

The Missional History and Legacy of Old Bethel

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Can churches ever truly stop impacting the surrounding environment, even after dissolving? The historical impact and legacy of Old Bethel Church, the first Non-Catholic church west of the Mississippi, continues to ring throughout Missouri's rich landscape long after dissolving in 1867. It has become a foundation and pillar of truth, helping start many churches. From July 19, 1806, to the last recorded service in August 1867, there is no mistake: the Lord has used what once was a small church of only 15 to turn Missouri into a threshold for churches of all kinds. The missional foundation of Old Bethel laid the groundwork for the lasting legacy of daughter churches across America. Old Bethel's significance is evident in these three key aspects: its establishment, dissolution, and its lasting effect on history in Missouri.

How it Started: Old Bethel Church's establishment marked a pivotal moment in history in the United States. Starting in July 1806 with only 15 charter members, Old Bethel was the first Non-Catholic Church to start west of the Mississippi River. Before the Louisiana Purchase took place, Spain and France owned the area, which made any religion besides Catholicism illegal. Protestant pastors had to sneak over during the night by boat or swim across the river to hold secret church services to spread the gospel in the small log cabins of the pioneer settlers.

According to The Missouri Baptist Centennial:

In 1799 joy was brought to their hearts and homes by the appearance of an aged Baptist preacher, Thos. Johnson by name. As a missionary to the Indians he was at home in this frontier settlement. He doubtless came at his own expense and, perhaps, at the risk of his life. To the few settlers he preached the gospel, though it was in violation of the

law of the Territory. His preaching was a great comfort to the faithful and the means of the conversion of others. He was, no doubt, the administrator of the first scriptural baptism in the Territory. The place was Randol creek, and the candidate was Mrs. Agnes Ballou, who afterwards became a constituent member of Bethel church (Missouri Baptist General Association pg 49).

Though sharing the gospel was illegal, there were no repercussions for Johnson or Mrs. Ballou. After this first great act of faith in southeast Missouri, it still took seven years before a church was in full commission. In 1806, the church was formed, wrote a constitution, and later built a simple log cabin. It was 1805, six years after the first baptism when Eld. David Green from Kentucky first visited the territory and preached to some in the Cape Girardeau area. Once returning home, Green still felt burdened by his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ in the Cape Girardeau area, which he took as a sign from God that he was to move there and pastor a church. The Missouri Baptist Centennial records that “with the assistance of Deacons Geo. Laurence and Henry Cockerham of Tywappity Bottom church, he organized Bethel church July 19, 1806. Brother Green and wife became charter members and he served them as their first pastor till his death, December 9, 1809” (Missouri Baptist General Association pg 50). The bravery of these men and women established a strong threshold for other churches and for truth-seeking believers to grow in number.

A Church without a Mission: The church’s eventual dissolution brings up the question: how can a church that started such a huge movement of the gospel dissolve? Many factors can lead a church to dissolve. These could include the lack of a clear mission, apathy among the members, failure to adapt, or poor resource management. These factors are often seen as contributors from a worldly standpoint, but ultimately, a church’s demise comes from theological disputes and organizational challenges that are a reality while living in a sinful world. That is not

to say that it is wrong or sinful for a church to dissolve. Individual churches serve the purposes of the Lord and His mission, and what ultimately made Old Bethel church close its doors was the lack of a mission to make Christ known.

Old Bethel had seven different pastors from 1806 to 1867. The first, Thomas Green, was an earnest advocate for mission work. The last was Benjamin Thompson, who was involved in Old Bethel since he became a Christian in the earthquake revival of 1812. Old Bethel was very involved in missions for most of her life and for 30 years was regarded as “the mother of Southeast churches” (Jenkins 21). In the year 1818, the church collectively gave \$31.37 to missions, equivalent to \$700-1,000 today. Furthermore, they sent out as many as nine churches throughout the church’s lifetime. Things started going downhill when Benjamin Thompson became pastor. He was ordained in 1825 and became pastor the following year. A few years prior, some congregants were asked to leave from membership after denying Calvinistic beliefs. Members of Old Bethel objected to Arminian principles, which caused some strife throughout the life of the church. Besides objecting to Arminianism, over time and under Thompson’s leadership, they became hyper-Calvinistic, which slowly shut down mission opportunities along the way. Ultimately, the church became anti-mission. Jenkins writes that “Parkerism and anti-missionism, the seed of which had been sown in the mother association, began to be a source of no little disturbance” (pg 28).

Despite its roots in the devotion of people like Thomas Johnson and Thomas Green who came over from the Mississippi to share the gospel, Old Bethel began to dissolve due to a lack of mission. The Missouri Baptist General Association lamented:

Bethel lost prestige when she grieved away the missionary spirit. During Thompson's pastorate, the records of the business meetings are frequently as follows:
"The church met in conference; all in peace and no business." When a church ceases to

engage in missionary work it has little business to attend to. About the same time and for the same reason three or four other churches in this county were reduced to tombstones and cornerstones. Shame must rest on the heads of Benj. Thompson and his co-laborers because they led the churches of Jesus Christ into open disobedience against their King and Redeemer (60).

Between 1862-1865, the church stopped meeting due to the effects of the civil war. This was in addition to internal disputes over a previous member's removal because he joined the war. It is unfortunate and devastatingly heartbreaking that what was started on a strong foundation by courageous men and women could come to this. The church's last recorded meeting took place in August 1867.

The Legacy Old Bethel Holds: The enduring legacy of Old Bethel is obvious in the surrounding area. During its early days, Old Bethel served as a beacon of light and truth to southeast Missouri, sending out different missionaries to the surrounding areas. Of the nine different churches it sent out, First Baptist Jackson, whose congregation just celebrated its 200th anniversary, is the only one of those nine churches remaining. However, the legacy goes beyond just one church; over 35 churches have emerged from First Baptist Jackson, including Mercy Hill Church. These churches are the enduring legacy of Old Bethel and, most importantly, a testament to the Lord's faithfulness. The missional legacy of Old Bethel still lives on to this day, from First Baptist Jackson sending out missionaries to start over 35 different churches, to Mercy Hill which is involved in missions in Andagua, Peru, Calgary, Canada, and Boston, Massachusetts.

In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus said "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of

the age.” Despite its eventual dissolution, Old Bethel made disciples through the guiding of the Holy Spirit. According to Lifeway Research, “Only 3 in 10 unchurched Americans (29%) say a Christian has ever shared with them one-on-one how a person becomes a Christian. Only slightly more say a Christian has told them about the benefits of participating in a local church (33%) or the benefits of becoming a Christian (35%)” (Earls 2021). How can Christians pursue Christ-likeness if they do not act in such a way? These were Jesus’ last words before He ascended into heaven, yet unlike the courageous brothers and sisters in the Old Bethel congregation and those who started the church movement west of the Mississippi River, many believers now struggle to share the gospel in places where doing so is both legal and safe. When faced with fear, humans resort to fight, flight, or freeze. How can believers freeze when they are called to fight for the sake of Christ?

While Old Bethel’s physical congregation dissolved in 1867, its rich spiritual legacy continues to shape Missouri Baptist history. From its courageous founding in 1806 as the first Non-Catholic church west of the Mississippi, to its visible legacy in churches like FBC Jackson and Mercy Hill, the Lord has used this once small congregation for His glory all while impacting generations of church-goers. Old Bethel’s legacy reminds churches in this day and age that mission-focused ministry is imperative to the life of a church. Christians today should take courage from the brave men and women who founded Old Bethel despite the risk of persecution. They should also take caution from the church’s eventual failure, stemming from its eventual stance of seeing missions as purposeless. Old Bethel's journey from passionately proclaiming His name to an anti-mission stance illustrates that a church's strength lies not in its buildings or traditions, but in its faithfulness to the Great Commission and Jesus’ call to the church. Modern congregations must remember that God's church thrives when it remains focused on His mission of relentlessly seeking and saving the lost while glorifying Him.

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