

Number 5

The Baptist Biography Series



Memoirs of Elder Jesse Mercer

Charles D. Mallary

MEMOIRS
of
ELDER JESSE MERCER.



JESSE MERCER, D.D.
1769-1841

MEMOIRS
of
ELDER JESSE MERCER.

BY CHARLES D. MALLARY.

NEW-YORK:
PRINTED BY JOHN GRAY.
1844.



The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc.

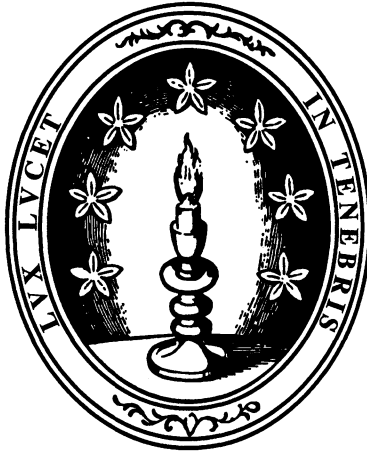
NUMBER ONE IRON OAKS DRIVE • PARIS, ARKANSAS 72855

Thou hast given a *standard* to them that fear thee;
that it may be displayed because of the truth.
-- Psalm 60:4

*Reprinted
by*

THE BAPTIST STANDARD BEARER, INC.

No. 1 Iron Oaks Drive
Paris, Arkansas 72855
(501) 963-3831



THE WALDENSIAN EMBLEM

lux lucet in tenebris

“The Light Shineth in the Darkness”

ISBN #1-57978-024-5

Advertisement

The following work was undertaken in accordance with the request and appointment of the Baptist State Convention, at its annual session at Lagrange, Georgia, in 1842. Its preparation for the press has been retarded by some difficulty and delay in collecting the necessary materials, by other numerous and pressing duties, but more especially by that feeble state of health, which for many years past has imposed upon the writer the necessity of taking much time to accomplish even an inconsiderable task. The volume is not altogether what the Author could have wished, and what perhaps the public have expected, nor what, under different circumstances, the writer could have made it; yet with all its defects, it is hoped that it will be found entertaining to the surviving friends and acquaintances of Mr. Mercer, and not altogether useless to the religious community in general. The work contains some reflections and historical details not absolutely necessary to illustrate the life and character of Mr. Mercer; yet they generally relate to affairs with which he was more or less connected, and may be in some degree interesting and useful to Southern Baptists, and particularly to the Baptists of Georgia. And it is proper here to state, that the Author in preparing the work has had particular reference to its usefulness upon that field where it was natural to suppose it would find its principal patronage and circulation. On this account, it is to be hoped, that the more distant reader will look with forbearance on what might seem to him to be the redundancies and defects of the publication.

Numerous quotations from the writings of Mr. Mercer are interspersed through the volume - more than what many might deem judicious, though fewer than what others no doubt would desire. In the selections, reference has been had, in some cases, to their practical excellence, in others, to their adaptedness to give a clear and impartial view of Mr. Mercer's various religious opinions. After all, these quotations constitute but a very small portion of his writings, and would not therefore supersede the desirableness of publishing his most important productions in a separate volume. The Biographer has in his possession most of these productions, having collected them at considerable pains, and could now very readily arrange them for publication, did he know that the general wish and anxiety of his brethren were such as to justify the undertaking.

The likeness which accompanies this volume is not as accurate as could be desired. There is no complete likeness of Mr. Mercer extant, from which an artist could copy; but still his surviving acquaintances cannot fail to recognize in the one which is here presented, the most striking peculiarities of his interesting features, and to regard it as a valuable appendage to the book. The engraved facsimile of his hand writing, which is inserted in the volume, will no doubt be also highly valued.

In the conclusion of this prefatory notice, the Biographer would tender his most sincere thanks to all the brethren and friends who have generously assisted him in various ways during the prosecution of his labor; and especially would he offer up a tribute of thankfulness to the Great Head of the Church, who has enabled him, through manifold infirmities, to press on to the conclusion of his toil, so that he can now present to the Christian public a volume which, notwithstanding all its deficiencies, may tend somewhat, with the Divine blessing, to perpetuate the usefulness of ONE, whose name will ever hold an honored place upon the catalogue of the WISE, the GREAT, and the GOOD.

Twiggs Co., February 9, 1844.

Foreword

Few books merit wider dissemination than this. In 1848 Joseph Baker, editor of the *Christian Index*, urged that the “Memoirs of Jesse Mercer should be in the hands of every minister.” The urgency is greater today. Mercer modeled Christlike devotion and leadership. He practiced a piety that was characterized by humility and selfless labor. He preached in the simple trust that God blessed the plain exposition and application of the truths of Scripture. He insisted that sound theology was the pillar of godliness and sought to understand the full range of systematic theology. He zealously urged sinners to faith in Christ and organized missionary activity. He led his denomination to promote and organize schools, missionary boards, and religious publishing. He gave generously of his own wealth to the noble causes he promoted. He pastored his churches with a wisdom that combined gentle tenderness with unflinching obedience to New Testament church discipline. He defended Baptist distinctives, yet without the parochial prejudices and petty animosity that often characterize Christian polemics. Few Christians have left such monuments to the grace of God. Few are as remarkably emulated.

Mercer’s influence was remarkably wide. Adiel Sherwood, who was professor and president of Baptist colleges in Georgia, Illinois, Missouri and Washington, D.C., judged that Mercer “wielded an influence in the denomination second to that of no other.” The source of his influence was the great esteem in which Baptists held him for his spirituality. Sherwood summarized it: “sincere and ardent piety, great intellectual strength, large liberality, unbounded zeal and great pulpit power.” He possessed a “kind and courteous demeanor” and “great meekness and humility.” Mercer purchased the *Christian Index* in 1833 and moved it from Philadelphia to Washington, Georgia. As editor, Mercer hoped to extend his usefulness as a minister of the gospel. His clear expositions of Scripture truth and his firm defense of Baptist Ecclesiology gained him many admirers. A number of leaders in the Central Baptist Association honored him in 1835 with an “elegant silver medal; on one side was engraved, ‘Jesse Mercer, the able expounder of gospel discipline;’ on the other, ‘Government is in the Church - the Christian Index, the scourge of ecclesiastical tyranny.’”

Others praised him too. The Baptist church in Mobile, Alabama commissioned and sold engravings of Mercer’s likeness in order to raise money to erect a church building. Individuals turned to him for his advice, especially in matters of church discipline. Georgia Baptists called him, “Father Mercer.” One Primitive Baptist preacher told his congregation that many Baptists were tempted by idols, among them the image of Mercer.

Mercer concerned himself primarily with the salvation of sinners and the godliness of the saints. He proclaimed justification by faith in Christ. He conducted preaching tours and protracted meetings (though he never approved of inviting persons to the “anxious bench” or the the “altar”). He helped establish many new churches. He urged the saints in his congregations to worship Christ and honor him with their conduct. He encouraged worship in the family and in the church and published a hymnal to foster worship in song. He insisted on purity in the churches. As pastor he moderated the monthly church meetings in which he guided the church’s administration of rebukes, excommunications and restorations. He gained a reputation for wisely managing the moral discipline of the churches.

In his sermons he often engaged in extensive discussions of some part of systematic theology. For Mercer and his congregations, the theology was not a burden that preaching must bear, it was rather the power of it. Mercer was satisfied when the doctrines of Christ's person and work sounded forth clearly. He wept when young Basil Manly, long before he became a denominational leader, proclaimed these. Richard Furman, the prominent Charleston, South Carolina preacher, became excited and engrossed when Mercer dwelt upon them.

His theology was Baptist Calvinism: "We have from our youth up, been taught the predestination, free grace plan of doctrine, and the independent plan of church government, as the characteristic doctrine and discipline of the Baptists; and these we now most freely and fully believe and advocate." He was assured that the great itinerant evangelists of the former generations believed the same: "The fathers and founders of the Baptist denomination in Georgia were strictly predestinarian." Mercer called upon Baptists to hold fast to this doctrine, for it was "full of comfort and calculated to promote humility and gratitude."

He identified his Calvinism more with that of John Gill than with that of Andrew Fuller. He announced that he was "rather of the old, than of the new school." He explained that he "inclined to the doctrine of such men as Gill, Owen, Brown, Toplady, Hervey, etc. That the atonement is special, both in its provisions and applications; but the men (and the doctrine) who teach that, the atonement is general in its provisions, but special in its application from the new school. To this representation, though taught by the excellent Fuller, we do not incline."

Mercer saw no conflict between the doctrines of limited atonement and predestination on the one hand, and missionary activity on the other. He encouraged and organized "benevolent societies," as they were called, especially missionary societies. He rejected the notion that Calvinism contradicted these: "By far the majority of those engaged in benevolent efforts are strictly Calvinistic." In 1801 he organized the first of the influential Powelton Conferences, which promoted itinerant preaching and mission activity among the Creek Indians. In 1815 he was elected the president of the Powelton Baptist Society for Foreign Missions. He helped persuade Georgia Baptists to establish a state convention in 1822 - it functioned deliberately as a missionary society. He served as president of the national Baptist Board of Foreign Missions from 1830 to 1841. He also gave leadership and financial support to temperance societies (he published a temperance newspaper for six years), Bible and tract societies, Sunday School societies, Baptist colleges, and theological schools (Mercer University was named in his honor for his organizational and financial support).

Mercer contended that Christians were obligated to establish churches according to the pattern found in the New Testament. This meant that all church power was congregational - each church had full ecclesiastical authority to accomplish all church affairs. There was no higher spiritual authority on earth. It meant also that all members of each local church held ecclesiastical authority jointly. The churches were democracies, not monarchies, aristocracies, or oligarchies. Each church ruled itself as a democracy, without enjoyment of bishops, presbyteries, presiding elders, or popes.

Mercer was nevertheless a strong advocate of the associational organization of Baptist churches. Mercer argued the traditional Baptist view that associations had no church power. They helped the churches by giving wise counsel and promoting unanimity of doctrine and practice. Mercer summarized: "The Baptists are democrats in relation to their church government in the strictest sense of that term. The little communities which

they call churches, are their highest tribunals. Their associations and conventions are only advisory councils. They are designed to promote union by the interchange of views, but nothing comes from these bodies in the form of law. The association may advise the churches, but cannot control them.”

New Testament democracy did not mean individual freedom in the modern sense. Mercer asserted churches had no authority over large areas of moral action and theological belief. Where church membership is concerned, Mercer taught, “equal rights must cease where iniquity begins.” When converts joined Baptist churches they pledged to submit themselves to the church’s control in these areas. Mercer reminded Baptists frequently that they could not afford to slacken their zeal for church purity - they must keep up church discipline. God would bless pure churches with spiritual vigor and revival. Mercer held, “A well executed discipline is the ecclesiastical life of a Gospel Church.”

Mercer’s teaching, piety and service should inspire all Christians who long for deeper love of God, greater knowledge of truth, and warmer zeal to serve both church and community. When Jesse Mercer died, the Sarepta Baptist Association noted the loss of their “esteemed Father in the Gospel.” They remembered his “wise counsels” and his testimony to the “great truths of the gospel.” They hoped his example would continue to be a blessing to God’s people. “May the truths which he has published among us, live in our midst, and may we all profit by his virtuous example, and the recollection of his diffusive benevolence.” May the republication of this volume grant their wish anew.

Gregory A. Wills
Archivist - Boyce Centennial Library
Professor of Church History
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, Kentucky
June 13, 1997

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I.

Introductory remarks—Brief notice of Mr. Mercer's paternal Grandfather—Sketches of the life of Silas Mercer—Early life of Jesse Mercer—His conversion. 9

CHAPTER II.

Mr. Mercer's first public exercises—His marriage—Brief notice of his first wife—His ordination—Personal appearance—Call to Hutton's Fork Church—Attends to his mental improvement—call to another Church and removal to Oglethorpe—His doubts as to his call to the ministry—Distressing temptation—Death of his Father and his return to Wilkes—Succeeds his Father in the charge of his churches. 26

CHAPTER III.

Mr. Mercer's ministerial labors—Sardis Church—Phillips' Mill—Bethesda—Powelton—Gov. Rabun—Extracts from Mr. Mercer's funeral Sermon on the occasion of Gov. R.'s death—Eatonton Church—Thomas Cooper 41

CHAPTER IV.

Number of immediate conversions not a certain test of a minister's usefulness—Mr. Mercer set for the defence of the gospel—His care to establish his churches in the truth—Skilful to aid the tempted—Anecdotes—His caution in receiving members—Able disciplinarian—His manner of presiding at church

meetings—His punctuality—No respecter of persons—His churches benevolent—Defects in the prevailing system of pastoral labor—Mr. Mercer in revivals—His views on Revivals—Ministerial support—Estimation in which he was held. 58

CHAPTER V.

Mr. Mercer's labors on his journeys from home, at Associations, &c.—Circulates useful books—his Cluster—Extracts from his correspondence—His relation to political affairs. 81

CHAPTER VI.

Death of Mrs. Mercer—Mr. Mercer removes to Washington—A church constituted there—His second marriage—Editorial labors—The degree of D. D. conferred on him—Letters to various individuals. 102

CHAPTER VII.

Mr. Mercer's connexion with the Georgia Association—Extracts from his Circular Letters—Connexion with the General Committee—Baptist State Convention. 137

CHAPTER VIII.

Mr. Mercer's efforts in behalf of Education—Mt. Enon—Columbian College—Attempts at co-operation with South Carolina—Mr. Mercer's views on the subject—His aid to Mercer University—Brief History of the Institution—Project of College at Washington—Sermon on Education—Extracts from the same, and from Christian Index 160

CHAPTER IX.

Mr. Mercer's efforts in the Missionary cause—Formation of Powelton Mission Society—Mission Board of the Ga. Association—Mission to the Creeks—His favorite argument for Missions—Letters in defence of benevolent plans from the Index—Letter to Mr.

Shuck—To Mr. Bolles on the abolition excitement—Remarks from the Index on the same subject—His kind feelings towards his northern brethren—Skeleton of a missionary Sermon—Letter on the “Imprisonment of the Missionaries to the Cherokees.” 188

CHAPTER X.

Mr. Mercer and the Temperance Cause—At first stands aloof—His reasons for this in a letter to Mr. Brantly—Mr. B.’s editorial comments—Finally takes the pledge—Establishes a Temperance paper—Opposes the use of wine—His opinion on the traffic in spirits—Remarks from the Index—Sketch of a Temperance Discourse—Short notes on the wine question. 223

CHAPTER XI.

Mr. Mercer’s pecuniary contributions to benevolent objects. 236

CHAPTER XII.

Unhappy divisions in the churches—Mr. Mercer’s opinion as to the causes—His Circular Letter published in the Convention Minutes of 1831—Usefulness at ministers’ meetings—Extracts from his sermon on Ministerial Union—Letters to Mr. B. and Mr. L. 245

CHAPTER XIII.

Mr. Mercer as a writer—Speaking the truth in love—His Ten Letters on the Atonement—Extracts—Sermon on the Excellency of the Knowledge of Christ, and Extracts from the same—Essay on Lord’s Supper—History of Ga. Association—Review of a certain Report—Essay on forgiveness of sins—Extracts from his Editorial pieces. 281

CHAPTER XIV.

Narrative of Mr. Mercer’s Life resumed—Letter to Mrs. R.—Severe indisposition—Address to patrons

of Index—Letter to the Ga. Association—Letter to Mrs. R.—To Heman Lincoln—Death of Mrs. Mercer—Letter to Mr. M.—Letter of Mr. Curtis to Mr. Mercer—Mr. Mercer's reply—"Hear what the Spirit saith to the churches," 3 nos.—His feelings in view of his approaching end. 332

CHAPTER XV.

Mr. Mercer's decline regarded with sorrow—His last Sermon—Sketch of the Sermon—Visits Penfield—Letter to Mr. Sturgis—Visits Indian Springs—Letter to Mr. Sturgis—His death—Mr. Carter's Letter in relation to his death—Resolutions of the Washington Baptist Church—Of the Presbyterian Church—Notice of Mr. Sturgis' Funeral Sermon. 373

CHAPTER XVI.

Mr. Mercer's personal appearance—Various traits of character described—Mr. Mercer in his social relations—Character of his mind and attainments—His character as a preacher—His gift in Prayer—His piety—His faults—His great influence. 395

APPENDIX.

A

Memoranda of occasional remarks made by Mr. Mercer, in his sermons, private conversation, &c. 431

B

Recollections of one of Mr. Mercer's sermons, furnished by Rev. W. H. Stokes. 434

C

Obituary Notice of Mrs. Nancy Mercer. 436

D

Mr. Mercer's Opinions upon various subjects connected with Church Discipline, &c. 441

“Oh, my brethren, what manner of people ought we to be, who as Christian men have succeeded to the heritage of martyrs? who have taken up a cause pleaded by apostolic lips? who have followed upon men of whom the world was not worthy? Our ancestors were made what they were by the grace of God, and the church of God may well glorify God in them. Their sufferings and heroic fortitude, their labors and their dauntless courage have left us under solemn obligations. Shall we be craven sons of heroic sires? Shall we be sluggards and slovenly in a work which they carried out so well? They built with gold, silver, and precious stones, shall we degrade their work by heaping thereon wood, hay, and stubble? I charge you, brethren, take good heed unto your ways by the remembrance of whence you came ... I address myself specially to those who are known as Baptists ... our ancestry as a body of Christian men is not to be despised. Albeit that the name of Anabaptist has been made the football of reproach, because it was wrongfully associated with fanatical opinions, we may rest assured that the more history is understood the more apparent will it be that those who were the most traduced were thus treated because they were before their times; they bore the brunt of battle because they led the van. God forbid that I should induce you to glory in them, and so to wear borrowed laurels. Of all pride I think that to be the most idle which hides its own nakedness beneath the tattered banners of ancestry. I do but dwell for a moment upon our past history to excite you to yet more earnest deeds. Prove ye yourselves to be these men’s sons by doing their deeds, else are ye bastards, and not sons.”

C. H. Spurgeon

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit

(London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1875)

Volume 21 - Pages 595-596.

The Baptist Standard Bearer, Incorporated is a republication society organized in 1984, and is recognized as a nonprofit, tax-exempt charitable organization. It was founded for the primary purpose of republication and preservation of materials reflecting the Baptist heritage.

It is not affiliated with, or financially supported by any association, convention or particular denomination. It is financed by individual donations, foundation grants, bequeathed inheritances, annual society membership dues, but primarily by the sale of its own publications.

ISBN 1-57978-024-5



9 781579 780241