

Our Baptist History

SHUBAL STEARNS

"The Old Father" of the Separates

There is no doubt that Baptists in America owe a great debt to the evangelism of George Whitefield and his preaching tours of our land.

Everywhere he preached souls were saved, and often his converts, driven to the Bible as they were, became ardent Baptists.

In New England many Congregationalists accepted Christ through Whitefield's ministry and were set aflame with the gospel.

These men were termed "New Lights," and they almost immediately advocated a regenerate church membership, (a tenet that was unacceptable to the General Association of Congregational Churches in Connecticut).

As these "New Lights" continued in the Word of God, many embraced the biblical teaching of believer's immersion.

Three such men were Isaac Backus, who became known as the "Apostle of Liberty"; Shubal Stearns, who became the outstanding leader of the Separate Baptists; and Daniel Marshall, who became the progenitor of the Baptist cause in Georgia.

Shubal Stearns was born on January 28, 1706, In 1745 he joined the "New Lights" and preached as a "New Light Congregationalist" until 1751, when he became convinced of believer's immersion and was baptized.

On May 20, 1751, he was ordained into the Baptist ministry.

Being led of the Spirit, Stearns moved south to Opeckon Creek, Virginia, and preached in that area.

Stearns was disappointed with the spiritual results of his ministry, for he had been impressed that God had a great work for him to do.

Then on June 13, 1755, upon receiving a letter from some New England friends who had gone to North Carolina, he took it as the call of God and removed, with his relatives, to Sandy Creek, North Carolina.

Upon his arrival there, a Baptist church was constituted with sixteen members.

His brother-in-law, Daniel Marshall, had accompanied him and was of great assistance.

A mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit's power fell on the preaching of Shubal Stearns, and with Daniel Marshall and Joseph Breed as his assistants, in a short time the church had over six hundred members.

Shubal Stearns and the others traveled extensively, and the Spirit of God attended their ministry, not only calling the lost to salvation but also calling a host of young men to the ministry.

John Dillahunty, Philip Mulkey, Joseph and William Murphy, James Read, Nathaniel Power, and James Turner were all called to preach.

Soon Baptist churches flourished, and the Sandy Creek Association was formed to serve all the Separate Baptist churches in Virginia and the Carolinas.

Shubal Stearns was lovingly revered as the "Old Father."

In time, the Association divided into three parts as the brethren in Virginia and South Carolina found the growth of the Baptist cause in their states sufficient to warrant closer attention.

Daniel Harris had baptized Samuel Harriss, who was to become the so-called Apostle of Virginia.

Stearns in North Carolina, Harriss in Virginia, and Marshall in the state of Georgia were mightily used in evangelizing the South, but Shubal Stearns must be considered the father of the movement.

He died on November 20, 1771, and was buried near the Sandy Creek church.

Cathcart (a Baptist Historian) opined: "Few men ever enjoyed more of the Spirit's presence in the closet and in preaching the Gospel. Had he been a Romish priest, with as flattering a record of service to the church of the popes, long since he would have been canonized, and declared the 'Patron Saint' of North Carolina. . . and stately churches would have been dedicated to the holy and blessed St. Shubal Stearns, the apostle of North Carolina and the adjacent states."

This article is taken from This Day in Baptist History: 366 Daily Devotions Drawn from the Baptist Heritage written by E. Wayne Thompson and David L. Cummins.

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