**ALABAMA CHRISTIAN COLLEGE**

**Berry, Alabama 1912-1922**

Mayor Dobbs, Brother Berry, and respected brethren and friends. We are remembering today a little country school that may very well have been forgotten as hardly more than a bump in the history of Fayette County had it not been for one very significant fact: that little school had a large and enduring impact on New Testament Christianity in Northwest Alabama and beyond. This came about through the individuals that the school drew to this part of the state as teachers and administrators, and through the men and women of the area who were educated here. Due to the fruitful labors of these good people, the school’s influence continues to resonate even today among the rugged hills and winding hollows of this hallowed region that so many of us are pleased to call home.

While the Alabama Christian College of Berry, Alabama, flourished for only a little more than decade in the early years of the twentieth century, its Christian roots reached back almost a hundred years before to pioneer days; to a time when settlers along the Atlantic Seaboard, many first and second generation Americans, were pushing westward in what came to be known as the nation’s Manifest Destiny.

Many of these early Americans migrated to Northwest Alabama from Virginia, the Carolinas, Tennessee, and Georgia, about the time the territory was opened for settlement. Some of these stayed only for a short time and then moved on to Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. But many others took root in the rocky soil of Northwest Alabama to carve out for themselves a distinctive lifestyle that was rural in nature and home and family centered. One young couple who came to this region from South Caroline in 1827 was John and Mary (Polly) Taylor, who settled in what was then part of Marion County along the Sipsey River, near Glen Allen. Mary was nineteen and John twenty at the time. He could neither read nor write when they married, but with the New Testament as their text, Mary taught him to read, and to write.

John Taylor showed little interest in religion until he married, but soon after coming to Alabama, Mary urged him to seek salvation in the Calvinist style of that day. But his efforts to get the promised assurance of salvation at the mourners’ bench met with utter failure. He despondently concluded that he was among the non-elect with no hope of redemption; and so, like many foolish ones of that day, and since, he sought to drown his inconsolable grief in alcohol. But when revival time came around the next year, Mary again pleaded, with many tears, for him to give up his jug and make another attempt at being saved. He finally agreed to try again and when the revival began in his community, he and Mary were at the meetinghouse early and took a front seat. As the preacher was preaching, he happened to quote Acts 2:38, where Peter told those sinners who had crucified Jesus to repent and be baptized for the remission of sins.

In recalling the occasion, Taylor said he reflected on the passage for a while and it dawned on him that if those Jews who crucified the Lord could be saved by repentance and baptism, then he could be, too. He said this truth became so plain to him that he began to clap his hands and shout, “Glory to God.” The preacher, who knew about John’s anguished concern for his soul, stopped preaching and said: “Thank God, John Taylor has got religion at last!” Taylor said he was embarrassed by this, and replied: “No, I have not got it; I only see how to get it. I see exactly what to do for the remission of sins.” But it was with considerable difficulty that he finally persuaded a neighborhood preacher to baptize him and his wife upon a simply confession of faith in Christ for the remission of sins.

There was no church of Christ in that whole country and, in fact, John Taylor had never heard of one outside of the New Testament. He knew nothing of the Restoration preaching of Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell; nor of the pioneering work of Ephraim D. Moore, James E. Matthews, B.F. Hall, and Elisha Randolph up in Lauderdale and Morgan Counties. So he joined a nearby Wade Baptist church, where he first heard a Baptist preacher inadvertently read Acts 2:38, and soon began to preach for it. But instead of preaching the creed of that church, he preached only what he found in the New Testament. For that, the church tried him for heresy, turned out of the church, and took away his license to preach. At the time, he had an appointment to preach just over in Fayette County, and although his license had been revoked and he was in a quandary as to whether to keep it, his brother in the flesh, Mark Taylor, encouraged him to do so. He said: “John, if you were able to preach before, you are still able.” So he kept the appointment and preached on, “What Must I Do to Be Saved.”

Time will not now permit us telling the thrilling story of how that preaching appointment led to the beginning of the first church of Christ in this whole region. This was in 1829-1830. The church he established consisted of about thirty members, all of whom John Taylor had baptized for the remission of sins within a month after his preaching license was revoked.

Thus, John Taylor began, right here in Fayette County, an independent church that was completely unique in that it had no connection whatever with any other undenominational Christians anywhere. However, within a year of the church’s beginning, the families of Robert Logan and Hugh White McCaleb, and a little later, Elisha Randolph, moved to the county. These were already Christians when they came here from Morgan County and with their help the church, now known as Old Berea, was established in the faith. This was the beginning of apostolic Christianity in Marion and Fayette Counties.

From that faithful congregation and the able pioneer preachers who were among its membership, literally thousands of people obeyed the gospel just as those sinners did on Pentecost, and simple churches of Christ were soon established in most communities of Northwest Alabama. Among the area preachers before the Civil War were John Taylor, Elisha Randolph, and his sons Jeremiah, Lorenzo Dow, and Simeon, together with Carroll and Allen Kendrick, William Stringer, and others.

This, in brief, is the background of the churches of Christ in this part of Northwest Alabama. It was from the descendants of these pioneer Christians that the move was made in the early part of the last century to build a school at Berry, Alabama, so their children could receive a college education in a Christian environment, free from worldly influences and sectarian biases. Many of these descended from people who, like John Taylor, laboriously learned at home to read and write, and came to appreciate the value of an education. Many of them wanted to make sure that their children not only could read and write, but that they could be educated by Christian teachers in a righteous atmosphere.

T.B. Larimore had operated Mars’ Hill Academy on Christian principles near Florence from 1871 to 1887, but he had closed it to give him more time for evangelistic work. J.M. Barnes also operated schools with Christian teachers south of Montgomery, beginning with Strata Academy in 1856, soon after he graduated from Bethany College. The school continued as Highland Home Institute until 1916, but that school was of little practical use to the Christians of Northwest Alabama because of the distance and expense involved in sending their children there. So in about 1911, John T. Lewis, O.C. Dobbs, J.C. Shepherd, and others took the lead in establishing a college with emphasis on the Bible to be located in the town of Berry.

Asa M. Plyler, in his *Historical Sketches of Churches of Christ in Alabama*, written in the early 1940s, referred to Berry as “another splendid little town” in Fayette County. Concerning the Berry church, he said: “This congregation has been known through the length and breadth of the land in times past. This was the home of the Alabama Christian College [that] did a fine work in Bible, business training and the literary branches for about ten years. A number of gospel preachers were trained in this school, and much and lasting good was accomplished by this school while it was in progress. I understand that the greater part of the money to build the school was furnished by one man who was a member of the Berry congregation … J.C. Shepherd. Among those who held meetings for the church there are such men as Joe S. Warlick, J.D. Tant, G.A. Dunn, Foy E. Wallace, Jr., and L.R. Wilson and many other leading evangelists.” Plyler concludes by saying: “We have known some very fine people in the church [at Berry], among the number are the Shepherds, Baileys, Shooks, Clements and Dobbs, and a host of others.”1

The Alabama Christian College at Berry was founded in June 1912, with J.C. Shepherd, John Tomlin, M.P. Bailey, and O.C. Dobbs as Trustees. Shepherd was a banker and a leading business man in Berry and O.C. Dobbs was a well known gospel preacher throughout Northwest Alabama. G.A. Dunn, Sr., a well known Texas preacher came to Berry to serve as the school’s first president. He remained with the school three years and brought to the community such outstanding preachers as J.B. Nelson and Frank Baker.

The girl’s dormitory was a large white two-story building on the north side of the campus. Boys were boarded in private homes; the cost ranging between eleven and fifteen dollars a month. Tuition ranged from twelve to twenty dollars for each term, depending on the department. A few years ago, Enloe Billingsley, who was reared in Lamar Country, moved to Sun City Center, Florida, and he and his wife, Marie, became identified with the East Bay church, where I preach. In visiting, we often talked about Alabama, and one day I said something about the old college at Berry, and he told me, very proudly, that his mother boarded boys who attended the school. Enloe, who died last March at 94, had deep roots in Northwest Alabama. He was a cousin of Price Billingsley and a great-great-grandson of Elisha Randolph. Randolph had a large family of nine boys and one girl. Enloe’s great-grandmother was Elisha’s only daughter, Anna Mariah, who married Jeptha Billingsley prior to 1832. If that were not enough preachers in his family, we might add the Enloe’s mother was Lucretia Black, a devout Christian in another family of Fayette County preachers, including V.P. Black, who yet lives [2006].

The college building was located where the Berry High School now stands. It was a two-story beige brick building with four classrooms on the first floor and wide cross halls leading to the entrance doors at each end. Two winding staircases led to the large upstairs auditorium. Two more classrooms were located at the rear of the auditorium. Larry Whitehead says: “A unique, sweet tolling bell weighing 2,400 pounds rang daily and could be heard for miles around. The bell was a gift of ‘Grandma’ Shepherd and was in use until the building burned in 1933.”2

J. Paul Hanlin of Sheffield served one year as president of the college following Gus Dunn. Writing about the school that year, he spoke of himself and John T. Smithson, of Fort Deposit, Alabama, as working with the school. Both had been students of David Lipscomb at the Nashville Bible School. Hanlin noted that Hal P. McDonald, another Texas preacher, was chosen to serve as president in 1916. McDonald’s tenure continued until the school closed in 1922. Whitehead writes of him: “He was known as an excellent teacher although somewhat eccentric. [He] introduced the concept of an annual lectureship after he took the reins in 1916. Each year prominent preachers from over the country were invited to present lessons during the lectureship and the general public was invited. Such men as J.C. McQuiddy, C.M. Pullias, E.A. Elam, John T. Lewis, and J.D. Tant were invited among many others.”3

The Alabama Christian College at Berry further influenced the area in that many of those who came to teach regularly and to participate in lectureships, left an impression for good on the region. Gus Dunn returned to Northwest Alabama every year for gospel meetings as long as he lived, baptizing hundreds of people. J.D. Tant frequently preached in the state in the early years of the twentieth century. McDonald himself spent the rest of his life in the area. Other notable preachers also came to the state originally because of the school. L.R. Wilson, who lectured at the school and served for a time as minister of the Berry church, influenced my life for good. I had the privilege of profitably sitting at his feet for two years in college. Through him I have at least a remote connection with the Alabama Christian College at Berry..

Perhaps the greatest influence of the Berry school was that made on the students. Gus Nichols, was without doubt the most successful and influential man who attended the school during its existence. Flavil Nichols, who is with us today, says his father baptized more than 12,000 souls. Angie Logan Thompson from Russellville, whose younger sisters, Lavaga and Hilda Jean Logan are also here today, attended the college in its heyday. Leo and Brody Plyler, sons of Asa M. Plyler, another student at the Berry College, are in the audience, along with forty or fifty others who are related to students of the school. The Logan sisters are descendants of Robert Logan, one of the early members of the Old Berea Church. They also have the honor of being my cousins. So that makes me kin to a family of a student of Alabama Christian College of Berry. Asa Plyler was a bell-ringer for the college.

We are pleased today with the beautiful marker that has been erected by the State of Alabama near the street and between the meeting house of the Berry church of Christ and the property that was the site of the Alabama Christian College, both near the home of the school’s benefactor J.C. Shepherd. This grand memorial no doubt will be telling the story of the old Berry College a hundred years from now, when we will be sleeping in the dust of the earth. We are grateful for the opportunity to have had a part in the services today celebrating the erection of the laudable monument.

Thank each of you for the interest you have shown in the Alabama Christian College at Berry by your presence here today. May God richly bless you as you continue to serve him in spirit and truth.

**Notes**

1 Plyler, Asa M. *Historical Sketches.*

2 Alabama Restoration Journal, Nov. 2005.

3 Ibid.

Earl Kimbrough, Oct. 15, 2006

An Address Given in the Building of the Church of Christ at Berry, Alabama, Sunday Afternoon, October 15, 2006, in Celebration of a Marker Erected by the State of Alabama, at the Site, to Memorialize the Alabama Christian College That Flourished in Berry, Alabama, from 1912 to 1922.