

## Revivals And Church History :: America's Greatest Revival—Ignored by Posterity...why?

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### America's Greatest Revival—Ignored by Posterity...why?

by James R. Beller

You may not believe this, but the greatest revival in the history of America, a story of unparalleled success and Holy Ghost power, is known by only a handful of Americans.

I am talking about the profound revival of the Separate Baptists of North Carolina, Virginia, and South Carolina. That revival began in 1755 and did not relent for 100 years. The Separates went out from North Carolina, Virginia, South Carolina and Georgia, and were the first to preach the gospel in Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, Mississippi, and Illinois. Their legacy is responsible for the gospel being preached in Missouri, Arkansas and Texas.

Who began this great revival? An obscure Connecticut preacher, whose heart was stirred for salvation and soul winning under the ministry of George Whitefield. His name: Shubal Stearns. Stearns was a "new-light" congregational church preacher after his conversion under Whitefield. His study of the Bible led him to embrace Baptist principles and so was immersed by Wait Palmer at the Baptist Church of Tolland, Connecticut early in 1751. Stearns was ordained as a Baptist in May of that same year. He felt impressed of God to move to some place in the south and west of New England to preach the gospel to the large number of migrating Americans moving into the pioneer south. He found his place to serve at a crossroads in western North Carolina called Sandy Creek and settled his infant church with 16 members on June 13, 1755.

Within 13 years, 17 men surrendered to the gospel ministry and fanned out across the north and south and west of Sandy Creek. The immediate results were astonishing for the frontier era. There were over 900 baptized in the first three years for the Sandy Creek congregation alone. No one knows how many in the branch churches. At the time of Shubal Stearns' death in 1771, there were 47 churches birthed from those original 17 preachers. The Sandy Creek association began in 1758 and was effective in organizing more new churches. By 1772 three associations had formed from the original and the vision and burden of winning the lost, baptizing the saved, and birthing new churches into existence was a part of the make-up of nearly all of the Baptist churches of the south. It is estimated that the Sandy Creek Revival directly resulted in the birthing of over 1,000 churches.

This is astounding. So why is it that no one knows much about it? Why the cover-up?

Some thoughts:

1. The Separate Baptist Revival was much too Baptist for the "evangelical alliance" that emerged in the mid to late 19th century.

The revival era of the 19th century was featured by an ecumenical spirit, which was possible at that time to practice without a lot of compromise. The revival era that produced the "evangelical alliance" was not a time for discussion about infant baptism, Baptist heritage and Baptist distinctives.

2. The way the Revival was continued was far too convicting for the next generation to report it. These people were bold:

"On the 4th of June, 1768, John Waller, Lewis Craig, James Childs, &c. were seized by the sheriff and hauled before three magistrates, who stood in the meeting house yard, and who bound them in the penalty of one thousand pounds, to appear at court two days after. At court they were arraigned as disturbers of the peace; on their trial, they were vehemently accused, by a certain lawyer, who said to the court, "May it please your worships, these men are great disturbers of the peace, they cannot meet a man upon the road, but they must ram a text of scripture down his throat." Robert Baylor Semple, History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia, Richmond, Virginia, 1810, p. 15.

3. For some Calvinists, it wasn't sovereign enough. The aggressive soul winning of the Separates was difficult for the "Particular" aka "Regular" Baptists at the time to accept. It is still hard to accept among all classes of dead Christians.

s. With Baptist preachers of today abandoning bold exhortations and altar calls, let our brethren realize that the fathers of our movement, the Separates, were among the first to use the altar for a place of serious contemplation of their spiritual condition. G.W. Paschal quotes from the History of the Grassy Creek Church, p. 68:

“When the preacher had finished his sermon he would come down from the pulpit and while he and the brethren were singing an appropriate hymn he would go around among them shaking hands. After the singing of the hymn he “would extend an invitation to such persons as felt themselves to be poor, guilty sinners and were anxiously inquiring the way of salvation to come forward and kneel near the stand, or if they preferred to do so they could kneel at their seats, proffering to unite with them in prayer for their conversion.”—G.W. Paschal, History of the North Carolina Baptists, Raleigh, North Carolina, 1930, p. 298.