

Appendix B

The Old-line and Progressive Primitive Baptist Debate

By Elder Jamey Tucker

From the time of the major division in the early 1800s there have been a variety of conflicts and splits among the Old School or Primitive Baptists. Some of the divisions appeared to be necessary at times to maintain the distinctions the Primitive Baptists were convinced gave definition to a New Testament church. Some of the divisions were local and regional, while others were more extensive. At the turn of the twentieth century another controversy among the Primitive Baptist was dawning, most notably in Georgia and the surrounding southern states. However, the Primitive Baptists at large, through the means of associations and periodicals, were knowledgeable of even local disputes and participated in the debates through writings and associational meetings. Such was the case with this particular controversy. Around 1910 the lines were being drawn for a formal split. The two sides were called the Old-liners, who opposed the use of instrumental music in the worship service, and the Progressives, who accepted or advocated the use of musical instruments in the song service. The two sides would indeed divide and develop into two separate groups with a reported 2000 persons joining the ranks of the Progressives when the split was solidified.¹ A number of issues were debated and discussed, but several of the issues were isolated to a very small number of churches or possibly exaggerated and misunderstood by those on the other side.

Elder William Crouse of the Progressives, who was respected by the Old-liners as a sound theologian, wrote about these issues and the charges levied at the Progressives from the Old-liners:

¹ Julietta Haynes, "A History Of The Primitive Baptists," 74

First: We were charged with advocating what was known as Federal Government for our churches. Second: We were charged of holding fleshly revival meetings. Third: We were charged with believing that God used the ministry and the gospel as a means in regeneration and of exhorting alien sinners to gospel obedience. Fourth: We were charged with advocating the receiving of alien baptism. Fifth: We were charged with advocating Sunday Schools as practiced by other denominations. Sixth: We were accused of advocating a salaried ministry. *Seventh: We* were charged with fellowshiping brethren who were members of secret orders. Eight: We were charged with using musical instruments in our song service.²

From the eight accusations and charges listed, Elder Crouse denied and disputed the first six charges. However, he wrote concerning the seventh charge relating to secret orders:

That was true. It is true yet. Our people are opposed to our brethren affiliating with certain secret orders. Many of our churches would not allow one of their members to affiliate with these orders. But instead of making this a strict test of fellowship we consider it a matter of teaching and leave it to each church to handle for herself. We have few secret order men among us. Our position is the position of MANY brethren called "Old-liners." It has seemed rather inconsistent to hold a bar against us on this issue and at the same time live in sweet fellowship with other bodies of Primitives who hold the same position as ourselves.³

Concerning the eighth charge, and probably the most heated topic and decisive offense in the eyes of the Old-liners,

² Elder W. Crouse, "Old-Liners and Progressives," *The Banner-Herald*, July 1928, 212-213

³ Crouse, 213

that being the charge of implementing musical instruments in the song service, Elder Crouse responded, "Many of our churches have them. We use good spiritual songs, sound in sentiment. The only use we make of the instrument is to help us in the singing of them."⁴

While protracted meetings and church auxiliaries would continue to be a part of the debate and arguments among the brethren, it was the organ or musical instrument in the worship service that would eventually be the focus of the split. According to the Elder T. J. Bazemore, he first witnessed an organ in the Primitive Baptist Church in 1897 or 1898 at Sharon church in Monroe County, Georgia. In the next few years Elder Bazemore claimed that seven or eight churches had started to use organs, including the Forsyth church in Monroe County, Georgia. After the death of Elder W. C. Cleveland, who served as pastor of the Sharon and Forsyth churches, Elder S. T. Bentley was called to serve as pastor of the church in Forsyth. Elder Bentley refused on account of the organ and afterwards the trouble over organs increased among the Primitive Baptists.⁵

The Progressives would argue that the organ was a minor issue and should not be a cause for division while the Old-liners saw the introduction of a practice not taught in the scripture to be a new innovation that could not be tolerated. Elder Bazemore expressed this point in writing:

Brethren and sisters were led to believe that there was a great departure from the faith in using the organ. And, strange to say, many of our Elders, instead of teaching the brethren and sisters that there should not be stress put on minor things, things in which there is no principle involved, they did to the contrary; taught there was a great

⁴ Crouse, 213

⁵ T. J. Bazemore, "Review," supplement to *The Banner Herald*,
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departure, and thus led many astray. In this, it seems to me, the Elders were governed by tradition themselves.⁶

Elder T. E. Sikes expressed similar sentiments like those of Elder Bazemore.

It was during this time that the unholy war over musical instruments broke in upon us. Quite a few of our Georgia churches had been using instruments in their song services for some years before this date. None of my own churches were using instruments, and no effort was being made to introduce them. But some leading preachers in other sections of the state had issued orders to force a separation between those churches using instruments and those which did not. All my own churches, including this one at Oak Ridge, were seeking to hold fellowship with all the churches which were sound in doctrine, but the division leaders pressed the issue, demanding that this church take sides immediately one way or the other. We pled with them to be allowed to fellowship churches on both sides, but our pleadings were ignored.⁷

Both Elders Bazemore and Sikes brought up an issue that the two sides would use in the debate and eventual division. The Progressives claimed that church autonomy gave them the right and prerogative to hold fellowship with sister churches that had not departed in the core principles of the faith. However, the Old-liners were convinced that adding musical instruments was sufficient enough of a departure from the faith as to warrant withdrawal of church fellowship. The Old-liners discussed in many of their writings their objections to instrumental music in the song service. Too, they declared their unwillingness to fellowship churches that would tolerate instrumental music even if the church abstained from musical instruments themselves. When

⁶ Bazemore, 3

⁷ Elder T. E. Sikes, *Memories and Thoughts Along Life's Journey*, 178

there was not a stated command or an explicit example in the New Testament, the brethren among the Old-liners were convinced that it was as if there was a clearly stated prohibition.

Elder R. H. Pittman stated the Old-liner position concerning instrumental music in churches by writing:

Recently some of our churches in Georgia have introduced the organ in their service which has caused confusion, bitterness, strife and will evidently lead to permanent division unless abandoned. The plea for musical instruments in the churches is based upon the fact that it is not condemned in the New Testament. Neither are Sunday Schools, Missionary Societies, Secret Societies, Christmas Trees, Cake-Walks, and various other things tolerated and practiced by Arminian churches condemned in plain terms in the New testament; and the same reasoning or fellowship that would allow the introduction of instrumental music would also allow the introduction of any other thing not plainly condemned. Christ established His church and thoroughly furnished her with all good works and useful things, and the only safe rule by which to measure the service of God's house, to glorify Him, and benefit His people is that the things needful for the church of Christ were placed in the church by Christ and His Apostles and the absence of a thing is its divine disapproval and everlasting condemnation.⁸

Elder C. H. Cayce often commented on the departure by the Progressives throughout his tenure as the Editor of the *Primitive Baptist*.

We have thought for some time that the brethren in some places were rather slow or slack concerning matters of this

⁸ Elder R. H. Pittman, "Instrumental Music in Churches," *Biographical History of Primitive or old School Baptist Ministers*, 382

kind--in receiving into their midst those who hold to and engage in new measures that destroy the peace and fellowship of the churches introduced. We desire peace and fellowship to abound in our churches, but peace cannot be had where such practices are continued. The churches in our section will not receive among them those who tolerate the use of instrumental music in the churches.⁹

From the turn of the twentieth century and for many decades following, numerous articles would appear defending and condemning the use of instrumental music among the Primitive Baptists in religious periodicals or Primitive Baptist papers. At times, as so often is the case, the division and split made for warring and name-calling. Elder Crouse makes mention of the antagonism expressed by both sides, "Brethren talked ugly about each other, and ministers thought their sermon incomplete unless they had taken a good hot fling at the other side."¹⁰

Eventually lines were clearly drawn and both sides made their stand resulting in a formal division and very little if any fellowship existed between the Progressives and Old-line churches for nearly 100 years. Even today, an article will occasionally be printed in a Primitive Baptist periodical or can be found online stating the reason musical instruments are or are not to be used or tolerated in the New Testament church. However, much of the ugly talk and hot flings mentioned by Elder Crouse are no longer heard from the Primitive Baptists pulpits. Neither is it uncommon to see an Old-liner attending a Progressive service or a Progressive attending an Old-line service from time to time, though the division is still continued between the two groups until this day.

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⁹ C. H. Cayce, "Concerning Organs," *Editorial Writings From The Primitive Baptist*, Vol. II, 61

¹⁰ Crouse, 211