

The “Gold Standard” of the Wiregrass Primitive Baptists of Georgia:
A History of the Crawford Faction of the Alabama River Primitive Baptist Association,
1842-2007

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ABSTRACT

The study of Primitive Baptists to date has focused primarily on the origins of the denomination in the 1830s. However, few works trace the subsequent development of the group. The object of this study was to examine the origins and development of a single Primitive Baptist Association and interpret their meaning in relation to the Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass Region of Georgia as a whole.

A single association was chosen because of the highly decentralized nature of the Primitive Baptists, which makes overarching studies difficult. Also, the personalities behind the developments in Primitive Baptist Doctrine are most clear in the study of an individual association. The Crawford Faction of the Alabama River Primitive Baptist Association is an excellent choice for this study because of their unique qualities among Primitive Baptists. Whereas other Primitive associations have changed aspects of their doctrine in the course of their development, the Alabama Association has remained essentially unchanged since its founding in 1842.

The findings of this study suggest that the Alabama Association has remained unchanged for a number of reasons including isolation from other Primitive Baptist associations, relatively stable membership, and a strong conservative faction that has survived numerous splits since the Alabama was founded. Their unchanged status among Primitive Baptists makes them a valuable reference point or “gold standard” for understanding the faith and practice of an often misunderstood denomination. Understanding the origins and development of the Crawford Faction of the Alabama is critical to understanding who the Primitive Baptists are and how their practices have evolved over the course of the denomination’s history.

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Introduction

Throughout the Wiregrass region of southeast Georgia, small unremarkable chapels dot the more remote areas of the countryside. Though they often go unnoticed and have little besides a cemetery to identify the structure as a house of worship, these austere meeting houses represent a significant and frequently misunderstood segment of religious history in Georgia. These churches belong to the Primitive Baptists, a small denomination that is concentrated in the southeastern United States.

Primitive Baptists are a somewhat nebulous group with no overarching ecclesiastical hierarchy. They generally divide themselves into small local organizations of a few churches known as associations. There is diversity present in the denomination from one area to each other, but usually they are more similar to each other than they are to any other denomination. Their doctrine derives from a strict interpretation of the New Testament and an intensively Calvinistic theology. Any rite or procedure not directly proscribed in the examples of the Bible is considered anathema in Primitive worship and practice. According to one study of their doctrines, the Primitive Baptists reject “universally received” religious practices such as Sunday School, instrumental music, salaried ministers, seminaries, state and national conventions, and organized evangelism.¹

In the past, the Primitive Baptists had the misfortune of being frequently

¹ The information provided in the preceding paragraph is taken from the account of Primitive Baptist faith and practice provided in: John G. Crowley, “Origins and Development of the Union Primitive Baptist Association of Georgia,” (M.A. Thesis: Valdosta State College, 1981), iv.

mischaracterized and maligned by the few authors who have paid them any attention. In his book on religion on the American frontier, William Sweet refers to the denomination as a “peculiar frontier Baptist phenomenon”² and the anti-mission movement that gave birth to the Primitives as ‘undoubtedly harmful to religion generally and to the progress of Baptists in particular.’³ A history of the Baptists written in the 1960s does not provide a much kinder interpretation and refers to the influence of the Primitives as “stultifying”⁴ Recent scholarship has attempted to reverse this view of Primitive Baptists, but the bulk of material available concerning the denomination has been limited to short generalized studies.

Scholarly work on the Primitive Baptists has rarely attempted to trace the subsequent development of the Primitive Baptists beyond the earliest years of their existence. John Crowley’s work on the Primitives of the Wiregrass regions of South Georgia and North Florida is one of the few publications that has researched the denominations’ development past the mid-1800s and well into the twentieth century. His work is especially unique because it recognizes the local nature of the denomination and notes that, “Focus on a local or regional group of Primitive Baptists reveals the influence of powerful personalities and social movements better than would a study of larger scope.”⁵

The Crawford Faction of the Alabama River Primitive Baptist Association provides an excellent localized subject for studying the development of Primitive Baptists

² W.W. Sweet “Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1830: Vol.1 The Baptists,” (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1964), 67.

³ *Ibid.*,76.

⁴ O.K. Armstrong and Marjorie Moore Armstrong, “The Indomitable Baptists,” (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1967), 158.

⁵ John G. Crowley, “Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South: 1815-Present,” (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998.), xi.

in the Wiregrass region of Georgia. At one time, it covered a large geographic portion of the region and was relatively large in membership. In addition, the association shares a similar background with most Baptists in the region and its development contains numerous examples of the tensions that arise in a new denomination. However, the most interesting factor surrounding the origins and development of this particular association is its determined resistance to accept changes in Primitive Baptist doctrine. Whereas every other Primitive Baptist association in the region has altered somewhat from the original tenets of the denomination, the Crawford Faction of the Alabama has remained unchanged from the time of its founding in 1842. This study seeks to document and interpret the origins, development, and significance of the Alabama Association in the Primitive Baptist denomination and the Wiregrass region of Georgia that it inhabits.

Chapter I

Baptist Foundations in Georgia and the Rise of the Anti-Mission Movement, 1733-1833

*He laid the precious corner-stone
To build the house of faith upon,
His well beloved and only Son
Who died and rose again.*
-- W.O. Gibson, *Rambling Meditations*.

The story of the Primitive Baptist denomination in Georgia begins with their roots in the Baptist faith. Individual Baptists were present in Georgia since the colony was first settled in 1733, but the first formal organization of Baptists did not appear until 1772. By 1777, there were only four organized Baptist churches in the colony, but this number expanded rapidly after the end of the Revolutionary War.¹ As the Baptists continued to spread throughout the state, controversies over the direction of the faith arose that gave rise to the Anti-Mission movement and later, the Primitive Baptist denomination.

The drive to organize the Baptist churches in Georgia arose from the expansion of the two most influential Baptist groups of the era, the Regular Baptists and the Separate Baptists.² These two groups along with scattered General, or Freewill Baptists, formed the primary divisions among Baptists in the colonial south. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the separation between the Regular and Separate Baptists had subsided somewhat. However, their influence was important as the Baptists began to divide again during the missionary controversy in the 1820s and 1830s.

¹ Emerson Proctor, "Georgia Baptists Organization and Division: 1772-1840" (M.A. Thesis Georgia Southern College, 1969), 1, 23.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

Regular Baptists, also known as Particular Baptists, were the older of the two groups. Their origins in the northern colonies in the late seventeenth century but did not go by the name “Regular” until the emergence of the Separate Baptists in 1755.³ Before this time, they were known as Particular Baptists and were similar to the Particular Baptists of England. They organized the first Baptist association in America in 1707.⁴ The Philadelphia Association, which comprised five churches in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware, remained the only Baptist association in America until 1751.⁵ From this association came the leaders and the doctrine that would shape major events in Baptist history in the years to come.⁶

The Regular Baptists followed a Calvinistic theology. In 1742, the Philadelphia Association adopted the London Confession of Faith of 1689⁷. This document was approved by the English Particular Baptists and was a revision of an earlier confession⁸. The 1689 confession greatly expanded upon the previous version and strongly resembled the Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith.⁹ The doctrinal positions of the document would lay the foundations for American Baptist theology.¹⁰ The strong Calvinistic tone in the document is evident in passages such as:

The doctrine of the high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men attending the will of God revealed in his Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election; so shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God, and of

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ David Benedict, “A History of the Baptist Denomination in the United States Volume I,” (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1813), 273.

⁵ Proctor, 4.

⁶ Benedict, 595.

⁷ Proctor, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel.¹¹

As the Particular Baptists moved south into Virginia and North Carolina during the 1750s and 1760s, another Baptist group was developing in the same region.¹² This group, which came to be known as Separate Baptist, would have great influence on the Baptists throughout the South. They placed great emphasis on the doctrines of “new birth”, “believer’s baptism,” and the individual autonomy of each congregation.¹³ The denomination arose out of the Great Awakening and was greatly inspired by George Whitfield. Doctrinally, the Separates believed in a milder Calvinism than the Regulars and in some cases they followed Arminian theology.¹⁴ They did not require an educated ministry and also placed major emphasis on conversion experiences.¹⁵ Because they believed in the autonomy of individual churches, Separates frequently divided and split over numerous theological issues. To some outside observers, this division was maddening. Parson Charles Woodmason, an Anglican itinerant in the Carolina backcountry in the early years of the Separate Baptists, criticized the new movement without reserve. The following passage is typical of his thoughts about the denomination:

Then again to see them Divide and Sub divide, Split into Parties—Rail at and excommunicate one another—Turn out of one meeting and receive into another—And a Gang of them getting together and gabbling after the other (and sometimes disputing against each other) on abstruse Theological Questions... such as the greatest Metaph[ys]icians and Learned Scholars never yet could define, or agree on—To hear Ignorant Wretches, who can not write...discussing such Knotty Points for the

¹¹ William L. Lumpkin, “Baptist Confessions of Faith,” (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1959), 235.

¹² Proctor, 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 5, 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

edification of their Auditors...must give High offence to all Intelligent and rational Minds.¹⁶

Though they may have seemed disorganized to individuals like Woodmason, the Separates maintained a strict church discipline. North Carolina Separates refused to unite with their Regular brethren, in part, because they thought the Regulars to be too “superfluous in dress.” The discipline was based on a desire to model all their religious practices on the Bible, an aspiration later found among the Primitive Baptists.¹⁷

The Regular Baptists did eventually seek union with their Baptist brethren, though they remained suspicious of the doctrinal latitude amongst the Separates. The Regulars admired the discipline and the growth of the Separates and in 1787, the first union was achieved in Virginia.¹⁸ After the two united, the Baptists tolerated a wide range of beliefs amongst their followers. However, some were confused over the mixed character of the Baptists during this time period. John Leland commented that, “Some [plead] for predestination, and others for universal provision. It is true that the schemes of both parties cannot be right, and yet both parties may be right in their aims.”¹⁹

Though the differences between Separate Baptists and Regular Baptists were clear in the years before Baptist organization in Georgia, the distinct terminology was not in common use among the early Baptists in the state.²⁰ The differences between the factions had begun to be resolved by the time the Baptist church was organized in the state and the distinction in terms between Separate and Regular Baptists rarely appeared among

¹⁶ Richard J. Hooker ed., “The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant,” Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), 102-03.

¹⁷ Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 10

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹ John Leland, “A Letter of Valediction on Leaving Virginia, in 1791,” in L.F. Greene ed. “The Writings of Elder John Leland, Including Some Events in His Life, Written by Himself, With Additional Sketches,” (New York:G.W. Wood, 1845), 172.

²⁰ Proctor, 21.

Georgia Baptists.²¹ The distinctive features of Separate and Regular Baptists were combined to great effect by the Baptists in Georgia. The early Baptist churches in Georgia were theologically more similar to the strict Calvinism of the Regular Baptists but they also retained a great deal of evangelistic fervor from the Separate Baptists.²²

The missionary spirit of the Separate Baptists may have been responsible for much of the growth among Georgia Baptists, but missionary pursuits would soon irrevocably divide the denomination. According to Primitive Baptist historian John Crowley, “After the War of 1812, the Georgia Baptists entered a period of bitter strife over certain theological and practical matters centering on foreign missionary efforts.”²³ The Georgia Baptists of the coastal plains opposed the ideals of the missionary movement early and vehemently. These fervent anti-missionaries spread throughout the Wiregrass region of Georgia during the missionary controversy and helped firmly establish the area’s opposition to the missionary movement.

The controversy had its origins in two important events. The first event was the Publication of *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* by the British Baptist minister Andrew Fuller. His book sought to moderate the strict Calvinistic tendencies of the Particular Baptists in England. Fuller despised such theology and felt that if the doctrine went on unchecked, “the Baptists would have become a perfect dunghill in society.”²⁴ Anti-Missionary Baptists essentially perceived Fuller’s work as teaching the waffling position that the atonement of Christ was conditionally offered to all men, but that only

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 22

²³ Crowley, “Origins and Development,” 5.

²⁴ Quoted in William Rushton, “A Defense of Particular Redemption,” (New York: Joeseeph Spencer, 1834), 24.

the elect would accept the offer. After providing a theological possibility for missionary work, he and other Baptists in England started the first Baptist missionary society.²⁵

Fuller's attempt to revolutionize Calvinist theology caused controversy among American Baptists. David Benedict's *Fifty Year's Among the Baptists* notes, "The Fuller System... was well received by one class of ministers, but not by the staunch defenders of the old theory of a limited atonement." He also noted that the controversy often wandered far from the bounds of civil discourse. A visit with one minister who supported Fuller's more progressive theology yielded a poem that exhorted its listeners to "Fill up the glass and count him an ass, who preaches up predestination."²⁶ The controversy would not become much more civil as it developed.

While Baptists fought over Fuller's theology, news arrived from India that two Congregationalist missionaries, Adoniram Judson and Luther Rice, had recently converted to the Baptist faith. Because their conversion cut off their former means of support, Rice returned to America to raise support among Baptists for foreign missions. Rice was quite successful in organizing local missionary societies around the country and in 1814, the newly formed Triennial Convention set out to organize these societies on a national level.²⁷

In Georgia, the Savannah Association had organized a foreign missionary society by 1813 and numerous other associations in the state soon formed their own. Soon, these societies were advocating for a statewide organization to coordinate their efforts.²⁸ In

²⁵ Cushing Biggs Hassell and Sylvester Hassell, "History of the Church of God from the Creation to A.D. 1885; Including Especially the History of the Kehukee Primitive Baptist Association." (Conley, GA: Old South Hymnal Company, Inc, 1973.), 337

²⁶ David Benedict, "Fifty Years Among the Baptists," (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1860), 140-141.

²⁷ Crowley, "Origins and Development," 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

1820, Adiel Sherwood made the initial suggestion to form the General Baptist Association of the State of Georgia. However, a general association was not widely supported by Georgia Baptists. Of eight total associations in the state, only three supported the formation of a general association.²⁹

One of the most fervent opponents of the general association and mission societies was the Hephzibah. The association had dropped out of an earlier General Committee of Georgia Baptists because it advocated an educated ministry, which the Hephzibah felt would “encumber the denomination with unspiritual, mercenary ministers.” Though the Hephzibah fought against missionary influence strongly, the association eventually replaced their anti-mission moderator, Jordan Smith, who promptly reprinted the non-fellowship resolutions of the Kehukee Baptist Association of North Carolina.³⁰

The Kehukee Association exerted a great influence on the early Primitive Baptists in Georgia. The Kehukee Association preached a strict brand of Calvinism that they inherited from the Philadelphia Association. This strict theology preached by the Kehukee was naturally opposed to the theological foundations of the missionary movement. Almost as soon as the missionary movement reached the Kehukee, it fell out of favor among its members. In 1827, the association declared non-fellowship with any Baptists associated with the missionary cause and barred any missionary ministers from using their pulpits.³¹ This declaration marked the beginning of the antimission movement

²⁹ Proctor, 77.

³⁰ Crowley, “Origins and Development,” 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 8, 12.

and the Primitive Baptist denomination.³² The wording of the declaration made it clear that no compromise could be made between the two factions. It stated:

After an interchange of sentiments among the members of the body, it was approved that we discard all Missionary Societies, Bible Societies, and Theological Seminaries, and the Practices Heretofore Resorted to for their support, in begging money from the public. And if any person shall be among us, an agent of any said societies we heretofore disassociate them in these practices; and if under a character of a minister of the gospel, we will not invite them into our pulpit; believing these societies and institutions to be the inventions of men, not warranted from the word of God.³³

The non-fellowship declaration was something new for Baptists in Georgia, who had tolerated missionaries in their ranks despite their doctrinal differences. When Jordan Smith circulated the Kehukee Association's declaration among the anti-mission faction of the Hephzibah, it led to the calling of a convention of churches in September, 1828. The convention prepared a list of grievances to present to the 1828 associational meeting, where it failed to receive a hearing. When the messengers of the churches who sponsored the list were not given a chance to present their grievances, they stormed out of the meeting house and began the process of separating the Georgia Baptists.³⁴

Thirteen churches left the Hephzibah Association after the split at the 1828 meeting and formed the Canoochee Association in 1830. The first explicitly anti-missionary association of Baptists in Georgia found its primary support in the large "pine-barren" counties of Southeast Georgia.³⁵ The Canoochee Association's constitution made their stand on the issue of missions abundantly clear. It stated:

³² James R. Mathis, "The Making of the Primitive Baptists: A Cultural and Intellectual History of the Antimission Movement 1800-1840," (New York: Routledge, 2004), 92.

³³ W.J. Berry ed., "The Kehukee Declaration and Black Rock Address. With Other Writings Relative to the Primitive Baptist Separation Between 1825-1840," (Elon College, NC: Primitive Publications, n.d.), 14.

³⁴ Crowley, "Origins and Development," 12-13.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

As the love of money is the root of all evil and has produced distress among Christians, and we wishing to live in peace, therefore this conference shall not engage in nor in anywise encourage any religious speculation called missionary, nor by any other name under the pretence of supporting the Gospel of Christ.³⁶

The divisions among the Georgia Baptists were typical of similar developments across the nation. The 1830s saw the development of a permanent rift between the missionaries and their opponents. In 1832, the Baltimore Association sponsored a conference of “Old School” Baptists at Black Rock Church in Maryland. Delegates from all the Particular Baptist Associations in the United States came to the convention.³⁷ The meeting produced a document that would come to be identified as the “Magna Carta” of the Primitive Baptists, the Black Rock Address.³⁸

In seventeen pages, the Black Rock Address lays out the clearest apology for the Primitive Baptist position. The document rejected tract societies, Sunday Schools, Bible Societies, Mission Societies, seminaries, and protracted meetings. The primary objection to these institutions was their lack of a scriptural foundation. The Address stated, “We allow the Head of the church alone to judge for us; we therefore esteem those things to be of no use to the cause of Christ, which he has not himself instituted.” In addition, there was a general fear of “those would-be religious societies, which are bound together, not by the fellowship of the gospel, but by certain money payments.”³⁹ Throughout the Black Rock Address, strict Calvinist theology that considers the Holy Spirit as the only source of true religious knowledge is evident. This passage concerning theological

³⁶ Canoochee Baptist Association, “Minutes,” 1829.

³⁷ Crowley, “Origins and Development,” 13.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Berry. “Black Rock Address,” 172.

schools provides an example of the general doctrinal and theological sentiments of the

Address:

We decidedly object to persons, after professing to have been called of the Lord to preach His gospel, going to a college or academy to fit themselves for that service. Because we believe that Christ possesses perfect knowledge of his own purposes, and of the proper instruments by which to accomplish them. If he has occasion for a man of science, he having power over all flesh, will so order it that the individual shall obtain the requisite learning before he calls him to his service, as was the case with Saul of Tarsus, and others since; and thus avoid subjecting himself to the imputation of weakness. For should Christ call a person to labor in the gospel field, who was unqualified for the work assigned him, it would manifest him to be deficient in knowledge relative to the proper instruments to employ, or defective in power to provide them.⁴⁰

The Black Rock Convention produced one of the most influential leaders of the Primitive Baptists as well. Gilbert Beebe was one of the most effective speakers for the Primitive Baptists of the South and the West, despite the fact that he was from New England and spent the majority of his productive years in New York State. Beebe established the first Primitive Baptist paper, *Signs of the Times*, in 1832 and its careful editing and widespread circulation enabled the consolidation of Primitives across the United States.⁴¹ Soon after Beebe began publishing *Signs*, the area around the Kehukee Association saw the publication of *The Primitive Baptist*. These two papers were circulating in Georgia by the mid-1830s at the height of the missionary controversy where according to the Christian Index's *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia*, they were responsible for the actual Baptist division.⁴² Indeed, the advocacy of non-

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Crowley, "Origins and Development," 15.

⁴² Christian Index, "History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia," (Atlanta, James P. Harrison and Co. 1881), 162.

fellowship measures in these papers would play a role in the division of the Georgia Baptists in 1836-37.⁴³

However, there were numerous reasons for the division among the Baptists in Georgia. One of the primary reasons was the improvements made by Baptists with increased culture, which alienated the frontier classes who clung to the attitudes of the Separate Baptists.⁴⁴ In addition, the union between the Regular and Separates was always an uneasy one and it often resulted in a more strenuous Calvinism among the Separates.⁴⁵ When Fuller's theology was introduced, it introduced a wedge of division between strict Calvinists and moderate predestinarians. When leaders from the old Regular Baptist tradition such as Gilbert Beebe and the Kehukee Association called for division from the missionaries, it was quickly achieved.⁴⁶

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 172-173.

⁴⁴ Crowley "Origins and Development, 16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Chapter II

Baptist Expansions in Wiregrass Georgia, 1815-1842

*I strolled alone one Autumn day
Through open fields and shaded bowers,
Quietly passing the time away
Mid withering leaves and Fading Flowers.
--W.O. Gibson, *Rambling Meditations*.*

As the missionary controversy moved into Georgia, settlement began in the interior of the southeastern section of the state. Most of this land was acquired after the Creek War in 1814, when Indians ceded a seventy mile strip of land from the Chattahoochee River to the old white coastal settlements.¹ The state of Georgia was not enthusiastic about its new acquisition, which had been described as little more than, “poor pine land, with cypress ponds and bay galls.”² Tradition holds that a committee reporting on the advisability of building roads into the country featured a minority report that concluded, “that it would be unwise to spend the people’s money trying to develop a country which God Almighty Himself had left in an unfinished condition.”³

In 1818, the new territory was divided into three large counties, Appling, Irwin, and Early. By this time, a steady stream of settlers was pouring into the region. These migrants came primarily from the Statesboro-Reidsville area, where they had come after

¹ Crowley, “Origins and Development,” 19.

² Benjamin Hawkins, “A Sketch of the Creek Country , In The Years 1798 and 1799, by Benjamin Hawkins and “Letters of Benjamin Hawkins 1796-1806” (Spartanburg, South Carolina: The Reprint Company, Publishers, 1974), 20.

³ Folks Huxford, “The History of Brooks County Georgia,” (Athens, GA: The McGregor Company, 1949), 5.

leaving North Carolina at the conclusion of the Revolutionary War.⁴ The majority of these settlers arrived from sections of North Carolina where the Regular Baptists were influential.⁵ It has been suggested the vigorous anti-missionism of the Hephzibah and Canoochee Associations and the generally conservative nature of frontier religion could be traceable to the ideology of the Carolinians.⁶

The first Baptist association in the region was formed in 1815 by delegates of Jones Creek, Little Canoochee and Sarepta Churches in Tattnall County and Wesley Creek Church of Liberty County. The group named itself the Piedmont Association and it would prove to be significant to South Georgia Baptist history. Not only did the Piedmont represent the first Baptist association in the region and contain the area's oldest churches, it also highlighted important divisions between Missionary Baptists and Primitive Baptists.⁷

The origins of the Piedmont are mysterious, though there is a tradition that the association was organized solely to combat the missionary movement. The belief is founded upon the memoirs of Adiel Sherwood, a prominent missionary preacher who believed the organization was organized in 1818 to combat missionism.⁸ Sherwood was mistaken in this regard, because there was a long period between the founding of the Piedmont and its first formal correspondence with another association.⁹ The Piedmont had tried to establish correspondence sooner, but the person they elected to deliver the

⁴ Crowley, "Origins and Development," 19.

⁵ Folks Huxford, "Pioneers of Wiregrass Georgia," Vol. IV (Pearson, GA: The Atkinson County Citizen, 1968), 225.

⁶ Crowley, "Origins and Development," 20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸ Adiel Sherwood, "Memoirs," quoted in Christian Index, "History of the Baptist Denomination," 166.

⁹ Crowley, "Primitive Baptists," 25.

letter, Moses Westberry, missed the conventions between 1816 and 1818 because of a “fall from a horse,” and “some occurrences not necessary to mention.”¹⁰

The real reasons for the organization of the Piedmont Association were more pragmatic. An important reason for the association’s founding was that the churches were simply too far away from other associations in Georgia. Beard’s Creek Church, which joined the Piedmont, previously could not choose between joining the Hephzibah or the Savannah Association because it was equally remote from both.¹¹ Land cessions from the treaty of Fort Jackson and the prospect of the annexation of Florida also encouraged the formation of the Piedmont, and provided the association with a good prospect for southward expansion.¹²

Perhaps no individual was more responsible for the success and expansion of the Piedmont Association than Isham Peacock. Though he was not a constituent member, he was considered the “father” of the association.¹³ Because he founded or assisted in the founding of so many churches that were involved in its organization, it can be said that the Piedmont and the general organization of the Baptist churches of southeastern Georgia are largely the product of Peacock’s labors. Even before the Piedmont existed, he was an active and uncompromising minister. His influence in the associations and in the communities of Baptists in Georgia in the first half of the nineteenth century is extensive.

Peacock was born in North Carolina on October 8, 1742. He was the son of a reasonably well off North Carolinian who was a member of Bear Creek Baptist Church

¹⁰ Piedmont Association, “Minutes,” 1816-1818.

¹¹ Beard’s Creek Baptist Church, “Minutes,” July-September 1807.

¹² Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 25.

¹³ Christian Index, “History of the Baptist Denomination,” 166.

before the start of the American Revolution. Peacock was drafted into service during the Revolution and migrated to Georgia at the conclusion of the war.¹⁴ By 1800, Peacock had settled in the area of Bulloch and Tattnall counties.¹⁵

Little is known about Peacock's religious convictions before he first appeared as an ordained Baptist minister. His first known church membership in Georgia was at Lott's Creek Church in Bulloch County.¹⁶ On August 15, 1802, Henry Holcomb, John Goldwire, and Henry Cook, who were all ministers at Lott's Creek ordained him. On the same day, Peacock baptized thirteen people who were immediately organized into a church with Peacock as their minister.¹⁷ The church was named Black Creek for the area Peacock had such success in converting the local populace. By January, 1803, the church had joined the Savannah Association and had grown from thirteen to seventy-seven members.¹⁸

There is not much to suggest how Calvinistic Peacock's early preaching was. His successes at Black Creek could have been an indicator of the inclusion of, "a little of what is called Arminianism", but pure predestinarian preaching seemed equally able to convert frontier dwellers.¹⁹ It is known that in his later years, he was decidedly Calvinistic. At a meeting of the Piedmont Association in 1823, Peacock warned churches against, "filling the house of God with unprepared materials which cannot bear the fruit of God's elect nor bear the close discipline which God requires of us."²⁰

¹⁴ Crowley, "Primitive Baptists," 21.

¹⁵ Huxford, "Pioneers," Vol. 6, 207.

¹⁶ Christian Index, "History of the Baptist Denomination," 67.

¹⁷ Crowley, "Origins and Development," 23.

¹⁸ Savannah Baptist Association, "Minutes," 1803.

¹⁹ Crowley, "Primitive Baptists," 23.

²⁰ Piedmont Baptist Association, "Minutes," 1823.

Peacock moved quickly and forcefully to stamp out any doctrines that did not meet the proper “discipline” of the Baptist faith. In 1830, he was able to get Beard’s Creek Church to adopt a resolution forbidding Missionary and temperance speakers to take the pulpit there. However, they rescinded the resolution as soon as he moved to Pierce County.²¹ Though he was alleged to be sober, he was known to demonstrate his aversion to temperance societies by carrying a cane full of whiskey he used to refresh himself while preaching. He also refused to attend the 1833 Piedmont Association because the moderator had joined a temperance organization.²² The disgust Peacock showed towards organized attempts to regulate public morality was typical of frontier Baptists.²³

Though he was never afraid to separate from his doctrinal opponents, Peacock’s efforts continued to “bear fruit” throughout his long life. Peacock was responsible for organizing a number of churches in the area after Black Creek. He assisted in organizing Beard’s Creek and Salem churches in Tattnall County in 1804 and 1811 respectively.²⁴ In 1819, he organized High Bluff Church in what is now Brantley County, Georgia and extended the Baptist frontier even farther south. Peacock would eventually push the edge of Baptist influence beyond the borders of the United States, albeit only briefly. In January 1821, Peacock and Fleming Bates established Pigeon Creek Church, the first Baptist Church in Florida, in what is now Nassau County.²⁵ Florida was still officially a

²¹ Beard’s Creek Church, “Minutes,” July 1830, July, 1833, April, 1833.

²² Index, “Georgia Baptists,” 166.

²³ Crowley, “Origins and Development,” 23.

²⁴ Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 23.

²⁵ Pigeon Creek Baptist Church, “Minutes,” January, 1821.

Spanish territory at the time; the establishment of a Baptist church was technically a violation of the law.²⁶

Peacock continued to preach long after the founding of Pigeon Creek Church despite his advanced age. He is known to have made a preaching tour of Florida when he was eighty, and was still baptizing converts in his nineties.²⁷ His last position as a pastor was at Providence Church in Ware County, Georgia when he was 101 years old.²⁸ It was only after going blind that he resigned his position there and moved to a small town near Jacksonville, Florida, where he spent his remaining years. Peacock would make one last journey to the Wiregrass country of Georgia when, at the age of 107 he set out to visit his grandchildren in Pierce County, Georgia.²⁹ He died there in 1851 and was buried in an unmarked grave at Shiloh Primitive Baptist Church, which was the place of his last known membership.³⁰

During Peacock's ministerial career, the Piedmont Association and the other churches of southeastern Georgia experienced rapid growth. From 1817-1825 the Piedmont received ten new churches organized across southeastern Georgia and northeastern Florida. By 1824, the Piedmont claimed four hundred members in sixteen churches. However, both members and churches tended to be somewhat ephemeral at this time. In 1825, the association had diminished to eleven churches with 267 members.³¹

Though the numbers for the Piedmont Association may have seemed slight, they were not unusually small for the region. The sparse population of the region made large

²⁶ Crowley, "Primitive Baptists," 23.

²⁷ Beard's Creek Church, "Minutes," June-July 1831

²⁸ Huxford, "Pioneers," Vol. 6, 208

²⁹ Crowley, "Primitive Baptists," 24.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Piedmont Association, "Minutes," 1817, 1819-21, 1823-25.

congregations difficult, if not impossible to attain. However, the continued rapid spread of settlements in the region led to the establishment of a number of churches outside the boundaries of any association in Georgia. Because of the increased number of churches in the region, a move commenced for a new association in southwest Georgia and northwest Florida.³²

On August 24, 1827, a council met in Thomas County, Georgia to determine the feasibility of forming a new association in the region. The council arranged for another meeting at Mt. Gilead Church in September and requested that all interested churches send messengers with a statement of faith and the date of their constitution together with names of the ministers taking part in it.³³ The careful attention to detail was necessary, because many churches in the area had cut corners in their organization. An example is Shiloh Church in Ware County. In 1833, the Ochlocknee Association would not accept Shiloh Church because it was constituted “illegally.” However, the association did offer instruction on how to craft a new constitution, which Shiloh did.³⁴

The council decided to go ahead with the plans for a new association. In October, 1827, the Piedmont Association, “received and read a petition from seven Baptist churches situated between the Alapaha and Flint River praying ministerial aid to constitute them into a new association.” The Piedmont set Matthew Albritton and Fleming Bates to oversee the organization of the Association. Both were members of Union Church, near present day Lakeland, Georgia, which requested and received dismissal from the Piedmont to join the new association.³⁵

³² Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 27, 31.

³³ Union Primitive Baptist Church, “Minutes,” September, 1827.

³⁴ Ochlocknee Primitive Baptist Association, “Minutes,” 1833.

³⁵ Piedmont Association, “Minutes,” 1827

The association held an organizational meeting at Bethel Church in what is now Brooks County, Georgia, in November, 1827. Six churches took part in the constitution of the Association. Union Church, was almost certainly the church that joined at the first session of the new association, which called itself Ochlocknee. In the first year of its existence, the Ochlocknee Association claimed 138 members among its seven churches. The initial meeting went well and Bates and Albritton reported to Union Church that, “much harmony and love abounded.”³⁶

The new association grew quickly. By 1833, the Ochlocknee had thirty-five churches with 1,010 members. Though migration to the region was steadily increasing during this time, it did not account for all of the increase. In 1833, 179 were baptized into the association’s churches. Fourteen new churches applied for membership during the same year. So many neophytes comprised the new churches that the association appointed William Knight to instruct them on the proper duties of churches to the association. The rapid expansion expanded the Ochlocknee’s borders to extend from the Piedmont Association to the St. John’s Association. The expansive size of the association prompted a proposal to divide at the 1833 meeting.³⁷

In 1834, Friendship, Union, and Elizabeth churches in Georgia, and Providence, New Zion, Concord, Newington, and New River in Florida, were dismissed from the Ochlocknee Association to form a new association.³⁸ In a reflection of the intense territorialism of the associations of the period, the new body was given a boundary that extended up the Suwannee, Withlacoochee, and Little River. The association took the name Suwannee River and scheduled a constitutional meeting at Concord Church for

³⁶ Union Church, “Minutes,” December, 1827.

³⁷ Hassell and Hassell, “Church of God,” 893-94.

³⁸ Ochlocknee Association, “Minutes,” 1833.

December, 1834.³⁹ The delegates duly arrived at the meeting, but the ministers failed to show. At a rescheduled meeting held in Spetember, 1835, only one appointed minister showed, so the delegates co-opted William A. Knight as the other member of the presbytery and proceeded to formally organize the association.⁴⁰

The Suwannee River Association did not experience rapid growth like the Ochlocknee. The Second Seminole War was the primary cause for the association's slow growth and sparse representation. The 1838 session recommended that the churches increase their days of fasting and prayer, "that the Lord might divert the judgments which seem to hang over us." They also suggested they put off any general business of the association, "by reason of the unsettled affairs of our country."⁴¹ The 1839 session met in the safer Georgia territory and again suggested more prayer and fasting, "so that the war-whoop of a savage foe, might not be heard any longer in our land to the great disturbance of our fellow citizens, while numbers of our women and infant children are falling victims to their relentless hands."⁴² Nearby associations "lamented the situation of the Suwannee Association, on account of the Indian War in that vicinity."⁴³

By the beginning of the 1840s, tensions in the region had eased and the Suwannee was experiencing growth. The 1840 minutes of the Suwannee Association speak of a revival that was strongest among its congregations in Georgia.⁴⁴ However, this period of growth and expansion would eventually produce discord and division among the Baptists of South Georgia. In the midst of the successes churches in the region were having after

³⁹ Union Church, "Minutes," November-December, 1834.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, October, 1835.

⁴¹ Suwannee River Primitive Baptist Association, "Minutes," 1838

⁴² *Ibid.*, 1839.

⁴³ Ochlocknee Association, "Minutes," 1836.

⁴⁴ Suwannee River Association, "Mintues," 1840.

the Seminole War, the missionary controversy finally arrived and left disagreement and disunion behind.

In September, 1840, a congregant brought the following question to Union Church: “Is it right for Primitive Baptist Churches to invite missionary preachers believing them to be such and holding them institutions of the day...to preach among them?” The church said that it was not and appointed a committee to question traveling preachers about their missionary influences.⁴⁵ This question and the churches response suggest that the influential body at Union Church had firmly decided its stance on the missionary movement. The use of the term “Primitive” in the congregants question was likely indicative of the presence of the anti-missionary periodical, *The Primitive Baptist* and provides a link between South Georgia Baptists and the North Carolina Baptists who had long advocated for total separation from the missionary movement.⁴⁶

Whether the *Primitive Baptist* circulated among the Baptists of South Georgia or not, total separation from the missionary movement occurred in 1840. The Suwannee River Association resolved to declare, “non-fellowship with all the unscriptural institutions of the day such as theological schools, state conventions, missionary societies,... and all their kindred relatives holding them to be unscriptural.”⁴⁷ The following year, the Ochlocknee Association adopted an equally strong anti-missionary resolution.⁴⁸

The missionary parties prevailed in no South Georgia churches and were forced to withdraw and form their own. The missionary churches that were formed in the region

⁴⁵ Union Church, “Minutes,” September 11, 1840.

⁴⁶ Crowley, “Origins and Development,” 38.

⁴⁷ Suwannee River Association, “Minutes,” 1840.

⁴⁸ Ochlocknee Association, “Minutes,” 1841.

appeared to be comprised, in great part, of wealthy slave-owners who were subscribing to a milder doctrine that seemed more congenial to the emerging upper class in the region.⁴⁹ Though some Primitives in the region did flock to the missionary movement, the denomination maintained reasonable expansion and remained committed to total non-fellowship with Missionaries. The lines between the two groups were drawn, though the final definition of the parties would not be achieved for nearly forty years.⁵⁰ It was during this period that the Alabaha River Primitive Baptist Association came into existence and went through the formative period that would carve out the association's position as the "gold-standard" of South Georgia's Primitive Baptists.

⁴⁹ Crowley, "Origins and Development," 41.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 45

Chapter III

The Early Years of the Alabaha River Primitive Baptist Association, 1842-1869

*Their faith and their order and practice the same,
They formed an agreement, a covenant, a law;
For their Association, they chose a name
And the name they selected was Alabaha
-- W.O. Gibson, *Rambling Meditations*.*

Though the Suwannee Association was growing at the beginning of the 1840s, it was also experiencing the administrative problems that arose whenever an association in the remote regions of South Georgia became too geographically expansive. Because the people in the wiregrass region were still few and far between and traveled primarily by horseback, an association that grew too large made travel among its churches difficult. Therefore, an Association that had grown too large would often create another out of a portion of its churches. Similar circumstances led to the creation of the Suwannee in 1833, and in less than ten years they had outgrown their reach as well.

In October, 1842, the Suwannee Association appointed a committee consisting of John Dryden and Daniel Patterson to meet at Mt. Pleasant Church in Appling County, Georgia. John Dryden delivered the opening sermon after which the meeting, “received and read letters from four churches expressing a desire to become constituted and was pronounced an Association on the principles of the Gospel.”¹ According to Elder Daniel Drawdy, who is a present-day elder in the association, “The four churches that constituted the Alabaha were on the northern or northeastern fringes of the Suwannee

¹ Alabaha River Primitive Baptist Association, “Minutes,” 1842.

Association, making it difficult to for their members to correspond or commune with...the Suwannee.”² The association adopted the decorum of the Suwannee as its own and “agreed that we postpone the laying off our boundary until the next session of the mother Association.”³ The actions taken in the first meeting indicated the desire for the Alabaha to engage in a spirit of cooperation with her parent Association.⁴

The 1840s were a period of relative harmony, cooperation, and growth in the association. It did not take the new association long to experience the rapid growth of its parent association. In the first year of its existence, the Alabaha doubled in size, increasing its congregation to eight churches with 248 members.⁵ By the end of the decade, the association had grown to include thirteen churches and 347 members. By this time, the association had expanded geographically from having churches in three counties to include congregations from six counties.⁶

During this time, the name and number of the churches would frequently change, but the young association was already gaining a reputation for its strict adherence its founding principles. The missionary controversy was now raging in southeastern Georgia and the Alabaha adopted the Primitive position of non-fellowship from the start. The founding principles of the association declared “that there are a number of Baptist Churches which differ from us in faith and practice and that it is impossible to have communion where there is no union.”⁷ The steadfast adherence to these principles seems to have aided in the growth of the association since a number of churches from the

² Daniel Drawdy, email to the author, October 1, 2006

³ Alabaha Association, “Minutes,” 1842.

⁴ Drawdy, email, October 1, 2006.

⁵ Alabaha Association, “Minutes,” 1843.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1850.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1842.

increasingly missionary Piedmont Association joined the Alabama in the early years of its existence.⁸

There are a number of accounts in the Associational minutes of the 1840s that indicate the Alabama's unwillingness to tolerate deviations from their established doctrine within the association. The association dealt with wayward churches in a manner that recalls the following passage from the Gospel of Matthew:

And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.⁹

In 1847, the Alabama withdrew from Elizabeth Church for, "attaching herself to another association not of our faith and order."¹⁰ Though the association Elizabeth Church was attaching to is not mentioned in the minutes, the anti-missionary attitude of the association indicated the body Elizabeth attached to was likely affiliated with the missionary movement. One year earlier, the association removed Ten Mile Creek Church for being "unsound in faith" and resolved to maintain the separation, "until she be reclaimed."¹¹ After unsuccessfully inquiring into her status the previous year, Mount Pleasant Church was also removed after being found "immoral in practice" by one of its members and failing to send representatives to the convention for the previous two years.¹² Though none of these withdrawals provides specific details, it is certain that the association would not tolerate any deviation from established doctrine among its churches.

⁸ Crowley, "Origins and Development," 48.

⁹ Mt 5:30 KJV.

¹⁰ Alabama Association, "Minutes," 1847.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1846.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1846-48.

A particularly interesting theological point that the Alabama Association defended during this period, and continues to defend until the present day is the means doctrine. This principle considered the gospel as the “means” by which God regenerated the elect and suggested that preachers address both saint and sinner.¹³ This doctrine was in circulation among the Baptists long before they arrived in Georgia. The London Confession of 1689, an influential document for Primitive Baptist theology, taught that the, “word and Spirit of God” could raise sinners, but only at God’s appointed time.¹⁴

The means doctrine appeared to be favored by early anti-missionary associations in southeastern Georgia. The 1833 Ochlocknee Association noted that the ministers appointed to preach the Sunday services delivered sermons, “to the consolation of mourners, the establishment of saints, and the alarming of sinners.”¹⁵ Isham Peacock’s preaching during this time was said to have, “alarmed sinners into convulsions.”¹⁶ The minutes of the influential Union Church also mention sermons that were, “alarming to poor careless sinners.”¹⁷ Even after the initial split with the missionaries, the Suwannee Association still asked ministers to “preach the word wherever you go, and whenever you can go; it is ...for the consolation of his children, for the comforting of mourners and the alarming of sinners.”¹⁸

However, support for the instrumentality of the gospel soon faded among the Primitive Baptists in the region. According to Crowley, “With the missions disputes raging, many Primitives adopted the opinion that regeneration is always the direct act of

¹³ Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 112.

¹⁴ London Confession, 10:1, quoted in Hassell and Hassell, “Church of God,” 676

¹⁵ Ochlocknee Association, “Minutes,” 1833.

¹⁶ Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 112.

¹⁷ Union Church, “Minutes,” 1832.

¹⁸ Suwannee Association, “Minutes,” 1849.

the Holy Spirit, independent of any instrumentality.”¹⁹ In 1855, the circular letter of the Pulaski Association’s made clear their position on the means doctrine:

The savior was far from teaching that the preaching of the gospel or any other labor of man was for the awakening of dead sinners...the Life giving power is of God and of God alone...How absurd then the idea of the preaching of the gospel being the ordinary and extraordinary means in the hands of God of giving life to sinners, it is closely allied to the great mammoth principle of missionism.²⁰

The anti-means position was soon adopted by the majority of Primitive Baptists in the nation.²¹ However, the change was not universal. The Alabaha disliked the anti-means position from its inception among the Primitives in the area. In the early 1850s, the association proclaimed the gospel as “the means of salvation” and lamented the dissension “respecting the preaching of the gospel” and “falling out about the way and plan of salvation.”²² Tensions would only increase as the decade went on.

Another interesting position the Alabaha took during this period concerns the proper way to readmit individuals who had been involved with the Missionary Baptists.

In 1854, the associational minutes contained a passage in the Decorum that states:

We recommend to the churches comprising this body to receive members who went off with the Missionary Baptists at the time of their separation from us who may return with a suitable confession, and not to receive any who may have been baptized by them since their separation only by experience and Baptism.²³

This doctrine was the original position on the issue among Primitives. Both the Ochlocknee and Suwannee River Associations had adopted similar resolutions over ten

¹⁹ Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 113.

²⁰ Pulaski Primitive Baptist Association, “Minutes,” 1855.

²¹ Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 113.

²² Quoted in *Ibid.*

²³ Alabaha Association, “Minutes,” 1854.

years earlier.²⁴ In the years to come, the Alabama would hold fast to this doctrine when other associations began to argue about the principle.

During the time that debate over the means doctrine and the missionary controversy was raging in South Georgia, a new hymnal was circulating among the region's Primitive Baptist associations. The *Primitive Hymns* compiled by Benjamin Lloyd of Alabama, which is still in near universal use among the more conservative groups of Primitive Baptists of south Georgia, first appeared in the area in 1853 at Beard's Creek Church in Tattnall County.²⁵ The hymnal is an interesting publication because it contained hymns that could be used by both sides of the means issue. The hymnal contained appeals to the unconverted such as:

Once more I ask you in his name
I know his love remains the same,
Say, will you to Mount Zion go?
Say, will you have this Christ or no?

However, the collection also contains more rigidly Calvinistic verses like:

Predestined to be sons
Born by degrees, but chose at once;
A new, regenerated race,
To Praise the glory of his grace.²⁶

The appeals to the unconverted included in the Lloyd hymnal should not be misinterpreted to suggest that Primitives believed in Arminian "free choice." It only provides evidence that Primitives at the time of the publication of the *Primitive Hymns* approved of expressing a desire to see sinners converted, something the anti-means group did not support.

²⁴ Ochlocknee Association, "Minutes," 1844, Suwannee River Association, "Minutes," 1845

²⁵ Crowley, "Origins and Development," 57.

²⁶ Benjamin Lloyd, Compiler, "The Primitive Hymns," (La Mesa, CA: Opal Lloyd Terry and La Verte Lloyd Smith, 1930), 92, 15.

The Alabaha made use of Lloyd's Hymnal during this time, and still uses it in 2007. Whereas some Primitive Baptist associations will shun free offer hymns, it has been the author's experience that congregations in the Alabaha will still select these songs at present day meetings. However, it is remarkable that the hymnal came to be used by the Alabaha at all. The association became increasingly isolated during the latter half of the nineteenth century and was not fond of customs they felt were out of line with their doctrine. It is therefore likely that the Lloyd's hymnal was in universal circulation by 1865, because it would have been highly unlikely for them to adopt a book in favor among "the heretics around them."²⁷

While the Lloyd's hymnal spread among the congregations of the region, the Alabaha entered a brief period of stagnation. In the first years of the 1850s, the association lost two churches and nearly 100 members. By the end of the decade, the association had four fewer churches, but the total membership remained relatively stable. During the 1850s, the number of associations the Alabaha corresponded with was at its zenith. During this time, the association maintained correspondence with the Suwannee, Pulaski, Lower Canoochee, and Union Primitive Baptist Associations. The Alabaha and the Union Association were particularly close during the latter half of the 1850s. In 1855, the Alabaha helped to aid in the establishment of the Union Association when it agreed to the Suwannee River Association's request to contribute, "ministerial aid and to constitute the Georgia portion of that Association and to constitute the Georgia portion of that Association into a new Association."²⁸

²⁷ Crowley, "Origins and Development," 57.

²⁸ Alabaha Association, "Minutes," 1850-1859.

As the 1860s approached, the country was entering a period of great turmoil, but this is not evident in the minutes of the Alabama Association. They seemingly had no desire to involve their churches in the political disputes of the day. While the Civil War raged in the first half of the decade, the conflict only received one mention in the association's minutes in 1864, when the meeting location had to be moved, "on account of the enemy being so near."²⁹ There may have been similar mentions of the war in the minutes of the member churches, but no church presently in the association, with the exception of High Bluff Church which makes no mention of the conflict, has records that date back this far.

The scant references to the war were not uncommon among Primitive Baptists. In a study of primitive Baptists of South Georgia and North Florida, John Crowley found no direct references to political or military matters in any minutes in the region. The *Primitive Baptist* was an important periodical for Primitives in the region and contained several letters from the region. None of these letters mentioned anything occurring in the political sphere.³⁰ During the election of 1860, one Thomas County resident wrote on church discipline and in the midst of secession the following year the same individual's letter mentioned nothing about the secession crisis raging in his state. Even after the war had broken out, David Hickox of Pierce County wrote a letter to the *Primitive Baptist* that commented on John 4:24 but said nothing about the war.³¹

As the Civil War raged on, the churches of the Alabama Association carried on much the same as they had prior to the conflict. During the first part of the 1860s, the

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1864.

³⁰ Crowley, "Primitive Baptists," 91.

³¹ *Primitive Baptist* 24 (October 27, 1860): 1-2; letter of January 17, 1861 in 25 (February 10, 1861): 42-43, letter of May, 1861 in vol. 25 (July 27, 1861): 219-20.

Alabaha experienced a period of growth. Two new churches came into the association during this time. Pigeon Creek, the first Baptist Church established in Florida, became the first church outside of Georgia to join the Alabaha in 1860. In 1861, Hebron Church in Coffee County petitioned to join the Association and was accepted. However, this church would only remain in the Association until 1866, when she was dismissed because, “the majority of Hebron Church is immoral in practice and sustains false doctrine.”³²

During this time, a major dispute erupted between the Alabaha and its parent organization, the Suwannee River Association. In 1860, Job E. W. Smith, moderator of the Suwannee River Association, preached at the Alabaha River Association’s annual meeting. During his sermon, Smith unequivocally advocated for the anti-means position when he held up the Bible and told the congregation, “You have been told that this is the word of God; do you believe it? I say it is not, it is ink and paper.” Smith also stated “the Gospel had no saving efficacy in it to the awakening of sinners; it was only for the feeding of the flock.” The Alabaha, who had long advocated the instrumentality of the Gospel, declared that Smith’s words were “a departure from the faith” and recommended “that this body withdraw her correspondence from the Suwannee Association until she becomes reclaimed.”³³

The Suwannee Association responded quickly. The association’s minutes from 1861 claimed that the “whole ministry stands impeached by the Alabaha River. Their circular letter warned of characters that had, “a great zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.” The letter also noted that you could tell preaching was “not of God” if it was, “generally engaged to alarm sinners.” The next year, the Suwannee declared

³² Alabaha Association, “Minutes,” 1866.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1860.

salvation through the means doctrine, an “uncertain sound.” In 1869, the association declared baptisms performed by the Alabaha to be invalid, because of differing faith. In that year’s circular letter, Issac Coon stated that the purpose of the gospel was for saving “a believer from all the bogs, dens, swamps, breakers, quick-sands and damnable delusions of false teachers.”³⁴

The Suwannee River Association’s other daughter association, the Union, continued to correspond with the Alabaha during the dispute despite experiencing significant dissension over the point at issue. Union felt the Alabaha was “too hasty” in their withdrawal from the Suwannee Association and felt the Alabaha should have followed the “Gospel rule laid down in the 18th chapter of St. Matthew.” However, the Alabaha thought an association holding such a heretical doctrine was unfit for further admonition. The Alabaha’s minutes stated, “We do not see with our sister Association. We do believe that this scripture referred to in their minutes only refers to the discipline of a church.” In 1864, the Alabaha dropped correspondence with the Union Association because they continued to correspond with the Suwannee and the following year, both associations banned communion with the other. The final word on the split from the Alabaha’s perspective came in the following exchange in the 1865 minutes:

A query presented by Hebron Church Asking of us is it right for the members of our churches in our Association to commence with the churches of the Union and Suwannee River Associations seeing they have drawn from us and us from them. In reply, we answer: no it will not be right.³⁵

As the Civil War was ending, the Alabaha was beginning its move into an isolation brought about by its rigid adherence to the association’s founding principles.

³⁴ Suwannee River Association, “Minutes,” 1861, 1862, 1869.

³⁵ Alabaha Association, “Minutes,” 1862, 1864, 1865.

After the split with the Suwannee River and Union Associations, the Alabaha was only corresponding with the Pulaski and the Lower Canoochee and correspondence with these associations was not constant.³⁶ The Alabaha was less than thirty years old at the close of the 1860s, and it had seen its share of controversies, but it had always come out of the disputes intact. However, a situation was forming in post-war Georgia that would split the Alabaha Association and set it on a path away from nearly all other Primitive Baptist Associations in the region.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1865-1870.

Chapter IV

Reconstruction and the Rise of the Crawfordites, 1869-1889

Dark and heavy clouds were drifting
Through the thickening atmosphere,
And the winds in constant shifting
Seemed to come from everywhere.
--W.O. Gibson *Rambling Meditations*.

At the conclusion of the Civil War, South Georgia remained much the same as it had before the war, primarily because the region was not militarily significant. Families who lost loved ones in faraway battles, the occasional plundering of crops by the Confederate Commissary, and the freedom of the relatively few slaves in the region made up the extent of the war's impact upon the region.¹ The Primitive Baptist denomination was largely unaffected by the conflict and continued to function the same way it had since their split with the Missionaries. However, the period following the war would bring some upheavals among the Primitives, some of which were indirectly caused by Reconstruction politics.

In 1868, Piedmont Primitive Baptist Church in Decatur County, Georgia, was presented an opportunity to express its opinion when one of its members, John Higdon, served in the 1868 Georgia Convention that produced a new constitution. The constitution ratified by the convention contained a provision required for readmission to the union that nullified the Confederate debt. Piedmont Church considered Higdon's

¹ Crowley, "Primitive Baptists," 99.

actions to be a violation of his oath to uphold the United States Constitution, because they felt it violated the provision against states enacting laws “impairing obligation of contract.” The conventioners further compounded their guilt in the eyes of Piedmont Church by voting to compensate themselves, “at the exorbitant rates of \$9 per day and 40 cts per mile.” The church voted unanimously to excommunicate Higdon for his actions.²

Primitive Baptists had always taken an uncompromising stand towards honoring financial obligations, which helps clarify their reaction to the 1868 constitution. It also explains their virulent reaction to the Georgia Homestead Law of 1868, a piece of Reconstruction legislation that permitted debtors to withhold some property from their creditors. Primitive Baptists were not known for trying to evade their creditors. Elder C.W. Stallings of Cat Creek Church in Lowndes County, Georgia, gave everything he owned to his creditors and relied on providence to sustain him, despite being an invalid with a wife and six young children. However, there were some Primitives who gave out before this point and took advantage of the Homestead Act, which caused controversy to erupt at a number of meetings.³

Bethlehem Church in Brooks County, Georgia, was an early leader of the anti-homestead movement. In January, 1869 Bethlehem refused to aid in the ordination of John Delk, “on account of his takeing the benefit of the homestead act for we believe it to be a transgression and unorthorised by the scripture.” When Harmony sent a query regarding their action, Bethlehem responded, “We as a Primitive Baptist Church unanimously agree that we oppose the principle of the Homestead Act and we unfellowship a brother or sister who takes the benefit of the act until reclaimed.” By July,

² Piedmont Primitive Baptist Church, “Minutes,” May-June, 1868.

³ Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 107.

1869, the church adopted a somewhat confusing and unabashedly virulent resolution against the Homestead Act that stated:

We agree to set up our standard concerning the Homestead that we invite no Minister of the Gospel to the priveledge of our pulpit that is a homesteader or that are living under the administration of a homesteader or that are living in the church with a homesteader in peace to seat with us or any that communes with a homesteader in peace knowingly until they are reclaimed.⁴

In October 1870, the Ochlocknee Association sustained Bethlehem's strict view on the Homestead Act.⁵ The confusion and bitterness surrounding this decision was so widespread that Bethlehem failed to have a communion meeting for two years.⁶ The Union Association also sustained the anti-homestead view of the Ochlocknee, though it was in more ambiguous terms.⁷ Despite the clouded wording of the association's declaration, one of its churches was quite clear in its expulsion of a member for "taking the homestead" in 1870.⁸

No association suffered more from the fallout over the Homestead Act than the Alabaha River. In 1870, the Association adopted a lengthy declaration from the Western Georgia Upatoie Association concerning the Homestead Act. The declaration stated that the association fully appreciated, "the difficulties by which some brethren are surrounded who are in debt and who have lost their property by the late war, but we still hold that they are not thereby justified in doing wrong." The wrong, according to the declaration, was "the right to withhold from the payment of his debt, if he has any, the sum or equivalent of \$3,000.00 in gold." The Association noted, "This is a privilege of which we

⁴ Bethlehem Primitive Baptist Church, "Minutes," January-July, 1869, .

⁵ Ochlocknee Association, "Minutes," 1870.

⁶ Bethlehem Church, "Minutes," July 1870, July 1871, April, 1872.

⁷ Union Association, "Minutes," 1870.

⁸ Crowley, "Primitive Baptists," 107.

may naturally and reasonably expect the world to take the benefit: and some members of the church...have been so inconsiderate as to support that it was not wrong... inasmuch as it as the law of the land.” The supporters of this view said that “taking the Homestead” was a violation of the “law of God” which “declares that that the borrower is servant to the leader [lender].” Nevertheless, the declaration concluded by saying “that any member who resorts...to the Homestead be dealt with..., not as an enemy, but an erring brother...And we advise all brethren who have resorted to the Homestead to renounce it and return to Christ.”⁹

The Alabaha reconsidered the adoption of this article the following year at their associational meeting. The motion to repeal the anti-homestead declaration narrowly passed, with ten delegates voting for its removal and eight voting against. The minority in the decision was not pleased with the outcome and a special session was called for July, 1872 to work out the differences between the two parties. However, the anti-homestead party did not receive the associational delegates well. The committee sent to the five dissenting churches noted that they “inquired into the course of the breach and received no other reason for a cause of disunion only referred to the letters which they were in possession of from their respective churches.” The committee tried to find a way to mend the breach and, “called on the delegates...for any proposition they had to offer for a reconciliation and received none.” When the delegation reported to the association later in the year, they could only, “report that they effected nothing satisfactory, but left matters worse than they found them.”¹⁰

⁹ Alabaha Association, “Minutes,” 1870.

¹⁰ Alabaha Association (Crawford Faction), “Minutes,” 1872.

The Alabama River Association withdrew from the five dissident churches at the 1872 associational meeting. A final attempt at a peace meeting was scheduled for the following January that invited both churches and concerned individuals to attend. However, the five withdrawn churches only handed in what was purported to be a reconciliation letter. This petition “failed to give the cause of withdrawal” and instead “held forth impeachments for the Association’s action and to reconsider her past action for withdrawing without a cause.” Reconciliation was not achieved by the 1873 associational meeting, where two more churches, New Hope Buffalo of Wayne County, Georgia, and Salem Church of Coffee County, Georgia, were dropped “for going off with the five withdrawn churches.” At the same meeting, two ministers were commissioned “to write off all the causes of disorder disturbances and other things that have caused the split... and have them published in the Primitive Baptist.”¹¹ Unfortunately, all of the surviving collections of that periodical lack most of the issues from the 1870s, so it remains unknown at this time if the Association’s letter ever saw print.¹² Whether or not the letter was ever published, it failed to heal the breach or rally support from Associations the Alabama had previously corresponded with.

Part of the reason the homestead controversy reached such heights in the Alabama Association was the personal conflict between two prominent preachers, Reuben Crawford and Richard Bennett. Bennett headed the anti-homestead party and Crawford led the opposing faction. The split between their groups has had long lasting ramifications for Primitive Baptists in South Georgia. Even today, more than one hundred

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1872, 1873.

¹² Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 108.

and thirty years later, one must specify if they are speaking of “Crawfordites,” or “Bennettites” when talking about Primitive Baptists in southeastern Georgia.¹³

Elder Reuben Crawford was born in Effingham County, Georgia, in 1801. He later resided in McIntosh County where he served as a lieutenant in the militia in 1823.¹⁴ He first appeared in church records as a delegate from Wesley Creek Church in McIntosh County to the Piedmont Association in 1835. He was preaching by 1836 and one year later, in an unusual move, he was ordained by the association and not his home church.¹⁵ His home church was one of the four churches that formed the Alabama River Association in 1842, and Crawford attended every session after 1843. Around 1845, he relocated to Pierce County, where he joined Shiloh Church where he remained a member and pastor until 1886. He died the following year and was buried at Shiloh. Strangely, one source mentions that Crawford had been expelled from Shiloh and reconciled with Richard Bennett shortly before his death in 1887, but no other sources are currently extant that corroborate this statement. Another contemporary source suggests Crawford was still exhibiting considerable vitality and a good relationship with Shiloh church even as he neared the end of his life. According to a newspaper account published the year before his death, he was preaching “at the church known as ‘Old Shiloh’” and he was also “in his 88th year and this season has been making his crop by his own labor with the plow and hoe.”¹⁶

Less is known about Crawford’s rival Richard Bennett. He was born in Appling County, Georgia, in 1825 and served in the Confederate Army as a Captain during the

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Huxford Society, “Pioneers,” Vol. 5, 83

¹⁵ Piedmont Association, “Minutes,” 1836, 1837.

¹⁶ Quoted in, Dean Carl Broome, “History of Pierce County Georgia Volume 1,” (Blakshear, GA: Broome Printing and Office Supplies, 1973), 55, 202.

Civil War.¹⁷ He first appears in the minutes of the Alabama Association as a delegate and an elder from Big Creek Church in Appling County, Georgia, in 1867.¹⁸ He adopted a strong anti-homestead stance against Crawford, whose son had felt compelled to “take the homestead”.¹⁹ During the height of the controversy, Bennett was said to have had more fellowship for a horse than for Reuben Crawford. Tradition holds that Crawford predicted that Bennett would commit suicide, which he did in 1898.²⁰

Bennett’s faction was able to obtain recognition from other Primitives in the region as the true Alabama Association. The group of five Churches declared the Crawford faction in disorder and invited them to come back to unity, but called upon other primitives not to receive baptisms performed by Crawfordites after the division. The Bennettites accused their opponents of withdrawing “without reserve or explanation,” though the minutes of the Crawford faction do indicate an attempt to explain the division.²¹

The Association was already nearly isolated from the debate over the means doctrine in the 1860s, but the split with the Bennettites completely cut them off from the rest of the Primitive Baptist community. In 1871, the Association agreed to suspend correspondence with sister associations. After the final split with the Bennett faction, who had been reaching out to other associations, the Crawfordites continued to refuse correspondence with any other association. The Crawford side of the Alabama Association would not correspond with any associations until 1878, when it established

¹⁷ Huxford Society, “Pioneers,” Vol. 4, 18.

¹⁸ Alabama Association, “Minutes,” 1867.

¹⁹ Broome, “Pierce County,” 202.

²⁰ Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 109.

²¹ Alabama River Association (Bennett Faction), “Minutes,” 1877, Alabama River Association (Crawford Faction), “Minutes,” 1873.

correspondence with the newly constituted St. Mary's River Association, which was created out of churches within the Crawfordite association.²²

Sister Emma Walker, who was a member of the Alabaha Association in the early 1900s, wrote an account of the history of the association's experiences with other associations. Her writing, though primarily culled from the associational minutes, does contain commentary that elaborates on the feelings of the association towards correspondence with other associations. She wrote a particularly interesting account of the lessons learned from the split with the Benettites in this work. She wrote:

The readers of this little brief account drawn from a regular church record kept by the clerk of the assoc. to wit Elder W.O. Gibson of Folkston, GA can rest assured that this assoc to wit, The Alabaha River Primitive Baptist Assoc has learned to let other assoc articles stay with themselves and not let them have anything to do with her business or come into her minutes and when other troubles would arise, she has considered them as her own, and needith not have any of the other assoc. to try to help tend to her business.²³

The fact that the need for a new association arose within the Crawford faction suggests that the split was not harmful to the Association's overall membership. In fact, the association enjoyed a healthy rate of growth throughout the 1870s. From 1873 to 1878, the Alabaha added five churches and fifty three members to its ranks. Even after the association dismissed two churches to form the St. Mary's Association, it continued to gain members. By the beginning of the 1880s, the Alabaha Association could claim

²² Alabaha Association, "Minutes," 1871, Alabaha Association (Crawford Faction), "Minutes," 1873-1878.

²³ Emma Walker, "A Brief Rehearsal of the Past Experience of the Alabaha River Primitive Baptist Association With Other Associations Up Until Dec. 4, 1932," (n.p., n.d.) n.p.

nearly 120 more members than they had in the first year after the split with the Bennettites.²⁴

In the early 1880s, the Crawford faction of the Alabama faction began to respond in earnest to the accusations of the Bennettites. Perhaps the letter they intended to send to the Primitive Baptist in 1873 concerning the split addressed the issue in detail, or perhaps the circular letters from the 1870s addressed the topic, but no copies of these documents are extant today.²⁵ In 1881, the association responded to other Primitive Baptists who declared the Bennett faction to be the “true” Alabama River Association by rechristening themselves as the “Original Constitution Alabama River Association.” The association’s 1884 circular letter provides important information on the deeper reasons for the split. It seems the means doctrine was still an important issue when the split occurred, for the Bennettites were accused of taking the anti-means position in this letter. Perhaps those who split with Bennett in 1871, dissatisfied with the association’s stance on gospel instrumentality, used the homestead controversy to separate themselves from the association. The circular address does not mention the homestead controversy and instead emphasizes the debate over instrumentality. A typical passage from the letter reads:

The Assyrians cried with a loud voice in the Jew’s language, just as a great many are trying to do to-day, using the Jew’s language and carrying a form of Godliness, but denying the power thereof saying, that the gospel of our Christ, the right arm of God has no power in it to raise the dead, it can only feed the living after they have been raised by some other power.²⁶

²⁴ Alabama Association (Crawford Faction), “Minutes,” 1873-1880.

²⁵ The record book for the Alabama was destroyed in a fire in 1896 and what remains are transcribed versions of the minutes the clerk, W.O. Gibson, could procure. The clerk did not include the circular letters in his transcriptions. Some circular letters have survived, but none are from the 1870s. Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 108

²⁶ Alabama Association (Crawford Faction), “Minutes,” 1881, 1884.

It is interesting to note, that some former members of the Alabama Association went far beyond the instrumentality doctrine in their concern for poor sinners. In 1866, the Association had expelled Hebron Church of Coffee County, Georgia, for “immorality and heresy,” though a minority remained with the Alabama. Two years later, the minority group was cut off for continuing to go off with Hebron’s minister John Vickers, who the Alabama accused of advocating a heretical doctrine.²⁷

In 1875, Vickers’ followers held a convention that withdrew fellowship from any who held “Calvinistic and Mahometan” beliefs and those who held “law salvation.” Vickers defended the withdrawal in a tract entitled *An Explanation of the Split between the Hardshell Baptists and the Primitive Baptists*. Vickers argued that election implied a choice that must be based upon distinction. Because the only relevant distinction that existed was that of believer and non-believer, election was conditional upon the foreseen faith of the believer. Though Vickers would have nothing to do with Missionary Baptists, he seems to have still been able to articulate the classic Arminian theory of election. However, despite his Arminian leanings, he still held that faith could only come from a divine gift and only divine revelation could enable one to believe his doctrine. According to Vickers, all Primitive Baptists originally held this view and he complained that the “hardshells” of his day did little to alarm sinners.²⁸

Vickers’ church remained in isolation until the 1880s, though it did venture in and out of other associations during the 1860s and 1870s. In 1889, another church joined with Hebron and the Satilla Primitive Baptist Association was formed. The association stayed true to Vickers’ original ideals, and locals named Vickers’ following after his first name,

²⁷ Alabama Association, “Minutes,” 1866, 1868.

²⁸ John Vickers, “An Explanation of the Split between the Hardshell Baptists and the Primitive Baptists,” (N.p. n.d.), n.p.

“Jack,” which yielded the rather awkward term, “Jackites.”²⁹ No matter what name was used to describe them, the Jackites were known for condemning fatalism at every opportunity. Eventually the association allowed such anathemas to Primitive Baptists as Sunday Schools on the grounds that they were “moral” and not “religious” institutions. The Association, which remained Primitive only in name and had few members, lasted into the twentieth century, when it became an Independent Baptist body.³⁰

Though the debate raged on outside of the Alabama Association, existing records from the latter half of the 1880s do not mention the split or the debate over the means doctrine. The Alabama continued to keep membership levels steady as well as adding a net total of two churches by 1889. The association did remove Cowpen Bay Church in Liberty County, Georgia, for “disorderly conduct.” The St. Mary’s Association was a source of brief controversy in 1887, when they refused the correspondence of the Alabama. However, at the Alabama’s associational meeting the same year, “the brethren who are delegates from that (St. Mary’s) Association acknowledged their wrong in refusing our correspondence and ask forgiveness for the same.”³¹

As the 1890s approached, the Crawfordite (Original Constitution) Alabama River Association had been completely cut off from the rest of the Primitive Baptist community in the region. The only association it corresponded with after the split was the St. Mary’s, an association it helped to establish. Despite its conflicts with other Primitives, the association had remained internally stable since the split was finalized in 1873. In the coming years, the isolation of the Crawfordites would prove to be a blessing as all of the Primitive Baptists in the region, with the exception of the Crawford Faction of the

²⁹ Warren P. Ward, “Ward’s History of Coffee County,” (Spartanburg, S.C.: Reprint Company, 1978), 47.

³⁰ Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 116.

³¹ Alabama Association (Crawford Faction), “Minutes,” 1887.

Alabaha Association began to argue over a whole new set of ideas that would drastically change the direction of the Primitive Baptist denomination in the coming years.

Chapter V

A Turn to Isolation in the Time of the Progressive Primitive Baptists, 1890-1930

Hail, traveler, whither bound, I pray
And why such haste I ask to know?
Have you no fear to go the way
So many careless travelers go?
-W.O. Gisbon, *Rambling Meditations*

During the 1890s, nearly twenty years after the split in the Alabama Association, a movement began amongst the Primitive Baptists of South Georgia that would send the denomination into a state of upheaval not seen since the Primitives originally split with the Missionaries in the 1830s. The Progressive movement advocated increased liberty for individual churches and opposed the authority of associations. Later, progressive Primitives would argue for modern religious practices that included ministerial support and the use of musical instruments in church services. Unlike previous movements, the Progressive Primitive Baptists were more concerned with church practices than doctrines. However, their efforts permanently altered the direction of the Primitive Baptist denomination in South Georgia, where the effects of the progressive movement are still felt among some Primitive associations.¹

Despite the changes wrought by progressives throughout the denomination, the Crawford faction of the Alabama River Association was unaffected by the movement. Already in near total isolation by 1890, the Crawfordite Alabama seemed to be shielded from the upheavals occurring in nearly every other association around them. There seems

¹ Crowley, "Origins and Development," 67.

to be only one instance of a remotely progressive practice receiving a mention in the association's minutes from 1890 to 1930, and this issue was brought up by the Alabama's sister Association, the St. Mary's River Association.² Because the Crawfordites remained unchanged throughout the Progressive Era they emerged on the other side as the only association in the region that still rigidly adhered to the principles of the Primitive Baptists at the time of their split with the missionaries.

In order to understand what set the Crawfordites apart from other Primitive associations it is important to study the effects of the progressive movement on the region as a whole. In the 1890s, South Georgia was becoming less isolated as railroads and new industries opened up the once remote area to outsiders. In addition, the availability of commercial fertilizer made the cut over land of the Pine Barrens more attractive to farmers. The influx of people brought growth, but it also brought new ideas and attitudes to the region.³

The Primitive Baptist Church appeared to benefit from the boom. During the 1890s, the Crawford Alabama Association grew from 386 to 440 members.⁴ During the same period, the Ochlocknee Association gained nearly 350 members and grew from eleven to sixteen churches.⁵ The Union Association also experienced growth during the 1890s, adding four churches and 322 members to their ranks during the decade.⁶ A.V. Simms, clerk of the Union Association during the 1890s, noted that, "some of our

² Alabama Association (Crawford Faction), "Minutes," 1911.

³ Crowley, "Primitive Baptists," 134.

⁴ Alabama Association (Crawford Faction), "Minutes," 1890-1899.

⁵ Ochlocknee Association, "Minutes," 1890-1899.

⁶ Union Association, "Minutes," 1890-1899.

churches in South Georgia and Florida are receiving members in a manner almost unprecedented in their history.”⁷

While the Primitives were experiencing rapid growth throughout the region, a new doctrinal development was occurring that would form the basis of the progressive movement. This new doctrine set forth a limited idea of predestination, known as “conditional time salvation.” Prior to this development, Primitives had embraced a view of salvation best expressed as, “the absolute predestination of all things.”⁸ The London Baptist Confession of 1689 put forth an eloquent version of this doctrine which took the nuanced view that though “God hath decreed in himself...all things whatsoever comes to pass,” he was “neither the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein.”⁹ However, the rise of the missionary controversy inevitably led some preachers and churches to a far more rigorous and less nuanced interpretation of predestination.¹⁰

During the late nineteenth century, some Primitive preachers began to fear the moral apathy the doctrine of absolute predestination could inculcate among their believers. The preachers’ fears may not have been unfounded, as a genuine decline in morality during the post-War years seems to have been a reality in South Georgia and the early circular letters of the Union Association frequently bemoaned the moral state of the region.¹¹ This led some Primitive preachers to speak against the doctrine of absolute predestination during the last years of the nineteenth century, in the form of the “conditional time salvation” doctrine. This “timely salvation” included a sense of

⁷ A.V. Simms, “Some Good Meetings,” *Pilgrim’s Banner* 1 (October 15, 1894), 237-38.

⁸ Crowley, “Origins and Development,” 73.

⁹ Lumpkin, “Baptist Confessions,” 254.

¹⁰ Crowley, “Origins and Development,” 74.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

communion with God and a respite from the guilt of neglected duties to God. Some Primitive Baptist ministers referred to it as “working out your own salvation.”¹²

The idea of “time salvation” caught on quickly among Primitive Baptists in South Georgia. In an editorial for the *Pilgrim’s Banner*, an influential Primitive Baptist Periodical based out of Valdosta, A.V. Simms wrote, “Our preachers... seem to understand that God has required more of them than simply to preach predestination and election.” Simms also noted that these ministers saw, “the need of practical obedience to God’s word.”¹³ By the late 1890s, letters arguing against “the absolute predestination of all things” were a common sight in the *Banner*.¹⁴

The introduction of “conditional time salvation” was responsible for a number of splits across the country, though one split directly related to the doctrine in South Georgia. The Mt. Enon Association, whose founders subscribed to the faith of Gilbert Beebe’s *Signs of the Times*, split over the issue in 1906, when they adopted the statement on predestination found in the London Confession of 1689.¹⁵ The historian of the absolute predestinarian faction later proudly declared: “We believe that God’s predestination reaches all the way down the line from salvation to damnation.”¹⁶ Other associations may not have divided over the issue directly, but doctrinal concerns were still part of the Progressive controversy, as they were during the missionary controversy.¹⁷

¹² Hurst, Gene, “Time Salvation,” in *The Banner-Herald Special Birdwood College Edition of The History in Word and Picture of the Progressive Primitive Baptists*, (Thomasville, GA: Banner-Herald Press, 1955), n.p.

¹³ A.V. Simms, “Associations,” *Pilgrims Banner* (1) November, 15, 1894, 280.

¹⁴ Crowley, “Origins and Development,” 75.

¹⁵ Mt. Enon Association, “Minutes,” 1906.

¹⁶ E.I. Wiggins, “History of the Absolute Mt. Enon Association,” (n.p., n.d.), 13-24.

¹⁷ Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 136.

During the time the doctrine of “conditional salvation” was gaining popularity in Georgia, the railroads were leading to increased communications among associations. This communication was not always positive. As a result of increased contact, a somewhat minor local dispute endangered the unity of nearly all the Primitive Baptist Associations in South Georgia and North Florida. The Primitive Pulaski association, who had churches in Dooly, Irwin, Wilcox, and Worth counties in Georgia, lay directly north of the Union and Ochlocknee Associations. Though these three associations had enjoyed close relations for many years, increased communication threatened to place them all in discord.¹⁸

In 1891, a controversy over an unspecified disorder in the Pulaski Association caused a split between two groups led by Perry G. McDonald and Deacon Hall. When the breach could not be healed at the next associational meeting, the McDonald party called for a council of elders from the Pulaski and the Union Associations to settle the dispute. With no witnesses from the Hall faction present, the council found in favor of McDonald and ordained him to the ministry. At the next meeting of the Pulaski Association, Elder T.W. Stallings from the Union Association put in a peace plan, but rejected it at the last minute to side with the McDonald faction. This action resulted in the creation of two factions, each calling itself the true Pulaski Association.¹⁹

The Union Association endorsed Stallings’ preference and recognized the McDonald faction, an action that drew the ire of neighboring associations. Both the Ochlocknee and the Bennett Alabama River Associations ceased relations with the Union Association. The San Pedro Association accused the Union of being the cause of the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 136-137.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

division and of acting too hastily in the matter. The Union called all of the offended parties to meet and discuss the dispute. By 1894, the Ochlocknee, Suwannee and Alabama had all adopted the Union's position on the issue.²⁰

The seemingly senseless wrangle between associations caused a number of Primitive Baptist preachers in South Georgia to begin questioning some basic principles of the Primitive denomination. These mostly younger preachers were led by A.V. Simms of the *Banner*, Robert Barwick, Lee Hanks, and J.B. "Toad" Luke, all of whom had become increasingly critical of the old ways by the late 1890s and early 1900s. Their flouting of tradition in a denomination that prided itself on preserving their "immemorial" customs caused major controversies throughout the region's associations. This group eventually became known as the Progressive Primitives. Their program centered around three major Primitive institutions: associations, correspondence, and ministerial nonsupport.²¹

Associations had long been the manner by which churches of the same faith and order could come together. Their constitutions made clear that they did not have the power "to Lord it over God's heritage, nor to infringe upon any of the internal rights of the churches." However, they usually did claim the power to "withdraw from any Church or Churches whom they may judge unsound in principle or immoral in practice until they be reclaimed." Associations also claimed the right to correspond with other associations of the same "faith and order."²² In this manner, an association could maintain vast discretion in recognizing other Primitive Baptist groups, because "dropping correspondence" with an association meant that fellowship and recognition were

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 137-138.

²² Alabama Association, "Minutes," 1842.

discontinued as well. Individual churches also corresponded with one another in order to maintain close ties between isolated congregations. It also served as a potentially divisive test. If a church refused to send correspondence, it was usually seen as an attempt to sever diplomatic relations with another ecclesiastical body.²³

Advocating for ministerial support was never a popular stance among Primitives in the 1800s. By the time the Progressive Primitive Baptists began agitating in the region, most “Old-Line” Baptists had ceased to even theoretically advocate for ministerial support.²⁴ Neither the Crawford nor the Bennett factions of the Alabama Associations have ever even introduced the idea of formal ministerial support for their elders.²⁵ To support ministers, especially with a stated salary, could brand a preacher as a hireling comparable to those that preached the heresies of the Missionaries.

In 1899, a wave of controversy began in the Ochlocknee Association over Progressive “reforms” that would soon touch nearly every association in South Georgia and North Florida. In that year, factions led by Robert Barwick and J.F. McCann divided over associational correspondence and church sovereignty.²⁶ The two parties split the Ochlocknee association into two factions, one progressive and one “old-line,” at the Associational meeting the same year.²⁷ The Barwick faction, which championed the reforms of the Progressive movement, adopted a resolution attacking “Associational dictatorial rulings” as a “fruitful source of confusion among our people.”²⁸

²³ Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 138.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁵ Alabama Association, “Minutes,” 1842-2007. (Crawford and Bennett Factions after 1873)

²⁶ Harmony Church, “Minutes,” September 1899.

²⁷ Ochlocknee Association (McCann Faction), “Minutes,” 1899.

²⁸ Ochlocknee Association (Simms-Barwick Faction), “Minutes,” 1899.

The confusion had spread to the Union Association by 1901, when factions led by J.B. “Toad” Luke and Timothy Stallings split over the same issues that divided the Ochlocknee Association two years earlier. However, the situation in the Union was exacerbated by the animosity between Elder Stallings and “Toad” Luke.²⁹ At the 1901 associational meeting, the Union dropped pro-Luke factions from four churches and expelled Mt. Paran Church entirely. It also declared four elders “unsound in practice.”³⁰ Two years later, four pro-Luke churches organized as the Union Association. The “new” Union quickly made ties with the Progressive Barwick faction of the Ochlocknee Association.³¹ The anti-Luke faction of the Union Association responded by adding “Old-Line” to their name.³²

The Progressive reforms quickly got out of control, even by the standards of those who originally espoused progressive ideals. The move to bring an organ into Valdosta Church caused controversy each of the three times they attempted to use the instrument in the early 1900s.³³ Disputes over the use of instrumental music in worship services tore apart the Luke faction of the Union Association. During one heated argument over the subject, it is said that an infuriated Luke rose from his moderator’s seat and stormed out of the church, saying, “Boys, you can take this and go to hell with it.”³⁴

The anti-progressive faction of the Progressive Union Association formed the Mt. Olive Association, which denounced the Progressives for poor discipline and worldly innovations. However, the newly formed group could not tolerate each other anymore

²⁹ Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 142.

³⁰ Union Association, “Minutes,” 1901.

³¹ Union Association (Luke Faction), “Minutes,” 1903.

³² Union Association (Old-Line), “Minutes,” 1903.

³³ Valdosta Primitive Baptist Church, “Minutes,” 1900, February 1906, July, 1907.

³⁴ Quoted in Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 145.

than those they separated from. They split twice between 1916 and 1923. The tiny factions served as refuge for a number of dissident groups and individuals who could find a home nowhere else among the primitives.³⁵

The disputes over Progressive reforms affected a large number of Primitive Baptists in South Georgia and Florida. It was estimated that Barwick had about twenty-five hundred followers and that McCann had eight thousand.³⁶ Nearly every association in the region had a brush with Progressive reforms during the late 1800s and early 1900s and most split over the issues raised by progressives. By the end of the 1920s, the “old-line” Primitives were essentially cut off from the larger body of Primitive Baptists. The Old Line Union, Bennettite Alabama River, Old Line Suwannee, and tiny factions of the Pulaski and Upatoi Associations still corresponded with one another and managed to remain separate from the Progressives, even to the present day.³⁷

These associations were not the only groups to remain dedicated to the “old path” during the progressive era. The Crawford faction of the Alabama River Association seems to have completely bypassed the debate over the Progressive Primitive Baptists entirely. While other groups split and fought over Progressive doctrine, the Alabama remained insulated from the conflicts. No doctrine that could be lumped under the banner of “progressive” was introduced during the time when fierce debates were raging in other associations.³⁸ Though always committed to the original principles of the Primitive faith, it is likely that the isolation of the association helped to ensure its doctrinal purity during this era.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

³⁸ Alabama Association (Crawford Faction), “Minutes,” 1890-1930.

The Crawfordites had been cut off from the rest of the Primitive community for nearly thirty years by the time the Progressives began to stir up controversy in other associations. The Alabama had suspended correspondence with other associations in 1871, while it was arguing over the resolution that would create the rift between the Crawford and Bennett factions.³⁹ After the split, the Bennetts took up correspondence with a number of Primitive Baptist associations, but the Crawfordites remained in isolation.⁴⁰ The Crawford Alabama did correspond with the St. Mary's Association from 1877 to 1911, but this group was founded by Crawfordite churches.⁴¹

While the Union and Ochlocknee Associations were splintering in the early 1900s, the Crawfordites were experiencing growth. Between 1900 and 1910, the association added three churches and nearly 150 members. In addition, the wrangling over the questions of associational authority and ministerial support that was raging in other associations received no mention in the minutes. In fact, no doctrinal disputes of any kind appear during this period in the associational minutes.⁴²

The Crawfordite Alabama did not entirely escape from controversy during this period. In 1911, the Association dropped its daughter association, the St. Mary's, over a dispute concerning assistant pastors. In this dispute, the St. Mary's held that it was not permissible to call assistant pastors, but the Alabama said that it was. A vote held earlier in the year at a called session found that opinion within the Alabama was divided. In all, ten churches in the Alabama supported assistant pastors and seven opposed it. Six of the seven opposed churches were reconciled at another called meeting the following month,

³⁹ Alabama Association, "Minutes," 1871.

⁴⁰ Alabama Association (Crawford Faction), "Minutes," 1877, Alabama Association (Bennett Faction), "Minutes," 1877.

⁴¹ Alabama Association (Crawford Faction), "Minutes," 1877-1911.

⁴² *Ibid*, 1900-1910.

but Pigeon Creek Church would not hear the delegates from the Alabaha and was summarily dropped by the Crawfordites. Though the association lost a church in the dispute, it gained Bethel Church and Emmaus Church, who had left the St. Mary's Association to side with the Alabaha in the quarrel over assistant pastors.⁴³

The split with the St. Mary's marked the final step towards total isolation for the Crawfordites. Despite being removed from the larger community of Primitive Baptists, the Crawford Alabaha continued to thrive in the 1910s and 1920s. No new churches were constituted between 1910 and 1920, and despite periodic increases in membership, the church was only ten members larger in 1920 than 1910. Most importantly, the association continued harmoniously from 1912 to 1920.⁴⁴

In 1921, a curious doctrinal dispute arose in the association. That year, Mt. Zion Church in Wayne County had been selected as the location for the associational meeting. However, Mt. Zion and Mill Creek had recently begun to share the doctrine of "holding the old Jewish Sabbath to be also the Sabbath of the Gentile Church." This particular doctrinal dispute was unusual among Primitive Baptists and does not appear in any other records of associations referenced in this study. The Crawford Alabaha did not favor this view of Sabbath observance and blasted Mt. Zion for "rebelling against the order." The majority party held that the disciples had set up and observed the Gentile Sabbath on the day Christ arose, "and it is shown to have been thus kept by the disciples in the twentieth chapter and seventh verse of the Acts." Small majorities of the rebelling churches sustained the Jewish Sabbath and two committees were formed to visit each of the

⁴³ Alabaha Association (Crawford Faction), "Minutes," 1911, Daniel Drawdy email 12/08/2005.

⁴⁴ Alabaha Association (Crawford Faction), "Minutes," 1912-1920.

churches. Upon their return, they could only say that they were “sorry to report that they refused to receive us or to hear our business.”⁴⁵

After the split with Mill Creek and Mt. Zion, the Crawford Alabaha entered a brief period of decline, though they did regain some members from Mill Creek, who constituted New Home Church and were received into the association in 1922.⁴⁶ Between 1921 and 1925, the Association lost nearly sixty members, though it should be noted that most of these losses were a result of members who had passed away. The decline in numbers was short lived and by the end of the 1920s, the Crawford Alabaha experienced the highest numbers of members in the history of the association. The majority of these appeared between 1926 and 1927 when the association grew from 491 to 711 total members. By 1930, there were a total of 793 members in the association, an increase of over three hundred in four years.⁴⁷

In 1930, the Alabaha endured another small dispute with one of its member churches when the association decided to discontinue the “occasional practice of a few numbers opening a conference away from one of the meeting houses for the purpose of receiving into the fellowship of the church a person who was sick...and was not able to go to the meeting house.” Prior to this time, most churches in the association held the practice of “extending the arm” of fellowship at the meeting house, then reconvening at the sick person’s house who had requested the meeting. The controversy arose when some in the association shortened the method and just convened at the sick person’s home as long as three individuals from the church were present. This caused some

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1921.

⁴⁶ Daniel Drawdy, email to the author, March 5, 2008.

⁴⁷ Alabaha Association (Crawford Faction), “Minutes,” 1921-1930.

confusion over whether this constituted an official act of the church, so the Alabama Association decided to vote on the practice.⁴⁸

Only Piney Grove Church in Ware County voted against the measure, but three other churches, Pilgrim's Hope, Mt. Olive, and Pilgrim's Home, failed to send delegates or letters to the called session. The committees sent to investigate into the cause of their absence reported that Mt. Olive and Piney Grove stood unanimously with the association. At Pilgrim's Hope the committee found enough members siding with the association to dismiss the minority and establish the majority as the "church in order." At Pilgrim's Home, where the main proponent of the practice, Elder Jesse Aldridge, was pastor, the committee could only find four members that would hear them. The committee recommended that these individuals, Elder John H. Boone, Mollie Boone, Sarah Gaster, and Vicie Justice, "go to any church in the Association where they wished for a home." The rest of Pilgrim's Home Church left the Association and eventually withered away.⁴⁹

The Crawfordites had weathered a few disputes during the era of the Progressive Primitive Baptists, but none had the lasting impact on their association that splits over progressive doctrines had on every other association in the region. The sometimes confusing correspondence between associations was behind a number of these splits. The Crawfordites, who had long since isolated themselves from other Associations because of doctrinal differences, were insulated, in part, from the fractious times of the Progressive era. After most of the fuss over the Progressives had concluded, the Crawford Alabama remained as committed to its founding principles as ever and was quickly establishing itself as the measurement of "old-line" Primitive faith in the region.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1930, Drawdy, email, March 5, 2008.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Chapter VI

Disorder and Disputes, 1931-1968

Thus, many a child may turn from the way
Its parents would wish it to go,
And follow the paths that will lead it astray
And bring it to trouble and woe.
-W.O. Gibson, *Rambling Meditations*.

At the beginning of the 1930s, a large number of Primitive Baptist associations in South Georgia and North Florida were emerging from the tumult and upheaval caused by the Progressives. However, the Crawfordites, who had managed to elude the controversies and divisions that plagued so many other Primitives in the region, were heading into their own period of discord and division that would last nearly thirty years. It should be noted that the isolated nature of the Association gave rise to issues that appear nowhere else among the Primitive Baptists of the region. Therefore, it is almost impossible to compare the history of the association during this period to any other associations in South Georgia or North Florida. During this period, controversies appeared on a nearly yearly basis in the minutes of the association. As a result, the church lost a great deal of its sister churches and overall membership. However, the upheavals in this period also did much to further define the association's commitment to its original founding principles.

After the controversy concerning the opening of conferences that occurred in 1930, the association appeared to be thriving. In 1931 and 1932, the association claimed

810 members, the most in the association's history before or since.¹ The total membership did decline between 1933 and 1935, though the primary cause of the losses came from members who passed away.² Though individual members were excommunicated during this time for various offenses, the association as a whole remained relatively peaceful in the early 1930s.

Though the association may have been peaceful, the Great Depression caused a great deal of tumult in some of its members' lives in the 1930s. Sometimes, these members availed themselves of government money from the varied Depression-era recovery programs. In one particularly interesting incident, High Bluff Church in Brantley County, Georgia, expelled two sisters for receiving money from their sons' work from the Civilian Conservation Corps, which included remuneration for labor performed on Sunday. Long after the incident occurred, the church decided that it had erred in judgment and offered to restore both of the expelled women.³

During the latter half of the 1930s, the association carried on in primarily in harmony, though one incident did threaten to cause division among the churches. In 1938, Oak Grove Church in Brantley County, Georgia, had allowed Elder H.C. Highsmith to preach after his home church, Smyrna, had declared him in disorder and asked him to stop exercising ministerial duties. The association declared Oak Grove in disorder for this action, but suggested that if the church had three orderly members who did not support using Elder Highsmith while he was in disorder, these three could hold an orderly conference and the rest of their congregation could make their overtures to the three orderly members, thus restoring Oak Grove to order. Though this conference was

¹ Alabama Association (Crawford Faction), "Minutes," 1931-1932.

² *Ibid.*, 1933-1935.

³ High Bluff Primitive Baptist Church, "Minutes," October 10, 1935, November 8, 1952.

initially deemed orderly, some individuals apparently changed their minds and wanted to re-declare Oak Grove in disorder. There was a great deal of contention amongst the members of the association, so a called conference was held to settle the matter. At this meeting, a majority of the churches voted that Oak Grove's conference was in order. Though five churches voted against this decision, all submitted to the will of the association upon further examination and a split was avoided.⁴

The association suffered an important loss the same year as the controversy at Oak Grove Church. On December 12, 1938, W.O. Gibson, a revered longtime member of the association, passed away. Though he had not held the position for the last four years of his life because he had gone blind, Gibson had served as clerk of the Alabama Association for forty-nine years.⁵ During this time, he was a faithful to his calling, as well as being a pillar of "old-line" orthodoxy. In addition to his duties as a minister and clerk, Gibson also composed a large number of poems. His verse, though varied in subject, provides an excellent insight into the doctrines and convictions of Gibson's faith.⁶

The association remained in harmony for a few years after Gibson's death, but discord returned to the association early in the 1940s. In 1941, the association held a called conference to determine whether or not elders attempting to judge matters by vote in annual conference was an orderly practice. However, seven churches in the Association refused to hand in their letters on the matter because High Bluff Church had sustained E.R. Dowling in rising up against the association at Oak Grove's annual

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1938.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1935, 1938.

⁶ Gibson's poetry, which precedes each chapter of this work, is compiled in W.O. Gibson, "The Rambling Meditations of W.O. Gibson," Lamar Gibson and Sandy Wildes eds., (S.I.: s.n., 1973).

conference and was declared in disorder by the association. The conference decided to send messengers to each of the churches who had not sent letters and to require Elder Dowling to venture to every church in the association to “make confession for rebelling against the order of the association.”⁷

Apparently, the controversy was enough to give some churches reason to leave the association. When the visiting committees made their reports to the conference, they noted Sardis and Bethel were in disorder and the other churches, High Bluff, Pilgrim’s Hope, Bethlehem, Corinth, Wayfair, and Oak Grove were “in order to travel on with the Association.” Interestingly, Pilgrim’s Hope Church, which was ruled in order by the committee, was expelled from the association at the associational meeting the same year. The Alabaha also withdrew from Sardis and Bethel. Though the split was relatively minor, it set the stage for future divisions, a number of which would involve Elder Dowling.⁸

After the split, the association experienced a few peaceful years, but it also lost a significant number of members. Between 1941 and 1945, the Alabaha went from 596 members to 424. The decline, like the drop offs of the 1930s, can primarily be traced to members who had passed away. There were excommunications during this time period, but the minutes do not clarify whether or not any of these were related to a particular point of controversy.

In 1948, there was another called session of the association to address problems that arose during High Bluff Church’s annual meeting. During this gathering, the question arose of whether it was right for a “servant to take thought and write an issue

⁷ Alabaha Association (Crawford Faction), “Minutes,” 1941.

⁸ *Ibid.*

beforehand to put before the Association.” The vote was unanimous that such an action was “contrary to the Holy Scripture.” However, J.W. Walker and the moderator B.W. Crosby, “rebelled against the annual conference, declared it disorder, and called a convention to try and overthrow the work of the annual conference and condemned High Bluff and singled her out of the Association.”⁹

During the called conference, in which High Bluff was not represented, a minority of six churches voted to sustain the actions of Walker and Crosby. Committees were sent out to all six churches to report on their status. Though the issue was so contentious that High Bluff Church was not represented and Shiloh Church was declared in disorder and unable to host the called conference, all six churches voted to submit to the decision of the association and a split was avoided.¹⁰

After the controversy of 1948, the association descended into a long period of turmoil that would last until 1968. A current member of the Association who is familiar with this period of the Alabama’s history laments these years as “trying times for the association.” He also noted that much of the controversy was a result of “power struggles between leaders of the church rather than any serious dispute over doctrine.” Doctrinal issues were at the heart of most of the controversies, but it is unlikely that such disputes would have arisen without the power struggles occurring in the church during this era.¹¹

The first incident of the tumultuous years occurred in 1950, when Shiloh church opened a conference away from the meetinghouse at the home of the infirm Elder Robbie Gill. At this meeting, the church received two members, who were not sick.¹² The

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1948, High Bluff Church, “Minutes,” 1948.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Daniel Drawdy, email to the author, March 26, 2007.

¹² Drawdy, email, March 5, 2008.

association had voted against this practice in 1930 and called the conference and Gill in disorder. The same year, B.W. Crosby and New Home Church upheld and communed with Gill with full understanding of his status in the association. The association voted to continue on with their previous ruling at the called conference that year and New Home Church submitted to the order of the association.¹³ The association came down hard on Elder Gill, which may have been due to jealousy among the members of the association. Gill was required to travel to the churches of the association and give satisfaction for his actions. However, he passed away before he completed his journey.¹⁴

The committee sent to Shiloh faced significant challenges in getting the church to submit to the Alabama's decision. Apparently the cause of the breach was Elder Crosby and Elder Gill's continued advocacy for actions that the association deemed, "contrary to the Decorum, Scripture, former Doctrine and Practice." When some members tried to complain about these actions, they were treated ruthlessly by the church officials. The issue was extremely contentious and complicated, and the visiting committee expressed their frustration with the issues at hand in the following comment:

There are too many things to write, but hope this exposes the principal and shows where it is, we feel there has been life at Shiloh all the while, but has been trampled under the feet of men. "But truth crushed to earth, will rise again."¹⁵

Soon after the committee left Shiloh, a party led by John and Noah Osteen attempted to plunge the association into confusion by conspiring with moderator J.O. Lewis to circulate a false committee report in order to turn the association against its decision. The Osteen party attempted to hold a conference at Shiloh, but the orderly part

¹³ Alabama Association (Crawford Faction), "Minutes," 1951.

¹⁴ Drawdy, email, March 5, 2008.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

of the association attempted to bar them from entering the church and carrying out “this disorderly act.” The orderly part of the Alabaha was successful in trying to prevent this conference despite the Osteens’ attempt to climb through the windows of Shiloh to circumvent the blockade at the front of the church. For their actions, the Osteens were “bound” by Shiloh and the church continued to remain with the Alabaha.¹⁶

As a result of the controversy, B.W. Crosby was stripped of his duties as clerk in 1952. He was replaced by Frank T. Lee, who composed a circular letter that was unreserved in its criticisms of Crosby and his followers. Lee went after Crosby for “the destruction wrought by his crafty hands” and compared his followers to the Edomites when providing a Biblical explanation for the Crosby party’s expulsion. Lee expected that the action of binding the rebellious party for six months would set the Association on the orderly path and noted that the association hoped, “the begetting of this principle of bastardy has ceased for a little while.”¹⁷

Unfortunately, the Alabaha’s troubles would not cease the following year. The association tried to promote healing that year, but it would prove unsuccessful. In 1953, the association addressed three questions brought up by the confusion from the previous two years. First, the association declared that individuals who became members during disorderly conferences could remain as members as long as it was in accordance with that church’s former practice. The conference also determined that a member in disorder need only travel to churches they had wronged instead of traveling to all the churches of the association. The last issue the association addressed was the ordination of Frank Lee. After determining him to have been in disorder during the time he was “tolerated,” or

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1952.

allowed to preach on a trial basis, and at the time he was ordained, the association voted to withdraw Frank Lee's ordination. This action set off a wave of controversy that would culminate in a major split in the association.¹⁸

In 1954, the confusion over the controversies of previous years continued to grow. At a called conference in January, the association voted that they could rightly call in Frank Lee's ordination for disorderly conduct. In addition, Elder E.R. Dowling was expelled from the association by a two-thirds vote. The Alabaha came together in another called conference six months later, in which the association upheld the doctrine that one annual conference could not change the action of another.¹⁹

In December, 1954 the association met in yet another called conference. The purpose of this conference was to settle the issue of revoking a disorderly ordination. The majority of the association held that it was right to call in these ordinations, and the minority agreed to submit to the order of the association. This session failed to quell the controversy, as the Alabaha was back in a called conference one year later. At this meeting, the association took up Bethlehem Church's attempt to hold a conference to condemn the previous actions of the association. The association managed to get all of the rebellious churches in order by the time of the 1956 associational meeting, and it seemed that the issues at hand may have been solved for a time.²⁰

After 1956, the Alabaha avoided the nearly constant controversies of the previous for a few years, but the infighting had taken its toll. Between 1950 and 1956, the association declined from 485 to 336 members. Unlike declines in the 1930s and 1940s, the majority of these drops in membership occurred because of excommunications, not

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 1953.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1954.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1955, 1956.

deaths. By the end of the decade, the association had declined to 296 members.²¹ In 1957, the association's circular letter lamented the declining state of the church after all the years of controversy in the following statement:

While we believe the church is united together in love, but in this cold and declining time, it does seem to the poor writer that the Lord is not pleased with. But it does seem according to His word that He had rather they were cold or hot. ... Remember the poor ones that can't see their own wrongs, but are only worrying about the wrongs of others, that they may be... brought back to the fold one more time.²²

Despite the sentiments of the circular letter, the church was not to stay “united in love” for long. In December 1959, a series of called conferences began that carried over into 1960. The meetings were initially called to inquire into two churches, Nathalene and Pilgrim's Rest, rebelling against the order of the association, but the direction of the called sessions changed on August 12, 1960. This meeting returned the focus to B.W. Crosby for, “impeachment in trying to call a convention by making statements to the folks at Shiloh August 10, 1960 allowing only one side to speak and storming the brethren down who opposed him.” In the end, those opposed to Crosby gained control of the association and abolished all of the new policies instituted during the period Crosby and his supporters ran the association.²³ As a result of the disputes of 1960, three churches, Mt. Olive, Emmaeus, and Corinth, along with their pastor Elder Sammie Hendrix were dropped from the Alabaha for their refusal to submit to the will of the association.²⁴

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1950-1959.

²² *Ibid.*, 1957.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1960.

²⁴ Drawdy, email, March 5, 2008.

The actions of 1960 did not succeed in quelling the turmoil in the association. In 1962, there was a called session to determine why Nathalene sent a corresponding letter to New Home. The issue was cleared up without incident and Nathalene submitted to the order of the association. Two years later, there was another called session to get High Bluff to forgive E.R. Dowling and restore him to order. Again, all of the churches in the minority submitted to the will of the association, and no churches were lost.²⁵

The following year, things began to grow more contentious. In a called session held November 24, 1965, the association turned against Frank Lee, who was accused of, “allowing the members there to partake of anything that they should have a mind to; that the church deemed ungodly.” Lee and his supporters offered to submit to the association, but only if they did not have to confess any wrongdoing. The association rejected this idea, noting that “Elder Frank Lee has brought a complete division in the Association and there was no amends offered for him.”²⁶

These actions did little to ameliorate the situation. The following year, three more called conferences were held to deal with churches that had apparently rebelled against the decision of the association in the called session of November, 1965. During one of these sessions, the associational committee approved a measure that would undo the resolutions of 1960. This restored the changes made in 1953 and required Frank Lee to once again turn in his ordination papers to High Bluff. This was not terribly clear to the members of High Bluff, where the visiting committee found, “only a minority and they appeared to be terribly confused.” The Church did finally submit to the order of the association, but only after expelling Frank Lee again, as well as agreeing to expel all

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1962, 1964.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1966.

members “involved in the chicken business...which involve a seven day contract”, which meant that church members could not profit from Sunday labor, even if they did no labor themselves. They also expelled everyone “who has radios in their cars or television in house.”²⁷

In 1968, all of the confusion of the past seventeen years finally reached a point where some of the members could no longer commune with one another and the association experienced a split. In a series of called sessions, the Alabaha voted in favor of restoring the decisions of the 1960 minutes. The five churches that were in the minority would not submit to the will of the association, and as a result, four churches, Enon, Wayfair, Bethlehem, and Smyrna, were expelled from the Alabaha. The fifth church, New Home, had three members willing to submit to the association. Because the association held the deeds to their property, these three were allowed to transact any business necessary and then travel on.²⁸ A court decision in 1968 allowed the members of New Home to use the property for meetings and allowed the Alabaha Association to use the house for associational meetings. This ruling was somewhat impractical and the Alabaha has never attempted to use New Home for any associational meetings since.²⁹

After fifteen years of constant struggles, the association had suffered. Between 1960 and 1967, the Alabaha lost fifty-four members, though most of these losses were members who had passed away. After the split, five churches had left the association, along with nearly one hundred members. Throughout the controversy, there was always a party that clung to the original form of the association, and in the end, all who sought to bring changes to the association that went against the Alabaha’s founding principles left.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1968.

²⁹ Drawdy, email, March 5, 2008.

Six churches remained in the Alabaha after the years of controversy and these longed for a return to more peaceful times. In the circular letter of 1968, these sentiments are made clear in the following passage:

So, brethren, may the Lord be pleased to move the dark clouds and cause the sun to shine again on the old Association, and send the heavenly showers that would cause the little plants to revive and grow.

So, do try to strive on and pray for the things that make for peace, and may the God of peace bless you. Farewell.³⁰

³⁰ Alabaha Association (Crawford Faction), "Minutes," 1968.

Chapter VII

Present Day Primitives and the Sacred Harp Controversy, 1969-2007

The sun never sets on that good land
For the light of endless day is there
The stain of a sin polluted hand
Can never invade a land so fair
-W.O. Gibson, *Rambling Meditations*.

In the early 1970s, the association's circular letter noted, "Brethren it does seem that the Alabaha Association has been blessed of late. Peace and love seems to abound over the Association at the present time and where ever there is love there is peace."¹ After nearly twenty years of turmoil, the Alabaha was finally moving into an era of calm. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the association experienced some of the most peaceful years in its existence. The period was so calm that doctrinal questions, that are relatively common among Primitive Baptist associations and not necessarily an indication of trouble, are entirely absent from the associational minutes.²

However, the times were not the most successful years for the association in terms of membership. In the post war years and the upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s, the Alabaha had lost a large percentage of its membership, but the 1970s and 1980s brought further losses. The continued dwindling of the faithful led some ministers to question whether they were witnessing the "last days." Frank Lee, a longtime elder in the Alabaha, declared the last days to be at hand in a sermon at Piney Grove Church in 1974. The

¹ Alabaha Association (Crawford Faction), "Minutes," 1971.

² *Ibid.*, 1970-1990

dwindling numbers were not unique to the Alabaha. In fact, a number of ministers in Primitive Baptist churches throughout the region echoed Frank Lee's sentiments. In 1977, Elder W.F. Bethea preached an ordination sermon at Pleasant Grove Church in Berrien County, Georgia, in which he informed the ordinand that the he should not expect great crowds and prosperous churches, because as the world came to its end, "the truth would become increasingly dim and unsought."³

Statistical tables from the Alabaha Association's minutes make the decline in membership clear. From its height of seventeen churches with 810 members in 1932, the association had dwindled to six churches with 114 total members by 1970. Just two years earlier, the association had lost nearly half its total membership when eighteen years of disputes and power struggles had culminated in a split. Though the association had lost a large number of members as a result of the turmoil, the peaceful years of the 1970s did not see a great upswing in membership. Throughout the 1970s, the Alabaha did not lose a great number of members, but by the end of the decade, they could claim just seven more total members than they had in 1970.⁴

The 1980s saw further decline in numbers for the association. From 1980 to 1989 the church went from 114 to 89 total members. Deaths and excommunications ran at nearly even rates throughout this period. What is most interesting from this decade is the declining number of new members joining the association's churches. Between 1984 and 1986, the association received no new members. The association did receive members

³ Crowley, "Primitive Baptists," 163.

⁴ Alabaha Association (Crawford Faction), "Minutes," 1932, 1968, 1970-1979.

during this period, but not at a rate that could outpace the numbers they were losing to death and excommunication.⁵

The reasons for the membership decline are not discussed at length in the minutes of the association. The 1975 circular letter does mention the small size of the association, but also praises those who have continued to stick to its principles.⁶ However, the effects of modernization on South Georgia and North Florida had reached the Primitive Baptist community in the years following World War II. John Crowley, the only author to write extensively on the history of the Primitive Baptists in the post-war years, suggests that “the combined effects of desertion of the southern countryside where their main strength lay, the pressures of town and city life, aggressive proselytizing by other denominations, competing worldly entertainments, and their own divisiveness resulted in a sharp and accelerating decline in numbers.”⁷

The technological innovations of the twentieth century have certainly had implications for the Primitive Baptist faith. The introduction of television and radio into the homes of Primitives has met with some resistance from the old line adherents. To this day, Crawfordites still shun these devices. However, they do not oppose radio and television on the grounds that the technology is harmful. Rather, they shun radio and television because they see it as little more than “worldly entertainment.”⁸ The stance against these devices is not unfounded, as, in some cases, these devices can prevent the transmission of the Primitive faith to the younger generations.⁹

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1980-1989.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1975.

⁷ Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 163.

⁸ Daniel Drawdy, telephone interview with the author, 10/27/2005, Transcript in possession of the author.

⁹ Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 168.

The growing urbanization of the region has proved somewhat detrimental to the health of the Primitive Baptist community. This notion was argued as early as the 1880s, when Sylvester and Cushing Biggs Hassell noted that “genuine Baptists Churches are seldom found in cities.” They also stated that “The forms and fashions, the parades and shows of city life, are very uncongenial to the staid habits and to the faith and practice of old-fashioned Baptists.”¹⁰

Primitive Baptists also tended to lose the younger generation to marriages to individuals of other denominations. With the modern age came increased mobility and new social opportunities for the young people whose parents were members of Primitive Baptist churches. Instead of meeting their spouses at church meetings, these children would often look outside the church for potential spouses. Unlike other conservative groups of Baptists, such as the Mennonites and the Amish, Primitive Baptists have never placed any restrictions on interdenominational marriage. Even if the spouses were not successful in converting their Old-Line partners, they often raised their children in their faith. This was usually successful, as Primitive Baptists, with the exception of the Progressives, generally had little more organized indoctrination for their young people than sitting through a sermon before going to play in the churchyard.¹¹

Primitive Baptists often saw little cause for alarm when their children ran off to other denominations. Because the Primitive faith places emphasis upon salvation as unconditional, it makes church membership unnecessary for salvation. According to Crowley, this attitude, “gave rise to a sort of antinomianism with respect to religious profession.” In addition, most Primitive Baptists believe that regeneration is necessary to

¹⁰ Hassell and Hassell, “Church of God,” 826.

¹¹ Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 167, 169.

believe Primitive doctrine, making proselytizing to anyone, even their own children, appear presumptuous. Even today, some Primitives subscribe to the attitude that good people can be found in all churches.¹²

Not all Primitive Baptists share this belief. The Crawfordites have proven to be a notable exception to this idea, holding that the continued profession of a heretical faith was an indicator of nonelection. When a young man went off to join the Missionary Baptists in the 1920s, his Crawfordite father informed him “he was on a fast track to hell.”¹³ This attitude remains in the Alabaha Association today, where even attending another denominations meeting is frowned upon.

In the mid-1990s, the Alabaha’s disdain for its members attending the services of other denominations played a role in a major doctrinal dispute within the association. The dispute arose over a style of religious singing known as “Sacred Harp,” which was named after a popular shaped-note hymnal. During the dispute, members argued over whether or not it was acceptable to attend Sacred Harp sings that were opened and closed with prayer from other denominations. The controversy presents an important example of the steadfast determination of the Crawfordites to stick to the old ways, even in the face of modernizing influences.

Sacred Harp singing has long been a part of the Primitive Baptist tradition. Its origins can be traced back much further, to colonial singing schools, where a system of shaped notes was devised to aid individuals in reading music.¹⁴ Though a few scattered Primitive congregations do use the hymnal in their services, the book has largely been

¹² *Ibid.*, 167.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Buell Cobb, “The Sacred Harp, A Tradition and its Music,” (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978), 57, 59.

used outside of formal worship, most often at individual houses or occasional sings held at a meetinghouse on days it is not occupied for services.¹⁵ This was not an unusual application of the hymnal, and in the preface to the 1860 edition of his volume of shaped note songs, *The Sacred Harp*, B.F. White noted:

While the churches may be supplied from this work, others have not been forgotten or neglected; a great variety will be found suited to singing schools, private societies, and family circles; in fact, the Sacred Harp is designed for all classes who sing, or desire to sing.¹⁶

The Sacred Harp has long maintained a reputation of being designed for “all who desire to sing.” This has led to an extremely democratic and inclusive nature in Sacred Harp Sings. According to Buell Cobb, who has written extensively on the tradition, “Sacred Harp singing is interdenominational, as it always has been.” Organizations that plan sacred harp sings note “Participation is open to all regardless of church affiliation.” Cobb also notes, “the only references to religious differences take the form of ribbing between Baptists and Methodists or between ‘Regular’ and ‘Hardshell’ Baptists.”¹⁷

The Sacred Harp tradition was experiencing decline in the 1970s and 1980s, but small pockets of singers managed to keep the tradition alive. By the 1990s, the tradition was experiencing a bit of a revival in South Georgia and North Florida. Often these “new” Sacred Harp sings were opened and closed with an interdenominational prayer, giving them an air of a religious service. In addition, these new singers frequently came

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁶ B.F. White, E.J. King eds., “The Sacred Harp, A Collection of Hymn Tunes, Odes, And Anthems, Selected From the Most Eminent Authors,” (Philadelphia: S.C. Collins, 1860), 3.

¹⁷ Cobb, 20.

from urban areas and often sang sacred harp as an art form rather than a sacred endeavor.¹⁸

Throughout the ebbs and flows of the Sacred Harp tradition in the rest of the state, the Crawfordites had a rich tradition surrounding Sacred Harp Sings. For a number of years, they had met in Hoboken, Georgia, to sing from the Cooper revision of the Sacred Harp. These meetings took great pains to distinguish themselves from worship services, and were not opened or closed with prayer. Because their association had become so isolated through the years, the members of the Crawford Alabaha knew little to nothing of the other communities of Sacred Harp singers until the early 1990s. At this time, the outside community of Sacred Harp singers initiated contact with the Crawfordites. These groups were fascinated by the style of singing practiced in the Alabaha Association, most notably the slow, ornamented style they sang the hymns in. They were also interested in a practice known as “walking time,” where the leader of a particular song keeps time by pacing in a slow, stately manner.¹⁹

The contact with other groups was tolerated until some members of the Lee family began to visit sings in other communities. The Crawfordites frowned upon these visits, primarily because of the prayer at the meetings, but also because of the growing number of secular singers involved at these “outsider” meetings.²⁰ The Crawfordites considered going to such meetings “chasing after” other denomination, because the meetings were opened and closed with prayers from other denominations. The Crawfordites have long been against their members attended meetings of denominations

¹⁸ John G. Crowley, “The Sacred Harp Controversy in the Original Alabaha Primitive Baptist Association,” *The Baptist Studies Bulletin*, 3 (7), July 2004, <http://www.centerforbaptiststudies.org/bulletin/2004/july.htm> Accessed 20 August, 2005.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

they think are heretical. This sentiment was addressed in the minutes of 1882 in a question from Shiloh Church that read:

If it is according to Gospel order for members of the Primitive Baptist Church to visit other professions of religion that are not in order while they are engage in their way of worship? We answer, “it is not,” and therefore, recommend the churches to admonish brethren that make a practice of running out after other denominations and if they will not hear, but continue to go to deal with them as for other offenses.²¹

The Lees who had gone off to these sings were soon called to account for their actions. At first, they humbly submitted to the demands of the association, but they continued to agitate for what the conservative Crawfordites called “new Sacred Harp Singing.” In July, 1996, the members of Sardis Church attempted to enforce new prayer and preaching guidelines that were favorable to the “new” Sacred Harp sings against the wishes of their pastor, Herman Lee. After this incident and another one at Piney Grove Church, where new pastors were elected in violation of church rules and practices, the Alabama Association withdrew from Piney Grove, Sardis, and Nathalene Churches.²² The Lees who left the Association that year went on to teach Sacred Harp to multitudes of students around the United States and even the United Kingdom and the sing at Hoboken is one of the most popular annual Sacred Harp events in the nation. The Crawfordites vowed to continue to sing Sacred Harp the way they had for generations. The Lees, who were sent out of the association where their families had worshipped for generations, have generally regarded the experience as theologically broadening. Reportedly, at the moment he was expelled, one of the Sacred Harpers arose from his seat and left the church singing the hymn *Liberty* from the Sacred Harp:

²¹ Alabama Association (Crawford Faction), “Minutes,” 1882.

²² *Ibid.*, 1996.

No more beneath th' oppressive hand, Of tyranny we groan, Behold the smiling, happy land, That freedom calls her own.²³

Though those expelled from the fellowship of the association may have seen the experience as “liberating,” the Crawfordites remained confident that they had once again staved off the changes wrought by man in their Association. The circular letter from the 1996 minutes provides an excellent summation of the Crawfordite position on the Sacred Harp controversy. The writer notes that ever since the inception of the association in 1842 “it was stated in the minute that there are churches that differ from us in faith and practice. Also, a union was needed for communion.” The author took issue with the Alabaha’s members going off to participate in this “worldly entertainment accompanied by religious practice” that was in violation of the 22nd article of the association’s decorum. In addition, it was made clear in the letter that some of those who sought to go to “new” Sacred Harp sings attempted to break the rules of individual churches in order to install pastors and rules more friendly to their cause. Because three churches were unrepentant in their actions, the Alabaha withdrew from them. The writer takes great care to emphasize that this action was not a split, but “only a pruning of branches by the Husbandman.”²⁴

After the controversy was over, the Association was left smaller, but this did not trouble its members. The association travelled on, just as it had through the previous 155 years and all the disputes and splits that accompanied it. The association had been reduced to four churches, but this number seemed to resonate with the author of the 1997 circular letter. He wrote:

²³ Crowley, “Sacred Harp Controversy.”

²⁴ Alabaha Association (Crawford Faction), “Minutes,” 1996.

In 1842, the Alabaha River Primitive Baptist Association was constituted consisting of four churches, to wit: Mt. Pleasant, Appling Co., Georgia, Wesley Creek, McIntosh Co., Georgia, Shiloh, Ware Co., Georgia, and Bethlehem, Appling County Georgia. At the close of this session there are four churches, known as Shiloh, High Bluff, Oak Grove, and Mt. Olive. There were four men and four women aboard the ark when it left this earth in days of the flood. These same four were still on board when it returned. Is this the Savior and his Bride, representing His work and His church extending to the four winds of the earth and above the dead works of men. He is Alpha and Omega.²⁵

The years since the dispute over the Sacred Harp have been peaceful ones for the Alabaha Association. Immediately after the controversy, the Association was down to three churches, but in 1997 Mt. Olive Church was constituted in Ware County, Georgia, with four members, bringing the total number of churches to four. These four churches make up the association in its present form. The total membership of the Alabaha has hovered around 50 throughout the last ten years and appears to be stable. The association continues to take on new members, and in a surprising trend, some of these members have been younger. In a potentially promising development for the association, a young couple has recently joined the association, the husband being baptized in 2000 and the wife in 2005.²⁶ There are a large number of relatively young people that are members or at least attend Crawfordite churches, which is surprising given that Primitive Baptists tend to be primarily older individuals.²⁷

The Alabaha Association continues to remain the same in a number of ways to the days of Isham Peacock and Reuben Crawford. Elder Daniel Drawdy, who has been an

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1997.

²⁶ Mt. Olive Church, "Minutes," April, 1997, May, 2000, November, 2005.

²⁷ Crowley, "Primitive Baptists," 169.

elder in the association since 1972, has provided excellent information on the practices of the association in the present day. His views on issues facing the church differ little, if any, from those who occupied the stand before him. Both he and other members of the association provide a constant reminder of the connections between the past and the present among the Crawfordites.

In an interview with the author, Drawdy answered several questions concerning the doctrine of the present day Alabama Association. He stated that essentially nothing has changed since he joined in 1970. Further, he noted that his experiences with older members lead him to believe that nothing has changed since their time either. However, Elder Drawdy made it clear that this does not mean the association can never change. He stated that if there was a good reason to change a practice, they will change it.²⁸

For instance, the association once changed her meeting time from the second weekend in October to the fourth weekend in October in order to correspond with another association that also met on the second weekend. After correspondence with that association failed, the Alabama changed back to their customary meeting time.²⁹

Even though the Crawfordites are willing to change, it does not occur often. Nearly all aspects of the religious services are practiced in the same manner they were 160 years ago. The preaching is a notable aspect of the service that has stayed the same. Crawfordites still shun a trained ministry and prepared sermons. They, like the Primitive Baptists of old wait, sometimes for several minutes, for God to point the direction a sermon will take. In addition, the preaching still makes use of the doctrine of Gospel

²⁸ Daniel Drawdy, Interview, October 27, 2005.

²⁹ Daniel Drawdy, email to the author, 3/12/2008.

Instrumentality, an original feature of Primitive Baptist preaching that is not found in other associations in the region.³⁰

Another unique aspect of the Alabama Association is their position on divorce and remarriage. Though the early Baptists in Georgia had placed a strict ban on remarrying after divorce during the lifetime of a former spouse, some associations began to develop a more forgiving position on the issue by the 1930s. At this time, some Primitives began to interpret the “exceptive clause” of Matthew 5:32 to allow divorce and remarriage in the case of adultery. The Bennett faction of the Alabama accepted this position in 1932, but the Crawfordites have never changed their position that divorced and remarried persons are not allowed to be members. They have maintained this position as recently as 1995, when Elder Tollie Lee delivered a sermon that informed members that they should not allow divorced and remarried relatives to sleep in their houses, or they would owe the church an apology for conniving at adultery.³¹

Though their conservative doctrine is often what garners the most attention, even the appearance of the average member of the Alabama Association has resisted change throughout the years. Crawfordites still prefer a simple style of dress that would not pass muster in some other churches. Male members shun accessories such as neckties, belts, and wristwatches, though there are technically no formal restrictions on these items. Elder Drawdy noted that their manner of dress has to do with shunning pride and style in one’s appearance. He also stated that wearing these items is allowed if required by a member’s job.³²

³⁰ Drawdy, Interview, October 27, 2005

³¹ Crowley, “Primitive Baptists,” 171-172.

³² Drawdy, Interview, October 27, 2005.

Though the Crawfordites can usually accommodate the requirements of a member's chosen profession, they still stress the importance of strict Sabbath observance. Occasionally, some members have had to work on Sunday and have made amends with the congregation, but it is expected that this should not become habitual. Those who regularly break Sabbath observance run the risk of expulsion if they do not offer an explanation and a promise to change their behavior to their fellow members.³³

Another aspect of the Crawfordite tradition that remains today is the construction style of the meeting houses. While other Primitive Baptist Churches, including those in the Bennettite faction of the Alabama Association, have begun to use brick, mortar, carpet, and other modern construction techniques, Crawfordite churches remain exactly as they would have appeared over a century ago. They are still fashioned from unfinished pine, with no electricity, carpet, or running water. Elder Drawdy noted that this austere architecture helps keep the connection with the past strong.³⁴ It should be noted that in recent years, one part of the church grounds has adopted more modern conveniences. The outhouses that adorned the grounds of all the churches in the association have now been replaced with outdoor restroom facilities with running water, though this change was made primarily to bring the restroom facilities in line with public health regulations.³⁵ However, this addition has not encroached on the overall intended effect of the architecture. Though other aspects of the Alabama Association's faith and practices might seem ethereal to a person unfamiliar with Primitive Baptists, anyone can see how these old meeting houses stand out in the landscape, like something from another time.

³³ *Ibid.*, Mt. Olive Church, *Minutes*, January 1, 2005, April 30, 2005, June 3, 2006.

³⁴ Drawdy, *Interview*, October 27, 2005

³⁵ Daniel Drawdy, email, 12/8/2005.

The Crawfordites continue to remain isolated from the outside world, shunning radios and televisions. Most events of the twentieth century that historians would consider major developments, such as World War II or the fall of communism, receive no mention in the records of the Alabaha Association, or any other Primitive associations. However, the circular letter of 2001 provides an interesting exception of remarking on current events that last occurred in the associations' records in 1864. The letter comments extensively on the events of September 11, 2001, and their possible meaning. It begins with Jesus words from the Gospel of Mark, "Sees thou these great buildings? There shall not be left one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down." The author goes on to make the circular letters connections to September 11 clear:

We have seen flying objects (our commercial airplanes) flown into our great buildings of late causing much harm as well as a lot of money and lives. These people will tell the world of the awful things that this land has done to people on a foreign soil. Even, when it is known that they have done to us what they say we have done or will do to others. Does not the Holy Word warn us of the deceitful works of man?³⁶

The Alabaha Association continues to struggle against the works of man in the present day. As the Crawfordite faction of the Alabaha Association moves into the future, it seems to be in a stable condition. For 165 years, the old line faction of the Association has persisted in maintaining the original founding principles of the Association and the Primitive Baptist faith. The continuity from generation to generation, which the Crawfordites feel is made possible only by God's will, currently shows no signs of trouble. Though they have struggled through numerous disputes and splits, there appears to be a resiliency to the Crawfordites that does not appear to be easily defeated. Though the association is not as large as it once was, its members are confident that a true church

³⁶ Alabaha Association (Crawford Faction), "Minutes," 2001.

will remain until Christ's return, whether or not that church bears the name "Alabama River Primitive Baptist Association."³⁷ Until that time, the Crawford faction Alabama River Primitive Baptist Association shall likely remain the "gold standard" of the Wiregrass Primitive Baptists.

³⁷ Daniel Drawdy, "Interview," October 27, 2005.

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