

THE CYPRESS CREEK CHURCH OF CHRIST

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I think there is a desire in most all men to know something of the past when that past has some relationship to them. We study the history of our nation so we can have some understanding of ourselves today. The same is true with God's people – we need to study the history of them in order that none of us should ever forget that we are building on the labors and sacrifices of others. Some who have sacrificed and suffered most have been forgotten.

The beginning of the church in Lauderdale County, Alabama should be of interest to every member of the church today. I am sure we have all wondered who went before us preaching “the ancient order of things” and how long ago it was done. In my study the most distant date in the past I can find is 1820. This was one year after Florence, Alabama was laid out for a town. At this time the county was a wild land with bears, wildcats and Indians – neighbors were few and life was hard. The first church of Christ to be established in the county was in the section of what we know today as White's Lake (or Sharp's Mill). It was known as the Cypress Creek church of Christ. Sister Jessie (Richardson) Porter (my mother-in-law) says she can remember the old meeting house still standing when she was a small girl. It was located up one of the hollows to the right of the road, just before you get to the mill. Brother Vernon Freeman also remembers the old log house still standing when he was a small boy, and as they would pass by his mother (sister Dollie Freeman) would point out that this was where the church of Christ met in days gone by. Sister Porter will be eighty years old her next birthday and brother Freeman is about two years younger. Both of these grew up in this section and attended the Stony Point church of Christ.

Some of the early preachers who came into this county came from the state of Kentucky where they had come under the influence of Barton W. Stone and had been converted. Two of these men were James E. Matthews and B. F. Hall. Another preacher who preached for the Cypress Creek church was Ephraim D. Moore who was converted in Tennessee. He was preaching in this county in 1826; and James Matthews was preaching in the county in 1827. It was in September of 1827 that B. F. Hall (a young preacher not yet 25 years of age) came from Kentucky to the Cypress Creek church to conduct a meeting. At the end of the sermon on Lord's day evening (Sept. 30) when the invitation was given, a young man came forward whose name was Tolbert Fanning. He was a tall, overgrown youth of six feet and six inches, and was seventeen years of age. The next morning (October 1) James E. Matthews baptized young Fanning into Christ. Soon after his conversion Fanning began to try to preach, and he preached some for the Cypress Creek church. At the age of nineteen young Tolbert Fanning left Lauderdale County (it was in October, 1829) and went to middle Tennessee to preach. In November 1831 he entered the University of Nashville and graduated in 1835. During this time, he preached in and around Nashville. On January 1, 1845 Tolbert Fanning opened the doors of his own school – Franklin College—out from Nashville, Tennessee. In the fall of 1866 T. B. Larimore entered Fanning's school, and in two years he graduated with honors. T. B. Larimore then came to Lauderdale County and opened his own school on January 1, 1871. He first called his school Mars Hill Academy, but in a few years he changed the name to Mars Hill College. He operated this school for sixteen years, and closed it in 1887.

During this period of time what had happened to the Cypress Creek church of Christ? It had moved its location to Stony Point. Brother T. J. Denson and wife deeded some land to the Stony Point church of Christ (Sept. 10, 1886) “for church purposes”. (Brother Denson is brother Neal Sharp's grandfather). The trustees of the

property at the new location were William Grisham, William Stenson, Sr. and J. L. (Jess) Townsley (J. L. was my great-grandfather). Brother Grisham did some of the preaching along with brother Bill Stevenson. The story is told that brother Stevenson was long-winded and not the best of preachers, and when brother T. J. Denson thought he had preached long enough he would reach out with his foot and put it on brother Stevenson's toes so he would know to wind down his sermon.

So, it is my understanding that the Stony Point church finds its origin in what was first known as the Cypress Creek church of Christ. This makes it the oldest church in the county, finding its establishment in about 1820.

At the time the brethren acquired this new location (1886) for meeting at Stony Point, the church had been going through a great digression all over the nation. At this time the digression and division had been going on for some thirty-five or forty years, and some division was still taking place. This division was over the human organization that had been formed in 1849 in Cincinnati, Ohio for churches of Christ to send their money to, so that it (the human organization) might in turn preach the gospel in destitute places. This human organization was called "The American Christian Missionary Society". Instrumental music had also been introduced into the worship of the church at Midway, Kentucky in 1859, and its use had spread like wild fire among the churches. This part of history brings up the name of Tolbert Fanning again. Brother Fanning started the "Gospel Advocate" in 1855 and began to oppose the Society (the church doing its work through human organizations). He drew fire from the "Society crowd" quickly and was considered just a "non-progressive" in their eyes. On January 1, 1866 David Lipscomb (who had been a student of Fanning) became the editor of the Gospel Advocate. He continued the fight that Fanning had started. This is what H. Leo Boles says about Lipscomb in his book, "Biographical Sketches", page 246: "During brother Lipscomb's career as editor of the "Gospel Advocate" the great questions of missionary societies and use of instrumental music in worship were discussed fully. Brother Lipscomb took a firm stand against the organization of human societies for the preaching of the gospel, and he as ably contended for the simple worship without the use of instrumental music, as taught in the New Testament." So, the brethren at Stony Point stood against human societies and instrumental music in worship and did not go with the "Society group" (the Christian church). No doubt the teaching of Fanning and Lipscomb in the "Gospel Advocate" (and there may have been some personal contact) helped them to keep their thinking straight (along with the teaching of men who were not as well known as brethren Fanning and Lipscomb). So, in those days Stony Point was considered in the derogatory language of the liberal Society group of the 19th century as a "non-progressive church" or an "anti" church. As I have pointed out the influence of Fanning and Lipscomb in holding the line against digression, someone may be wondering about brother T. B. Larimore. History bears out that brother Larimore did not speak on the "issues" that were dividing the churches of that day, and he nullified his tremendous influence, handing the advantage and the churches over to the liberals – the Christian church. To brother Larimore's credit, he acknowledged with regret his mistake in his later years. Preachers today need to learn from brother Larimore's mistake in the digression of the 19th century.

The "Society group" of the 19th century took about all the large congregations and churches with wealth. In fact, the majority of the churches went digressive. The "non-progressives" or "antis" as the "society group" (Christian church) called them, were mostly rural churches in the south, and they were poor. Most of the preachers went with the Society and money group. Only a small number of preachers stood for the truth, and many of them were uneducated and without much ability we are told. So, many of these little congregations, like Stony Point, that had weathered the storm, sat almost dormant, growth being very slow for a period of

about forty years after the digression. Many of them did not begin to grow and have financial strength until after World War II.

When I was born, August 26, 1931, Stony Point was being served by three elders and two deacons: The elders were Fred Townsley (who also served as song leader and was my grandfather, the son of J. L. Townsley); H. S. (Henry) Townsley (Edison Townsley's father and first cousin of Fred and son of James "Chook" Townsley); and Hilliard Smith, the late husband of sister Inez Smith. The deacons were brother Lee Wilkes, the late husband of sister Eula Wilkes, and brother James Henry Butler, father of brethren Vernon and Lester Butler. When I was growing up, Lester served Stony Point as one of its elders, along with brethren Lloyd Townsley, O. A. Danley, and Walter Hale. I have said all this to show that I have a deep and abiding interest in the restoration of New Testament Christianity in this section of the county. My teen years were spent on the old Denson farm, right in the section where the restoration movement began in this county 150 years ago, and I grew up attending the church it all started with, as did my parents, my grandfather, and my great-grandfather.

So, you can see, my forefathers made the plea for simple New Testament Christianity and they stood against the human doctrines of denominationalism. And God, being my helper, I shall stand for nothing but the ancient order of things as revealed in the New Testament in this generation so that my children and your children might know the way that their forefathers knew, uncorrupted with denominationalism. For my stand I am not ashamed nor afraid before God, or man, because I can give Bible authority for my preaching and practice. Those in this section of the country, who have turned from Bible authority for their practices, are busy "aping" the denominations, and are working hard to turn the church into a first-rate denomination. They ought to be ashamed and afraid before God and man. Those who would turn the church into a first-rate denomination have no appreciation for the church and the truth as it has been passed to them from their forefathers who had to study themselves out of denominationalism many years ago. Brethren, why go back to that which our forefathers found wanting and unable to save generations ago in this county? Many of our forefathers were called "antis" and "non-progressives" by their liberal brethren in the 19th century, and I believe they were standing for the truth. I am called "anti" in the 20th century because I am standing for the same truths they stood for in the 19th century. I stand against turning the work of the church over to human organizations!!

Sources of information:

1. Recollections of Men of Faith by W. C. Rogers – 1889
2. Biographical Sketches of Gospel Preachers by H. Leo Boles
3. The Christian Messenger, Vol. I and II – Barton W. Stone (From brother Frank Puckett's personal library. I don't have any idea who else would have these. His are original copies.)
4. The Search for the Ancient Order, Vol. 1 by Earl Irvin West
5. The Hazard of the Die by James R. Wilburn
6. A History of Lauderdale County, Alabama by Jill Knight Garrett (This is published in mimeograph form and is in the public library in Florence.)
7. J. D. Tant – Texas Preacher by Fanning Yater Tant
8. "Special Privilege" -- a tract by James W. Adams, San Augustine, Texas
9. Abstract Deed to the old Denson farm owned by Wilbur Townsley
10. Living Sources: Mrs. Jessie (Richardson) Porter, Route 3, Florence; Mr. Vernon Freeman, 1626 Winston, Florence; Lester Butler, Route 3, Box 365, Florence; and Wilbur Townsley, Route 3, Florence.

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