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Elijah Baker 1742 - 1798

By Homer Massey

John Leland said of Elijah Baker, "he was a man of humble parentage, small learning, and confined abilities. But with one talent he did more than many do with five."¹ What he did was to establish himself as a pioneer in the effort to establish Baptist churches in eastern Virginia, and in the process point many souls to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Most likely born in Orange County, his father died soon thereafter and the family moved to what became Lunenburg County. His mother re-married, and had another son named Thomas Wood who, along with Elijah's brother Leonard, made three Baptist preachers for their mother Margaret Baker. Leonard Baker and Thomas Wood both served Musterfield Baptist Church in Halifax County, and also established themselves as responsible and faithful pastors and leaders in the Baptist movement.²

Elijah Baker made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ at age 27, and was baptized by Samuel Harris in 1759. He began speaking in public as an exhorter in his home area, and after three years he decided to devote his whole life to preaching and serving as a minister of the gospel.

¹ James B. Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1859), 114.

² Robert B. Semple. *History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, Revised and extended by George W. Beale. (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1894). 251.

He planted churches in Henrico County, James City, Charles City and York. After he traveled to Gloucester he established a working relationship with Thomas Elliot with a purpose to establish churches on the eastern shore of Virginia.

On the first Sunday after they reached the new locale they were to attend a service but the minister failed to arrive. Mr. Baker told those who had gathered that if they would travel down the road he would preach for them. Standing on the end of a large tree he used as a pulpit, he preached with considerable results. He and Elliot stayed in the area and visited the people in the community for several days, establishing a ministry. It is said that he was the first Baptist preacher to set foot on the eastern shore.

Continuing his new efforts on the eastern shore, he was joined by his brother Leonard who was just getting started in the ministry. On a certain Sunday the parish minister had announced that he would preach against the Baptist doctrines with a goal of proving them in error. The minister apparently did not succeed in his campaign, and many of the people looked to Elijah Baker to lead them.

Baker became a resident of the area, and married Sarah Copeland. They had one son, and she later died. He continued his ministry and along the way made some enemies who were successful in having him arrested and put in the

Accomac County jail. This was surprising since by this time (1778) the oppression of Baptist preachers had largely ceased.

Elijah Baker was imprisoned from May to August of 1778 when the case was dismissed. Instead of gaining his release, however, he was taken and put on board a ship with orders that he be shipped off to any place but America.

Because the seas were so rough, those on the ship decided that it was because of Baker's presence (much like Jonah in the Old Testament), and transferred him to another boat, then a third before he was eventually released into the custody of a friend. Some say that Baker was "shanghaied" for the Lord.

Now in his fifties, Elijah Baker became ill. Fearing he may not live much longer, he wrote to his brother Leonard:

Dear Brother, some of my complaints are such that I do not expect to continue long in this world. However, I leave that to my dear Redeemer, who has all the power of life and death in his own hands. In all probability I shall never be able to go out as far as your house again; yet I should be very glad to see you if you could make it convenient to come over once more while I live. I will pay all your expenses. If our dear mother is yet alive, I can send out some relief to her. As to religion, thanks be to God there is some little stir among us! I have baptized eight lately.³

Elijah Baker died shortly after his brother Leonard arrived, on November 6, 1798, at age 56. Taylor states that Baker "constituted the first ten Baptist churches" on the Eastern Shore of Virginia and Maryland.⁴

³ Taylor, 115.

⁴ Ibid., 114.