



The Old Bethel site as it exists today.

Old Bethel: Pioneering Church Planting

By Joanna Perkins, Archivist

BETHEL CHURCH, established in 1806, was the first non-Catholic church west of the Mississippi River. The church was founded by 15 charter members, and stated in their constitution: “We the members of the Baptist Church having been a long time destitute of having the privilege of being in any Church order, do feel it our duty to embody ourselves together in the fear of God as a church, hoping that God will bless us in so good an undertaking with the teaching of his holy spirit and enable us through grace to live to the declarative glory of Him, and

the praise of his Gospel.”

And they were indeed blessed in their good undertaking. They built a small log structure on the farm of Thomas Bull to hold meetings, but soon outgrew the building. In September of 1812, they resolved to build a larger meeting house, 30 feet by 24 feet, able to seat 100-150 people. It was from this meeting house that the reach of Bethel Church extended to other churches. During the first 18 years Bethel Church existed, the congregation stretched to establish “arms” at nine other churches: Boise Brule (1807); St. Michael (Fredericktown, 1812); Saline (1813); St. Francois

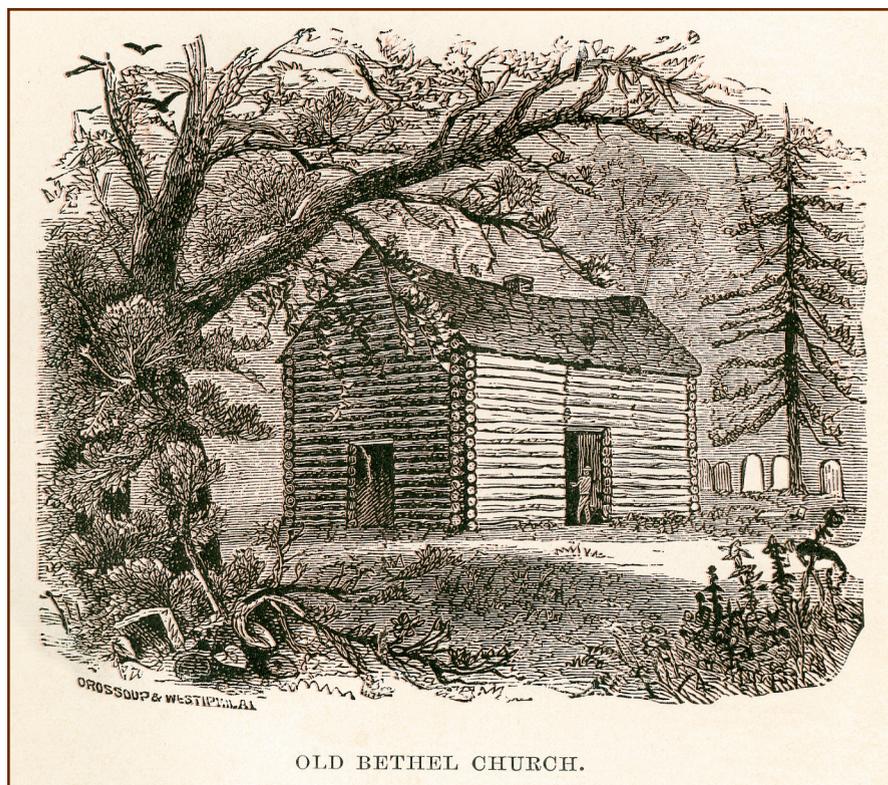
(1813); Turtle Creek, also called Turkey Creek (1813); Apple Creek (1820); Big Bend (1821); Hebron (1822); and Jackson (1824). Of those churches, Jackson still exists as First Baptist Church of Jackson. At the peak of membership (1813), Bethel Church had 143 members, with 43 other members at the three “daughter churches” they had established at that time.

Bethel Church had always led in outreach in the area, and realized early that they not only needed to help with new churches, but needed to support foreign missions. They voted in 1818 to correspond with the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions, and took a missionary collection that year of \$31.37. They also met on the first Monday of each month for the purpose of prayer for missions.

Associational Activities

Bethel Church was also involved in associational activities, belonging to the Red River Association of Kentucky in 1809, and helping to form the Bethel Baptist Association, which met at the Bethel meeting house to constitute in September 1816. These associational ties linked Bethel with other churches that were similarly pro-missionary. In 1824, a new association was formed out of Bethel Association, and was called the Cape Girardeau Association. Since Bethel Association had refused to connect themselves with any missionary organization, the ten churches that formed the Cape Girardeau Association felt it necessary to establish the new association.

During the years from 1806 until 1832, Bethel Church and the Cape Girardeau Association thrived. Beginning around that time, the association began to split into the



OLD BETHEL CHURCH.

An illustration of Old Bethel Church shows two entrances and grave-stones located behind the church. Notice how the roof is already sagging in this lithograph drawn in the late 1800’s.



pro- and anti-mission factions, and by 1840, the eight pro-missions churches withdrew and founded another association, leaving Bethel Church behind with their anti-missions sentiments. The church withdrew fellowship from several members during that time for supporting missions activities.

The Church in Decline

The church continued insulating themselves from any but those who agreed with their stance. Church records reflect this complacency during the 1840s, when most monthly entries read, "Church met in conference, no business, all at peace." The records of the 1850s are a bit more expansive, but still reflect the same inactivity: "Church met in conference and after prayer the church was organized and proceeded to business. No reference and the church found in peace. Visiting brothers and sisters were invited to seats with us. A door was opened

for members." Meetings became less frequent during the early part of the Civil War, and ceased completely from August 1862 until October 1865 "because of the rebellion in the United States." In 1867, the records of the church stopped completely, with no explanation as to why. However, Reverend T. H. Jenkins had some thoughts on that at his address in 1906 marking the centennial of Baptist work in Missouri. In his speech, as he stands on the site of Bethel Church, he makes a significant observation: "Our fathers built well, but they made two mistakes: the first was in neglecting to found a denominational school for southeast Baptists. This was detrimental and contributed largely to the second mistake which was fatal, namely, opposition to missions. Had Bethel church proposed, at the organization of Bethel Association in 1816, the establishment of a Baptist school for Southeast Missouri; and had she led vigorously in the

movement, no doubt there would have been little, if any, fight over missions; and we would be fifty years in advance of where we are today."

Honoring the Past

Bethel Church began its life looking to Christ, growing and thriving in a way that showed its health to all that were reached by the congregation. The Missouri Baptist Historical Commission, in honor of the expansionist spirit of the early Bethel Church, has established the Bethel Heritage Church Planting Award. This award will recognize churches with the same heart as Bethel for sowing congregations and spreading God's Kingdom. In July, the Historical Commission voted to award the first Bethel Heritage Church Planting Award to **First Baptist Church of Oak Grove**. This award will be presented at the Missouri Baptist Convention annual meeting in Springfield on October 24-26.

Old Bethel Restoration Project

In the 200 years since Bethel Church organized, the church building has been dismantled. In an effort to remind us of our past and point the way into the future, the Missouri Baptist Historical Commission has begun a year-long fundraising campaign to rebuild the church on the original site with the original logs.

If you would like to participate in this historic project, gifts can be sent to the Missouri Baptist Historical Commission, 400 E High St, Jefferson City MO 65101, designated to the Old Bethel Restoration Project. To volunteer time and/or labor, contact Melvin Gateley at 573-334-1303.



A model of the original church.



A metal awning will cover the restored church building.

"...that this may be a sign among you when your children ask in time to come, saying, 'What do these stones mean to you?'

⁷'Then you shall answer them...'

Joshua 4:6-7 (NKJV)

For more information about Old Bethel or MBHC services, contact Joanna Perkins, Archivist at 800-736-6227, extension 205 or visit www.baptistparchments.org.



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