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A BRIEF HISTORY OF UNION
BAPTIST CHURCH
(Old North Church)

REVEREND A.J. HOLT
EDITED BY JERRY M. SELF

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

William Tellis Parmer in *Seventy-five Years in Nacogdoches** says that Akoniram Judson Holt was born in Kentucky on December 1, 1847. He was converted and ordained to the ministry in his early twenties while living in Louisiana and received a theological education at intervals from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, first in South Carolina and later in Kentucky when the school was moved to Louisville. He was at various times a missionary to Indians in Oklahoma, superintendent of missions in Texas, and secretary of missions in Tennessee. He served as financial secretary of Baylor University, president of Tennessee Baptist Normal College, editor of the *Arkansas Baptist*, the *Baptist Oklahoman*, and the *Baptist Witness* of Florida. Holt served churches in Dennison, Palestine, and Nacogdoches, Texas; Louisville, Kentucky; Knoxville, Tennessee; Lake City and Kissimmee, Florida; and Chickasha and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. His two pastorates of the First Baptist Church in Nacogdoches were 1891-1893 and 1902-1905.

The following article was written by A.J. Holt. The original copy is in the Library of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. All the editor has done is to add footnotes.

*William Tellis Parmer, *Seventy-five Years in Nacogdoches, A History of the First Baptist Church, 1884-1959* (Dallas, the Dorsey Company: 1959).

FOREWORD

The lips of Him who spake as never man spake said "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." This (Matt: 16:16.) is the very first time in all the world's history that the word *church* was used. It was a new term coined by Jesus Christ.¹ It is strictly a New Testament term, a New Testament idea and a New Testament institution.

We search in vain in the Old Testament for either the word or the institution. Those who go to the Old Testament for either the word or the institution are simply Judaizers seeking to foist Judaism on to Christianity. The church was not only a New Testament institution, but up to the time our Lord spake these words, it had not yet been organized. He said "I will build my church." He did not leave it to be built by Ignatius Loyola, nor by Henry VIII, nor by John Calvin, nor by John Wesley, nor by Alexander Campbell, nor by Joseph Smith, nor indeed by anyone else. He built His own church. Those which have been organized by others are not His. They may be good people, do many good things, may be overruled by Him in the salvation of millions of souls, yet they are not His.

The church organized by Jesus Christ was composed of baptised believers. It was a voluntary body of baptised (immersed) believers. It was not composed of believers and their families, unless those families were baptised believers. It was a local church. It became known as the church at Jerusalem. There were numerous other churches modeled after that one such as the church of God at Antioch, the church of God at Corinth, the church of God at Ephesus, the church of God at Rome, *et. cet.* All of these were never combined under the general expression "The Church." But each was referred to separately as a church. Even when the Revelation was written to the particular churches of Asia Minor, they were not referred to as "The church of Asia Minor," but they were named specially as "The church at Smyrna," "The church at Sardis," *et. cet.*

So we have no Scriptural authority for calling all the separate organizations "The church of God" nor yet for designating those organizations of certain sections, or certain forms of belief "The church." A Scriptural church is a local body of baptised believers, associated in the faith and fellowship of the gospel, covenanted to seek to know and endeavor to do His will, having the New Testament as the only guide of faith and practice.²

The writer of these lines, A.J. Holt, is perhaps the only living man at this time who was personally acquainted with Isaac Reed and M.G. Whitaker who came from Fayetteville, Tennessee in 1835. M.G. Whitaker was in the battle of Sanjacinto [sic] in 1836. They both had personal conversations with the writer of this sketch. So it seems well to me, at the urgent request of J.H. Summers, Sr. and John S. Orton, to perform this service.

It has been my privilege also to have something to do with the organization of the First Baptist Church of Nacogdoches, of which church I was several years the pastor, and of Nacogdoches Asson. whose constitution I wrote. As I am about to leave the state to labor in Florida I leave this upon record.

Baptists have a history. But all too careless have been our honored forefathers in preserving the records of their earlier history.

BEGINNINGS

Elder Isaac Reed and M.G. Whitaker came to Texas in 1835 while it was yet a part of Mexico. At that time it was a violation of the law of Mexico for any religious service but that of the Catholics to be publicly held. But many people from the United States had already settled in the Eastern part of Texas and the law was not always strictly observed.

There being a considerable settlement some four miles north of the Mexican town of Nacogdoches, prayer meeting was frequently held. Immediately after the Battle of Sanjacinto [sic], Elder Isaac Reed began preaching under a large oak tree that still stands near old North Church.³ (It scarcely admits of a doubt that this was absolutely the first sermon ever preached in Texas.) M.G. Whitaker testified in the presence of witnesses before his death that Elder Isaac Reed began preaching at this place at least a year before any other sermon was preached in Texas.⁴ In October, 1836 the neighbors of this vicinity built a log school house, and in honor of the victory of Sanjacinto, [sic] named it Liberty School House.

It was in this school house, on the First Sunday in May, 1838, that Union Baptist Church was organized. The record now before me reads: "At Liberty School House, Nacogdoches County, Texas, on the First Sabbath in May, 1838, after preaching by Elder Isaac Reed, and Robert E. Green, the following named persons came forward with letters from Baptist churches in the United States and professed their willingness to constitute themselves into a Baptist church:

1. John Eaton
2. Mrs. Betsy Eaton
3. Charles H. Whitaker
4. Sarah Tipps
5. Mary Crain
6. Ruth Anderson
7. Emily Knight
8. Anthony a slave
9. Chancy a slave

These nine persons adopted a Confession of Faith found in *Browns Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* which is now in almost universal use among Baptists. The name "Union Church" was agreed upon. C.H. Whitaker was elected clerk. The door of the church was then opened and the following members were added to the church.

Benjamin F. Whitaker	by Experience
Elijah Anderson	by Experience
Leander Tipps	by Experience
Mary Sparks	by Experience
Sybil Bryant	by Experience
Elizabeth Ann Whitaker	by Experience
Tera Witaker [Whitaker?]	by Experience
Jackson a slave	by Experience
and Elizabeth Whitaker	by Letter. ⁵

The church now numbered 18 members three of whom were slaves. Ten others were received at the next monthly meeting and others were added from time to time until at the end of six months there were forty members.

Among those who were active in getting up the organization of the church, none were more so than Mrs. Massey Sparks, afterwards known as Aunt Massey Millard – the name of her last husband. She made it a matter of prayer effort, and the church was ever afterward her pride. Her name does not appear among the constituent members.⁶ But the third meeting of the church she united and remained a faithful member until her death. She had long been a Christian and had often knelt on the rock that yet remains at the spring just north of the old church and there prayed that God would establish a church there where she could serve Him. Her prayers were answered.

SUCCESSION

A majority of the constituent members of the Union church came from the same locality in Tennessee. Now it transpires that this same Tennessee church, the Mulberry Church of Lincoln County, Tennessee, is well known to the writer of this sketch.

While serving as Secretary of Missions in Tennessee and on July 21, 1901, I preached the dedicatory sermon of a new house of worship for the Mulberry Baptist Church. The following bit of church history came into my possession in Tennessee. I was asked to attend the centennial celebration of the Spring Creek Baptist Church in 1897. An historic paper was read before that meeting, if I mistake not by Prof. Irby of the Southwestern Baptist University, now Union University. In this Prof. Irby recited the following facts:

The Spring Creek Church came in a body from the old Welsh Neck Baptist Church, South Carolina,⁷ in 1797. They organized themselves into the Spring Creek Church immediately on their arrival in Tennessee. The Welsh Neck Baptist Church came in a body from Wales. The Welsh Baptists are the oldest Baptists of history and their history dates back to Apostolic times. So the Union Baptist Church, the Mother Baptist [church] of Texas has a fairly good pedigree.

I have written to the Mulberry Church to know what connection if any their church had with the Welsh Baptists. Up to the present writing I have not been advised by the clerk of the Mulberry Baptist Church.

REGULARITY OF MEETINGS

The record so far as preserved shows that the church met with great regularity on Saturday before the first Sunday in each month for many years. The following minute taken word for word from the minutes exhibits the painstaking regularity of the meetings and their records:

Saturday before the first Sabath in September 1838, the Union church met in conference. Opened the door for the reception of members. Received by experience Julia a black woman, the property of J.H. Sparks. The church resolved to have four days communion meetings during the year, the first of November and quarterly thereafter. Agreed to have trend of mind until the October meeting to choose a deacon. J.L. Bryant C.C. Pro Tem.”

C.H. Whitaker who was for so many years the clerk of the church was clear and accurate in his records and always wrote with pen and ink in a clear legible hand. Had

this old book been properly cared for it would have afforded an important historic document.

Later clerks have also done well. John W. Crain served the longest term as clerk. J.H. Summers being next in point of service. All three of these clerks were careful and accurate in their records and deserve the thanks of the lovers of accurate history.

DOCTRINE

As before stated Union Church adopted at the beginning the Articles of Faith found in *Browns Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, which virtually the same as is now found in Pendelton's *Manual* which are almost in universal use by the Baptists of America. Yet there have been variations in the belief and practice of the church. In the first eight years of her history under the leadership of Elder Isaac Reed nothing unusual in the way of doctrine was mentioned. In 1845 Elder D. Lewis was called to the care of the church. He recommended that feet washing be observed. A resolution was also passed by the church to do so. But there is no record that it was ever carried into effect. Elder Lewis, as will be elsewhere recorded, only remained as pastor for three months and left the church in much confusion. It is reasonable to suppose that the innovation introduced was the occasion of this confusion. Nothing more was recorded concerning feet washing for several years when a query was sent to the association as to whether feet washing was to be observed as a church ordinance. The record is silent as to the advice the association gave. Later under the pastorate of Sanders who was temporarily the pastor in the absence of C.H. Gibson who was ill in Hot Springs, the effort was made by Sanders to force the church into the observance of feet washing. J.H. Summers was the church clerk at the time and refused to participate in proceedings when Sanders asked the church to prefer charges against J.H. Summers but the church declined to take such a step. The matter was then dropped and nothing more was said or done.

In 1854 a committee was appointed to consider the propriety and scripturalness of having a Sunday school in the church. But the committee seems not to have ever reported and no further mention was made of it.

DISCIPLINE

It is refreshing in these latter days, when church discipline seems to be almost a forgotten thing, to read of the strict disciplinary measures adopted and practiced by this great old church.

For twenty years it was the invariable practice to inquire for the fellowship of the church, and the record was "All in peace." But just after the Civil War, there seems to have been an epidemic of disorder. Drunkenness, dancing and fighting were the prevailing offenses. But close attention was paid to th[ese] sins. It is recorded of one prominent member that he was arraigned no less than ten times for drunkenness or drinking. He was twice excluded and twice restored and eight times forgiven his making promises of amendment. The young people were swept off into dancing frequently. But it is of record that young men and women frequently arose in church conference and acknowledged their sins and asked for forgiveness which was always granted. But if no such acknowledgement was made exclusion was certain.

C.H. Whitaker who made an excellent record as clerk, without whose record this history could not have been written, was absent from the church conference two consecutive months and a committee was appointed to enquire into the cause of his absence. It seems to have had a salutary effect, for he was ever afterwards for several years invariably present. Profanity was also frequent and was always disciplined.

Several Negro women after freedom were excluded for adultery. Emancipation seemed to not have improved the morals of the Negro members of this church: as before "freedom" there was no case of discipline among them save that *one Negro man* was disciplined for drinking.

One preacher, the pastor of the church, Elder D. Lewis, was disciplined. His particular offense was not mentioned. But he was cited to the church for trial and he sent a defiant reply and was excluded for contempt of the church.

One member was excluded for joining the Free Masons. Afterwards it seems to have become questionable as to whether this constituted a real offense. A committee was appointed to carry to the association a query on the subject. But the advice of the association is not a matter of record. In 1854 a member was excluded for joining "a society called Campbellites."

But gradually, as the years passed, the prevailing laxity of Baptist churches generally seems to have crept into Union Church. Along with this neglect there was also a general neglect of other matters. The minutes were not so faithfully kept, and when kept at all, were frequently written in pencil or in an almost illegible hand and carelessly. The last luminous and well kept minute was kept by J.H. Summers. While his handwriting was not so even as that of C.H. Whitaker or John W. Crain, he was always present and recorded fairly and legibly what was done.

NEGRO MEMBERS

As has already been recorded, slaves entered into the constitution of this church. They appear to have made faithful members. At one time no less than twenty-five slaves were members. They seemed to have had all the privileges of other members, and until after the Civil War no case of discipline was observed among them, save the one case of drinking aforementioned.

After the war however, as has also been mentioned, there were frequent cases of discipline as was also the case among the white members only the offense was of a different nature. After the Civil War the main body of Negro members drew out their letters and were organized into a separate church. Some of the colored members however preferring to remain did so, and the record is not wholly clear when they finally withdrew.

When the church was first constituted when a Negro member was received mention was made of the fact that he was a Negro, and "the property of" whoever was his master. Of course after freedom this record ceased. The Negroes also after the war began to take sir names, so that it was not easy to distinguish between the white and colored members.

REVIVALS

Union Church had its birth in a great revival conducted by Elder Isaac Reed. Thereafter and for several years, there were seasons of revivals. The pastor on such occasions usually had the assistance of some neighboring pastor who had been invited by the church.

Those who are recorded to have held meetings with this church are as follows: Isaac Reed, G.W. Butler, J. Lambert, J.W.D. Dreath, John Sparkman, W.H.H. Hays, S.F. Baucum, and A.J. Holt. Elder G.W. Butler held a notable meeting in 1864 when the following named persons were converted and baptised. Nancy Tucker, Eliza Greer, Parmelia Christopher, Tennessee Parmelly, Louisa Coon, Sarah Frailey, Mary Bullock, Nancy Scoggins, Eliza Fraley, Rebecca Parmelly, Catherine Richardson, Martha Richardson, Alabama Parmelly, Nancy Coon, Ann Scoggins, Nancy Traley, Mary Anderson, James M. Anderson, Jesse Summers (J.H. Sr.) James M. Taylor, Wm. Tyndale, George Parmelly, W.E. Mayfield, Julia, Polly, and Rhoda, servants. Twenty-six in all.⁸

At a meeting held in 1898 by S.F. Baucum, twenty-two were baptised. At a meeting held by A.J. Holt in 1904, twenty-three were baptised. The meeting was held under a tent in front of the old church house. The tent was the property of the First Baptist Church of Nacogdoches.

LATER IMPORTANT EVENTS

In 1885 or 1886, the Mt. Zion Baptist Asson. held its annual session with this church. Rev. W.H.H. Hays was the moderator and A.J. Holt was the State Superintendent of mission and was present. The year before this Elder L.R. Scruggs had been sent to Nacogdoches as a missionary. Before this Elder W.H.H. Hays had visited the town and had tried in vain to hold regular services. But it was a Catholic town, and was given over to godlessness and infidelity. Brother Hays had become thoroughly discouraged and had left the field. Elder Scruggs had moved to the town and was holding service in a school house on Hospital Street not far from where the Methodist church now stands.

At this meeting of the association J.H. Summers prevailed on A.J. Holt to come down to Nacogdoches and preach Sunday night. He had preached under an arbor at the association in the morning. That night he took in the situation and promised to return later in the fall and hold a protracted meeting which he did bringing with him a little baby organ which was performed on by Mrs. Sutton. The first night of this meeting occurred the first conversion ever known to have occurred.⁹ It was a young girl Jennie Voight. It was a bright profession. Several others were converted during the meetings. Out of this meeting grew the First Baptist Church of Nacogdoches, now one of the best, if not the very best, churches in Eastern Texas.

Elder Scruggs procured [sic] a lot and within twelve months had erected a church house. At the time there was no church house nor church organization in Nacogdoches, but the Catholic and Episcopalians. I think the Methodists preached here occasionally. They had one member, Mrs. Brown, whose husband was a saloon keeper, but who was converted in the first protracted meeting held by A.J. Holt.

The church house was dedicated in 1887 by A.J. Holt who held another protracted meeting with great results. This second meeting was taken up by the Methodists and carried forward for over two months, resulting in the organization of a Methodist and a Presbyterian church. In 1901¹⁰ A.J. Holt was called to the care of this church and accepted. He served for about two and one half years and accepted the care of the church at Palestine because the Nacogdoches church could not employ all his time.

In 1901, he was requested to come from Tennessee to dedicate the new and beautiful church house which had been built. In 1902, Oct. he was again called to the pastorate and accepted and served until 1905 Jan. when he resigned to go to Knoxville, Tenn.

Step by step this superb church through great tribulations has come to the front and stands a beacon light for all this East Texas country.

NAME

Union Church is now known as Old North Church. It was named Union however because other denominations were allowed to worship there. For several years the Primitive (?)¹¹ Baptists had a day. The Methodists also had a day. Later the Primitives withdrew, likewise the Methodists still later and thus the church remains now to [be] occupied solely by the Missionary Baptists.

HOUSES

The first house was the celebrated "Liberty School House" built of logs. It was a substantial structure built between 1836 and 1838. In 1852, upon the same foundation stones, a *framed building* was erected. The corner stone of the S.W. corner was laid by Thos H. Summers, father of J.H. Summers Sr. This house stood for several years without being ceiled or painted or well seated. About 1882, they re-modeled the house, ceiled it, changed the doors, put in new benches, and arranged to paint it.

The matter of painting the house gave great offense to the Primitive (?) Baptists who were strongly opposed to painting the house calling it a matter of worldly pride. However, it was painted nevertheless. This so disgusted the Primitive (?) that they withdrew and moved their preaching place [to] a place called Hickory Flat about two or three miles from the Union church, and they called the name of their organization "Arm of Bethel." It seems that the name of their organization was "Bethel." They never afterwards worshipped in Union church house. The house has since been frequently repaired and repainted and re—¹² But the house is at this writing the same house that was built where Liberty School House stood and upon its foundations.

THE GRAVE YARD

This was started a short while after the building of the School house. It is now the oldest Protestant grave yard in the county. Many of the original members are buried in this grave yard. The spot is becoming more and more sacred as the days go by.

It is now being proposed, and will doubtless be done, to build on this spot of ground a suitable monument, to commemorate the preaching of the first Protestant Sermon ever preached in Texas.

PASTORS

1. Elder Isaac Reed	1838-1847
2. Elder D. Lewis	3 mo.
3. Elder Moses Dawson	1847-1852
4. Elder B.E. Lucas	1852-1857
5. Elder N. Connor	1858
6. Elder B.E. Lucas	1859-1861
7. Elder B.W. Butler	1862
8. Elder J.S. Milstead	1863-1866 +1872
9. Elder John Sparkman	1867
10. Elder James Powers	1868
11. Elder M. Melton	1869
12. Elder James Powers	1870-1871
13. Elder J. Lambert	1872-1876
14. Elder W.W. Albritton	1877-1880
15. Elder L.R. Heflin	1880-1886
16. Elder W.W. Albritton	1887
17. Elder W.H.H. Hays	1882 ¹³
18. Elder L.A. Traylor	1883
19. Elder W.W. Albritton	1891-1892
20. Elder S.A. Acrey	1890
21. Elder C.H. Gibson	1887-1888-1889
22. Elder S.F. Baucum	188-
23. Elder H.M. Hutson	1895-6-7-8
24. Elder S.F. Baucum	1893-4 +1899 to 1900
	1901-1902-1903-1904
25. A.T. Gerrard	1905-1906
	1911

(There were some pastors between 1906 and 1911 - but the record fails to show whom)

CLERKS

1. C.H. Whitaker	1838-1845
2. Andrew Caddell	1845-1850
3. T.H. Rogers	1850-1853
4. W.W. Crain	1853-1854
5. B.L. Whitaker	1854-1858
6. John W. Crain	1858-1876
7. E.F. Coon	1877
8. J.H. Summers first	1877 to 1885
9. J.H. Summers again	1889-1890
10. J.G. Cooper	1886, 1888
11. W.J. Teddlie	1887-1888

12. G.M. Hale	1889
13. J.J. Scoggin	1890-
14. J.M. Grimes	1891-1898
15. D.J. Smelley	1899-1902
16. H. Petty	1903-1906

(Suggested Inscriptions on monument to be erected at North Church.)

(North side of monument)

*Erected to the memory
of
Union Church.
The first Protestant or Baptist
church House Erected in Texas*

(West Side)

*Built by a loving posterity.
To the memory of an
Honorable Ancestry.*

(East Side)

*Organized May - 1838
By
Elder Isaac Reed*

(South Side)

*The mother church of all this land.
Built not upon thy sinking sand,
But founded on the solid Rock,
Withstanding all the tempest's shock.*

*To many souls the Lord has given
This spot to be the gate of heaven.
By whomsoever this be trod,
Remember here's the House of God.*

*So keep thou this a sacred place
Commemorative of the grace
When God gave Texas to be free,
And gave RELIGIOUS LIBERTY.*

FOOTNOTES

¹Whether Jesus used the Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic word that would fit his statement it would have been a word in common usage indicating a public assembly having either political or religious overtones.

²This "Foreword" reflects a Landmark ecclesiology. Landmarkism developed within the Southern Baptist Convention about 1851. It involves an emphasis on the local Baptist church contending that Baptists date from the time of Jesus Christ and that only Baptist churches are true churches, only Baptist ministers are true ministers. The practice of observing close communion and the opposition to "alien immersion" and sharing pulpits with non-Baptists stems largely from this minority segment of Baptist history. See William Wright Barnes, *The Southern Baptist Convention 1845-1953* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1954), pp. 103-110, 246. During the first decade of this century Landmarkism was an especially vocal part of Southern Baptist life particularly in East Texas. In 1902 a General Association of Baptist Churches was organized by Landmarkers in Texarkana. See Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1950), 458.

³The note "Incorrect" appears in the margin at this point.

⁴The strong anti-Catholic bias denies Catholic history in Texas as religiously significant. Yoakum indicates that a Methodist preacher, Rev. Henry Stephenson, preached in what is now Texas as early as 1818. A Baptist named Joseph Bays preached in 1827. H(enderson) Yoakum, *History of Texas* (2 vols. New York: Redfield, 1855), II, 536-38.

⁵"The original records of Union Church were destroyed by fire in the home of the church clerk subsequent to Holt's compilation." Parmer, 40.

⁶Following this statement Holt had written "Why she was not present is not known. She may have been ill the day of the organization." This is marked out and above it is written "She had not yet been baptised."

⁷This was a particular Baptist Church formed by people from the Welsh Tract in Delaware in 1738. William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations in the South* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1961), 64.

⁸The distinction between Holt's "T" and his "F" is sometimes not clear.

⁹Obviously Holt means the first Protestant confession of faith in Nacogdoches. A questionable assertion at best considering, among other things, the presence of Episcopal and Methodist work in Nacogdoches. At the Annual Conference, East Texas Conference, the Methodist Episcopal Church South, 1886, Nacogdoches Methodist Church reported it had 207 members.

¹⁰This date should be 1891.

¹¹Holt's question mark, the point being that his own group represents lineal succession from the original church and not such "half-breed" sects.

¹²Illegible. For the most part Holt's handwriting is not too difficult to decipher.

¹³The dates of Hays and Traylor are confusing since they coincide with those of Heflin. It could be that they should read 1892 and 1893. The date for No. 22 Baucum either reads 188? or 1884.