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## The Independent Presbyterian Church and Reunion in the South, 1813-1863

In the early history of the Presbyterian Church in the South there were several attempts at organic union with Presbyterian bodies in that area. Some of the efforts were successful, others were not. In 1863 the first of these unions was successfully consummated when the Independent Presbyterian Church united with the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America. The purpose of this article is to trace the history of the Independent Presbyterian Church from its inception in 1813 through the union with the southern Assembly. The theology, polity, institutions, and major personalities of the Independent Church will be discussed, as well as the contributions which the union made to southern Presbyterianism.

The General Convention of the Independent Presbyterian Church was a small denomination that straddled the border of the Carolinas. It owed its existence to the defection of the Reverend William Cummins Davis from the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. in 1811.<sup>1</sup> At the time of his withdrawal and the subsequent

<sup>1</sup>For the records of Davis' trial, see *MS "Minutes,"* Synod of the Carolinas, II, 98, 190-2, 227-8, 237-9, 308-45; *MS "Minutes,"* Concord Presbytery, I, 300-2, 332-46; *Minutes*, General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1810, pp. 448-53—hereafter cited as *Minutes*, GAPCUSA; Samuel J. Baird, *A Collection of the Acts, Deliverances, and Testimonies of the Presbyterian Church*. . . . (2nd ed.; Philadelphia, 1858), pp. 646 ff. The *MS* records of the Synod of the Carolinas and of Concord Presbytery are located at the Historical Foundation, Montreat, North Carolina. Valuable secondary sources include George Howe, *History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina*, 2 vols. (Columbia, 1870, 1883), II, 97, 158, 307; William Henry Foote, *Sketches of North Carolina*. . . . (New York, 1846), pp. 459-62; F. D. Jones and W. H. Mills, *History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina Since 1850* (Columbia, 1926), pp. 334-6.

trial *in absentia* on the grounds of contumacy, Davis was the pastor of the Bullock Creek and Salem churches in York District, S. C. These two congregations withdrew from the jurisdiction of Concord Presbytery at the time he resigned from the Presbyterian Church. For two years Davis' activities are not known. In October, 1813, delegates from five congregations met at Bullock Creek and framed a constitution, "consisting of the radical articles of faith and discipline of Mr. Davis, and of the independent sect which he established."<sup>2</sup> In addition of Bullock Creek and Salem, the Shiloh, Edmonds and Olney churches were in the original organization, all but Olney being in South Carolina.

Most of the members of Bullock Creek had withdrawn with Davis, selected a place to worship a few hundred yards west of the regular Presbyterian church, and for fifty-four years "two congregations, Regular and Independent, were maintained."<sup>3</sup> A similar situation obtained at Olney, where the spirit of animosity entered and for many years the two congregations even had preaching scheduled at the same hour and the same day in their respective houses of worship.<sup>4</sup> The Salem Church divided, but by 1838 the Presbyterian congregation was dissolved.<sup>5</sup> Thus it can be seen that almost from the beginning the Independents were more aggressive and stronger than the regular Presbyterians when they occupied the same locales. They further posed a serious threat to normative Presbyterianism in the small area within which they functioned, and they would serve as a further threat to the stability of Presbyterianism for the next half century. While the movement was not broad in its scope, it was nevertheless intense in its impact.

#### INDEPENDENT THEOLOGY AND POLITY

Had Davis not withdrawn from the Presbyterian ministry, he would have been tried and found guilty of heresy. His *Gospel Plan*, which contained the essential positions of his theology, had been condemned by the General Assembly. In brief, Davis' theology differed from the Westminster Standards in several particulars. He taught (1) that the "active obedience of Christ constitutes no

<sup>2</sup>*The Constitution and Form of Government of the Independent Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, as Adopted by the Churches in Convention, Held at Salem Church, in Union District, South Carolina, A. D. 1833: Together with Mr. Davis's Solemn Appeal to an Impartial Public* (Columbia, 1839), p. 4—hereafter cited as *Constitution and Government*; see also Howe, *op. cit.*, II, 273.

<sup>3</sup>Jones and Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 518. There was also an Associate Presbyterian Church in the area, 1798-1828, cf. William Melancthon Glasgow, *Cyclopedic Manual of the United Presbyterian Church in North America* (Pittsburgh, 1903), pp. 98, 399.

<sup>4</sup>George A. Sparrow, *History of Olney Church* (Gastonia, N. C., 1902), p. 21.

<sup>5</sup>Jones and Mills, *op. cit.*, pp. 565-6.

Him. A "church" is defined as a congregation, and each church is responsible for administering laws and discipline "as a body sovereign and independent." The only judicatory is the presbytery, composed of the minister and the elders elected by the people. The presbytery had the power to counsel candidates and licentiates on the course of study to be pursued toward ordination and to ordain ministers. The power of the presbytery was confined by the Scriptures, for the court could make no laws "in any wise" contrary to the Scriptures. Inasmuch as the Scriptures seem to authorize an association of churches through delegates, the Constitution provided for such an organization termed "The Church in General Convention," which met annually. The Convention had no authority over any congregation, however.<sup>9</sup> In sum, the polity was an admixture of representative Presbyterian and democratic Baptist governments.

#### THE INDEPENDENT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The General Convention of the Independent Presbyterian Church in the United States of America existed from October, 1813, until December, 1863. During this half century of effort to maintain her existence, a denomination which seldom exceeded one thousand members developed. Some of the congregations were unusually strong. Her ministers were well-trained and men of exceptional spirit, dedication and ability. Still the church never grew as her founder had hoped. While her growth was unusual in many ways, she was never able to break out of her original geographical chrysalis—save in one singular instance—, her ministerial ranks were always thin and her communicant members small in numbers. However, statistics alone do not tell her full story.

For several years following her founding the denomination stood still; then she began a rapid expansion, characterized by the organization of new congregations. In the period 1825-1831 both members and congregations more than doubled.<sup>10</sup> The first of these new congregations was in the "Western Country," which probably meant Tennessee.<sup>11</sup> In 1825 a church was organized at Yorkville, which already had a strong Presbyterian church. Harmony was organized in 1827; Hephzibah (North Carolina) in 1830; the Salem congregation in Lowndes County, Mississippi, in 1832; Chesterville and Mill Creek in 1835; and Olivet and Bethany in 1844.<sup>12</sup> Davis died in 1831, after having gone with some of his fol-

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, *passim*.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>F. W. Gregg, "The Historical Address," *Centennial of Bethel Presbytery* (Rock Hill, S. C., n. d.), p. 13.

<sup>12</sup>The sources for these dates are *Constitution and Government*, *passim*, and

lowers to the West. The following chart of statistics shows the strength of the Church in 1835.<sup>13</sup> When it is remembered that the average size of a Presbyterian Church in the South in 1861 was only seventy members, most of the Independent congregations exhibited a healthy membership. Membership was biracial, although the statistics never revealed the number of Negro communicants.

STATISTICS FOR THE INDEPENDENT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 1835

<i>Church</i>	<i>Address</i>	<i>Members</i>	<i>Pastor</i>
Bullock Creek	York, S. C.	200	R. Y. Russel
Salem	Union, S. C.	49	S. J. Feemster
Olney	Lincoln, N. C.	132	S. J. Feemster
Yorkville	York, S. C.	90	G. W. Davis
Harmony	York, S. C.	106	R. Y. Russel
Tabor	Union, S. C.	93	T. Mitchell
Hopewell	York, S. C.	67	G. W. Davis
Hephzibah	Lincoln, N. C.	72	G. W. Davis
Beth Shiloh	York, S. C.	123	S. J. Feemster
Salem	Lowndes, Miss.	26	
Chesterville	Chester, S. C.	18	R. Y. Russel
Mill Creek	York, S. C.	16	S. J. Feemster

992

The lack of a complete file of statistics on the Independent Church hampers objective accuracy, but sufficient statistics have been found to permit a broad tracing of the church's development. The next year for which statistics have been uncovered is 1844. Changes since 1835 were few. The Salem Church in Mississippi and the Chesterville and Mill Creek Churches were closed, but Olivet and Bethany, both in South Carolina, had been organized. Feemster and Mitchel were both missing from the role of ministers and only one new minister, J. O'Daniel, replaced them.<sup>14</sup> Statistical reports for 1855, 1856, 1858 and 1860 have been found. Carmel Hill and Union Churches had been organized, making a total of 13 congregations. While the number of members for each church was not reported every year, by using conservative estimates to adjust, the Convention reported 770 members in 1855, 840 in 1856, 850 in 1858 and 865 in 1860. Thus it is seen that the church seldom reached the 1,000 mark in membership; and from the point of

the MS journal of the Reverend Robert Young Russel. This latter document is by far the most contributive single primary source on the history of the denomination. It, as well as other MSS referred to below as "Russel Papers," is found in the Historical Foundation, Montreat, N. C. Russel began his ministry in the Independent Church in 1820 and labored within her bounds until union with the southern Presbyterian Church in 1863.

<sup>13</sup>*Minutes, General Convention, 1835, p. 19.*

<sup>14</sup>*Pastoral Letter of the General Convention of the Independent Presbyterian Church; with Extract from the Minutes (Columbia, S. C., 1844), 14.*