*Pioneer Preachers of Northwest Alabama, 3*

**GREEN M. HALEY: A RELUCTANT CONVERT**

Green Monroe Haley is probably one of the most intriguing gospel preachers in the history of churches of Christ in Northwest Alabama. I call him a reluctant convert because before his conversion he objected to the baptism of his wife Juliet and even threatened to shoot John Taylor if he baptized her. Haley was a successful Marion County farmer. He owned a few slaves, but sided with the Union and recruited men for the Union Army during the War Between the States. There was actually a war within a war in northwest Alabama between Confederate and Union sympathizers. Haley had some close brushes with death because of his Union sympathies. He not only became a fearless gospel preacher in a time of constant religious warfare, but he also left a mark on Alabama’s secular history.

I want to tell a little about Haley’s opposition to baptism, his threat against John Taylor, his abrupt conversion, and some other incidents, as time permits. F.B. Srygley said he first met Green Haley on an 1882 preaching trip Northwest Alabama with John Taylor, when Haley was an old man and nearing the end of his life. Actually, Haley died the year before, in November 1881. Srygley evidently met him a year earlier, when he was teaching school at Thorn Hill near Haley’s home and at one of Haley’s earlier preaching points. Family legend says Haley attended services in his last days by having his sons place a mattress in a wagon bed for him to lie on and take him to the meeting.

Green Haley was born March 13, 1820, in Kentucky. His father, Allen Haley, was a member of the Christian Church, as it was then known, in Tennessee, but his son did not unite with the church until later in life. Green Haley was twice married, first to Charlotte Dickens of Readyville, Tennessee. She was a daughter of Baxter Dickens, who was a gospel preacher. Haley had three children by her: William, Vardeman, and Martha. Charlotte moved to Alabama with Green, but became sick and returned to her family in Tennessee where she died in 1848 at the age of 24. Haley’s second wife was Juliet Wright (1835-1870), a Mississippi girl whom he married about 1850, when she was 15 years old, or possibly a little younger. She was about 16 years old at the time of her baptism.

Haley came to Marion County in the early 1840s and bought 1,000 acres of land on Buttahatchee River near the site of the Union church. He probably came there in 1840 when his father moved to the state. He would have been 20 years old at the time. There are conflicting accounts of his conversion. Some say he was converted before coming to Alabama. Others say he was converted by T.W. Caskey and Carroll Kendrick, early preachers of that region. However, Srygley’s account of his conversion is correct for it came from John Taylor, the preacher that baptized him. However, Taylor told him that before his conversion Haley opposed the truth as preached by him.

“Brother Taylor said that many years before, he was preaching in [a community near Haley’s plantation], when Haley’s wife made the confession of faith and they set the time for her baptism on the afternoon [of the day] following her confession. At the meeting next morning she told Taylor that her husband said he would shoot the preacher that tried to baptize her. He was so prejudiced against what he called ‘Campbellism’ that he felt that he would be justified in killing any one who would dare undertake to baptize his wife. Mrs. Haley asked Brother Taylor to go home with her and try to persuade Green to allow her to be baptized.”

“The old man went, and he said that when he got there he ‘found Green sitting on his back porch with his gun near him, reading his Bible.’ The old man said that Green never came near him; neither did he come to the table to eat his dinner. Mrs. Haley and Brother Taylor sat down to the table and ate their dinner. Soon after dinner the time came for the preacher and the frightened wife to go to the water to attend to the baptizing. Brother Taylor said he went out where Mr. Haley was still reading his Bible, and said: ‘Green, you do not propose to stand between your wife and a command of God, do you?’ Green Haley did not answer him, but called his wife and asked her if she believed that the Bible commanded her to be baptized, and she said: ‘I most certainly do, Mr. Haley.’ Then he said: ‘Go on, then, and do it.’”1

The story, as Srygley told it, has a happy ending. He said: “They left the house together, but left the husband still reading his Bible. As I remember it, before the meeting closed he came and demanded baptism upon a confession of his faith. Green Haley afterward became a preacher of the gospel, and Brother Taylor told me that he was one of the most logical men he had ever heard in debate. He was brave as a lion and was always ready to defend the truth with any adversary.”2

In telling about Haley’s conversion, Srygley twice called John Taylor an “old man.” He was old when he told Srygley about it, but he was only about 40 when the incident took place. The threat Taylor received shows the danger that pioneer preachers like him faced in a time of extreme enmity and persecution against such preaching as he did. This was in an untamed frontier region where fighting with knives and guns, and threatening to shoot an enemy, were more than idle threats. Haley at the time was a fiery young man 31 years of age.

A church on Buttahatchee River near Green Haley’s home was started by John Taylor. It met in a union meeting house and was first known as Union church. It later built a meeting house of its own at the edge of Haley’s property. This remained one of Taylor’s preaching stations for many years. In an item in the *Gospel Advocate,* written on the eve of the War Between the States, Taylor said the congregation on Buttahatchee had “a very efficient preacher in the person of G.M. Haley.”Through their joint efforts thirty persons were added to the church there in 1860.3

After writing a vignette about Green Haley’s conversion, based on F.B. Srygley’s recollection of what John Taylor told him, I began to have second thoughts about it. I relate this now to show how history even when based on eye witness accounts that come down through apparently reliable second hand sources can be misleading. Haley’s early opposition to the gospel and his threat to shoot the man who would baptize his wife are factual and they make a good story. But upon a closer look at the matter, it now seems that Srygley believed John Taylor may have been in greater danger than he actually was. This is understandable because such threats against pioneer preachers in frontier society were not uncommon. Taylor himself may have thought that, or more likely he may have unintentionally left that impression on Srygley, who wrote about it from memory half a century later.

Green Haley’s father, Allen Haley, was a Christian and worshiped with a church where John Taylor preached and that Taylor probably started. It is believed to have met near Guin, Alabama, and was known in early times as Scuffle Grit church. Taylor and Allen Haley were good friends. When Taylor’s fourth son was born in 1844, he named him after Allen Haley.

Juliet Haley’s fear of her husband at the time of her conversion, referring to him as “Mr. Haley” and asking Taylor to go home with her from the morning services to intercede with him on her behalf, is not hard to understand: she was only 16 years old and Green was twice her age when they married. What is difficult to understand is his fierce objection to her being baptized. His first wife was a Christian and her father was a gospel preacher. Green’s father was also a Christian and lived only about fifteen miles of him. Why, then, would he so adamantly object to Juliet being baptized, even threatening to shoot any man who would attempt to baptize her?

While Green Haley is known to have been a strong-willed young man, not easily persuaded, that does not account for it. This is especially true in view of his reputation in later years as a family man, a faithful gospel preacher, and a compassionate neighbor. Larry Whitehead has a fascinating supposition as to his reason, but it is largely conjecture and so we leave it at that. The real reason is simply unknown and may never be known.

However, it is my conviction, considering all the factors involved, that whatever his reason for objecting to Juliet being baptized, he did not intend to shoot John Taylor. There is nothing in his life indicative of a violent nature. Further, his threat to shoot Taylor was not made to the preacher, nor did he send any such message to him. It apparently was never meant as a threat to him. The threat was made alright enough, but it was made to Juliet after she told her husband that she planned to be baptized in the afternoon of the next day. She told Taylor about the threat and asked him to go home with her for dinner and intercede for her. From this, it seems obvious that the threat was made to intimidate Juliet so that she would back out of being baptized.

Moreover, there is no indication that Haley expected his wife to tell Taylor about the threat or to bring him home with her for dinner. So the gun near by, as he sat on the *back* porch reading his Bible, was not for Taylor to see. It was there, I believe, to implement his effort to scare Juliet out of being baptized. (Anyone who knows much about a pouting husband knows one can do strange things to have his way.) When Taylor reached the house, Haley did not greet him, or even speak to him while he was there (no threat here), “neither did he come to the table to eat his dinner.” He read his Bible while his wife was at the meeting and while she and Taylor ate dinner. And he was reading it when the time came for them to leave for the baptizing.

Further, sane men that are bent on murder are not given to Bible reading. When Taylor approached the stubborn young man on behalf of his teenage wife, he spoke in a familiar manner of prior acquaintance, but Haley refused to reply. Instead he asked his apprehensive wife if she thought she should be baptized and when she replied affirmatively, he then gave his consent. We conclude that Green Haley never intended to inflict harm on John Taylor, or even to threaten him with harsh words. He made no such threat to Taylor personally while he had an opportunity, and in fact, he said nothing at all to him while he was in his home having “dinner” with his wife.

Another fact is apparent. Green Haley already knew what the Bible taught about baptism. He knew where to find it in the Bible and was perhaps mulling over the texts when John Taylor, unexpectedly, came to see him. Since his first wife, her father, and his own father were Christians, he surely had heard the gospel preached. Also, before Taylor’s meeting ended, Haley “came and demanded baptism upon a confession of his faith.” If John Taylor ever found a time for shouting since he first learned what to do to be saved, it must have been on the bank of the Buttahatchee River, when Haley renounced his stubborn will and, as Taylor often expressed it, “ground his puny arms of rebellion and closed in with the offers of mercy before it was everlastingly too late.”4 And as for young Juliet Haley, what copious tears of joy must have filled her eyes and wet her rosy cheeks on that happy day.

We have mentioned Haley’s siding with the Union during the War Between the States. He actively recruited men for the Union Army, arranged for them to reach the Union lines, helped their families while they were away, and provided hiding places and otherwise aided men and boys to avoid Confederate conscriptions. The story of the terrible war within a war among the people in the mountains of Northwest Alabama over the conflict is told in Wesley S. Thompson’s *Tories of the Hills*, 1960, and in Don Umphrey’s, *Southerners in Blue*, 2002. Wesley Thompson was a gospel preacher who preached at the old Berea church. Umphrey’s book is based on a diary kept by his great-grandfather, John R. Phillips, who fought for the Union. Green Haley is a major character in the book.

During the war, Haley used Abraham Lincoln’s “Emancipation Proclamation” as occasion to free his slaves. The mother of Haley’s great-great-great grandson provided Don Umphrey with evidence that Alex Haley, the author of *Roots, the Saga of an American Family,* descended from a slave owned and freed by Green Haley. In a letter to Mrs. Elwyn Dobbs of Haleyville, Alex Haley wrote: “I’ve thought upon how from childhood I’d heard my Dad mention ‘Haleyville’ as where the plantation had been upon which his father was born, the son of a mulatto slave woman either ‘Viney’ or ‘Sabrina’ … and an Irish overseer…. And we got the ‘Haley’ surname as all slave-born children were automatically surnamed for their plantation’s owner.”5

Another interesting side bar to the Green Haley story, which is also mentioned in Umphrey’s book, concerns the town of Haleyville. Charles Haley, one of Green Haley’s sons married the daughter of J.R. Phillips and started a general store with his brother Walker at a place known as Davis Cross Roads on the Byler Road in Winston County, which became the largest store in the area. Local folklore says that Charles Haley gave a suit of clothes to a man named “Bucky” Davis in exchange for renaming the town Haleyville.6 Chester Estes, a native of Marion Country, says it was Walker Haley for whom the town of Haleyville was named.7 Walker Haley founded the Traders and Farmers Bank at Haleyville and J.R. Phillips was a share holder and had a $100,000 account there. “John was always indebted to the Haley family for the friendship and generosity of Green Haley during he Civil War and in the years after.” He was a leader in the church of Christ at Bear Creek and the community’s Phillips High School bears his name.

Green M. Haley was one of the closet friends of John Taylor before, during, and after the War Between the States. But their friendship came close to ending during the war when Haley was hanged by a gang of Tory bandits. According to the story handed down in the Haley family, he was attacked by some Tories that would have been expected to befriend a fellow Union supporter, but these were actually outlaws, which were not uncommon in North Alabama on both sides of the conflict. They were bent on robbing Haley, caring more for his money than his Union loyalty. When Haley refused to tell the gang where any of his money was, they proceeded to hang him. Fortunately, the would-be murderers rode off quickly leaving him swinging from a rope. Green’s wife Juliet was able to stand beneath his body to give him sufficient strength to support himself until help came to cut him down and save his life. Haley continued to preach the gospel until near the end of his life.

Almost unbelievable animosities prevailed among the people of Northwest Alabama during the war, including brethren in the Lord. This gave preachers like Haley, John Taylor, J.M. Pickens, T.B. Larimore, and others a great hurdle to overcome after the war. While Haley supported the Union during the war, John Taylor apparently sympathized with the south, although he was not a partisan and his own family was divided over the war. If there was any estrangement between Taylor and Haley due to the conflict, there is no record of it. They remained close friends until Haley’s death in 1881.

The Berea church in Fayette County was greatly affected by the war. It was so deeply divided, while located in a veritable hotbed of guerilla warfare, until it seems that it would be impossible for it to hold worship services. Yet, Berea survived the war and continues until today. Haley and others were able after the war to revive, reunite, and restore congregations that were composed of both sides of the bitter divisions that gripped the people of that region long after the war was over.

How was this possible? Don Umphrey, writing about his research among the people of Northwest Alabama was surprised to find them almost completely uninformed about this period. He said: “I grappled with the question of why so many people wouldn’t know about their own rich historical heritage.” He speculated about the possible reasons for it, adding: “At the urging of the book’s editor, I was trying to find out what life was like after the war between people of northwest Alabama who’d been enemies during the conflict. Roger Burdge of Haleyville, an expert in the history of the area, told me that afterward, people didn’t talk about the war. ‘If they did,’ he related, ‘they would wait until the children were in bed or they would send them out of the room.’ He added, ‘Your great-grandfather’s book was a rare exception to this.’”8

Larry Whitehead, who has given considerable attention to the post-war period, was interviewed by Dr. Margaret Storey, a prominent historian at Loyola University, about his views on how the people of Northwest Alabama were able to live together peaceably after their embittered divisions during the war. He told Dr. Storey that “many were members of the church of Christ and loved the Lord and one another. That they asked each other for forgiveness and it was apparently granted.” Larry concluded that the brethren were able to unite after the war for two basic reasons: they did not talk about it and they were Christians. He wrote especially in regard to the Berea church of Christ in Fayette County.

**Notes**

1 *Gospel Advocate*, May 29, 1930.

2 Ibid.

3 *Gospel Advocate*, Oct. 1860.

4 H. Leo Boles, *Biographical Sketches of Gospel Preachers*.

5 Don Umphrey, *Southerners in Blue*.

6 Ibid.

7 Chester Estes, *Faith that Overcomes*.

8 Umphrey, *Southerners*.