

# LUTHER RICE, FOUNDER OF THE BAPTIST TRIENNIAL CONVENTION AND OF COLUMBIAN COLLEGE.

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Luther Rice came of one of the leading families of Northboro, near Worcester, Mass., where he was born March 25, 1793. He was converted in the revival that visited New England in the year 1805, and he joined the Congregationalist church. At that time the chill of Universalism and Unitarianism had settled on the Congregationalist churches, and no sympathy but determined opposition was shown to the efforts of the ardent young disciple to extend the revival. Every door, even that of an old deacon, was closed to him. Finally his brother Asaph opened his house, and a Baptist in a neighboring village bade him godspeed. His mind was turned to the ministry by the encouragement of a Calvinistic preacher of another town, and he entered Leicester Academy where he supported himself by giving singing lessons and teaching school. He entered the sophomore class at Williams College in the fall of 1807. There the revival had come through almost violent opposition and an incident of the revival was the famous haystack prayer meeting where American Foreign Missions were born in 1806. The broad stream of missions in America can be traced back to the Berkshire Hills and the haystack on the outskirts of Williamstown. There the Holy Spirit spoke as of old at Antioch, "Separate me Mills and Hall and Richards for the work whereunto I have called them". Williams-town was the modern Antioch. In the hearts of these young men was formed the plan of going into all the world. Rice became one of the five charter members of a secret society called by themselves "The Brethren", which met away from the college to avoid interruption, to fast and pray for a mission or missions to the heathen.

To this work each member pledged himself for life. During his course at Williams, Rice had a friendly correspondence with a good-natured but poorly educated Baptist, but he finally dismissed the matter as one of the non-essentials.

Rice went to the new theological seminary at Andover with Richards and with Hall, who had taken the highest collegiate honors, where he met Judson, high man from Brown, Nott from Union College, and Newell from Harvard, all consumed with zeal for Foreign Missions. At the meeting of the Conference at Bradford, Mass., a few miles north of Andover, an appeal from these young men to be sent forth as missionaries, written by Judson and signed by four of them, was read. The names of Rice and Richards were left off for fear that if too many candidates appeared, the Conference might be appalled. However, after the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions had been formed and the churches had responded liberally to the appeal, Rice was ordained at Salem with Judson, Nott, Newell, and Hall, and they were commissioned to establish themselves if possible, in the "Birman" Empire. Before sailing, Judson suggested to Dr. Bolles that the Baptists ought to imitate their English brethren and start a Foreign Missionary Society. Just at that time there was war between England and France so that English Baptist missionaries sailed to India by way of Philadelphia. Rice overcame two serious obstacles before he sailed with two of these English missionaries. He was required to raise money to fit himself out and to pay for his passage. "A handsome part of this fund" was given by Baptist friends. A more serious difficulty faced him in the refusal of the young lady whom he was engaged to marry to risk her life in so hazardous an enterprise. Discussion with the English missionaries on board the vessel repelled him and rather strengthened him in his old views.

When Rice arrived in Calcutta he lived with the Judsons, who had decided that nothing can be found in the

New Testament that favors infant baptism. Judson says that "Rice manifested uncommon obstinacy in defending the old system. He would give me a fierce battle, but I held off and recommended him to betake himself to the Bible and to prayer. He did so. His mind remained undecided through the month of September." William Carey found him "the most obstinate friend of infant baptism of any of the missionaries", but at length, he says, "Rice came one morning before I was up and asked permission to examine my Greek Testament". The Judsons had been immersed September 3, 1812, and on September 17 Judson preached his great sermon on Baptism, with Rice in the audience. Then Rice confessed: "I have some feelings and difficulty upon this subject which I find some reluctance to disclose to my brethren. May the Lord Himself lead me in His own right way." On October 12 he wrote to his brother Asaph: "What may be the result of these inquiries, I am not able at present to say. It is possible that a revolution in my own mind similar to that which my dear brother and sister Judson have experienced may take place. I am endeavoring to investigate thoroughly the subject of the sacred ordinance of Baptism. My affection for Judson and his wife can by no means determine me to become a Baptist without the conviction that Baptists are right. I cannot be deterred from considering the question by any unpleasant fears. Truth can be no loser by the most rigid examination." Hall and Nott wrote that they were "surprised and distressed because Rice has been led to change his sentiments on Baptism. What the Lord means we cannot tell."

On November 1, Luther Rice was immersed by the English Baptist Missionary Ward. Judson and Rice wrote at once to the American Board and announced with Christian courtesy the change in their attitude. They also wrote to Dr. Baldwin and Dr. Bolles in Massachusetts asking if the Baptists would adopt them as their missionaries. This action occasioned regret not to say

alarm among those who had so recently and so joyfully sent them forth on the vast enterprise. That was natural and unavoidable, but it was not till the time of Judson's great success in Burmah that the dark cloud of suspicion and reproach passed away.

It was soon decided that Rice should return to America to rally the Baptist churches to support and extend foreign missionary work. From Behia he wrote June 5, 1813: "The Lord has manifested peculiar mercy in leading us to adopt more apostolic views than we had formerly entertained in relation to the ordinances of His House. May He incline our brethren to extend to us that patronage which may enable us to prosecute those missionary purposes to which we have, I trust, sincerely and sacredly devoted our lives." Upon his return to Boston he told of the pain he had felt in separating from his former missionary friends, but he expressed the hope that "their remaining errors, particularly that concerning baptism, will at no very distant day be removed. He had feared that the Lord would not bless his labors if he had refused obedience to what was to his mind so perfectly clear in the Bible." He wrote to his family, "Let the consequences be what they may, I hope that nothing shall deprive me of the consolation resulting from a conscience void of offence. I thought the Baptists a denomination in no small degree reprehensible for party feeling and sectarian conduct. It has been no small trial to me but I have had the distinct favor of Divine Providence."

When Rice arrived in Boston in September, 1813, he found the Baptist churches ready to welcome him. As early as 1802 the Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Society had been organized to "promote the knowledge of evangelical truth in new settlements within these United States or farther if circumstances should render it possible". They had already agreed to support the Judsons, but at Rice's suggestion they sent forth a call for a general convention of Baptists to promote the work. They

commissioned Rice to arouse the denomination. He traversed the Atlantic coast states. He visited state conventions and associations and started missionary societies, all to forward the missionary enterprise. It was a sermon of his that led Kincaid to devote his life to work among the heathen.

He was over six feet tall, graceful as well as vigorous, unequalled in industry and zeal, with a voice adapted to any assembly, a master of extemporaneous speech, with a dash of the dramatic. Wherever he went he was received first with respect and then with affection. It was a triumphal progress. He wrote in 1814: "The success of my effort in this business has surpassed even the fond anticipations of my own eager wishes." He wrote to Judson: "I hope to rally American Baptists in five or six months and then return to Burmah. I will return unless my stay here will more advantage the mission than my departure for the field again. I am greatly pained to find myself at so great a distance from the dearest friends I have on earth." Judson wrote: "Our chief anxiety is that brother Rice may not be able to join us again." The same year there was constituted at Philadelphia "the General Convention for Foreign Missions and other important objects relating to the Redeemer's Kingdom". The next year the Board put on record its conviction that "they could scarcely conceive the possibility of Luther Rice's having occupied a sphere of greater usefulness. His labors have been crowned with happiest success. The glorious Redeemer will compensate every privation incurred for the sake of His name." The year following he reports "a very happy display of liberality in Virginia". He had ridden four hundred miles in six days to reach Shiloh Association. There was much toil and difficulty owing to rain and rivers, creeks, mountains and mud to reach the North District Association in Montgomery County, Kentucky. In Pulaski County, Georgia, there were within two miles of each other the wilderness of the

savage and the home of the civilized. He had visited fifteen associations in fifteen weeks and traveled 3,300 miles.

The Board expressed "its high sense of the zealous, disinterested and faithful services of their beloved brother and agent and asked him to continue his itinerating services in the United States to excite the public mind to engage in missionary exertions and to assist in originating societies or institutions for carrying the missionary design into execution". In 1817 he tells "of the multiplication of societies, especially of female societies". He is "devoutly thankful for the signal kindness and mercy of the Lord. Across mountains and valleys, in populated and in dreary portions of the country, in weariness and in pain, in loneliness and in fasting, he had never lost a moment through sickness. No peril had closed upon him, fear had not preyed on his spirits nor disquietude disturbed his peace". Thus he labored on at a salary of eight dollars a week and expenses. No wonder the Board voted again that year that "Brother Rice do not go to Burmah, but remain in the United States". The next year they record that Brother Rice has "continued persevering in those active exertions for the advancement of the missionary cause which so essentially contribute to its rise". In 1818 Judson wrote to his friend "how much we have needed your congeniality of mind, the support of your tried attachment". The next year Mrs. Judson added her entreaty to Rice to "come to the help of her husband. We are still alone. You are the person we need just at this stage of the mission."

In 1819 Rice said that he found "no reason to calculate on any other than a life of toil and exertion to the end of his life. It is I hope a happiness to me rather than a burden to labor in so glorious a cause. While wearing away the best part of my earthly existence in the business it has not been in my power to carry forward these systematic arrangements with greater rapidity and with more vigor and success." In 1822 Judson wrote: "Your labors

will be ultimately appreciated and the page of history will do you ample justice." The following year he expressed the hope that "Mrs. Judson will return accompanied by one or two good missionaries. I cannot help indulging a faint hope that you will come yourself."

Before turning to the part taken by Luther Rice in the establishment of Columbian College, it may be well to gather some of the tributes of praise passed upon his labors for Foreign Missions. The editor of "The Religious Herald" declared "that there were few churches below the Blue Ridge in Virginia that he had not visited. Foreign Missions owe more to him than to any other person in the country. He spoke with a power, energy and pathos rarely surpassed. His loss is the greatest our denomination could sustain." W. F. Broadus called him "the Apostle of American Missions". Jesse Mercer felt sure that "posterity would do him justice". Jonathan Going spoke of "his enterprise in awakening the denomination". Baron Stow told of "the fresh impetus he gave to the missionary movement". William Gammell, in his history of Baptist Missions, tells how "multitudes hung on his lips and followed his footsteps with an enthusiasm that has seldom been known since the days of Whitefield. His name deserves to be enrolled among the ablest and most devoted of the founders of American missions for he accomplished a work which no one of his contemporaries could possibly achieve." Mark Hopkins referred to him as "a graduate of Williams College going from one end of the land to the other, waking up the missionary spirit in Baptist churches and sustaining those missions which have since been so successful." Professor Knowles (*Christian Review*, vol. 2, p. 116) says that "to Luther Rice we must ascribe the principal honor of devising and carrying into successful execution the plan of the Convention as actually organized in Philadelphia in May, 1814. He was raised up at an important period for a most important purpose."

As soon as the missionary movement was under way the need of trained missionaries was felt, but at that time there was no school to train them. Andover made it unpleasant for Baptist students to attend there. Article 4 of the First Constitution of the Convention provided for "the employment of missionaries and if necessary to take measures for the improvement of their qualifications". An address to the denomination was prepared by Drs. Furman, Baldwin, and Staughton. They said that "education while not indispensable is desirable for some who may obtain all the advantages which mature studies can afford". They suggested the founding of a theological seminary. In 1817 the constitution of the Convention was amended so as to embrace the interests of education. At this meeting in Philadelphia a plan for a theological school was presented. The next year on the promulgation of the plan gold rings and gold necklaces, offered for the cause, showed the enthusiasm which had been awakened. Mr. Rice now combined appeals for education with his appeal for Foreign Missions. The Board of the Convention expressed its "high satisfaction with his labors. They deserve the thanks of the Board, they said, and of the friends of the Kingdom of God".

In 1819 a literary association was formed by Luther Rice, Obadiah Brown, Spencer H. Cone and others, which bought in 1820 47½ acres of land in the outskirts of Washington for \$7,000, with the object of founding an institution to "promote the education of ministers and ultimately to establish a college". The year following the Board again voiced their thanks to their agent for "his unwearied services to promote the cause of missions and education".

By the charter of Columbian College, which was granted in 1821 and unanimously accepted by the Board of the Convention, the trustees were allowed to create a faculty in law, divinity, and medicine, as well as in the ordinary branches of collegiate study. This university

plan was gradually carried out. The oldest law school in this country was established at Harvard in the year 1817. The law department at Columbian was opened in 1823. The medical school followed in 1825. The charter, like that of Brown University, was extremely liberal. Clause 7 provided that "no professor or pupil shall be refused on account of his sentiments in matters of religion". However, the deed provided that two-thirds of the trustees should be nominees of the Convention and "if it shall so happen within a thousand years that more than one-third of the trustees shall be other than those nominated by the Convention, the whole property shall pass over to the Convention in fee simple". By 1822 the college was in operation with as high standards of entrance examinations as usual in those days with sixty students enrolled.

Judson was interested in this move of his friend and wrote, "You are evidently absorbed in the college, a great and worthy object. There is no truer maxim than that a man never does anything to purpose unless his whole soul is in it." At the first commencement in the year 1824, President Monroe and Lafayette were the guests of honor. A university at the nation's capital appealed to the government and contributions of \$100 each were made by James Monroe, John Quincy Adams, and J. C. Calhoun. Among other benefactors at the same time there were 32 members of Congress. Jesse Mercer raised in Georgia \$20,000 for the new enterprise. But Rice overestimated the intelligence and benevolence of his denomination and added building to building in Washington, confident that he could tap the resources of the Baptist churches and pay the contractors. His very success in arousing an interest in education had limited his appeal, for local institutions had begun to appear, theological schools at Hamilton, N. Y., and at Newton, Mass., and academies everywhere. When the debt of the college had risen to \$135,000 in 1826, the Convention which, from the first, had refused to be responsible for the debts of the

college, though nominating the trustees and encouraging their agent in his labors for the institution, changed its charter again, confining its attention to Foreign Missions only. No fault could be found with the financial accounts of their agent, but he was blamed for incurring so great a debt without the ability to raise the money to meet it. He was removed from his office as agent in 1826, but he continued, unofficially, his travels for his beloved Columbian until his death in 1836. In the days of its deepest adversity the college was sustained by his unwearying and persevering assiduity. No discouragement could dampen his zeal, no opposition could allay his ardor for its prosperity. He would sometimes preach seven times in a day. He devoted the first and third Mondays in the month to fasting, humiliation, and prayer, and the second and fourth to thanksgiving and praise.

In 1832 he had a slight paralytic shock. A friend asked him, "Are you ready to die?" He replied, "Yes, but I would like to bring up the college first." He gave up his patrimony of \$2,000 to the college. The last words he uttered, when on a soliciting tour for the institution, were "Send my sulky and horse and baggage to Brother Brooks with directions to send them to Brother Sherwood and say that they all belong to the college."

Elon Galusha and Dr. Semple undertook to save the institution and after it had been closed in 1827, it was reopened in 1828. John Withers of Virginia gave \$70,000 for its support. In 1860 the attendance had reached its highest point. In 1891 there were 755 pupils in all departments. The value of Columbian, now George Washington University, and the consequent honor of Luther Rice as chief among its founders, can be determined by the number and quality of its alumni. By 1891 there had been 1345 graduates from the law school. Among the well-known Baptist graduates of the college, were James D. Knowles, Robert W. Cushman, Baron Stow, N. M. Williams, and R. H. Neale of Massachusetts, Robert Ryland,

President of Richmond College, Wm. Carey Crane of Texas, Henry Holcomb Tucker of Georgia, and Charles L. Cox of Virginia. Other distinguished graduates were C. P. Cranch, the artist, F. P. Stanton, Governor of Kansas, and Robert Ould, the Assistant Secretary of War of the Confederacy.

Luther Rice was a wise preacher. While the sermons at the associations discussed predestination, he told the brethren that predestination was milk for babes, missions was meat for men. When one side charged the other with being Arminian and was itself accused of being antinomian, Rice became a mediator. "Drop those words", he said. "Instead of getting apart as far as you can, you should come as near together as possible." In revival meetings he said: "Don't distress a really humble soul and don't encourage any unconverted person. To an unregenerated soul that continues in such a state nothing but terror can be presented." It was the settled habit of his life to forgive, a habit he would not part with for all the world. The charges brought against him on account of his administration of Columbian College gave him little uneasiness, he said, "for the Lord is a God of knowledge and by Him actions are weighed". The editor of the "Christian Review" (September, 1841) declared him "a great and good man". His biographer attributed to him "more than to any other man, the change that has been effected in the Baptist denomination in regard to the education of ministers". Dr. Stephen Chapin, President of Columbian College, said, "Luther Rice had powers to enable him to shine in any orbit in which great men choose to move". Dr. Going, President of Granville College, thought that "no individual in the United States has endured so much, traveled so extensively, and preached so much as Luther Rice".