

# The South Florida Baptist Association

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Much of South Florida with its numerous fresh water lakes, its rich fertile soil and its mild, moist climate provides an ideal home for the white settler. Into this environment came pioneers including Baptist laymen, missionaries and preachers. As was the custom elsewhere among members of this religious sect, the first religious services were held in the homes of the scattered settlers. By the 1850's several churches were organized in this part of the Peninsular State. One of the earliest of these was the Hurrah Baptist Church (Alafia) of Hillsborough County which was established in 1850 and which in 1851 called as its pastor Reverend James N. Hayman.

Born near Savannah, Georgia, Hayman, as a young man, had migrated to Lake Lindsey, Florida. Converted at a revival meeting which was conducted by a Baptist Missionary, John Tucker, Hayman was baptised July 4, 1844. Upon the organization of the Eden Baptist Church in 1848, this new convert was elected clerk and shortly thereafter he became a deacon. Feeling a call to preach, Hayman was ordained in 1851 and immediately accepted the call to the pastorate of the Hurrah Baptist Church.

Perhaps this early south Florida frontiersman was by nature too restless for the exacting duties of a pastorate or perchance he visualized greater fields of spiritual service as a missionary. At any rate, within two years, Reverend Hayman began work as a missionary in South Florida. It was as an itinerant evangelist that this Georgia emigré was to make his greatest contributions to the Baptist cause in the Sunshine State. In 1853 this Baptist minister began to hold religious services in the Socrum Community. These services, a decade later, resulted in the organization of the Bethel Church with fifteen charter members. In 1854 Reverend Hayman, assisted by R. G. B. Wooley, constituted the Peas Creek Baptist Church. This church later changed its name to the Peace Creek Baptist Church and eventually in 1882 became the First Baptist Church of Bartow. In 1855 a very successful revival meeting in this village church so strengthened the church in religious endeavor that a parsonage was erected and a minister moved into the community among the members of the congregation. By 1867 this growing church had an active

membership of seventy-three, sixty-four of whom were white. Yet another church which was established under the influence of Missionary Hayman was the Shiloh Baptist Church which later was renamed the First Baptist Church of Plant City. Organized in January, 1866, with seventeen charter members, the Shiloh Baptist Church provided a place of worship and for instruction in the Baptist doctrine for its members.

The spiritual fruits of Reverend Hayman's missionary efforts included not only the organization of the Bethel Baptist Church, the Peace Creek Baptist Church and the Shiloh Baptist Church, but also the First Baptist Church of Tampa. Apparently, the first sermon which Hayman preached in the growing town of Tampa was in June 1852. Despite the fact that no Baptist Church existed in the Tampa Bay area at that time, converts to the Baptist faith were won and the ordinance of baptism was administered. During the following year, 1853, Reverend J. H. Breaker organized a church which, unfortunately because of lack of support, was soon forced to disband. On July 23, 1860 Missionary Hayman reestablished this defunct church with sixteen white and eight colored members. Hayman, elected pastor, remained for approximately two years. During this brief period, because of an inadequate income, he was compelled to supplement his pastoral work with employment as a carpenter and painter. The Civil War wrought havoc with this church in that the membership decreased to exactly a dozen, of whom only three were men. During the ensuing years the First Baptist Church of Tampa was frequently without a pastor but lay leaders organized a Sunday School, maintained prayer meetings and endeavored successfully to carry on the work. In all of this work, Hayman's encouragement was repeatedly felt.

In addition to aiding in the organization and early development of four Baptist Church, this Georgia-born missionary-pastor preached 2,200 sermons, performed 424 baptisms, married 147 couples, and, as a minister, aided six young men in becoming preachers. In spite of these time-consuming tasks, Hayman gave evidence of wide reading and progressive ideas.

Reverend Hayman was by no means the only missionary who helped to spread the Baptist doctrine in south Florida. There were others whose work was just as interesting, whose hardships were just as severe, but whose careers in this area were not as long as was that of Missionary Hayman, nor were the fruits of their spiritual efforts as bountiful as were those of this adopted Floridian.

Baptists have many denominational characteristics and practices. Certainly, one of the most wide<sup>1</sup> of the latter is that of establishing numerous

associations. An association is a loosely organized group of churches usually located in a rather compact area. Each local church is completely independent and may or may not join the association of which because of the church's location it would naturally become a member. Moreover, once a member in good standing any church can by formal request or by merely refusing to attend the associational meetings, sever its relations with any regional Baptist association.

The element of personality or leadership often explains the division of an association into two or more similar but smaller organizations. Moreover, upon certain conditions a Baptist association can drop a church from its membership. However, it should be added, that this step is an unusual one and is seldom taken.

South Florida Baptists were no exception to these common denominational practices. In 1867 the First Baptist Church of Bartow withdrew from the Alachua Association and assumed the leadership in creating the South Florida Association. In spite of this fact the Bartow Church, for non-attendance at meetings, was dropped from membership six years later, only to be reinstated in 1882. Ably aiding the Bartow Church was the First Baptist Church of Plant City. Upon invitations from these churches, twelve Baptist churches located in Hernando, Manatee and Polk Counties chose messengers who met in the Plant City Church to discuss the formation of a South Florida Association. After much consultation and fervent prayer a decision to establish a new association was made. An organizational call was then issued to these churches to convene at Bethel Church on December 6th. At this meeting at which all twelve churches were represented by a total of seventeen messengers the South Florida Baptist Association was effected. Elder S. B. Todd, pastor of the Plant City Church, was elected moderator. Possessed of unusual talents, Todd, a graduate of Harvard University, had journeyed southward as a Methodist preacher. Under the leadership of Pastor A. Wilson, Todd joined the Bethel Baptist Church in 1865 and subsequently was ordained as a Baptist minister. Elder Samuel C. Craft of Tampa became associational clerk. The total membership of all the churches in this new South Florida Association was 371. In area this South Florida Baptist Association included much of central Florida and all of the southern part of the Sunshine State.

Evidencing a keen interest, people came from far and near to attend meetings. Sister Robinson rode on horse-back from Manatee County to Dade City Oak Grove Church to be present at an assembly. As further evidence of zeal five new churches joined the South Florida group in 1868. Interest

and enthusiasm continued so well that by 1902 this union was declared to be the "banner association in the state." As the Florida Baptist strongest association in numbers and in wealth it gave, in 1902, the largest gifts to all denominational endeavors.

In the South Florida Baptist Association the Bartow and Tampa churches pioneered in the Sunday School movement. They, in 1868, reported prosperous Sabbath Schools in their churches and repeatedly exerted annual efforts to have every church in the group to establish a Sunday School. But, as late as 1941, two churches in this organization were without Sunday Schools.

Interest in spreading the Gospel throughout the southern part of the Peninsular State was evidenced at the first associational meeting by a report of the Finance Committee that it had for missionary work received \$29.08 in cash and "4 bushels of potatoes, 5 beef steers, 2 pr. socks, 1 grubbing hoe" in provisions. Determined efforts were made to keep at least one missionary at work within the boundaries of this association. It was not until the great freeze of 1895 which extended deep into south Florida and financially "embarrassed beyond description" so many Floridians, that the mission program, as did all religious work, suffered greatly. Within five years, however, this group of Baptist Churches, was supporting seven missionaries in the associational field.

The South Florida Association was aided in its missionary endeavors when the Baptist Home Mission Board in the 1880's sent Reverend J. G. McCaskey of Georgiana, Alabama, on a missionary tour of Florida. Over roads of sand, through reptile infested swamps, around the periphery of numerous lakes and across streams of brackish waters this tireless missionary plodded his way on horseback. Arriving in Lakeland in 1885, McCaskey found twelve Baptists. These he assembled and constituted into the First Baptist Church of Lakeland. Although this servant of God was soon on his way elsewhere the spiritual enthusiasm with which he left this small group bore a rich harvest. Within two years this church had increased its membership to eighty-three. By 1903, eighteen years later, this church had advanced from quarter time pastoral labor to full time work, and had replaced its original wooden church building with a much larger and better equipped edifice. Under the inspiring leadership of Pastor T. S. Boehm, Lakeland First became one of the ten leading Baptist churches of Florida and certainly one of the foremost members of the South Florida Association.

American religious history is replete with examples of a minority of a religious group withdrawing to form a different, though similar organiza-

tion, or to create a new sect. An illustration of the former type occurred when, in 1922, one hundred and six of the members of the First Baptist Church of Lakeland withdrew to form the Southside Baptist Church. Convenience of worship was the only reason for this secession from the church founded by Missionary McCaskey a generation earlier. Dr. W. J. Bolin, pastor of the First Church, presided over the organizational meeting of the Southside church. A tent, purchased as a temporary home of this newly created church, was completely destroyed shortly thereafter by a September storm. Undaunted by such catastrophe the church subsequently erected a roomy brick building but at considerable expense and some indebtedness. With the advent of the major depression in October 1929, Southside Church found itself, as did many other such institutions, burdened with a debt which seemed steadily to increase. Since Dr. James S. Day became pastor in 1934, Southside has met all of its financial obligations, erected a \$99,000 Educational Building and launched a program of advancement which has earned for Southside a well merited place in the upper bracket of the increasing number of churches in the South Florida Baptist Association. Both Lakeland First and Lakeland Southside have grown from the initial church of twelve members effected by Missionary McCaskey.

South Florida Association, at its annual meeting in 1902, received a request from the Manatee River Baptist Association that, because of inadequate finances, the latter organization was disbanding and that its entire membership wished to unite with the former group. In part of the area served by the Manatee River Association, a railroad was nearing completion. Already, new towns were mushrooming up at Boca Grande, Palmetto, Parish, Sarasota, and Venice. In some of these sparsely settled rural communities Baptist missionaries had visited, but, there was a great need for more evangelistic effort. The South Florida Association accepted the opportunity at once.

As those who were developing the phosphate mines in Polk County, began to increase appreciably the number of their employees, a missionary was sent to serve them. Reverend O. N. Williams was chosen by the association for this work and received a monthly salary of \$50. This organization was informed that twenty phosphate mining communities "comprising a population of nearly 4,000 souls" were in great need of spiritual leadership. Because of sustained zeal, the association, in a few years, had established churches within the environs of every sizable phosphate mine.

Around the turn of the century, Tampa was growing and expanding rapidly. The South Florida Association took note of the great spiritual desti-

tution in this surrounding area and dispatched Reverend E. N. C. Dunklin as Missionary. He was to be paid \$100 a month for his work in Tampa. Born in Alabama, Reverend Dunklin knew and loved people. From the very beginning of his work, the Missionary succeeded. In 1909 E. L. Todd was appointed "colproctor and missionary of the Association" at an annual salary of \$1,200.

At the annual 1920 associational meeting when discussing the subject of missions someone moved that a large tent be purchased for Missionary-Evangelist F. T. Taylor. With the tent supplied, Taylor "proved himself to be the right man in the right place". Under the influence of his preaching many were converted, and numerous "trunk Baptists" (whose church letter is in his trunk rather than in a local church) placed their letters in local churches. One of the high water marks in this Association's mission work was reached more recently by Missionary Frank Faris who entered this field of service in 1942. Men's brotherhood groups sought to anticipate the needs of the Reverend Faris by purchasing for him a trailer, loud speakers and other desired equipment. Also in 1942 the South Florida Baptist Association began the publication of an *Associational Bulletin* to inform all of its member churches and its increasing number of home missionaries of the widespread and varied work of this organization.

As early as 1897 this group of alert Baptist churches established an Associational Library. Appropriations were made annually for the purchase of books which were placed at the disposal of the preachers serving as pastors and missionaries within the organization. Especially, were the younger men who had been called of God to preach, but who lacked a higher formal education and who were without the financial means of securing the needed training, encouraged to read extensively in this collection of books. The increasing library included volumes on Baptist doctrine, Baptist History, commentaries on various Books of the Bible, biographies of distinguished Baptist leaders and Biblical characters, books of collected sermons, and volumes dealing with the increasing number of auxiliary organizations of a growing Baptist Church. The Association came to the aid of a group in real need of support.

In denominational doctrine the South Florida Association, for many years was extremely orthodox. When President Whitsett of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary declared that the Baptists could not trace their origin beyond 1610, this Association, with obvious enthusiasm, leaped into the controversy. The Association, at its next meeting, voted not to send any more money to the Seminary until Dr. Whitsett was fired or until he resigned. This decision was made in the face of a denial by the Seminary President of

ever having made the assertion. "Higher criticism" with all of its scientific hypotheses and implications was condemned. Fear that the younger ministers might possibly be influenced by such an approach to the Bible was frequently expressed. Even Stetson University was viewed with a critical eye. The Association expressed opposition to the practice of adding more faculty members from the North. To an increasing number of Associational members Stetson appeared to be out of step with the wishes of Florida Baptists. Some were not greatly surprised, when, in 1906, the South Florida Association voted to withdraw all financial support from its only state denominational university. Fortunately, upon further debate the minority convinced enough of the majority that a great mistake had been made so that another vote was taken and the customary financial support was restored.

The orthodoxy of the South Florida Association would tolerate neither an addition to nor a subtraction from the Holy Writ. When the Young Men's Christian Association, under the leadership of John R. Mott, published a "Shorter Bible", the Association's ire was aroused and a sharp rebuke was administered to the Y. M. C. A. One of the repeatedly stated aims of the South Florida body was to teach the Bible to the people. For any person or any group of people to attempt to alter, in any way whatsoever, the Word of God was anathema to the Association.

For a number of years this group was plagued with churches that called themselves Baptist, but actually refused to cooperate in Associational matters. Especially was this lack of cooperation evidenced in the work of Missions. These churches, although out of step, retained their membership in the Association and seemed determined to capture control of the organization. In the 1921 Associational Assembly these churches were condemned for their promotion of disunity and as Baptist churches, they were urged to fulfill their obligations to the South Florida Association of which they were full fledged members. This reprimand sufficed for nine years but in 1930 notice was served that letters or messengers for non-cooperating churches would not be accepted. Moreover, any preacher who served such a church would not be recognized by the South Florida group as a Missionary Baptist minister.

Slowly, the Association's dedication to orthodoxy began to change. With an increasing number of Baptist churches within the bounds of the Association which were termed "Landmark" churches because they refused to organize Sunday Schools or to contribute anything to missions through the Mission Boards as established by the Southern Baptist Convention, the Association voted to receive all such churches who were "desirous of fellowship". Those

who sponsored such a move declared that they were not giving up any Baptist doctrines nor did they contemplate that the Association would decrease its gifts to missions. In these statements they seem to have been accurate. Some thought that the decision was a mistake but all agreed that a brotherly gesture had been extended to the non-cooperating Baptist churches with the hope that the widening breach between the "Landmarks" and the "Missionary" Baptist churches of South Florida would be healed. This pleasant anticipation has not been realized with the unanimity which many anticipated.

Generally speaking, the pastors and the leading laymen of the South Florida Association appreciated the loyal support and endless work of many Christian women. "A great deal of dissatisfaction" arose among the leaders of this organization when the Florida State Mission Board employed a woman to be State Secretary of Woman's Work. It was "an unwise expenditure of money" protested the South Florida Association, and concluded that such an office was not needed. Although women have gradually won a more significant place among the councils of this Association they have not yet gained for themselves a position of absolute equality. When, for example, the issue of women preaching in churches of this group arose, the Association affirmed the ancient doctrine that no woman was to preach or exercise control over mixed public assemblies. What would happen if a member church, believing in democracy and exercising that faith, voted to extend an invitation to a woman minister to preach in its pulpit? If the proposal was accepted, that church would be immediately dropped from the Associational membership. This rather high-handed procedure was taken in an organization of Baptist Churches long since dedicated to democratic congregational government.

The churches of this group were possessed of the highest type of patriotism during the two global wars in which our country participated during the first half of the twentieth century. Not only did this group of South Florida Baptist Churches furnish its share of young men for the armed forces but special sermons were delivered and prayers were uttered in churches and in Associational Meetings for the cause of our country. Recognition was given in all these churches to those of their members who participated in these wars. Memorial services were held for those who gave their lives in the service of our country. The names of these brave heroes have been preserved on a special page set aside in the Associational Minutes for that purpose.

In 1941 the Baptist Book Store, located at Jacksonville and under the management of Miss Effie Sutton, paid an unusual compliment to the growing membership, the cultural interest and influence of the South Florida Asso-



ciation by displaying, for the first time, a large selection of books at the Annual Meeting. This innovation proved so successful that it has been continued each year. Hitherto, at only the Florida State Baptist Convention had there been displayed a collection of books from the Baptist Book Store.

By 1944 the South Florida Association was promoting so many activities that it became necessary to employ the clerk-treasurer two days out of each week to supervise the work. The joint clerk-treasurer official was an old office in the organization but the administrative responsibilities were new. As compensation for these added chores a salary of \$600 per year was provided.

Throughout the years in which the South Florida Baptist Association has existed, several other Baptist organizations have been created within the area served by the original association. Usually, these new Baptist organizations have been formed by the union of two groups of churches. These consist of new churches which had been recently created and had not joined the South Florida Association and older churches which had gained membership in the parent Association but for various reasons desired to withdraw from the older group and to assist in forming a new organization. To list all of these younger Associations, their charter members, the denominational leaders who created them and the immediate background of their organization would constitute an article itself. One example will suffice here.

There were at least two reasons for the formation of the Tampa Bay Baptist Association. Some believed the South Florida Association had become too large. Not that the territory had been extended because such was not the case but the number of Baptist churches within the southern part of the Peninsula State was mounting rapidly. From the Associational records, one learns that leaders of the large west coast Baptist churches were convinced that the stronger Polk County Churches were dominating the organization's policies and program. When the Tampa Bay Area Churches in 1911 failed in their efforts to gain control of the Association, they served notice of their intent to form a new organization. Messengers, clergy and laymen from the Clearwater, Manatee County, St. Petersburg and Tampa Baptist Churches withdrew from the original Association, and created the Tampa Bay Baptist Association. Every phase of the new organization's work has prospered from its birth.

In 1950 the South Florida Baptist Association, despite the withdrawal from time to time of a goodly number of its members to help create new

organizations, was composed of sixty-eight churches. These churches, at the Annual Associational Meeting, reported 1,396 baptisms within the past year and a total membership of 25,532. Gifts, during the mid-twentieth century year from these churches amounted to \$748,101 of which \$129,040 was for missions. In 1950 church property owned by the members of the South Florida Baptist Association was valued at \$2,331,860.

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