



ADDRESS AT UNVEILING OF MONUMENT.

BY E. W. STEPHENS.



We commemorate to-day a pivotal event in the history of mankind. This is the centennial not only of the organization of the first non-Catholic church west of the Mississippi river, but also of the death of ecclesiastical intolerance and of the permanent establishment of religious freedom in our country. For up to a brief period before Bethel church was organized, Protestant Christianity was forbidden in the Louisiana Territory and was not permitted until after the purchase of the territory by the United States in 1803-4, during the administration of Thomas Jefferson. Thenceforward for the first time there was to be no part of our beloved land in which men could be hindered from worshiping God as their consciences directed them.

This spot should therefore be forever sacred, not to Baptists only, but to all liberty-loving Americans, because here stood the church which led the vanguard in the final triumph of religious liberty in America, the battle for which had been begun by Baptists over a century and a half before, and waged with ceaseless vigor during all that period.

It had been just one hundred and sixty years since Roger Williams and John Clark had raised the standard of revolt against ecclesiastical tyranny, against the domination of the established church in New England, and the revolution then inaugurated had not stopped until it brought both civil and religious independence and freedom to our country.

Let it never be forgotten that it was Baptists who lighted the fires of religious liberty in America, and who, not in New England only, but in Virginia and Maryland and in the Carolinas and all the colonies for over a century of bitter persecution but unflagging heroism, kept up the fight until they stirred the consciences and patriotism of the people to the point of armed revolution. Let it not be forgotten that it was Baptists who led the way to American independence and the organization of the Republic.

Animated by the spirit first infused into it by Baptists, it has ever been the glory of our government that wherever it has had sway, even in its earliest history, when our people had just emerged from centuries of ecclesiastical domination, it has never proscribed any man or class of men for worshiping God as their consciences directed. It was Baptists who had that safeguard of religious liberty inserted as an amendment to our Constitution.

For twenty years after the close of the war of the Revolution the vast region west of the Mississippi lay under the ban of religious persecution and tyranny. But when the Louisiana Territory was purchased from France there came to this region an even greater blessing than political

freedom, and to this country an asset more valuable than the acquisition of magnificent resources, and that was the guarantee by the American Republic of religious liberty to its people—the right to worship God as they saw fit, without dictation from any source. And to this guarantee more than even to her splendid physical possibilities or commercial energy or educational progress has been due the marvelous prosperity and progress of the century.

Baptists were the pioneers of religious liberty west of the Mississippi as they had been east of it one hundred and sixty years before. As they had given this precious boon to the America of the East they were destined under the guidance and the blessing of God to give it to the America of the West.

The fact that they were enabled to do so by protection of the Government they had initiated and into which they had infused their principles and which they had done so much to establish, was a fitting reward to them for what they had sacrificed so much to accomplish.

If, as has been justly said, it was the raising of an American flag west of the Mississippi river that made a Baptist church possible in what is now Missouri, let it also not be forgotten that it was the raising first of the Baptist standard of soul liberty that made it possible for an American flag to be raised at all. If Baptists owe their origin in Missouri to the American Government it is in reciprocity for the larger fact that the American Government owes its origin to Baptists.

The Baptists were the pioneers of Christian education and Christian missions in Missouri and in the world.

The Baptist spirit is the pioneer spirit. It began with John the Baptist and has run through all the centuries. A vast majority of those hardy pioneers from Virginia and Tennessee and the Carolinas, who pressed forward to occupy this magnificent domain, were Baptists. Side by side in their simple log cabins were the rifle and the Bible and they were as familiar and as handy with one as with the other, and one was probably as often a weapon of warfare as was the other; for these pioneer Baptists were every ready to battle for the truth. They had family altars in their homes. They read the Bible at their firesides, studied it deeply, and were fond of discussing its truths, for they found in its sacred and precious promises solace and comfort in their loneliness. Their religion was their meat and drink. It was with them as they lay down at night and as they rose with the sun, and it echoed from the woodman's axe as it resounded through the solitude of the forests. It is no wonder that such devout people speedily organized churches and erected meeting-houses in which to worship God. The picture of David Green and his small band of devoted followers gathering in the humble Baptist meeting-house on this spot nearly a hundred years ago was one that was to be repeated soon afterward in scores and hundreds of places in this great valley. From these humble beginnings, from these plain frontiersmen, who braved the perils and hardships of the wilderness, and, full of conscience, courage and consecration, took up the great work that confronted them, was to be wrought the mighty fabric of civilization in this great valley.

How brave and true and patriotic and devoted they were! The story of their sacrifices and sufferings reads like romance. The Bible was their handbook. They read it thoroughly and understood not its moral lessons only, but its doctrines, its philosophy and believed it implicitly and exemplified its teachings in their lives. There was no question about the orthodoxy of the primitive Baptists. They were sound to the core. They were deeply and aggressively religious. Side by side with the pioneer stood his devoted wife, vigorous, patient, self-sacrificing and ready to share with her husband the terrible privations and perils of the wilderness. The world has no higher type of Christian manhood and womanhood than the pioneer Baptist man and woman. Is it any wonder that from such a race was to spring a great and prosperous commonwealth? As we enjoy today the splendid prosperity, the manifold conveniences and facilities of commerce and social life with which we are so greatly blessed, let us not forget the glorious men and women who a century ago blazed the pathway of progress in this western wilderness, and amid untold sacrifice made all we now have possible.

Standing upon this spot, with its pioneer memories thronging about us, we catch the inspiration

of those pioneer days and again inhale their hallowed atmosphere.

The present domain of Missouri had an estimated population of less than 6,000 when David Green and his fourteen associates organized Bethel church. But within a few years the immigration to the Territory flowed in a steady tide and the population grew amazingly. Today Missouri has 4,000,000 of people and 200,000 Baptists. Our denomination has grown in a more rapid ratio than the population. What will be the condition a century hence no imagination can fancy.

There was a wisdom and a fitness in the planting of the Baptist standard in this vast western region upon this spot. And we who have inherited this splendid legacy from our fathers have reason for gratitude and congratulation that they first unfurled their banner here, for surely in all this favored land there is no part of it with greater possibilities than our own beloved Missouri. In magnitude and variety of resources, in its soil, its climate, its minerals, its waterways, its location, it embodies a combination of attractions that has not a superior, if an equal among all the states of our Union. Bethel, not Boston, was located at the hub, for it was not far from the geographical center of our country.

Missouri is the very axis of our nation. Through its borders as through the Promised Land of old must ever stream the populations of all America, and as the land of the Bible was influential and strategic to wield its influence for all time because it was the pathway of the civilizations of Greece and Assyria and Egypt, so Missouri must be the most cosmopolitan of states, the vital center of influence and power, because all sections of America must converge to it and diverge from it and must find a common home upon its soil.

Although since its organization it has grown from the twenty-fifth to the fifth state of the Union, and although it has attained a population and a wealth that is the wonder of the age, it has scarcely yet entered upon its real career of development. In the century to come it is destined to the attainment of a growth beyond that of which the present is even a prophecy.

Our forefathers chose wisely and well, and in the achievements of the past century in Missouri, Baptists bore no inconspicuous part. They are proud of the fact that they were the first to plant the standard of religious liberty in the West upon its soil; and prouder still that in the great work of its development they have had an honorable and honored share. This state could not be what it is but for the blessings of Almighty God upon the work which Baptists have here wrought.

We have reason for encouragement in pressing forward in the great work of missions, of education and evangelization, for no spot upon the planet has a brighter promise, and from none is it possible for the electric cords of influence to reach more readily all sections of the world. Again let us thank God that our fathers chose this favored spot and that we are their heirs and their successors. Let us go forward to fields white for the harvest.

Holding as we do to the truth, so simple and yet so broad that no one, Pagan, Infidel or Christian, questions its orthodoxy there is no reason why we should not take Missouri for Jesus Christ. We need but the faith and courage of Caleb and Joshua to possess the land.

The year 1806, in which Bethel church was organized, was full of historic interest. A number of events had taken place which were to exert an important influence upon the destinies of our country and of mankind. Lewis and Clark were returning from their remarkable expedition to the Pacific Coast and there was thus being opened a wider vision to our whole country and to the world. The United States Congress and the Parliament of England about that time enacted laws forbidding the slave trade. It was a day of freedom, of missions, of onward movement for the development, the disenthralment and the evangelization of the human race.

William Carey had been in India about thirteen years and was arousing a strong sentiment for missions in all parts of Christendom. Foreign missionary societies were organized between 1800 and 1806 in most of the states, and within a few years Luther Rice and Adoniram Judson were to start as missionaries to foreign lands and to be converted to the Baptist faith while on their voyage.

In fact, the beginnings of Baptists in Missouri were synchronous with the birth of missions in America.

And now, gathered as representatives of the 160,000 white Baptists of Missouri upon this historic spot, let us thank Almighty God for these pioneers of the faith, for their fidelity and heroism and for the legacy of devotion to truth they have left us. Let us thank Him for the gracious mercies and blessings of this century, for the souls that have been saved, for the gift of Jesus Christ, and for the splendid Christian civilization that has grown out of the seed sown a century ago.

To-day we erect this monument as an expression of our honor and reverence for those who have transmitted to us such a goodly heritage; and as we unveil it we utter the prayer that it may tell to future generations not only the story of loyalty and faith of those in whose honor it is reared but of the gratitude of their descendants and followers; and may this lesson and this history, may the triumphs of the Gospel in Missouri and in the world, may the blessings of Christianity, may our Heavenly Father's goodness to us and to our fathers, may the impregnable rock of Holy Scripture, may the hope of heaven and of meeting our fathers and Jesus Christ who redeemed them and us—may all these things inspire us to go forward with renewed energy to our work and not be content until, not only our beloved Missouri, but all America and all the world may bow down in reverence and honor to Him who is the Captain of our Salvation and to whom we will ascribe honor, glory and dominion and majesty and power now and evermore.

As Jacob, from a stone at Bethel, beheld a vision of angels ascending and descending a ladder which reached to heaven, so may we from this Bethel stone, pillowing our heads upon God's promises, behold a vision of development, progress and glory greater than ever found place in the dreams of Jacob, and in this vision may we look beyond the things of time and sense, and through the open heaven see the risen Christ at the right hand of the Father and the spirits and angels of our fathers, ascending and descending before us, cheering us onward as we go hence to meet the unsolved problems of the coming century.