschal 270-71 as cited in Mosteller, 32, 34.

⁵⁷ Semple, 100.

⁵⁸ M. A. Huggins, *A History of North Carolina Baptists 1727-1932* (Raleigh, NC: The General Board, Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, 1967), 66.

⁵⁹ Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 62.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Mosteller, *Kiokee Baptist*, 22.

⁶² John Leland, *The Writings of John Leland*, ed. L. E. Greene (n.p., 1833; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), 413, 414.

⁶³ David T. Morgan, Jr., "The Great Awakening in North Carolina, 1740-1775: the Baptist Phase," *North Carolina Historical Review* vol. XLV, no.3 (July 1968): 272.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Morgan, "The Great Awakening in North Carolina," 272.

⁶⁶ William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969 [rev. ed]), 358.

⁶⁷ Included in Mosteller as "Appendix B," 267.

⁶⁸ Edwin S. Gaustad, "Baptists and the Great Awakening in New England," *The Chronicle* vol. XV no. 1 (Jan. 1952): 41.

⁶⁹ William Heth Whitsitt, "Baptists in America," handwritten ms, Special Collections, James P. Boyce Centennial Library, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Morgan, "The Great Awakening in North Carolina," 283.

⁷² Paschal, "Shubal Stearns," 57.

⁷³ Paschal, "Shubal Stearns," 43.

⁷⁴ Paschal, "Shubal Stearns," 57.

⁷⁵ Charles E. Taylor, "Elder Shubael Stearns," *North Carolina Baptist Historical Papers* vol. II no. 2 (Jan. 1898): 105. The author quotes from someone that he only identifies as "a more recent historian."



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A Prayer for Passion

THOU GOD OF MY END,
Thou hast given me a fixed disposition
to go forth and spend my life for thee;
If it be thy will let me proceed in it;
if not, then revoke my intentions.
All I want in life is such circumstances
as may best enable me to serve thee in the world;
To this end I leave all my concerns in thy hand,
but let me not be discouraged,
for this hinders my spiritual fervency;
Enable me to undertake some task for thee,
for this refreshes and animates my soul,
so that I could endure all hardships and labours,
and willingly suffer for thy name.
But, O what a death it is to strive and labour,
to be always in a hurry and yet do nothing!
Alas, time flies and I am of little use.
O that I could be a flame of fire in thy service,
always burning out in one continual blaze.
Fit me for singular usefulness in this world.
Fit me to exult in distresses of every kind
if they but promote the advancement of thy kingdom.
Fit me to quit all hopes of the world's friendship,
and give me a deeper sense of my sinfulness.
Fit me to accept as just desert from thee
any trial that may befall me.
Fit me to be totally resigned to the denial of pleasures I desire,
and to be content to spend my time with thee.
Fit me to pray with a sense of the joy of divine communion,
to find all times happy seasons to my soul,
to see my own nothingness,
and wonder that I am allowed to serve thee.
Fit me to enter the blessed world where no unclean thing is,
and to know thee with me always.

The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions, ed. Arthur Bennett (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 178.



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