

This is the 1833 Circular of the Contentnea Association in N.C. It is extra-ordinary, seeing they had just in the past two decades realized the direction Fullerism was sweeping them, and their need for self-preservation as a sound witness to the cause they loved. Their reform, a spiritual war, as it were, left its awful effect upon them. We have not read another self-examination and repentance as expressed in this letter. We surely hope you find this of a special blessing to your own soul. S. P.

## **1833 Circular, Contentnea Baptist**

### **Association**

[Ministers seated at this session were Elders: Samuel Moore, Thomas Dupree, Mark Bennett, George W. Wallace, John A. Atkinson and Bynum S. Wallace.

Associations in correspondence were the Kehukee and Little River.

Pardon me for the intrusion of my thoughts on the Circular below: The sweeping flood of humanly devised errors, modifying both the doctrines, practices, and order of the primitive churches in N.C., had to have been resisted, or the Truth would falter even worse. The committee on this Circular letter saw the natural results of such needful, yet painful discipline, and this circular is outstanding as an honest self-examination of the darker side of faithful resistance. In light of the then present situation, it brings tears to our eyes to read of their repentance. What a lesson for our own age!-SCP]

### CIRCULAR LETTER

*The Contentnea Baptist Association assembled at Tyson, M, Pitt County, October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1833, - To all the churches and brethren composing her body,*

*Beloved in Christ:-*

The long forbearance and grace of God have permitted us to assemble once more in association where the presence of brethren from almost every church in our bounds has gladdened our hearts and where the pleasing and brotherly manner of our sittings together we trust has tended to strengthen the cords of our love and of our union.

With an earnest and longing desire for your prosperity we feel unwilling to part and return to our homes without sending you some token of our remembrance and some word of admonition and encouragement to assist you while passing along on your pilgrimage. There is, we believe, dear brethren, but one state in which the miseries of the present life can be softened and the dismal gloom of sin and the future can be removed - viz - That in which the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts casting our affections to warm our way to heaven and our hearts to embrace our brethren. Love is the essence, and quintessence, of all true religion and never are the saints of God so happy as when they feel its warmest exercise. Believing, Brethren, that the love of many, nay, the love of all is waxing cold and that our happiness is thereby diminished and diminishing, to the intent that we may seek to regain our first love, we will call your attention to this, as the subject of our present Circular.

Is not our situation similar to that of the Church at Ephesus described by John the Divine (Rev. 2: 1-5)? And may not the Holy Ghost have the same charge against us? *“Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith He that holdeth the seven stars in His right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for My name’s sake hast labored, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.”*

Soon after the churches in Asia were planted, certain teachers came amongst them saying, “We are apostles.” The church at Ephesus not being willing to be led away from the truth felt it to be their duty to try them. The result of the trial was they found them liars, the testimony together with the commendations bestowed upon this church by the Holy Ghost shows them to have been true and steadfast in almost everything but one: they had left their first love.

As soon as they had got through with their trial of the false apostles, they were commanded to repent and do the first works and they were threatened that in case they failed their candlestick should be removed out of his place – that is, their church should be scattered and brought to naught. They doubtless did right to try the false apostles. But whatever effect this business with its attendant circumstances ought to have had upon that church, it is certain that it had the tendency to cool their affections and to remove them from their first love. And now to our own situation:

For about twenty years teachers have been among us, the truth of whose doctrines and the correctness of whose practices we from the beginning had reason to doubt. We felt it our duty to try them. The trial has been long and distressing and we do believe the result is we found their doctrines and practices unscriptural and we may again say, whatever ought to be the effect produced by this investigation, it surely appears to have cooled and drawn us away from our first love.

How lukewarm has it left our love to God and how cramped and indifferent our good affections to one another! But to advance, It is certainly a duty for Christians to love God and each other fervently, sincerely and ardently; or this charge: *“Thou hast left thy first love,”* and the attendant command, *“repent and do the first works,”* could not have been offered to the church at Ephesus. Do we not hear the same charge and the same command directed to us? and why? The trying of false doctrines has changed in so degree the business of the preacher from *feeding* to *fighting*, from *nursing* the flock to *opposing the encroachment* of the wolf and feelings of resistance were obliged to be cherished. Finding error and deception among us, our general confidence has been weakened; and with the firmly resistance, the joy of confidence has been marred.

Suspicious and jealousies have been created; shyness and distance have been discovered and that charity which suffers long - bears all things and believes all things, or hopes in what it cannot believe, has lost something of its freeness, sweetness and openness. Contentions have been followed by injured feelings almost affecting our brotherly habits. We hope, Brethren that you have been able to discern the errors which have prevailed, so that you are now settled in your minds; having measurably got through with the examination of their false doctrines. And now if we have left our first love, we pray that we may remember from whence we have fallen. Not from all love; but from *our first love*.

Prior to this trial our hearts contained room enough for all our brethren in the United States. Now two or three small associations, or a few faithful churches and frequently not all the members in a single church can find unfeigned love in our bosoms. A sourness, we fear, is contracted which is too prone to debate; and contentions develop, even when brethren of kindred sentiments meet, while mutual love of the Truth constitutes a source of considerable happiness and esteem. They, notwithstanding frequently feel their brotherly affections obstructed by something they scarcely know what - Love struggles for freer exercise, but fails and mourns under disappointment. In this condition, the Christians' largest share of spiritual comfort is not our lot.

Our first love could turn misfortunes into blessings while it could contemplate all things working together for our good, as with Jacob, it could "shorten" time with us and as with Abraham it could make us sacrifice our dearest delights. It could hide a great many sins, nearly all the faults of our brethren. It could cause us cheerfully to forsake our homes and our husbandry and hasten to the Sanctuary. There sitting under the Lord's shadow it was delightful and His fruit was sweet to our taste; the songs of Zion were our employment and our conversation was favored with love. But where are we now? Fallen and our first love is gone! (Mere trifles overmatch our present love, and grosser passions are contending for the mastery.) Each day the Holy Ghost is secretly saying, "*I have somewhat against thee because thou hast left thy first love,*" And instead of wrathfully crying, No! here is graciously whisperings, "*Remember.*" Let us remember His threats, **They will be executed!** It is not enough that we "contend for the faith," but that we live the life of charity, also! On proportion to our love to Christ and to one another will be our good works. If our first love be left, our first works will also be left. Give heed to the merciful warning - will not the Lord perform His word? And shall our candlestick be removed out of *his* place? Shall our church or churches be dissolved and scattered; and our children grow up without a light or refuge? Our number is growing less - The church at Ephesus was the Lord's and yet He threatened to remove it. Our cause, we believe, is the cause of God and we hold His truths in our churches. Yet He may remove them. Let us sit ourselves as one man to enquire whether we have left our first love. If we have, let us try by this merciful warning of the Holy Ghost, by the solemn obligation of servants and the high privilege of brethren to the Lord Jesus and by all the desire of our greatest earthly comforts to seek to repent and do the first works; works of

unfeigned, fervent love; works of willing and dutiful obedience to Christ; works of Christian behavior through life. The Lord make you perfect in love and preserve you blameless unto the coming day/

May He spare our churches and add to their number. Until we meet again, either in our association or as we hope, in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Farewell