*Pioneer Preachers of Northwest Alabama, 2*

**JOHN TAYLOR:**

**“PINE LOG** **AND CHIMNEY CORNER PREACHER”**

John Taylor was born in or near Newberry County, South Carolina, in 1809. He married Mary “Polly” Preisach early in life and they came to Alabama in 1827, when he was 20 and she was 19. They settled first in Marion County, before moving to Franklin County in 1842. Their route to Alabama was most likely through the Creek Nation of Georgia along an Indian trail known as “High Town Path.” It ran from near the site of Atlanta, through present Gadsden, passed south of Sand Mountain, and into the Chickasaw country of Northwest Alabama. The trail crossed Lawrence County where it intersected with the Old Byler Road, which ran south across the mountains into Marion County within a few miles of where the Taylors settled near Bazemore.

John Taylor had four brothers and one sister. His mother was with him when he came to Franklin County where she died the year he moved there. His parents were too poor to provide schooling and he could not read or write when he married. But he was intelligent, industrious, and learned from his environment. In addition to farming, he was a blacksmith, a carpenter, and a cobbler. He remained poor all his life, but he was able to provide for his large family of five boys and four girls.

Much of great interest could be told about John Taylor. Just recently I finished a book on his life.1 However, I am limiting this talk to just a few events in his life. While he was an uneducated citizen of the backwoods of Northwest Alabama, he was an original pioneer preacher who began an independent restoration movement in Fayette County contemporary with the work Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell of whom he then knew nothing. He preached baptism for the remission of sins in Fayette County at the time Walter Scott was preaching that doctrine on the Western Reserve of Ohio.

The conversion of John Taylor is one of the most inspiring episodes in Alabama Restoration history. F.D. Srygley first mentioned his conversion in *Larimore and His Boys*. However, he did not tell when, where, or under what circumstances this took place. Neither did he tell anything about Taylor establishing the first church of Christ in Fayette County. About all he says is: “A queer old man was John Taylor. In early life he was a Baptist; but he always had a way of thinking out conclusions for himself which constantly brought him no little trouble in that church. He never could understand from reading the New Testament that God had promised to pardon his sins before baptism, and hence caused trouble at the beginning of his religious life by requesting to be baptized ‘for the remission of sins.’”2 Even in this, there are implications that are not factual.

Until just recently, most of what was known of Taylor’s conversion and early ministry in Northwest Alabama came from F.B. Srygley in the *Gospel Advocate*. In the last decade of his life, Srygley wrote extensively about the life of John Taylor. It was from Taylor himself that he learned the story of his conversion and early preaching. But as much as he wrote about Taylor, he also failed to tell when and where this took place. So for many years, in research into the life and times of John Taylor, I wondered about it and sought information to that end without a shred of enlightenment.

Then about three or four years ago, after we started publishing *The Alabama Restoration Journal*, we quite unexpectedly found some letters published in the last volume of the *Millennial Harbinger*, which together with some other documents that came to light about that time, filled in some missing gaps about John Taylor’s conversion and first preaching. As a result, we now know the time of his conversion, the name and location of the Baptist Church with which he was briefly associated, and even the Fayette County farm where he established the first church of Christ in that country, which was actually the first church of Christ he ever heard of outside of the Bible.

F.B. Srygley was a student at Mars’ Hill College from 1880 to 1882. He said: “When I was through school in June 1882, I went with Brother Taylor, at his earnest solicitation, into the counties south of us, where he had spent the greater part of his life. [The greater part of Taylor’s life was spent in Franklin County.] He knew all the older brethren and familiarly called them by their given names. We must have been on that evangelistic trip six weeks or two months, as I kept a record of the number of sermons I preached, with the number baptized, and the record was sixty-five sermons and sixty-five baptized…. During that trip [Brother Taylor] gave me a history of how he learned the truth and the difficulties he had in rendering obedience to it. I asked him to write it out and send it to me, which he did with his own trembling hand. While I lost that letter, I still feel that I can give it in substance to the readers of the Gospel Advocate.”3

Srygley not only heard the account of John Taylor’s conversion and first preaching from Taylor himself, but he had a record of it written by Taylor. His frequent reading of the letter, even though he later lost it, indicates that his account is more factual and more nearly complete. Even though Srygley’s memory was flawed and some details loosely stated, what he wrote better fits the story as it is now more fully known. In 1930 and again in 1936, Srygley wrote at length about John Taylor’s conversion. He told the story, the best he could from memory, just as he received it from the old preacher. So we can give John Taylor’s early history substantially in Taylor’s own words.

Taylor said he grew up without learning to read or write. His wife taught him to read using the New Testament as their text. Until then he knew very little of its teaching and had felt no concern for his soul, but Mary was interested in his learning to read as well as in his salvation. He saw from reading the New Testament that he was lost and in need of salvation. So with Mary’s persuasion, when a revival was held at the church near their home, John went and was the first person at the mourner’s beech when the preacher called for seekers. He was told that when he was saved he would feel a great change and become shouting happy. He took all the advice the preacher and other exhorters gave him, but he experienced no miraculous change. The meeting closed without him having obtained any ecstatic feeling of joy. He told his wife there was no religion for him; that he must have committed “the unpardonable sin.” He spent the winter brooding over his lost condition. He tried to drown his distress in drink. He was then working as a cobbler and kept his whiskey jug under sole leather and stayed just drunk enough to do his work. Mary wept over his condition, but he could not escape his inconsolable grief.

As the next summer was coming on, John’s good wife begged him to stop drinking and make another effort to “get religion.” He felt he had done all that he could do, but nevertheless, moved by Mary’s entreaties and tears, he agreed to throw away his jug and make another honest effort to be saved. The entire religious part of the community was interested in him and was anxious to see him “get religion,” as salvation was called in those days.

When the revival began, John and Mary went to the first service. He told Srygley that in the midst of the sermon the Baptist preacher took a rather strange text for that day. It was Acts 2:37-38, where the Jews asked: “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” and Peter told them to be baptized for the remission of sins. Taylor said: “As I sat and meditated on that answer, I thought, if these wicked Jews who had crucified the Savior could repent and be baptized and receive the remission of sins, why may I not do the same and receive the same blessing? It was as clear to me as the noonday sun, and I began to clap my hands and to shout.” The preacher looked at him and said: “Thank God, John Taylor has got religion.” Taylor said: “This embarrassed me, and I spoke up at once and said: ‘No, brother, I haven’t got religion, but I see how I can get it.’”4

At the close of the service, Taylor told the preacher he wanted to confess his faith in Christ and be baptized in order to be forgiven. The preacher brought the matter before the church but it refused to grant his request. They tried to persuade Taylor to relate an experience of grace, but he said he could not do that because he had not yet reached the grace of God. So the preacher refused to baptize him and he went home in renewed grief.

There was another Baptist preacher in the neighborhood. So Taylor went to see him, and when he got there the preacher’s brother-in-law was visiting. Taylor went in and asked for baptism on a confession of faith. The brother-in-law said: “Brother William, that is a scriptural demand, and if I were you I would baptize him on a confession of his faith.” The preacher said: “If I do it without the authority of the church, it will get up trouble in the church.”5 However, he agreed to meet Taylor and his wife at a pool in the creek two miles from his house at midnight and baptize them on a confession of their faith. Nothing was to be said about it so as to prevent trouble in the church.

John and Mary double rode their only horse to the place and sat on the creek bank till daylight, but the preacher never come. A few weeks later he saw Taylor and told him it looked so much like stealing that he changed his mind; but he promised that if Taylor came to church the next preaching day, he would try to persuade the church to baptize him, and if it refused, he would baptize him anyway. The church again refused and this time the preacher kept his word. He left with John and Mary and baptized them on a confession of faith for the remission of sins. Paralee Gassaway, Taylor’s granddaughter who was ten years old when he died, told me in an interview in 1964 that John Taylor afterward baptized the Baptist preacher that baptized him. I have not been able to verify that, but have no reason to doubt it. The old Wade Primitive Baptist church, also known as Old Union and New River, where Taylor learned how to “get religion,” itself was eventually decimated by the loss of members to the church of Christ. The remnant of the church then moved to the western part of the county and continued as the Old Union church.

There was no church in that country at the time that followed the Bible alone. Taylor thought he should belong to a church, but his only prospect was the church that had refused to baptize him. The stir over his “unorthodox” baptism soon ceased and the church received him by a liberal interpretation of Baptist usage, and he soon began to preach. He knew nothing to preach except the New Testament, and this, very naturally, caused trouble. F.D. Srygley said: “Those people were not the sort of folks to quietly sit and hear John Taylor or any body else say their religious ideas were not correct, and John Taylor was not the sort of man to fail to declare his honest convictions from the pulpit.”6 He tried not to be an agitator, but once the conflict begun, he gave himself unreservedly to the support of his cause.

John Taylor never was a true Baptist. He was a Baptist and a Baptist preacher only in name, and he preached in the Baptist church less than a year, more likely only a few months. He was in and out of Baptist fellowship almost before the liberal door by which he was admitted rested on its Baptist hinges. “Some of the things he preached the Baptists called ‘heresy,’ and they ‘cited him to trial.’ He was tried and convicted of preaching heresy. But Brother Taylor insisted that he was preaching only what the apostles preached, but they ‘turned him out of the church’ on the ground that he was preaching heresy.”7

The “heresy” he was charged with preaching was what the Baptists called “Campbellism.” “‘And before God, brethren,’ the old man would say in his earnest manner in after years, ‘I had never heard of Campbellism nor of Alexander Campbell before in all my life.’ That was way back when Campbell first began to preach. The truth is, he learned Campbellism from the New Testament and was excluded from the Baptist church for preaching it in North Alabama before he ever heard of Campbell or his teaching.”8

It should be pointed out here that John Taylor was only about 21 years old when he was turned out of the Baptist church. At the time, the young preacher had an appointment to preach the next Sunday over in the next county. Lacking experience, he knew not what to do. He had an older brother to whom he often went for advice. Martin Taylor was not a religious man, but John went to him about this problem as he would about any other. Martin was a carpenter and out on a job when John went to see him. He called him out and told him his predicament: that he had an appointment to preach the next Sunday, but had been turned out of the Baptist Church and that the church had also canceled his license to preach. His brother thought about it a few minutes and said: “John, if you were fit to preach, the action of that church would not render you unprepared to continue; and if I were you, I would go on preaching what is in the Bible and let that church attend to its own business.”9

The counsel of Martin Taylor was crucial at the time. John heeded his advice and continued preaching the Bible for the balance of his life. Immediately taking his brother’s counsel, although still in some doubt as to his duty, Taylor decided to preach independently of the Baptist Church. He kept his appointment the next Sunday over in Fayette County and preached on “What Must I Do to Be Saved.”He showed that Peter’s sermon on Solomon’s Porch was the same in effect as the one he preached on Pentecost. When he finished the sermon, a young lady at the house where he preached asked to be baptized for the remission of sins. This raised an issue he had not yet worked out and he was reluctant to baptize her. Yet, what she wanted him to do was exactly what he said Peter preached. This was a distressing time for the young preacher. It demanded an immediate decision that he was not prepared to make immediately.

He then told the people that he had been turned out of the Baptist church. He now belonged to no church. He said: “If I baptize her, since I am not a member of the church, she will be in no church.” The girl’s father said: “She will be in the kingdom, and that will be good enough.” Reflecting on the words of the girl’s father, he said, it appeared to him that the church is the body of Christ, and if one is in the kingdom, he is evidently in that body; and if in the body, he is in the church. However, he said: “We will think about this for a month; and when I return, we will make some disposition of the case.” 10 He promised to return for his appointment the next month, and if the girl still wanted to be baptized, he would baptize her.

Taylor went back the next month and preached several days. As a result, he baptized the girl and thirty-nine more in the same creek. He solved the problem of her church membership by organizing those he baptized into a church patterned after the apostolic order. He taught them to be Christians only, to follow the Bible as their only authority, and to worship as the New Testament directs.

This was the first church of Christ in the whole region of Marion and Fayette Counties. “At that time Brother Taylor had never heard that there was such a man living as Alexander Campbell, neither did he know anyone that held to the position which he had learned from the New Testament; but he continued to preach as the New Testament teaches.”11 He incrementally saw the truth, but with the Bible as his guide, he soon came to see more fully the ancient order of things. Some Christians from Morgan County soon came to that country and with their help the cause was firmly established in that region and it is today one of the strongest areas of churches of Christ in the state of Alabama. “From the point where the [Sipsey] river crosses into Marion County from Winston County to the outskirts of Fayette where it crosses highway 43, is approximately 30 miles. From its banks twenty five miles, both east and west, there are at least forty five to fifty congregations of God’s people. These [are] in one of the most rural areas of Alabama.”12 Several of these churches were established by John Taylor, or are successors to churches established by him.

The letters that helped lead us to the time, place, and other formerly elusive details of Taylor’s conversion and early preaching, were written by Christians in Fayette County to W.K. Pendleton editor of the *Millennial Harbinger*. From of these, we now know where Taylor lived in Marion County. We now also know the time and place of his conversion, the location of the Baptist church where he tried to “get religion” and heard a Baptist preacher read Acts 2:37-38, the identity of the church he established, and the owner and the location of the farm where he established the first church of Christ in that country. The Baptist Church was the Wade Primitive Baptist Church located about five miles from his home. It was the only church near where he lived at the time.

When the time and place of John Taylor’s conversion came to light, the place where he established the first church of Christ in that country was still unknown. However, along about the same time, Kenneth Randolph, a good friend and Bible professor at Faulkner University, sent me a thick package about the Randolphs of Alabama, and other papers. Kenneth is a descendant respectively of Elisha, Jeremiah, and Virgil Randolph, three of the five Randolphs that were well known pioneer preachers of Northwest Alabama. One manuscript was a brief history of churches of Christ in Fayette County. It identifies the place where Taylor established the church with the forty members that he baptized for the remission of sins as being on “the Thornton Farm.” Further, search revealed that this was David Thornton. It was there that John Taylor kept his “appointment to preach the next Sunday,” which resulted in the first church of Christ in that region being established by him about five weeks after the Baptists set him free. This church continued to meet in Thornton’s home and other nearby homes for several years. The church later met in a schoolhouse, and then built a log meetinghouse on Studhorse Creek near Thornton’s home. That church, now known as Berea, still meets in close proximity of the original site, about four miles south of Glen Allen. The conversion of John Taylor occurred in 1828 and he established the first church of Christ in that country in 1829. This was within a two years of his migrating to Marion County.

John Taylor began his restoration work by preaching baptism for the remission of sins. It took Barton W. Stone more than 20 years to convincingly preach that doctrine. And it required Alexander Campbell about a dozen years to come to that conclusion and even then he did not preach it enthusiastically until Walter Scott showed him how. Taylor began a one man, one church, restoration movement in Fayette county contemporary with the pioneering work of Stone and Campbell.

This was the beginning of a long and fruitful ministry by Parson John Taylor. Robert Leslie James, a Franklin County historian who lived among the Taylors, said: “Perhaps no preacher in the history of Alabama was more devoted to his religion and more severely persecuted than John Taylor.”12 He was in the beginning a poor, uneducated backwoods preacher and remained such all his life, but through diligent study of the word of God, he became one of the most knowledgeable men in the Scriptures in all of Northwest Alabama. He knew the Bible so well that if a person quoted a passage he could tell where it is found and quote the next passage after it. He often entertained people for hours round the fireside by this exercise.

**Notes**

1 Earl Kimbrough, *John Taylor,* *The Life and Times of a Backwoods Preacher*.

2 F.D. Srygley, *Larimore and His Boys*.

3 *Gospel Advocate*, Dec. 3, 1936.

4 Ibid, April 17, 1930.

5 Ibid.

6 Srygley, *Larimore*.

7 *Gospel Advocate*, April 24, 1930.

8 Srygley, *Larimore*.

9 *Gospel Advocate*, April 24, 1930.

10 Ibid.

11.Srygley, *Larimore*.

12 Larry Whitehead, *Baptizing in the Sipsey,* unpublished.

13 Robert Leslie James, *Distinguished Men, Women and Families of Franklin County, Alabama*.