

LITTLE KNOWN CHAPTERS  
*in*  
FREE WILL BAPTIST  
HISTORY



*Robert E. Picirilli*

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randall house  
114 Bush Rd | Nashville, TN 37217  
randallhouse.com

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Published by Randall House Publications  
114 Bush Road  
Nashville, TN 37217

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 13: 978089265

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# Preface



My purpose for this volume is twofold. First, as a historian of our movement, I like to research and tell the stories that are little known or not known at all. There are many of those in Free Will Baptist history. Second, I have attempted to clear up some matters that are not correctly understood and so to make sure we see ourselves more accurately. There are some misconceptions, out there, about who we are and what has made us that.

My interest in Free Will Baptist history began when I was a student at Free Will Baptist Bible College—now Welch College—during the years 1949-53. For one of my classes, I wrote a paper on our history. I still have it. I was excited to encounter the Free Baptist Cyclopaedia, and I leaned heavily on that big book. It opened up a world I didn't know existed: the world of far-away New England just before the end of the eighteenth century. It was thrilling to read about Benjamin Randall and the rapid spread of the movement that sprang up from his preaching. I was immediately seized with the idea that this was, indeed, the history of the Free Will Baptist people, and I was eager to learn everything I could about Randall and Buzzell and Colby and Marks and Bates College and Hillsdale College, and even about Free Will Baptists all the way out to California.

It took me awhile to learn that things weren't quite that simple. After all, the story of the Randall movement is captivating. Those evangelistic New Englanders lit a fire that burned a place in the history of New England, swept

westward, brought people to Jesus, planted Baptist churches of the “free will” variety across the midwest, established educational institutions, and made a name for themselves in promoting causes like total abstinence, the anti-slavery sentiment, and the ordination of women and blacks to the ministry.

Like many others, I thought that this was the exciting history of my denomination, the Free Will Baptists! I took pride in their achievements. I said, along with others, that we lost all those churches and schools when the Randallites merged with the Northern Baptists in 1910-11. I sort of hated them for that, but I figured that some influential people must have led them down the wrong path, and that we could still delight in the stories they left behind them.

I still think that, to some degree. But I’ve come to understand that the reason we all rely on the history of the Northern Free Will Baptists so heavily is very simple: they published it, and it’s available, whereas the history of the Southern movement didn’t get put into writing like that.

It is true that there are segments of our contemporary Free Will Baptist denomination that owe their origins to the Randall movement. It is a mistake to downplay that. But it is equally a mistake to think that the history of the Randall movement is the history of our denomination as we know it now. That is not quite the case. Randall, Marks, and the others who were lights in that movement contributed to the Free Will Baptist people of today, yes; but they were not the ones who made us what we are now. We need to look elsewhere for our heroes and for the sources of our denominational culture.

Some of that “looking” has been done in recent years. Men like Bill Davidson and Michael Pelt (with a narrower focus than Davidson) have worked on the big picture and especially on the state of things in Eastern North Carolina from the days of Paul Palmer in 1727 until the people known as Free Will Baptists were more clearly defined as such in the early to mid-nineteenth century.

Even so, there are many, many places where research needs to be done if the full story is ever to be understood. There are heroes to be looked up to, some whose names we don't even know. There are interesting stories to be discovered and shared.

This volume unearths just a few of those. For the most part, each chapter is a separate “story,” dealing with a hero here or an important set of events there. I have placed them in a more or less chronological order, although the first chapter, dealing with how we name ourselves, covers things from the beginning to the present. All of the stories involve people and things a long time ago, except for the last one. That one, which is set in the period 1949 to 1954, is the most recent one, and it involves “personal” history that I think others will find interesting. It, too, contributes something to seeing ourselves clearly.

My interest in Free Will Baptist history has been whetted to a finer edge over the last ten to fifteen years. Since I retired from Welch, I have devoted a significant part of my time to the Free Will Baptist Historical Collection. It “belongs”—in some sense of the word—to the denomination and is more or less jointly supervised by the Free Will Baptist Historical Commission and Welch College, where the Collection resides as part of its library. Even during my years as Registrar and then Dean at the College, I gave some attention to cultivating the collection, but time for that had been almost non-existent for the last many years of my tenure there. When I retired, I came to realize that nothing at all had been done to put the collection in order for many years, and that even what had been done needed to be done over. With Carol Reid's capable help, I learned basic librarianship and did the cataloging and organizing. I became, in essence, the curator of the collection or the historical librarian—without title. I re-did everything and caught up all the boxes of material that had not been



cataloged. I put it all on computer. Today, everything in the collection is appropriately classified and readily accessible via the online catalog.

While doing this, certain matters captured my attention. Among them are the things I have written about in the chapters in this volume. In most cases, the chapters are not connected to each other. Even when put together, they don't even try to tell "The Free Will Baptist Story"—to borrow Damon Dodd's title for a book so precious when he wrote it and so out of date now in comparison to more recent works. My stories simply treat parts of our history, describing small matters that enable us to see a little more clearly some of the things that have shaped us.

I could not have written these stories were it not for the Free Will Baptist Historical Collection. It is a great and growing resource. The catalog can be accessed through either the college's website or a link on the site maintained by the Historical Commission, [fwbhistory.com](http://fwbhistory.com). The continued growth of that resource depends, of course, on the help of all of us. Many valuable items have been irretrievably lost, and many more will yet be lost unless people are willing to help us obtain and preserve the materials that will preserve our history for other researchers to come.

# 1

## “Free Will Baptist”: What’s In a Name?



*What’s in a name? that which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet.  
—Shakespeare, in Romeo and Juliet*

There appears to be an idea abroad that the Free Will Baptists of the North—the Randall movement—more or less consistently used “Freewill Baptist,” while those in the South—the Palmer movement—more or less consistently used “Free Will Baptist.”

Things aren’t quite that simple, and therein lies the interesting story of the name(s) we wear.

### **Part One: The Randall Movement**

I begin the story here, partly because it is a little easier to tell this first and partly because it’s less important in the big picture. Many are aware that the Northern denomination began with the planting of a church in New Durham, New Hampshire, by Benjamin Randall in 1780. What some may not realize, however, is that neither this church nor the others that sprang from

this beginning used any form of *freewill* in their name for some twenty years.

When Randall wrote the covenant for the new congregation in New Durham, he gave the church no name at all.<sup>1</sup> “They organized simply as a Baptist church.”<sup>2</sup> A letter dated January 13, 1783, was addressed “To the Baptist church of Christ at New Durham,”<sup>3</sup> and a letter from them in the same year was “From the Baptist church at New Durham.”<sup>4</sup>

As other churches in their fellowship were planted, they “were, for many years, known only as Baptist churches.”<sup>5</sup> A Quarterly Meeting was organized in 1783.<sup>6</sup> The first minutes begin, “The Baptist Quarterly Meeting convened,”<sup>7</sup> and a 1786 letter from that body was “From ... the Baptist Quarterly Meeting, held at New Durham.”<sup>8</sup> A 1799 petition from the same body referred to “a member of this Quarterly Meeting of Baptists.”<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, according to I. D. Stewart, the name *Freewill Baptist* does not appear in any old records or historical papers until 1799, when some ordination certificates spoke of “the Church of Christ, commonly known by the name of the new Durham church; also a member of the community in general, commonly termed General Provisioners, or Freewill Baptists.”<sup>10</sup> Even in this, the authors of the certificates were merely acknowledging names that

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1 For this covenant, see John Buzzell, *The Life of Elder Benjamin Randall: Principally Taken from Documents Written by Himself* (Limerick: Hobbs, Woodman & Co., 1827), 83-84.

2 I. D. Stewart, *The History of the Freewill Baptists, for Half a Century, with an Introductory Chapter: Volume I. from the year 1780 to 1830* (Dover: Freewill Baptist Printing Establishment, 1862), 55. There never was a volume II.

3 Stewart, 69.

4 Stewart, 70.

5 Stewart, 72.

6 Stewart, 76-77.

7 Stewart, 174.

8 Stewart, 88.

9 Stewart, 144.

10 Stewart, 175.

others used for them, not representing these as their official names. “Many of the fathers lived and died objecting to the name, but a majority finally acquiesced in its use.”<sup>11</sup> It was five more years, in 1804, before the name would be used in any official capacity.

## Different Names in New England

This seems a good place to discuss the names more generally. Indeed, several different names were used during the early years of those in the new denomination in New Hampshire and other New England states. As already noted, sometimes they were simply known as a *Church of Christ*, but this was apparently not a way of distinguishing them from any other groups of Christians.<sup>12</sup> As a title of difference, they were known as *Baptists*, and one simply had to know which Baptists were of the Calvinistic persuasion and which were Arminian (“free willers”). Stewart sometimes distinguishes the two by identifying the followers of Randall as “the free division of the Baptists”<sup>13</sup> or “Baptist churches with free principles.”<sup>14</sup>

A simple way of specifying exactly who they were was as churches of the *New Durham Connection*<sup>15</sup> or *Connexion*. Spelled either way, the word meant essentially the same thing as a denomination. An 1801 letter from a church in Vermont to the Yearly Meeting (organized in 1792) was “To the Church of Christ, New Durham connection.”<sup>16</sup> The same thing could be accomplished, and sometimes was, by identifying the churches in this con-

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11 Stewart, 176.

12 See Stewart, 174, for discussion of this.

13 Stewart, 99.

14 Stewart, 145. Subsequently, it became popular to identify all Arminian Baptists, whatever their denominational name, as “liberal Baptists.” But this was apparently not used by any denomination in its official name and so it remains a convenient and broad, generic term.

15 Stewart, 174.

16 Stewart, 175.

nection as *Randallites*.

Since *Baptist* was not enough, additional qualifiers came into use. *General Provisioners* was one, as noted above in the 1799 ordination certificates. A 1792 filing for incorporation, with the General Court of Massachusetts, referred to them as “the Baptist Quarterly Meeting, sometimes called General Provisioners.”<sup>17</sup> This term reflected the “free will” doctrine that Jesus’ atonement made provision for all men in general and not just for the elect in particular. From the beginning of Baptist history in England, those of Arminian persuasion were known as “General” Baptists, while their Calvinistic counterparts were known as “Particular” Baptists.

## ***Freewill* a Derogatory Name Finally Accepted**

It was probably inevitable, however, that the *Randallites* ultimately came to be known as *Freewill Baptists*. Long before 1780, believers of Arminian persuasion were mocked as “free willers”—or maybe “freewillers.” All the historians of the Northern movement agree that this was first a term of derision, put on them by their critics, accepted only gradually and with some reluctance. Frederick L. Wiley observes that the name, “though a contemptuous nickname, was eventually accepted by the majority of our people.”<sup>18</sup> Stewart puts this in perspective: “So important was their estimate of this sentiment—*freewill*—that it was reproachfully forced upon them as a part of their denominational name.”<sup>19</sup> He reports that Randall, according to John Buzzell, finally said,

The devil always overshoots the mark when he attempts to reproach the people of God. The disciples were contemptuously

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17 Hosea Quinby, *Freewill Baptist Quarterly Magazine* 1:3 (December 1839), 81.

18 F. L. Wiley, *Centennial Souvenir of the New Hampshire Yearly Meeting of Free Baptists 1792-1892*, second unnumbered page in front.

19 Stewart, 28.

called “Christians” at Antioch, but that has become a name of the highest national respect. So the name “Freewill” may, in process of time, become a title of high respect in the Christian world.<sup>20</sup>

Even so, Randall’s last letter to the New Durham Quarterly Meeting, dated May 14, 1808, was addressed, simply, “To the Baptist Quarterly Meeting to be held at Andover, N. H.”<sup>21</sup>

Regardless, it came to pass in 1804 that the Legislature of New Hampshire, in response to a request from the Randallites, passed the following resolution:

Resolved, That the people in this State, commonly known by the name of Freewill Antipedo Baptist church and society, shall be considered as a distinct religious sect or denomination, with all the privileges, as such, agreeable to the Constitution.<sup>22</sup>

That, minus the “Antipedo,”<sup>23</sup> is the name that stuck.

## Different Spellings of the *Freewill* Name

As I have said, however, things are not quite that simple. When we read the work of an author like Stewart, we should realize that, for the sake of consistency, he chose to represent the name the same way all the time and in the form he preferred. From his book, we would never learn that the *Freewill* took any other form. But it did. We also will understand that if one says “freewill” to a dozen different people, various ones may well write it down differently. At least two other variations are possible: *Free-will* (hyphenated,

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20 Stewart, 176.

21 Stewart, 246.

22 Quinby, 81.

23 The “Anti-paedo” was an old name for all Baptists because they were opposed (*anti*) to infant (*paedo*) baptism.

with or without a capital on *Will*) or *Free Will* (two words).

Within the Northern denomination, even the official documents often used *Free-will Baptist* (occasionally *Free-Will*). The various editions of their *Treatise of Faith and Practices*, for example, show the variety. The 1839 edition has *Freewill* both in the title and in “Published by the Trustees of the Freewill Baptist Connection.” But the 1850 edition has *Free-will* in both places. Indeed, the Introduction to the 1854 edition reports, in an abbreviated history, that the first church in the movement was reproached as *freewillers* and “Hence this church received the distinctive title, *Free-will Baptist*”—in the very same sentence that read, in the 1839 edition, *Freewill Baptist!* (This goes to show that the name will be represented, in any publication, in the form chosen by the writer, editor, or printer.) By 1869, the form reverts to *Freewill Baptist*, and in the 1886 edition, the publisher is “The F. B. Printing Establishment.”<sup>24</sup>

*The Morning Star* was the Northern denomination’s leading periodical, a weekly. It shows the same variety. The issue for July 15, 1835, was “Published ... by the Freewill Baptist Connexion.” The one for May 26, 1852, was “Published by the Free-will Baptist Printing Establishment,” with its office “in the F. W. Baptist Building, Washington St.” (Dover, N. H.). By 1869, the masthead is back to saying “Published by the Freewill Baptist Printing Establishment.”

*The Myrtle*, another of the publications from the same establishment, from 1847 to 1853, at least,<sup>25</sup> was “Published by the Free-will Baptist Printing Establishment.” Similarly, the annual register and yearbook was *The Free-will Baptist Register* (published by the F. W. Baptist Printing Estab-

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24 I have not footnoted these references since all one needs to do to confirm is to consult the edition of the *Treatise* identified. This observation will apply to several references to follow, including minutes of organizations, where the sources are obvious.

25 These are the only issues we possess.

lishment) from 1842-1858, and then *The Freewill Baptist Register*.

Even earlier than these was *The Free-will Baptist Magazine*, beginning in May of 1826, “Published by several elders of the R. I. Quarterly Meeting for the Free-will Baptist Connexion.”<sup>26</sup> In 1836, *Hymns for Christian Melody* was published by the trustees “of the Free-will Baptist Connection” under the auspices of a publishing committee chosen by the “General Conference of the Free-will Baptist Connection”; but the 1853 *Psalmody* went back to *Freewill*. In 1841, *The Free Communionist* was “Published by the Trustees of the Freewill Baptist Connection, but officially registered for publication by Wm. Burr, agent of the “Trustees of the F. W. B. Connection.” The 1847 *Memoirs of the Life of David Marks* uses *Free-will*, as does the 1854 *Life of Colby*. In the 1851 *Life of Clement Phinney*, author D. M. Graham, in the Preface, uses “F. W. Baptist Connexion.”

It is therefore clear that *Freewill* and *Free-will* were both widely used in the Northern denomination, with *F. W. Baptist* apparently being an abbreviation for the latter (and sometimes for the former). The name of the publishing house itself changed accordingly, with *Free-will Baptist Printing Establishment* especially used during the middle part of the nineteenth century. Again, this may well have reflected the preference of the persons responsible.

## Did They Ever Use Two Words?

Was *Free Will* ever used by them? Indeed, it was, although if all we had to go by were the things printed by the publishing house we wouldn’t know that. (Even if I did not have evidence, I would be fairly confident that *Free Will* was used among them often, officially or unofficially.)

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26 *The Herald of Gospel Liberty* for September 1, 1808, refers to the “Quarterly Meeting of the Free-will Baptists.” (The paper was apparently published by one who was part of the Christian connection.)



Indeed, it may be that Randall himself used it this way. Buzzell relates an anecdote in which Randall said, about a certain preacher, “He has a mitten for either hand. When he is with the Predestinarians, then he is a great Predestinarian; and when he is with the Free Willers, then he is a great Free Willer.”<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, Buzzell quotes Randall as saying that, after he had drawn up the original covenant and put it before the members in New Durham, on June 30, 1780, “we all, in a solemn manner, by prayer and supplication to the Lord, covenanted together in the fear of God, and signed our names to the instrument. This is the beginning of the now large and extensive connection, called FREE WILL BAPTIST.”<sup>28</sup> It is possible, of course, that Buzzell erred in extending the quotation to the last sentence,<sup>29</sup> or in printing the name the way he thought it ought to be printed. But at least Buzzell himself, who was baptized by and ministered with Randall, as early as 1827 regarded *Free Will* as two words. Although he personally preferred to refer to the churches more simply as “Churches of Christ,” he said that Randall “laid the foundation of the connexion, now extending over a great part of North America, commonly known by the denomination of FREE WILL BAPTIST.”<sup>30</sup>

I first thought it would be difficult to confirm the use of *Free Will* by the Randallites. But as soon as I realized where to look, it turned out to be easy enough. One simply has to look in documents, handwritten or printed, that were not printed by the Freewill (or Free-will) Baptist Printing Establish-

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27 Buzzell, 98.

28 Buzzell, 84. The way the name is printed is original.

29 I find it difficult to think that Randall himself would have written the last sentence.

30 Buzzell, 82. Again, the way the name is printed is original. Buzzell had not been consistent in this. In his *A Religious Magazine* for August 1820, he used both *Freewill* and *Free-Will*. At that point, however, he still thought of this as a name given by others: “Our opposers will heap upon us the name of Free-Willers, a name which we have hitherto considered ourselves unworthy of.”

ment. Of the references I found, I selected ten to mention<sup>31</sup>:

(1) In *The Life of Elder Abel Thornton*, written by himself and published in 1828 by J. B. Yerrinton in Providence, Rhode Island, for the Rhode Island Q. M., in the “Preliminary Remarks” (perhaps by Z. Tobey, the writer of the Preface), the heading says *Free-will Baptists*, but in the body of the remarks, when the group’s identity is discussed, *Free Will Baptists* appears.

(2) The Hillsdale College paper, *The Advance*, for October 21, 1885, in an article about Ransom Dunn, refers to the organization of “a Free Will Baptist Church.”

(3) An old handwritten journal is identified, in 1876, as the record of “Mill Creek Free Will Baptist Church” (in Kansas).

(4) Another record book, in 1882, reports that the church was organized in 1845 “and took the name of ‘The Free Will Baptist Church of Green Oak’ [Michigan].”

(5) There is an 1893 printed program for “The Indiana Free • Will • Baptist Association.” (The bullets are original.)

(6) An 1890 publication is entitled “An Historical Sketch of the Vermont Yearly Meeting of Free Will Baptists.”

(7) An early (undated) handwritten constitution of a Young People’s Aid Society says that its objective “shall be to raise funds in the interest of the Free Will Bapbist Society of East Andover, N. H.” (*Bapbist* is original.)

(8) The handwritten minutes of the Ohio River Yearly Meeting, for 1833, refer to “the Treatise on the Faith of the Free Will Baptist [sic].” Interestingly, in 1868 they resolved “to oppose dropping the word ‘Will’ in our denominational name.”

(9) An 1883 volume describing the early history of the town of Bethlehem, New Hampshire, refers to “the Free Will Baptist building” that was

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31 Since writing this, I have examined another large batch of material from the Randall movement and could supply many more examples of this usage.

originally located “on the main road nearly opposite the residence of Timothy Hildreth and his son Orville,” but was later “taken down and transformed into a starch factory”!<sup>32</sup>

(10) An 1846 obituary in Anson, Maine, indicates that the deceased, Rev. William Paine, was converted “under the labors of ... a Free Will Baptist preacher.”<sup>33</sup>

These seem adequate to make the point that across the broad sweep of the Randall movement the name often appeared as *Free Will Baptist*. Even the 1898 minutes of the General Conference represent article 1 of the constitution as reading: “The General Conference of Free Baptists shall be composed of delegates from the several bodies now composing the General Conference of the Free Will Baptist Connection.” This is obviously an error—the correct reading was “Freewill Baptist Connection”—but it shows how easily varieties of the name appeared in print. Authors and publishers would consistently put the name in the form they thought “correct,” regardless how earlier users might have written it.

It is therefore not incorrect to refer to the Randallites, generically, as “Free Will Baptists.” They were that. Harrison and Barfield called them that (in 1897), and so did the record of the old Bethel Conference in North Carolina (in 1832)<sup>34</sup>—just as publications in the North often referred to the freewillers in the South as “Freewill Baptists.”

## **From *Freewill* to *Free Baptists***

The Randallites did, however, make yet another change, this a lasting

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32 Simeon Bolles, *The Early History of the Town of Bethlehem, New Hampshire* (Woodsville: Enterprise Printing House, 1883), 94-95.

33 As will be noted in chapter six of this volume, the material cited in that chapter published by those that originated in the Randall movement uses all three forms of the name.

34 T. F. Harrison and J. M. Barfield, *History of the Free Will Baptists of North Carolina* (W. E. Moye, 1897), 57, 219.

one: they officially became *Free Baptists* in 1892. The roots of this extend at least to 1841 when their General Conference merged with a smaller group named Free Communion Baptists or Free Baptists.<sup>35</sup> As part of that union, the Conference voted that they considered “the name of Free Baptist, Free Communion Baptist, Freewill Baptist, and Open Communion Baptist as designating the same people.”<sup>36</sup> The name *Free Baptist* was not entirely unknown before then. Stewart reports that, in 1826, a small group of “Free Baptist” churches in Vermont united with those in the Randall movement; he describes them as churches “of liberal Baptist sentiments.”<sup>37</sup> Stewart also notes that many preferred this shorter name as “more expressive and appropriate ... since we believe, not only in free will, but *free* salvation and *free* communion.”<sup>38</sup>

Not all the constituents of the General Conference approved this, of course. In southern Ohio, for example, Thomas E. Peden, beginning in 1895, led resistance and made the change of name a basis for contending that he and those who followed him were the true General Conference of Freewill Baptists. That story is too complex to tell here,<sup>39</sup> but an article in an 1897 issue of *The Church Watchman*, an Ohio paper, entitled “Free Will or Free Baptists,” attempts to calm any waters troubled about the issue, saying:

Many of us use the term Freewill or Free Baptists interchangeably, and often for mere sake of brevity drop the word “Will.” It

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35 The minutes of the General Conference for 1841 refer to them as “Free Baptists,” but they were also known as “Free Communion Baptists”; see Stewart, 76-77; also Norman Allen Baxter, *History of the Freewill Baptists: A Study in New England Separatism* (Rochester: American Baptist Historical Society, 1957), 1 (n. 1).

36 Baxter, 1 (n. 1), citing the 1841 minutes of the General Conference, found in the 1859 bound volume of minutes from the beginning until that date, 192.

37 Stewart, 372.

38 Stewart, 176.

39 For this story, see chapter five of this volume.

is not very strange that some of our brethren should feel deeply sensitive about any change of name of our denomination, after honoring the old name so long. ... Our principles are unchanged, rest assured. While there are honest differences about the use of above names, and some noble brethren have felt greatly excited over the legal change of names in our new constitution, personally we have not been greatly worried over these changes. "Let us have peace!"<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps those who resisted the change would have appreciated a later writer in the Southern denomination, I. W. Yandell, who contended that the Randall movement lost its identity by uniting with the Free Baptists of New York.<sup>41</sup>

At any rate, the short name gradually became accepted by most of the Northern denomination. When the merger with Northern Baptists came in 1910-11, the "General Conference of Free Baptists" completed this union and ensured that as a separate denomination the Randall movement would go out of existence.<sup>42</sup>

## **Part Two: The Palmer Movement**

For contemporary Free Will Baptists, this part of the story is more important. Although there are significant parts of the denomination, now, that had their origins in the Randall movement, the larger part trace their origins

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40 *The Church Watchman* (Ashtabula, Ohio), VIII:9 (June 1897), 3. The article was apparently written by the editor, T. H. Drake.

41 I. W. Yandell and Dovie Yandell, *The Origin, Doctrine, Identity and History of the Free Will Baptist Church*, (self-published, n. d.), 193.

42 Technically, the General Conference of Free Baptists continued to exist as a legal entity for a number of years after the merger, but it was a paper organization that held meetings as formalities for legal purposes.

to Paul Palmer in 1727 in Eastern North Carolina<sup>43</sup> or (to a lesser degree) to other indigenous movements in other places in the southeastern United States.

## ***Baptist* the Original Name, *Free Will* a Nickname**

Interestingly, the North Carolina Free Will Baptists also did not at first call themselves by that name. Like the early followers of Benjamin Randall (but preceding them by half a century), the followers of Paul Palmer were originally known as *Baptists*, even though it was apparently not uncommon for Baptists holding to Arminian sentiments to be derided as *freewillers* (or *free-willers*, or *free willers*!).

My purpose, here, does not include extensive coverage of the background of this, but some brief observations seem appropriate. As a nickname, usually used negatively, *freewiller* goes back to England, well before the 1727 Palmer church in North Carolina. Stewart, writing for the Randallites, says, “The first controversy on predestination among the English reformers, was in queen Mary’s reign [1553-1558], when those who believed in the freedom of the will were called ‘*freewillers*’.”<sup>44</sup> For this, he cites Daniel Neal’s history of the Puritans, although a check of the passage he cites reveals that while Neal himself called those mid-sixteenth century Arminians “free-willers,” he did not quite say they were called that at the time.<sup>45</sup> Even so, that was probably the case. Adam Taylor notes that Thomas Helwys, the found-

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43 Michael R. Pelt, *A History of Original Free Will Baptists* (Mount Olive: Mount Olive College Press, 1996), 20-55, has the most recent and thorough presentation of the first General/Free Will Baptists in North Carolina.

44 Stewart, 31. He is citing Neal’s *History of the Puritans*, I:65, and he always spells the name as one word.

45 Daniel Neal, *The History of the Puritans; or, Protestant Nonconformists; from the Reformation in 1517, to the Revolution in 1688 [etc.]*, vol. I (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1979 reprint of 1837 work), 73-74.

ing pastor of the original General Baptist church in London, “met with much opposition. The separatists, whom he had left, attacked him and his tenets with great warmth, calling his party heretics, anabaptists, and free-willers.”<sup>46</sup>

William F. Davidson devotes helpful discussion to the use of this nickname, observing, “More recent discoveries have given weight to the conclusion that the name was in fairly common use throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century in England.”<sup>47</sup> He cites documents dated in 1659 and 1660, the latter written by an outsider “to the Free-Will-Anabaptists” and the former by “a small society of baptised believers, undergoing the name of Free-Willers, about the city of London.” He argues convincingly that these represented the original Baptists in London who held to the doctrine of a general atonement (and are therefore often called “General” Baptists).<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Thomas Helwys, the founding pastor of the first Baptist church on English soil—a General Baptist church at that—published a pamphlet in 1611 that addressed “the congregation, which men called the New Frylers” while they were still in the Netherlands, and Davidson is confident that *Frylers* means *Freewillers*.<sup>49</sup>

Apparently, then, *freewillers* (however spelled) was not only a common term for anyone believing in the Arminian view of salvation but also a term applied specifically to the General Baptists in England and then in America. Even so, it was more likely to be used *of* them than *by* them, at least at first. When those English General Baptists wrote their “Standard Confession”

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46 Adam Taylor, *The History of the English General Baptists*, vol. 1, *The English General Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Printed for the Author by T. Bore, 1818), 86. I have William F. Davidson to thank for this citation, found among his papers in the Free Will Baptist Historical Collection in Nashville, TN.

47 William F. Davidson, *The Free Will Baptists in America 1727-1984* (Nashville: Randall House Publications, 1985), 19.

48 Davidson, 19-20.

49 Davidson, 19. He thinks this might have been a Dutch pronunciation, but it might simply have been a contraction of the seventeenth-century English spelling of “free-willers.”

in 1660, the document began, simply, “A brief confession or declaration of faith, Set forth by many of us, who are (falsely) called Ana-Baptists.”<sup>50</sup> The document used no other name to identify them.

## Baptists in the Lineage of English General Baptists

It is enough to say, here, that the Baptists who ultimately came to be called *Free Will Baptists* in North Carolina, and spreading out from there, traced their spiritual lineage to the English General Baptists. They used the Standard Confession of 1660, mentioned above, as their basic statement of belief. Like them, then, they simply identified themselves at first as *Baptists*. When they needed to distinguish themselves from Calvinistic Baptists, they said something like “Baptists holding to a general atonement.” Apparently, then, the distinctive name most likely to be used for them soon came to be *General Baptists*. Lemuel Burkitt and Jesse Read, writing in 1803, testified to the fact that the early “General Baptist” churches in North Carolina used the 1660 Confession as “their Confession of Faith.”<sup>51</sup>

In 1812, the North Carolina General Baptists produced a revision of the 1660 Standard Confession entitled, “An abstract of the Former Articles of Faith confessed by the original Baptist Church, holding the doctrine of general provision”—often called, in short form, the *1812 Former Articles*. Perhaps they were not yet using *Free Will Baptist* officially. However, subsequent editions of this document (1855, 1884, etc.) read the same way, although *Free Will Baptist* was certainly in general use by then. The 1895

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50 The *Anabaptists* were groups of European believers—often called the “Radical Reformation”—who insisted on re-baptizing people, when converted, who had been baptized as infants. The church planted in London by Helwys had spent some time in the Netherlands where they were acquainted with and to some degree influenced by Anabaptists, but there was no organic connection between them.

51 Pelt, 69.



edition included a preface identifying the “Western Conference of Original Free Will Baptists” as the sponsor of the publication.

One cannot be absolutely sure exactly when the North Carolina General Baptists first applied the name *Free Will Baptist* (spelled one way or another) to themselves. Rufus K. Hearn said, in 1875, “We were called Ana-Baptists, Baptists, and General Baptists, until the year 1828, when we adopted the name of Free-Will Baptists.”<sup>52</sup> For the 1828 date, he relied on a statement by Elias Hutchins—of the Northern Freewill Baptists, who visited in North Carolina during the period 1829-1833. Pelt observes, “There is no reason to doubt Hutchins’ statement,” which means that there is also no way to confirm it.<sup>53</sup> Even so, I think it likely that the North Carolina brethren decided to make “Free Will Baptist” their official name after learning this had been done in the North.<sup>54</sup> Regardless, *Free Will Baptist* had become the name that stuck.

## Spellings of *Free Will* in the South

Once again, however, things are not quite that simple. In keeping with the opening paragraph of this article, my purpose includes showing that early Free Will Baptists in the Palmer movement, and throughout the part of the denomination that did not originate with the Randall movement, used *Free Will*, *Freewill*, and *Free-will* with equal freedom. *Free Will* may be the consistent form, more or less, in our day. It was not always so. In documenting this, I have limited myself to things published before 1900, even though

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52 R. K. Hearn, “Origin of the Free Will Baptist Church of North Carolina,” in the *Toisnot Transcript* (May 20-June 17, 1875), reprinted in D. B. Montgomery, *General Baptist History* (Evansville: Courier Company, Book and Job Printers, 1882, 148-178), 169.

53 Pelt, 107.

54 See chapter four of this volume. My opinion could easily be shown wrong by any publication or manuscript among North Carolina Free Will Baptists, dated before 1828, that used the words as part of the official name.