

**HISTORY OF THE BAPTIST
CHURCHES COMPOSING THE
STURBRIDGE ASSOCIATION:
FROM THEIR ORIGIN TO 1843**

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History of the Baptist Churches Composing the Sturbridge Association: From Their Origin to 1843 by Various

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HISTORY
OF THE
BAPTIST CHURCHES
COMPOSING THE
STURBRIDGE ASSOCIATION,
FROM
THEIR ORIGIN TO 1843.

PREPARED BY A COMMITTEE OF THE ASSOCIATION.

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HISTORICAL SKETCH
OF THE
BAPTIST CHURCH IN STURBRIDGE.

Prepared by Rev. Joel Kenney.

It seems very desirable, in giving to the world a history of any particular church, to go back beyond the time of its organisation, to notice those influences and primary causes which operated to call it into existence.

In relation to the Baptist church in Sturbridge, it is supposed to have originated from instrumentalities, that could hardly have been expected to produce such a result. About the year 1740, when the legally established churches and their ministers, with hardly an exception, had long been wrapped in spiritual slumber, the venerated George Whitefield visited these shores. He began, like a son of thunder, to break the long repose of clerical and ecclesiastical apineness, in which ministers and people were sunk. The Tenants, and other men of like precious faith, followed in his footsteps.

The truth, as it fell from their lips, had its own proper effect, in arousing the slumbering, in arresting the attention of the careless, and in making the vain and giddy, serious and thoughtful.

An extensive revival of religion spread through

a large proportion of the towns in New-England ; and thousands were probably born of the Spirit in that season of refreshing from the presence of the Lord. The revival went on for several years, and, in many places, the face of society was greatly changed. Many of those who embraced the power of godliness preached by those devoted men, proved to be eminently pious people. There was an integrity in their conduct, and a holiness in their demeanor, that bore living testimony to the truth of their religion.

In the instructions of the preachers of righteousness to whom reference has been made, one principle was developed which led in a direction that they did not themselves take. They taught that the Bible, and the Bible only, is the religion of Protestants. The consequences of this position, those excellent men did not, however, follow out in their full length. Guided by the light which this sentiment holds up before the mind, men began vigorously to inquire, not only, what are the great fundamental truths of christianity, but also, what are the ordinances of Christ's house ? The result was, that many of the converts of those days became Baptists. Taking the Scriptures for their only guide, they arrived by a direct and plain course of reasoning at this result. This was the origin of the Baptist church in Sturbridge. Previous to the year 1747, several members of the original church in this town had caught the holy flame, which Whitefield and his associates had been instrumental in kindling. They went wherever they could hear that kind of preaching, which was thus spreading the light of life. These persons often went to Brookfield, and Leicester, and other places, to fan that holy flame which had been lighted up in their hearts, and to receive that spiritual instruction which

they did not find at home. On the tenth of May, in the year just named, several persons of this description separated from the church which was of "the standing order," and set up a meeting among themselves for their mutual edification; and in the following November, they were embodied into a church. On the 28th of September, 1748, Mr. John Blunt, one of their members, was ordained to the pastoral charge of this recently organized church.

On the following day, two of their members, Daniel Fiske and John Newell, were chosen and ordained deacons.

Their first place of worship was a school-house, situated on Fiske Hill, not far from the spot where their first meeting-house afterwards stood.

Churches constituted as this was, were then called "*separate churches*;" and the members were called "*separates*," often, undoubtedly, by way of reproach. These separate churches were built upon the principle of receiving none into fellowship, who did not give evidence of having experienced the renewing grace of God by the influence of the Divine Spirit, a principle which was not recognized either in theory or practice by the established churches of those days.*

This church was in its origin, one of those which claimed vital and practical godliness to be an indispensable qualification for membership in a church of Christ. This principle was the whole ground of separation, in this case, as well as in many others.

* At first, the church believed in, and prac-

* *Note by Chairman of the Committee.*—It may be doubted whether the facts of history will sustain in its length and breadth this statement. The "practice" of New England Churches was worse than their "theory."

tised infant sprinkling. The fact that this is not an ordinance of Scripture, probably, had never entered their minds. But still, the other principles which they had adopted, especially that of making the scriptures the supreme arbiter in religion, prepared the way for their giving up this unscriptural ceremony. Accordingly, some of the members soon began to entertain strong doubts of the correctness of their practice, in this respect, and, soon after, openly to call in question the validity of infant sprinkling. A number of the members of the church became fully convinced that the scriptures point out no other baptism than that of believers, and no other mode than that of immersion. In May 1749, thirteen of the members submitted to this ordinance, administered according to apostolic direction and practice. The ordinance was administered by Rev. Mr. Moulton of Brimfield. About fifty of the members were soon afterward baptized, including with those before mentioned the Pastor, the Deacons and the Ruling Elders. From the time of the first baptism, when the thirteen mentioned above, were baptized, the sprinkling of infants, like the house of Saul, waxed weaker; while the baptism which the scriptures require, waxed stronger and stronger; till at length, the baptism of believers, as held and practised by Baptist churches at the present day, gained the complete victory.

It will be seen by these statements, that this church was originally a Pardo-baptist church.

Within a period of about two years from the time this church was organized, more than sixty members had been baptized; thus showing that at this early period it had attained to considerable strength. For many years after the church took the ground of believers' baptism, its members held to what is called open communion. This

ground, it is supposed, was not formally and publicly relinquished till the year 1780, though probably the practice never prevailed to any great extent among them. The Presbyterian form of church government was the model by which the discipline of this church, in its early history, was conducted. Henry Fiske, and David Morse were the Ruling Elders. On their decease, it does not appear, that successors were appointed. And it is presumed, that by tacit consent, the form of government in the church, became congregational.

Up to the year 1780, no regular records of the church are to be found, and it is supposed that none had been kept. From this circumstance, which is matter of deep regret, we have no means of knowing, at this distant day, the number, or, with few exceptions, the names of the early members of the church. In 1783, Dec. 17th, the church held a meeting to consult upon the erection of a house of worship, and came to the conclusion to build. "Accordingly, a committee was chosen," to draw a plan of the house, to consult upon the method of building it, to select the place for its location, and to report to the society at their next meeting. On the 25th of the same month, they met, and voted "to accept the plan which the committee had drawn for the bigness and form of the house," and at a subsequent meeting, they resolved "to build on the height of land on Fiske's Hill." This ground was given and deeded to the church and society, for the use to which it was applied for almost half a century, by Henry Fiske, one of the Ruling Elders of the church. The building was raised, and the outside finished in the summer of 1784, and the inside was completed two years after. One thing is calculated to excite surprise and regret, in the transactions