

# Luther Rice: Dreamer and Doer

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## Introduction

Luther Rice and Adoniram Judson. Writers always link their names. They write of their call to mission and their appointment as the first American foreign missionaries. Baptist authors wax eloquent about their conversion to Baptist beliefs. They tell how Luther Rice came home to America to raise support, and then give the rest of their attention to Judson's sacrificial service in Burma. They ignore Luther Rice for the more sensational career of Judson.

Perhaps their emphasis is natural, but it seems hardly correct. It could well be that Rice made the greater contribution to Baptist missions. His indefatigable journeying and heartfelt appeals awakened Baptists to their responsibilities to a world in need. Rice's career may have been more mundane, but it was no less meaningful.

This article focuses on the key period of Rice's life, 1813-1820: During these years he sounded the trumpet call of missions, and Baptists responded. It gives a brief sketch of his life, emphasizing his promotion of mission support. Concern for missions united Baptists in the nineteenth century. The career of Luther Rice spans the formation of the Baptist denomination in the United States and the development of many of its institutions and ministries. Looking to our roots is salutary, and our Baptist roots are quite instructive.

## Luther Rice's Early Years

On March 25, 1783, Luther Rice was born the ninth child to Amos and Sarah Rice. Amos Rice was known as "Captain" Rice because of his long service in the Continental Army. He was a man of excess. He

had a violent temper and a fondness for alcohol. Though a member of the Congregational Church in the town of Northborough, Massachusetts, he was not active.

Sarah Rice was a lively, intelligent woman who took great interest in her church as well as her family. She was careful to teach her children the Scriptures, and required young Luther to memorize portions of the Westminster Catechism.

As a child Luther was a quick learner and diligent student. He was an obedient child with an amiable temperament. It seems that he was a confident youth. When he was sixteen, without consulting his parents, he contracted to travel to Georgia to secure lumber for ship building. This trip lasted about six months, and the task was completed satisfactorily. The family was apprehensive that Luther would acquire bad habits on the trip, but these fears proved unfounded.

Luther's education in the local grammar school and experiences on the farm prepared him well for life as a prosperous Massachusetts farmer. He had been baptized as a baby in the Northborough Congregational Church, but was scarcely interested in spiritual matters. In his nineteenth year, this young farmer began reading a biography of John Newton, the slave-ship captain who became a pastor and hymn writer. As Luther began a long spiritual quest, he was pained by the results of self-examination. He wrote a friend:

When I became convinced that I had not experienced a change of heart, convinced too, that such a change was essential to happiness ... and

saw, too, clearly that I ought to love God, and possess absolute submission to his holy will; I was reduced unavoidably to keen anguish and very great distress...spent most of my time, in literally weeping and wailing...it did also seem to me that if I should find mercy and deliverance from the wrath to come, I would endeavor to rescue others from the same most wretched condition.<sup>1</sup>

Rice continued in his spiritual distress for about two years. His anguish disturbed his sleep and injured his health. Luther's friends became alarmed.

At length the period of deliverance drew nigh...I felt that I should be willing thus to put a blank into the hand of God, to be by him filled as he might please!...I was absolutely at the disposal of God; and should know the details of my destiny just as the same should be developed. And I found in this disposition of absolute unreserved submission to the will of God, a sweet and blessed tranquility.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, peace came to Luther. He united with the Congregational Church at Northborough on March 14, 1802, just before his twentieth birthday. He became an active member of the church. His industry in organizing home prayer meetings aroused antipathy and distrust among many neighbors and church members, but he was not easily discouraged.

At the time of his conversion, Rice was working with his father on the farm and had no plans to leave his work. As the youngest son, everyone assumed he would stay on the farm and care for his parents in their old age. A local pastor, however, suggested that Luther attend college to prepare for ministry. The suggestion astonished the young farmer, but the idea captivated him. Not long after, against his father's wishes, Luther began to prepare

for college. He studied three years at the Leicester Academy to prepare himself for college. To defray the expenses of his schooling, he taught in a day school and gave singing lessons at night. During this time period he led prayer meetings in private homes.

Luther must have done well in his studies because, when he entered Williams College in 1807, he did so well on the entrance test he was enrolled as a sophomore. While at college, Rice was licensed to preach by the Mountain Association, Berkshire County, Massachusetts.<sup>3</sup> At Williams College, the novice preacher found a group of students fervently interested in missions. Samuel Mills led in the organization of the Sol Oriens Society at the college in 1808. The society developed out of a weekly prayer meeting for campus revival. The group soon changed their name to the Society of Brethren, and their main concern was to encourage the conversion of the heathen through the effort of society members. When the members graduated from Williams, they formed a similar society at Andover Seminary. Their "Society of Inquirey on the Subject of Missions" became a model for many other student groups. Charles Chaney notes, "What was born in spiritual awakening was channeled into the missionary enterprise."<sup>4</sup>

Luther Rice was an active member of the missions society. Missions was often on his mind as he went about his activities. He later wrote this account of his decision to become a missionary:

It was during a solitary walk in the woods, behind the college, while meditating and praying on the subject, and feeling half inclined to give it up, that the command of Christ, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," was presented to my mind with such clearness and power that I came to a full

decision.<sup>5</sup>

He remembered soon after, "I have deliberately made up my mind to preach the gospel to the heathen...I do not know but it may be in Asia."<sup>6</sup>

### **Luther Rice the Missionary**

In June 1810, Gordon Hall, a recent graduate, returned to Andover Seminary to consult with the faculty about devoting himself to missionary service. He had been greatly influenced by the published reports from William Carey in India. Hall's arrival greatly excited the members of the missions society. Adoniram Judson addressed a letter to the General Association of Massachusetts (Congregational ministers), which was meeting in Bradford the same week. Judson, Samuel Nott, Jr., Samuel J. Mills, Samuel Newell, James Richards, and Luther Rice all volunteered their services as missionaries. Later the group feared that their number might overwhelm the association; therefore, the names of Richards and Rice were deleted.

Perhaps one reason Rice allowed his name to be stricken from the list was an unresolved love affair. He was engaged to Rebecca Eaton, a pious young school teacher from a fine family. Luther spent months trying to persuade her to accompany him to the mission field. Finally, they mutually agreed to break their engagement, and Luther determined to go to the mission field without a wife. Meanwhile, the Association responded with alacrity and formed the Constitution of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. This group proceeded with plans to send out the young missionaries.

When Rice committed himself to accompany Judson and the others, the date of departure was already near. Luther peti-

tioned the Board of Commissioners for appointment, but they were hesitant because of lack of funds. As Judson later related,

They gave him leave, on condition that he would occasion them no additional expense, but provide for his own outfit, and raise the money for his passage. With this hard condition he cheerfully complied, and immediately started on horseback, and traveled day and night, though in the depth of winter, to raise the needful sum.<sup>7</sup>

Rice raised the money in only six days, appearing tired, but fully financed at the group's ordination service at the Tabernacle Church, Salem, Massachusetts on February 6, 1812.

The ordination service was inspiring even for the weary Luther Rice. Leonard Woods preached the sermon. Samuel Spring gave the charge. He concluded his message—

Go then, with the tender companions of your bosoms, like pilgrims and strangers, and lay your bodies by the side of Ziegenbalg and Swartz, that you may meet them and Eliot and Brainerd, and all other faithful missionaries in the realms of light, and so be ever with the Lord. We, in the mean time, will pray, that the salvation of souls may be your joy, and crown of rejoicing in the day of the Lord. Amen.<sup>8</sup>

Immediately after the service the group hurried to the ports of departure. The new missionaries traveled in two parties. The Judsons and Newells sailed from Salem on February 19, 1812, while Rice along with Hall and Nott left from Philadelphia five days later.

This voyage to India has become famous to Baptists. The new missionaries planned to first visit with William Carey at Seram-

pore before establishing their own mission station. Judson began studying his New Testament in order to prepare himself to refute the Baptist position on baptism. In the process Judson became convinced that the Baptist doctrine was correct. It is difficult to know how or when Rice changed his views on baptism. In college he corresponded with a Baptist pastor on the subject, and during the voyage to India he discussed baptism with two English Baptist missionaries on their way to join Carey. Yet, it seems clear that he had not changed his mind when he arrived in Calcutta. Upon arriving Rice learned of Judson's change of mind, leading him into an intensive period of study and prayer.

William Carey described Rice's situation in a letter to Dr. William Staughton:

Brother Rice was, on the voyage, thought by our brethren to be the most obstinate friend of Pedobaptism of any of the missionaries. I cannot tell what has led to this change of sentiment, nor had I any suspicion of it till one morning when he came before I was up, to examine my Greek Testament; from some questions which he asked that morning, I began to suspect that he was decidedly on the side of believer's baptism. I expect therefore that he will soon be baptized.<sup>9</sup>

How did Rice come to this momentous decision knowing the effect it would have on his missionary career? He explained himself in a letter to Rev. Thomas Baldwin:

The subject respecting the solemn...and important ordinance of Christian baptism presented itself to my mind in such an attitude, that I could not conscientiously refrain from examining it...I have endeavored, I trust, with prayerfulness, in the fear of God, and with no small impression of the delicacy and high responsibility of my situation, to give it a careful and very serious examination.

But it is with emotion peculiarly afflicting, that I proceed to inform you, that...I am compelled to relinquish a view of that sacred ordinance which I had formerly apprehended to be highly important. I am now satisfactorily convinced that only those who give credible evidence of piety, are proper subjects, and that immersion is the proper mode of baptism.<sup>10</sup>

Having made his long study and painful decision, Rice was baptized on November 1, 1812, in the Baptist church of Calcutta by Rev. William Ward. Luther wrote his parents saying, "It was a comfortable day to my soul!"<sup>11</sup> Judson and Rice were both men of integrity. They realized that they could no longer receive support from the Congregationalists. They wrote the Board of Commissioners immediately, but they were uncertain about their next move. Years later Rice described their feelings:

Unassociated with the English Baptists—unacquainted with the Baptists in our own country—unable to calculate with any satisfactory degree of certainty what might be the effect of letters sent home—we were three solitary individuals disconnected from all the Christian world, in a heathen land, with only scanty means for a very temporary subsistence:—but we did not doubt that the Lord would provide for us!<sup>12</sup>

As it turned out, the first problem Rice and the Judsons faced was one of legal status. Soon after their baptism, the missionaries were forced out of Calcutta by the British authorities. They transferred temporarily to the Isle of France. They then decided it would be best for Rice to return to the United States to confer with the Board of Commissioners and "to contribute towards engaging the Baptist churches of America in the mission cause and to obtain...if practicable, their patronages."<sup>13</sup>

Rice returned instead of Judson for two

reasons. First, Rice had been quite ill, and it was thought that a trip to a temperate climate might aid his recovery. Second, Judson was married while Luther remained a bachelor. Therefore, on March 15, 1813, Rice left the Judsons on the Isle of France en route to the United States. No ship was going directly, so he embarked on a ship bound for St. Salvador (Bahia), Brazil. He had to remain in St. Salvador for two months before securing passage to New York. While in St. Salvador he offended the wife of the American Consul by refusing to christen her baby. Finally, he arrived in New York on July 17, 1813.

### **Luther Rice and Mission Support**

What was the condition of the Baptist denomination in 1813? One could hardly say that there was a denomination. When Rice returned to the United States, there were 115 associations and about 2400 churches. Generally, the churches only related to each other through their associations. There were no state conventions and no institutions other than Brown University in Rhode Island.<sup>14</sup>

Several efforts had been made to achieve united action. After the Continental Congress refused to disallow religious taxation in 1775, the Warren Association sent a letter to all the Baptists on the continent proposing a general meeting of delegates from all the associations to discuss means of securing full religious freedom. In 1799, the Philadelphia Association called for a “general conference” of delegates from the associations. The next year the same association called for all the associations “to unite with us in laying a plan for forming a missionary society, and establishing a fund for its support, and for employing missionaries among the natives of our continent.”<sup>15</sup> There was no general response

to these invitations. Charles Chaney observed, “What Baptists would not do for separation of church and state or for frontier and Indian evangelization, they were persuaded to do for Luther Rice, Adoniram and Ann Judson and the eastern mission.”<sup>16</sup>

While there was no national organization waiting to welcome Rice, several local groups were keenly interested in missions. There were two types of missionary organizations among American Baptists—the society and the associational. The society method was more popular in the north, the associational more popular in the south. The associational approach was based on geography; the society was financially based. Both approaches confined their efforts to home missions until 1812.<sup>17</sup>

The Baptists of New England showed particular interest in missions. Much of this interest developed through the published reports of William Carey. In May 1802, the Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Society held its first meeting at the First Baptist Church in Boston. The delegates adopted a constitution which read in part: “The object of this society shall be to furnish occasional preaching and to promote the knowledge of evangelistic truth in the new settlements of the United States, or farther, if circumstances should render it proper.”<sup>18</sup> In 1803, the society began publishing the *Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*, which was the second oldest Baptist periodical published in this country.<sup>19</sup> This magazine had a powerful effect in promoting concern for missions.

Baptists organized the Salem Bible Translation and Foreign Missions Society in 1812. While the older Massachusetts society was primarily concerned with domestic missions, the Salem group had a foreign missions orientation:

The object of this society shall be to raise money to aid the translation of the scriptures into the Eastern languages...under the superintendance of Doctor William Carey: or, if deemed advisable at any time, to assist in sending a missionary or missionaries from this country to India.<sup>20</sup>

After the news came that Judson and Rice had become Baptists, the Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel in India and Other Foreign Parts was organized in Boston.

The Baptists in the United States not only organized societies; they also opened their pocketbooks. Baptists gave more than \$3000 to send to the Judsons and Rice in India under the auspices of the Congregational Church. Between 1806 and 1814, American Baptists gave over \$20,000 for foreign missions. William Carey's letters inspired most of this giving.<sup>21</sup>

The baptisms of Judson and Rice electrified American Baptists. Their decision was viewed as "a call in providence upon us to extend our views and missionary efforts to that quarter of the globe."<sup>22</sup> As noted above, a new society was organized immediately in Boston, followed quickly by societies in Rhode Island and Connecticut.

Some Boston Baptists wrote the Baptist Missionary Society in England proposing that Adoniram Judson become a missionary of that society. They promised to guarantee his support. The British society, however, was reluctant, thinking it better for American Baptists to organize their own society.<sup>23</sup> William Carey wrote in this vein to William Staughton—"But is it impossible to form a Baptist Mission Society in America?...indeed stir in this business; this is a providence which gives a new turn to American relation to Oriental Mission."<sup>24</sup>

Thus encouraged, the Baptists in the United States were eagerly awaiting the

first-hand reports of Rice. When he landed in New York on July 17, 1813, he was warmly received by the Baptists. He did not stay with them long but hurried on to Boston, convinced that he needed to sever his ties with the American Board of Commissioners before embracing Baptists. The American Board quickly released him, and Rice began to solicit support among the Baptists.

The young missionary met with the Boston Society in September, 1813. Messengers also attended from the Salem and Haverhill societies. Those attending made plans to appeal to Baptists throughout the country. At first the Boston Society desired to invite all Baptists to contribute to the Judsons and Rice through their organization, but Rice was able to convince them that a new national body would garner more support. To that end they requested Rice to travel throughout the middle and southern states to gain Baptists' cooperation and organize missionary societies that would combine their efforts with New England.<sup>25</sup>

On September 29, 1813, Rice left Boston on his first southern tour. After stopping in Northborough to see his parents, he proceeded to New York and on to Philadelphia to attend the meeting of the Philadelphia Baptist Association. The Philadelphia Association responded enthusiastically to the idea of a national missionary society. They furnished Rice with letters of introduction to aid his efforts. The editor of the *Missionary Magazine* described Rice's experience:

Our esteemed brother Rice...has returned from India, and is now visiting our brethren in the south, for the purpose of uniting them with us in this great object. By letters received from him, it appears, that the proposed Mission is everywhere

received with the utmost cordiality. On his trip Rice visited the Philadelphia Association which upon hearing of his baptism and that of Judson voted to recommend the formation of a society of a similar kind with those already formed in New England to be denominated the Philadelphia Baptist Society for Foreign Missions.<sup>26</sup>

When the Philadelphia Association's meeting adjourned, Rice traveled to the south. He visited Baltimore and then journeyed on to Washington, D.C. Leaving Washington, the missionary rode on toward Richmond. During this stage of his journey, Rice began to catch a vision of what Baptists could become:

While passing from Richmond to Petersburg in the stage, an enlarged view of the business opened upon my contemplations. The plan which suggested itself to my mind, that of forming one principal society in each state, bearing the name of the state, and others in the same state auxiliary to that; and by these large or state societies, delegates be appointed to form one general society.<sup>27</sup>

With this expanded vision Rice pressed on to the south, visiting churches and associations in the Carolinas and Georgia. As he traveled, he helped to organize new missions societies. He received a warm reception and good hearing at every stop, being greatly aided on his initial and subsequent trips to the south by three outstanding Baptists: Richard Furman, William B. Johnson, and Jesse Mercer. All three showed great interest in the cause of missions.

Rice first met Furman at the Charlestown Baptist Association meeting. Furman gave firm support to Rice's plan. When the missionary visited the Savannah association, he found an enthusiastic supporter in W. B. Johnson. They discussed the idea of

a general society, and Johnson seized upon the idea. He volunteered to go as a delegate himself. With the association's approval Johnson distributed a circular letter promoting a general meeting. The letter read in part:

Since the defection of our dear Rice, Judson and Lady...several Missionary Societies have been formed by the Baptists in America. These societies have as their object the establishment and support of foreign missions and it is contemplated that delegates from them all will convene in some central situation in the United States for the purpose of organizing an efficient and practicable plan, on which the energies of the whole Baptist denomination in America, may be elicited, combined and directed, in one sacred effort, for sending the word of life to idolatrous lands.<sup>28</sup>

Buoyed by this support Rice retraced his steps northward. As he went, he encouraged associations and societies to participate in the general meeting. When Rice revisited Washington, he received an invitation to address the Congress of the United States. After hearing his sermon, that august body contributed sixty-seven dollars for missions.<sup>29</sup> By May of 1814, seventeen societies had been established for the purpose of supporting foreign missions. Luther Rice's efforts had born fruit in both money and concern.

Delegates from the societies were summoned to meet in Philadelphia on May 18, 1814. The meeting convened as planned with twenty-six pastors and seven laymen in attendance. They represented eleven states and the District of Columbia. Dr. Furman was elected chairman of the proceedings. After much deliberation the group voted to establish "The General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States of America, for

Foreign Missions.” The delegates decided to meet every three years, and the new organization soon was called the “Triennial Convention.”

The Convention elected twenty-one commissioners to act ad interim. These commissioners were called the “Baptist Board of Foreign Mission.” Richard Furman was elected on the first ballot to be president on the board, but declined because his home was so distant. On the second ballot Dr. Baldwin was elected as president with William Staughton as corresponding secretary.<sup>30</sup>

It is difficult to discern Luther Rice’s role in the Convention. Apparently he kept a low profile. He was asked to serve on a committee to formulate a plan to reach the “heathen” and on a committee designated to receive reports from local mission societies.<sup>31</sup> In one of its first acts, the Board voted to enroll Luther Rice as a missionary under appointment. However, they officially requested that he

continue his itinerant services, in the United States, for a reasonable time; with a view to excite the public mind more generally, to engage in missionary exertions; and to assist in originating societies, or institutions, for carrying the missionary design into execution.<sup>32</sup>

The Board had good reason to ask him to remain in the States; at the meeting he turned over to them \$1836.67, which he had collected on his southern tour.<sup>33</sup>

### **Luther Rice, The Missionary Itinerant**

The years from 1814 to 1817 were the busiest and happiest years of Rice’s life. He traveled constantly to promote the cause of missions. The records of his travels are as remarkable as the man who made them.

Only a man made of stern stuff could withstand such rigors. A. H. Newman wrote that Rice was “possessed of a robust constitution, he was able to endure an incredible amount of rough travel, and his eloquence and enthusiasm won the hearts of multitudes to the cause he had espoused.”<sup>34</sup> The itinerant was over six feet tall, and he had a strong voice. He excelled at extemporaneous speech, sometimes showing a dramatic flair. Certainly his industry and zeal tested his physical stamina. During the year 1815-1816, Rice spent most of his time in the western and southern states. He reported to the Board in May 1815 that there were seventy-one mission societies organized and cooperating.<sup>35</sup> This was no accident. These societies were the fruit of his tireless travels.

The entry in Rice’s *Journal* for August 31, 1816, reads:

Madison Co., Virginia. Proceed to Culpepper Courthouse 13 miles; get my horse shod; thence to Groundvine 13 miles; thence to Battle Run near Gaines Crossroads 8 miles; find the Shiloh Association in session—Mission business attended to my satisfaction—invited to preach this afternoon and tomorrow—Association adjourns—Preach “good shepherd.” Go to Bro. Conner’s 3 miles, + 3 = 29 miles today = 412 miles this week. Three nights rode all night—one of them in much comfort. Probably slept not more than 10 hours in 6 days and nights. My coming to the association appears to have been important.<sup>36</sup>

The Board commended Rice in their 1816 meeting on his successful efforts to raise money and organize societies. The Board also expressed its pleasure that Rice declined the presidency of Transylvania University in Kentucky. They renewed the missionary’s assignment—



Let him attend as many associations in the south and west as may be in his power, visiting, if possible, St. Louis and its vicinity; and spend the winter forming societies, collecting monies, and effectuating arrangements for keeping up a regular intercourse between the Board, and all the associations and mission societies in the United States.<sup>37</sup>

As compensation they paid Luther eight dollars a week, plus expenses.

Though underpaid and overworked Rice continued his faithful service. He wrote Dr. Staughton on May 16, 1817, reporting:

Since June 19, 1816, I have traveled 6600 miles—in populous and in dreary portions of the country—through wilderness and over rivers—across mountains and valleys—in heat and cold—by day and by night—in weariness, and painfulness, and fastings, and loneliness; but not a moment has been lost for want of health; no painful calamity has fallen my lot; no peril has closed upon me; nor has fear been permitted to prey on my spirits; nor even iniquitude to disturb my peace. Indeed, constantly has favourable countenance of society toward the great objects of the mission animated my hopes...I have...received for the missionary object, in cash and subscription more than \$4000.<sup>38</sup>

During the period described, Rice attended the North Carolina Baptist General Meeting of Correspondence, a yearly meeting in Virginia, a meeting of the Kentucky Baptist Mission Society, and assisted in the formation of a mission society in Tennessee. In addition he visited fifteen associations in Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi Territory, the Carolinas, and Georgia.<sup>39</sup> The Board recognized his efforts and resolved “that the signal successes that have, under the blessing of heaven, attended the indefatigable labours of the

Rev. Luther Rice, agent of the Board... suggest the expediency of maintaining such an agency for a period to come.”<sup>40</sup>

Rice did not let this praise go to his head. He made even greater efforts the next year. In April 1818, he wrote Dr. Staughton:

Since the date of my letter to you, the 16<sup>th</sup> of May, 1817, I have traveled 9359 miles, and received 5443 dollars and 57 cents. The expenditures connected with this course, including my allowance of \$8 per week, distribution of the last *Annual Report*; paper, printing, and distribution of the *Luminary*; paper for the report this year; postages, etc. have amounted only to 1963 dollars and 67 cents.<sup>41</sup>

Rice’s accomplishments are all the more remarkable given his means of transportation. Normally he rode horseback from place to place. Sometimes he would ride in a stagecoach if one was available. Later in his career he occasionally took passage on a steamboat. As he grew older, he rode a horse less and used a small buggy or sulkey more. His sulkey, pulled by his famous horse, Columbus, became a familiar sight to Baptists in the south.

On his preaching tours Rice’s pattern varied little. He sent letters ahead announcing his coming to each association. In the letters he identified himself and requested time on the program to present a missionary appeal. Usually he was warmly welcomed, and his sermon well received. After his sermon he always took an offering for missions and distributed copies of the *Annual Report* of the mission board. He encouraged each association to elect a corresponding secretary to maintain contact with the convention and distribute the *Annual Report* in the future.<sup>42</sup>

Luther’s preaching added to his success. He had great ability to sway an audience. His pleasing manner, appealing voice, and

boundless enthusiasm held the attention of the crowd. William J. Broadus remarked, "As a minister of the gospel, I doubt whether brother Rice had an equal in all these United States."<sup>43</sup> Certainly his firsthand accounts of Asia and South America pricked the interest of his provincial audiences.

Communication was the essence of Rice's responsibilities. His eloquence aided the cause of missions, but his prolific correspondence played a large part as well. His *Journal* is filled with detailed notations of hundreds of letters he sent. At every step in his travels he wrote more letters of encouragement or reply. The missionary remarked to a friend: "Frequently, after completing a day's ride, instead of indulging in the repose which nature solicits, it is necessary for me to employ my pen; however, fatigues too often overcome me, or perhaps I too easily yield to the inclination for rest."<sup>44</sup> Not only did he correspond while on the road; but when in Philadelphia or Washington, he often wrote thirty or forty letters a day. Some of his letters were sent to prospective missionaries. He was anxious to find missionary companions for the Judsons. Finally, he found a suitable couple. George Hough, a printer, and his wife were appointed by the Board. They arrived in Burma in 1816. The faithful itinerant was always alert for missionary candidates, and his old comrade Adoniram Judson gave him some suggestions:

In encouraging other young men to come out as missionaries, do use the greatest caution. You have hit it right in brother Hough. But one wrong-headed, conscientiously obstinate fellow, would ruin us. Humble, quiet, persevering men; men of sound sterling talents (though perhaps not brilliant) of decent accomplishments, and some natural aptitude to acquire

a language; men of an amiable, yielding temper willing to take the lowest place, to be the least of all, and the servant of all; men who enjoy much closet religion, who live near to God, and are willing to suffer all things for Christ's sake without being proud of it—these are the men. But O, how unlike the description is the writer of it!<sup>45</sup>

It is not clear how many candidates were found that fit Judson's request, but Rice certainly tried.

Another part of Rice's job was to organize missionary societies. He had good success in this area. By 1815, twenty-five female societies had been established, and the numbers grew year by year.<sup>46</sup> The missionary spokesman found a very responsive audience in the ladies of the Baptist churches. He led these women to form women's Mite or Cent Societies all over the country. These societies contributed to foreign and home missions as well as innumerable benevolent causes. These societies eventually joined together in the south to establish the Woman's Missionary Union. The main responsibility of Luther Rice was raising money. This came to be his life's work. How successful was he in this endeavor? Contributions by Baptists to foreign missions totaled \$1239.29 in 1814, but by 1816 the amount given was \$12, 236.84, almost a tenfold increase.<sup>47</sup>

Why was Luther Rice able to achieve so much? L.T. Gibson suggests three reasons. First, he spoke in such specific terms about Asia and South America that his hearers were impressed with his knowledge. Second, he was able to enlist people in his cause. And lastly, he always maintained an interest in individuals even when dealing with groups.<sup>48</sup>

The preceding account may seem overly positive, but Rice did find great enthusiasm in his early itinerations. Unfortunately,

that situation lasted only four or five years. Opposition arose, especially in the west. When Rice began his travels in that region, he found great interest in missions. In fact, when he visited Kentucky and Tennessee for the first time, he received larger contributions than in the other states. Prior to 1820, he made several tours of the west and met with a good response. After 1820, however, an anti-missionary feeling developed.<sup>49</sup>

Two notable opponents of Baptist missions (both home and foreign) were John Taylor of Kentucky and Daniel Parker of Tennessee. They opposed missions for two reasons: first, that the main concern of the missionaries and societies was to get money; and second, that the missionary societies were contrary to Baptist church government.<sup>50</sup>

Taylor compared the missionaries to Judas, "who was a lover of money," and to the horse leech which "sucks blood with great vigor." Taylor went on to call Luther Rice "a modern Tetzal." He said Rice's motive was about the same as Tetzal's and that "our Luther by his measures of cunning in the same art of Tetzal may alarm all American Baptists." Parker was no less slanderous comparing the missionaries to the money changers whom Christ drove from the temple.<sup>51</sup>

What brought on these heated attacks? William Warren Sweet suggests several reasons. First, these pastors were opposed to the centralization of authority in the denomination. Second, they resented an educated and paid clergy. Third, they were jealous of the better-educated missionaries. Fourth, they were simply selfish with their churches' funds. And fifth, most of these men held to a hyper-Calvinistic theology.<sup>52</sup> Sweet writes:

Generally the anti-mission Baptists were ultra-Calvinistic in doctrine, were opposed to academic or theological education for the ministry, and were hostile to all societies for the promotion of the spiritual and social welfare of mankind. They taught that God in his own time and way would bring his elect to repentance and redemption, and that therefore any effort on the part of man to assist God in his redemptive work was not only presumptuous, but wicked.<sup>53</sup>

Many of these anti-missions Baptists became part of the intriguing Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Baptists founded by Daniel Parker and also the Primitive Baptists. In summary Sweet says, "The total effect of the anti-mission movement in the west was undoubtedly harmful to religion generally and to the progress of the Baptists in particular."<sup>54</sup> Often the anti-mission speakers would excoriate Rice for not returning to Asia. That raises an interesting question. Why did Luther not return? It seems that he wanted to go back, at least at first. He wrote Judson on September 30, 1814:

The Baptist Board for Foreign Missions...readily undertook your support and mine, but thought it necessary for me to continue my labors in this country for a time. Of this I am convinced in my judgement, though it is extremely painful to my heart to be thus detained here. I hope, however, in the course of five or six months to get the Baptists so well rallied, that the necessity of my remaining will no longer exist.<sup>55</sup>

Judson and Rice were firm friends, and Adoniram missed his colleague intensely. There was a note of pathos in his letter to Rice of August 3, 1816:

You remember that the furlough we gave you on the Isle of France, extended to two years only. Little did

we then think, that three or four years would elapse before we met again... Still permit me to hope, that, as you are spending the prime of your life in such valuable services, in America, for the heathen, you will give them your personal services in your old age; and that we shall unite our prayers together, in an Eastern clime.<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps that letter touched Rice deeply. He wrote the Board in 1817 expressing his desire to join Judson in Burma. The Board decided, however, "that it is not the duty of Mr. Rice, as yet, to depart for the Burman empire."<sup>57</sup> Judson was not a quitter, and he did not give up easily on Rice. He wrote from Rangoon in 1819 saying:

Your great work is mainly done. If you should close your American labors by actually embarking as a missionary, it would add great weight to all your past deeds, and be most suitable and worthy consummation. You would perhaps do more good in America, by such a measure, than your presence would effect. It would at least stamp a character of sincerity on the whole affair, which multitudes will otherwise question.<sup>58</sup>

Judson was right. If Luther Rice had heeded his advice and returned to Asia, Rice would have been enshrined in the missionary hall of fame. If he had returned to Asia, he would have avoided all the heartache of his last years. But, he stayed in America. Why? One reason is that he wanted to return with a wife. He wrote Judge Tallmadge that he did not "expect to return to India without being provided for in this respect."<sup>59</sup> Another reason may have been fear for his health. Luther became very ill in India, contracting a liver disease that eventually killed him. Perhaps he feared a recurrence. One certain reason was his work. He became so immersed in raising mission support and later in the

work of Columbian College he just could not let go. At any rate, Judson and Rice never met again in this life.

### **Luther Rice and Denominational Development**

Luther Rice was a man of many dimensions. Though he was passionately devoted to the cause of foreign missions, he also cared deeply about other matters. His travels in the West convinced him of the need for home mission work. He stated in 1815, "Not only do I conceive it proper that a mission be established in the West, on account of the importance of the region itself, but indispensably necessary to satisfy the wishes and expectations of pious people in all parts of the United States."<sup>60</sup>

John M. Peck was the first Baptist home missionary in the west. In 1815, he met Luther Rice, who stirred his interest in missions. Rice encouraged him to study with Dr. Staughton in Philadelphia, and in 1817 the Triennial Convention sent Peck and his family to St. Louis. He had a great ministry in that region.<sup>61</sup> On his tour in the south in 1816-1817, Rice met Humphrey Posey. Posey had a concern for the Cherokee Indians. Rice encouraged him toward this ministry and helped him establish the Cherokee mission station at Valley Towns, North Carolina. This became a project of the Triennial Convention.<sup>62</sup>

Rice also had a continuing interest in Baptist publishing. He had made Washington, D.C. his headquarters and helped to establish two Baptist journals that were published there. The first, the *Columbian Star*, began publication in 1819, and *The Latter Day Luminary* in the next year. Both of these magazines struggled financially. Eventually the *Columbian Star* was transferred to Georgia where it became *The Christian Index*, the Georgia Baptist state

paper.<sup>63</sup>

As early as 1819 or 1820, several important Baptist leaders began meeting to discuss the need for a Baptist tract society. Rice was a leader in this group. Finally in 1824, the Baptist General Tract Society was organized. As usual, Rice wanted to locate it in Washington, but it was located in Philadelphia because of the better printing establishments there. The Society published eighty-five thousand tracts the first year, and later evolved into the American Baptist Publication Society.<sup>64</sup>

As he pursued his travels, Rice became convinced that Baptists needed institutions for ministerial training. Perhaps the vociferous opposition of untrained preachers in the west prompted this conviction. Whatever the reason, from 1820 on, Rice gave much of his time to concerns of ministerial education. In doing this he was convinced that he was aiding the cause of missions. Always fond of Washington, Rice was eager to see a new college located there. In his report to the Convention in May 1820 he stated:

It has afforded me no small pleasure to find it convenient...to bestow some attention on providing at Washington a site for the institution to promote the education of the ministry...suffer me to express the deep impression I cannot but feel that the arrival of the period of this convention brings with it a crisis, particularly in relation to the education of the pious young, brethren in the ministry, of the utmost moment.<sup>65</sup>

The Convention voted at that meeting to establish Columbian College. This college began operations in January 1822. Luther Rice served as agent and treasurer.

In addition to his work for the mission board, Luther now had almost sole responsibility for Columbian College. He

redoubled his travels and speaking engagements. The college got off to a good start, and in 1823 the Convention adopted a resolution of gratitude for the "generous devotion of the agent to the college, and other concerns of the convention."<sup>66</sup>

### **Luther Rice's Last Years**

Luther Rice's last years were a period of trouble, even disgrace. An agreement had been made in 1820 by which Rice was to give half of his time to raising funds for missions and half to raising funds for the college. Baptists concerned with missions began to say that Rice was neglecting the work of the mission board (perhaps they had some reason for this).

Rice was not only the chief fund raiser of Columbian College; he also served as the chief financial officer. This latter job proved to be his undoing. He was much too optimistic in his financial plans for the college. While a large student body was attracted, money came in much more slowly. The economic depression of the early 1820s complicated the situation. The Convention had adopted a pay-as-you-go policy, but new buildings were constructed on credit. The college plunged deeply into debt, and funds were borrowed from the mission board with the expectation of quick repayment. When the Board called for its funds, they could not be returned. This prompted a scandal in the denomination.

A group of pastors who were very happy that the Convention had departed from its original concentration on missions intervened. Exhorted by their spokesman, Francis Wayland, they called for a complete investigation and audit. The audit revealed financial disaster at the college, and Rice received most of the blame. Some harshly accused him of dishonesty, but the investi-

gation proved that he was only guilty of imprudent planning and inept book-keeping.<sup>67</sup>

Rice accepted all the responsibility, though he could have shared it with other college officials. In 1826, the Convention dismissed him from his responsibilities with the mission board and college. The Convention further voted to separate Columbian College from convention support. The meeting of 1826 was dominated by New Englanders and others opposed to Rice. They wanted to return to the spirit of the 1814 constitution of the Triennial Convention. This proved a victory for those advocating a societal rather than a denominational approach.<sup>68</sup>

After his dismissal in 1826, Rice continued without pay to travel throughout the country soliciting funds for the college and missions. He retained much of his popularity in the south, and he made most of his itinerations there. He was worried about the debt of the college and hence made a personal contribution of \$3500. To his inheritance of \$3000 he added his life's savings of \$500 that he had saved out of his salary of \$8 a week.<sup>69</sup> In 1832, he was elected President of Georgetown College in Kentucky, but he refused the position to continue his fund raising efforts.

Rice attended the Triennial Convention meeting at Richmond in 1835 not knowing that it would be his last. The delegates there represented some of the 8000 churches with more than 600,000 members. He heard reports from the mission Board concerning the work of 112 missionaries working in 25 mission stations overseas. The Board encouraged support for a budget of over \$100,000.<sup>70</sup> After the meeting, though ill, he began another tour through the south. On September 25, 1836, in Edgefield County, South Carolina, he died.

As he lay dying, Rice gave these instructions: "Send my sulkey, and horse, and baggage, to brother Brooks, with directions to send them to Brother Sherwood, and say that they all belong to the college."<sup>71</sup>

The Baptist Convention of South Carolina erected a monument over his grave, which reads:

Perhaps no American has done more for the great Missionary Enterprise. It is thought the first American Foreign Mission, on which he went to India, associated with Judson and others originated with him. And if the Burmans have cause of gratitude toward Judson, for a faith version of God's Word; so they will thro' generations to come "arise up and call Rice, blessed:" for it was his eloquent appeals for the Heathen, on his return to America, which raised our Baptist churches to adopt the Burman Mission, and sustain Judson in his arduous toils.<sup>72</sup>

## Conclusion

Luther Rice ministered among Baptists in the United States for twenty-three years (1813-1836). He led in the transformation of widely scattered, disorganized churches into a true denomination. He envisioned and initiated programs of foreign missions, home missions, Christian education, and publications, which enrich Baptist life and witness today.

The records show that Baptists were interested in missions before Rice returned from India, but he was a catalyst for Baptists. His unceasing travel and exhortations accelerated missionary movements that had been developing since the start of William Carey's ministry in 1792. The missionary itinerant captured the imagination of Baptists so they too could share his dreams and visions.

Rice was gratified to see the developments that followed the foundation of for-

eign mission societies. Baptists discovered that the most effective means of promoting religion at home is to encourage foreign missions. The proliferation of voluntary societies led to an age of benevolence in American Christianity. The growing tendency toward national organizations was amplified by the formation of the overseas societies. The establishment of these overseas societies led to the division of home and foreign missions.<sup>73</sup>

Luther Rice never found his way back to India, but was his contribution less for that? Lynn May of the Southern Baptist Historical Commission says, "Though he never returned to the foreign mission field, Rice did more for the cause of missions through his ministry in the United States than he could ever have accomplished abroad."<sup>74</sup> Rice was most popular and influential in the south. The Triennial Convention departed from the denominational pattern that Rice had envisioned, concentrating solely on foreign and domestic missions. Yet, when the Southern Baptist Convention organized in 1845, the trees planted by Luther Rice bore fruit.

Rice helped awaken Baptists to the need for Christian education and ministerial training. Though his efforts were resented and misunderstood, he persevered in this as in all things. W. O. Carver said that Luther Rice "inaugurated every form of effort which our denomination has today except orphanages and hospitals."<sup>75</sup> One could add the radio and television ministry in modern times, but it is not hard to imagine Luther's enthusiasm for these new technologies. He literally gave his life riding the rugged trails of rural America to visit churches, camp meetings, and associations spreading his passion for world missions. "He was surely one of our greatest pioneers."<sup>76</sup>

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### ENDNOTES

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- <sup>2</sup>Ibid., 30-31.
- <sup>3</sup>Ibid., 48.
- <sup>4</sup>Charles Chaney, *The Birth of Missions in America* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1976) 191.
- <sup>5</sup>Taylor, 82.
- <sup>6</sup>Ibid., 77.
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid., 90-91.
- <sup>8</sup>Leonard Woods, *A Missionary Memoir: The Sermon and Addresses Preached at the Ordination of Adoniram Judson and Luther Rice*



- (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1812) 38.
- <sup>9</sup>Letter from William Carey to Dr. William Staughton, dated October 20, 1812, *Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine* 3 (September 1813) 322.
- <sup>10</sup>Letter from Luther Rice to Rev. Thomas Baldwin, *Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine* 3 (May 1813) 293.
- <sup>11</sup>Taylor, 104.
- <sup>12</sup>Luther Rice, "Origin of American Baptist Foreign Missions," *The Cross and Baptist Journal* (October 1835) 1.
- <sup>13</sup>Taylor, 119.
- <sup>14</sup>Lynn E. May, Jr., "Foundations Laid by Luther Rice," *Baptist History and Heritage* 8 (April 1973) 70.
- <sup>15</sup>Chaney, 196.
- <sup>16</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup>Robert A. Baker, *The Southern Baptist Convention and Its People* (Nashville: Broadman, 1974) 98.
- <sup>18</sup>Henry S. Burrage, *A History of the Baptists in New England* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1894) 138.
- <sup>19</sup>The oldest Baptist publication was the *Georgia Analytical Repository* published by Henry Holcomb in 1802-1803.
- <sup>20</sup>*Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*, September 1812, 215.
- <sup>21</sup>Baker, 107.
- <sup>22</sup>"Report of the Baptist Missionary Society," *Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*, September 1813, 349.
- <sup>23</sup>Burrage, 153.
- <sup>24</sup>*Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*, September 1813, 153.
- <sup>25</sup>Burrage, 153.
- <sup>26</sup>"Remarks on Foreign Missions," *Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*, December 1813, 353.
- <sup>27</sup>Taylor, 133.
- <sup>28</sup>*Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*, March 1814, 7-8.
- <sup>29</sup>Evelyn Wingo Thompson, *Luther Rice: Believer in Tomorrow* (Nashville: Broadman, 1967) 93.
- <sup>30</sup>Ibid., 98.
- <sup>31</sup>L. T. Gibson, "Luther Rice's Contribution to Baptist History" (S.T.D. dissertation, Temple University, 1944) 74.
- <sup>32</sup>"Constitution and Proceedings of the General Missionary Convention," *Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*, September 1814, 68.
- <sup>33</sup>Thompson, 99.
- <sup>34</sup>Albert Henry Newman, *A History of the Baptist Churches in the United States* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1915) 394.
- <sup>35</sup>Taylor, 14.
- <sup>36</sup>Luther Rice, *The Journal of Luther Rice* (Washington: Library of Congress Microfilm, N.D.).
- <sup>37</sup>"Proceedings of the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions," *Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*, September 1816, 343.
- <sup>38</sup>*American Baptist Magazine* (Succeeded the *Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*), November 1817, 219-220.
- <sup>39</sup>Ibid., 216-217.
- <sup>40</sup>Ibid., September 1817, 172.
- <sup>41</sup>Ibid., July 1818, 371.
- <sup>42</sup>Thompson, 138.
- <sup>43</sup>Taylor, 244.
- <sup>44</sup>Ibid., 154.
- <sup>45</sup>The General Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States, *Proceedings of the First Triennial Meeting* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1817) 164.
- <sup>46</sup>*Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*, March 1815, 142.
- <sup>47</sup>Newman, 394.
- <sup>48</sup>Gibson, 75.
- <sup>49</sup>William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier: The Baptists 1783-1830* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1964) 61.
- <sup>50</sup>Ibid., 68.
- <sup>51</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup>Ibid., 72-74.
- <sup>53</sup>Ibid., 67.
- <sup>54</sup>Ibid., 76.
- <sup>55</sup>Taylor, 139.
- <sup>56</sup>*Proceedings of the First Triennial Convention*, 163.
- <sup>57</sup>*American Baptist Magazine*, September 1817, 174.
- <sup>58</sup>Adoniram Judson, "Letter to Luther Rice," June 24, 1819, Archives of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, Richmond, Virginia.
- <sup>59</sup>Thompson, 125.
- <sup>60</sup>Newman, 396.
- <sup>61</sup>Burrage, 146.
- <sup>62</sup>George Washington Paschal, *History of North Carolina Baptists*, 2 vols. (Raleigh: North Carolina State Convention, 1955) 2:538.
- <sup>63</sup>Baker, 121.
- <sup>64</sup>Ibid., 113-114.
- <sup>65</sup>Taylor, 170-171.
- <sup>66</sup>Ibid., 174.
- <sup>67</sup>Newman, 399-400.
- <sup>68</sup>*American Baptist Magazine*, June 1826, 181.
- <sup>69</sup>William A. Carleton, *The Dreamer Cometh* (Atlanta: The Home Mission Board, 1960) 67.
- <sup>70</sup>Thompson, 196.
- <sup>71</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>72</sup>Ibid., 237.
- <sup>73</sup>Chaney, 203-204.
- <sup>74</sup>May, 72.

<sup>75</sup>Taylor, 16.

<sup>76</sup>May, 73.