

## **Who is the Yates of Yates Baptist Church?**

### **2 Cor 5:16-20**

Before there was Lottie Moon there was Matthew Yates. He was the first missionary from North Carolina to go to a foreign land. He was the first missionary appointed by the newly formed Southern Baptist Convention to go to China where he would live and serve for 43 years. He was a giant of a man in American, and even more so in China, pushing the tape measure to 6 foot 2 inches tall and weighing close to 244 pounds in his prime. He was the very opposite of Lottie Moon who was only 4 foot 3 inches tall and didn't weigh 100 pounds with a big King James Version of the Bible in her hand. He was a trail blazer, building a legacy of trust and respect among the Chinese people so they might be receptive to other missionaries in the future. He is little known today outside a few cloistered Baptist historians, but I would venture to say that if any human being has something to do with the great revival taking place in China today, it would be on the account of Matthew Yates.

Yates Baptist Church is named after this great missionary to China. And most of us know very little about the man whose name and life have given identity and purpose to this congregation for 132 years. We know what it means to be a church. We know a little about what it means to be a Baptist. I hope today, you'll know what the rest of the name of our church means and how that continues to drive the missionary instincts of this church.

About 9 years ago a letter came to our home with a return address of "Yates Baptist Church." Rebekah, who was 7 years old at the time enthusiastically picked up the letter and said, "Look Daddy a church is named after me." Her full name is Rebekah Yates Gordon. Perhaps Yates Baptist Church wasn't named after Rebekah, but it was named after another Yates, whose name has come to represent the very best Baptist have to offer the world in missionary zeal.

The Apostle Paul once reminded a young, fledgling church, "*We are therefore, Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us*" (2 Cor 5:20). Matthew Yates came to embrace this word from God as a word to him. He heard God's voice calling him to be an ambassador for Christ to the world. He left home, family, and the comfort of a secure teaching post to enter a foreign land where the Gospel of Jesus Christ was at best, a curiosity, and at worst, a poison created by the devil. Yates offered his life, body, and vocational energies to Christ so that he could be an ambassador for Christ in China, and create a foothold in the corner of the world that is more and more being enlightened by the Spirit of Christ.

On this Homecoming Sunday of 2010, the Sunday before we expand to two worship services, I want you to know something of this great ambassador for Christ so that you too can be inspired to be such an ambassador in your home, your neighborhood,

your school, your workplace, and yes, perhaps somewhere far away for the sake of Christ.

## **Beginnings**

Matthew Yates was born in 1819 just a few miles down the road from where you are sitting, in a place called Green Level near the boundaries of Chatham and Wake Counties. He was the second of ten children born to William and Delilah Yates. His parents were devoted members of Mount Pigscah Baptist Church where his father was a deacon for 50 years. Matthew grew up on a large farm of 500 acres where he learned hard labor, wielding an ax, holding a plough, and caring for cattle. This lifestyle of constant hard work and solving practical problems would prove invaluable to Yates throughout his life.

His first school was a one room field house where the only textbooks were a Noah Webster's spelling book, a Walker's Dictionary, and a Pike's Arithmetic book that helped the students "cipher." This education clearly had its limitations but it did build within him a knowledge of words, and would inspire him to write the first missionary training manual for future missionaries to China, a digitized copy I hold in my hand today.

Matthew's father loved his pastors, as well as preachers from other denominations, and he often had them over for a meal. One of these Rev. John Purefoy one day put his hand on Matthew's head and said, "May the Lord make a preacher of him." This made a strong impression on Matthew, for the preacher's manner was kind and his tone very serious.

One day Rev. Purefoy asked Matthew, "Do you pray?" He responded, "I don't know how to pray." Purefoy gave him a lesson on prayer on the spot. He said, "I will tell you. Say 'God be merciful to me, a sinner.'" Matthew didn't know it, but he was being taught the "sinner's prayer", a prayer that many people, including myself will breathe and meditate throughout the day. It was the first time Matthew considered himself a sinner and he was troubled by it.

Purefoy wouldn't let Matthew off the hook. A while later he asked, "Have you prayed yet?" Matthew responded, "I don't know where." The reverend wasn't put off by this excuse. He said, "Go into the woods where none but God can hear you. God is everywhere." So this is what Matthew did.

Later in his life Yates would write of the value of these words spoken to him when he was a child. He wrote regarding the religious instruction of children that "they usually have a high respect and reverence for a minister; and, judging by my own experience, a solemn word spoken to a child of ten years, when there is not one present to distract attention, leaves a lasting impression...that may ultimately be blessed to the salvation of the soul."

## **Baptism**

At the age of 15 Matthew presented himself to the “anxious seat” for prayer at the church. This was a pew on the front row of the church left vacant for those who were willing to expressed a troubled spiritual condition. Matthew was under conviction and he was willing to expose that to the preacher and congregation. He would wrestle with the Holy Spirit for two more years before he finally blurted out in spiritual despair the first prayer he had ever been taught, “Lord, have mercy on me a sinner.” Soon thereafter he was baptized in New Hope Creek at the age of 17.

Like Jesus, he was still wet behind the ears from his baptism, when Satan attacked him, tempting him to abandon this folly of Christian discipleship. With his wet clothes slung on a stick laid on his shoulder, he began the 3 mile walk home when he confessed “the tempter joined me” and said, “Well, how do you feel now, that you have been baptized? Are you as happy as you thought you would be? Don’t you think you’ve made a spectacle of yourself? You see everyone who passes on horseback looks at you, and some even smile at you. I think you have made a fool of yourself....You know it is not pleasant to be laughed at” (p. 14).

Matthew was driven by this satanic voice off the road to find a place to pray. Not long after he began praying he heard a great noise in the leaves on the other side of a fallen tree. He stood up to see what the commotion was, and there was a king snake 2 and ½ feet long in a deadly battle with a very large black serpent that was 6 feet long. Yates watched an amazing thing, which he interpreted to be a sign from God. The smaller king snake killed the black serpent and crawled quietly away. He thought about Jesus, in his weak state on the cross, defeating Satan and felt great joy. He believed he was in a sacred place and he was glad to be there. Henceforth, his prayer would be, “Lord, what will you have me do? Show me my duty and grant me the grace and courage to do it.”

## **Early Struggles**

Matthew believed God wanted him to win his friends to Christ, but he felt awkward in talking to them about such a serious subject. Satan tried to get him to stop this, so he said, “Get thee behind me Satan” and spoke to them briefly. The Lord eventually made him feel he ought to preach, so he consented. He determined to preach in the Sabbath school the next Sunday. The Sabbath school was a large Sunday School class where a lay person would teach or offer some word of testimony to the congregation. All week long he rehearsed his sermon in his mind as he was plowing the fields. That Sunday morning he walked the 2 and ½ miles to church and became more terrified with each step. When the time came, he sat in his seat in silent fear. The time came and went, and he never left his seat and never spoke a word.

Later, he convinced two baptized friends to host a Sunday afternoon prayer meeting at the church. When the time came the church was filled from wall to wall. The

people were eager to hear the young people pray. Again he was terrified and so he announced a hymn. After the hymn he said a prayer. Following his prayer he heard Satan say to him, "Now you've done it. You have disgraced yourself and done the cause more harm than good. You had better quit, and never try again" (p. 18). He dismissed the voice, announced a second hymn, then asked a gentleman to pray who did worse at praying than Matthew. He did this a third time, and each time the man he asked to pray did a poor job of it. Ironically, it was the poor praying of the adults that encouraged Matthew the most. He thought, "I'm bad, but I'm not that bad." Still, he was unsure of his call to be a preacher and told the Lord so. But he heard the Lord say, "This is your duty; walk ye in it." And so he did.

### **School**

His pastor, Mr. Dowd, recommended he enter Wake Forest Academy, 34 miles away from home. This small, private school, 3 miles away from Wake Forest College would become his first home away from home. He completed the school and received a recommendation to attend Wake Forest College, the first Baptist college founded by the state convention. Dr. Samuel Wait, president of the college encouraged him to come, even though he didn't have the money. The state convention adopted Matthew as the sole beneficiary of their scholarship funds and they paid his way to college. Yates was a quiet but steady student. One of his roommates called him a "plodder." He was affable and charming, but not filled, as one student described with "unbecoming jocularity." He instinctively seemed to know the point where propriety ends and impropriety begins.

### **SBC Missionary**

President Wait and others knew that Yates was not a brilliant scholar but he was a young man of genuine piety and a gentle way with people that was winsome and attractive. Wait wrote to J.B. Taylor, the first president of the Foreign Mission Board of the SBC about Yates. Taylor traveled to Wake Forest to interview Yates about the possibility of going to China to serve as a missionary. Yates attention had been brought to the "heathen world" through the journal writings of Ann Judson detailing her work in India. Taylor was impressed. Yates was ready to go to China, but there was one catch. He owed \$250 to Wake Forest College for his education and his conscience would not allow him to leave the country until he had paid his debt in full. One of his professors, Dr. White came to Yates' dorm room and said, "Here, Yates, is the money you say you require to liberate you. Now prepare yourself for China." So he did.

Even though he had a firm offer from a Christian school in Alabama to teach for a salary of \$2000 a year, Yates decided to go to China on a salary of \$750 a year. Before leaving, he married Eliza Moring of Chatham City, who would serve beside him his entire 43 years in China, and when he died she would serve another 6 years with no compensation from the convention. It's one of those historical tragedies that we don't

know more about this extraordinary woman who left her home and served nearly a half century in a foreign land. All this Presbyterian seminary trained woman wanted to do with her life was, in her words, “to be the wife of a missionary.” That she did amid perils, afflictions, and discouragements, yet she remained cheerful to the end.

Yates was the first missionary from North Carolina to go to a foreign land. The year was 1846, only one year after the creation of the Southern Baptist Convention. It would be almost 30 years before Lottie showed up in China to build on the work Yates had begun. While his work in China was extraordinary the influence on his home state was equally strong. North Carolina became known as “the missionary state” primarily because of Yates. A state that had once been indifferent to missions because of ignorance, or hostile to missions because of a hyper-Calvinistic doctrine that said, “If God wants to save the heathen, he can sure do it without our help” became filled with a missionary spirit. North Carolina would become the strongest missionary state of the convention in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## **China**

Matthew and Eliza arrived in Shanghai, China “unannounced and solitary, two young strangers who absolutely ignorant of the language, the place, and the people, but with strong faith in God” (p 45). They had come to help lay the foundations of a mighty superstructure for the kingdom of God. They had no place to live and they knew only one sentence in the Chinese language: “Te – ko – kian – sa?” which meant “What is that?” That’s how they learned the Chinese language by going around the house and saying, “Te – ko – kian – sa?” They had a letter to the Austrian Counsel who was supposed to help them find housing, but he was too busy helping victims of a shipwrecked French vessel (My how times change, but situations stay the same!). The Austrian sent Mr. and Mrs. Yates to Bishop Boon of the Protestant Episcopal Church, who helped them find and rent their first home in China.

The Chinese language was a bear to learn. While there are 26 letters in the English alphabet, there are 44,700 characters in the Chinese dictionary. In addition there are 700 distinct sounds to each of these. Tone, pitch, and accent are all important to the Chinese, which is why even the best Chinese linguists never master the language. John Wesley, the great Methodist preacher once said the Chinese language was the invention of the devil to keep Christianity out. Yates would practice and plod his way through the language and became so good at it, that unless the Chinese people actually saw this giant white man speaking, they would be convinced a native Chinaman and scholar was speaking. Yates eventually would write the first training manual for future missionaries to China, and he would translate every book of the New Testament, except the book of Revelation, into Chinese.

## **First Meeting**

After a year of learning the language, Yates found an old warehouse where he established his first church. He would have a friend stand outside and invite people inside. As soon as two or three were present he would begin to preach, lest they got bored and wandered away. It wasn't long before 50 people were coming to hear him preach. This would have been very encouraging had he not known they were there primarily because of the entertaining value of listening to a large white man try to speak the Chinese language. Rumors abounded about Yates. Some claimed he had no knees. Others said he was hairy like a horse and that he would kick like a horse if you got too close. All of these factors prevented the gospel from taking root. It would take three years of preaching before he had his first baptism. Despite preaching 6 times a day and walking up to 15 miles each day to preach in nearby villages, very few believed the gospel he preached.

Three years into his stay in China the Taiping Rebellion broke out. This civil war affected 400 million people over a 14 year period. Twenty million people died, making it one of the deadliest wars in world history. It didn't help matters for Yates that one of the key leaders of the rebellion claimed to be the brother of Jesus Christ. There were 68 battles near Yates home and there were days that bullets, even cannon balls smashed through his house. By this time, all other Christian missionaries of every denomination left Shanghai. Only Mr. and Mrs. Yates remained.

## **Sickness**

Near the end of the Taiping Rebellion Yates was sick, malnourished, and in need of rest. His physician advised Yates to take a sabbatical for one year and return to his home country. He tried, but was shipwrecked and had to return to Shanghai. On a second try he boarded a ship, sailed around the cape of South America and made it to New York City in only four months. Today missionaries can travel to and from China in 20 hours. It took the Yates four months!

When he arrived in North Carolina he was able to see his mother, father, brothers, and sisters for the first time in 11 years. He gave lectures in Raleigh and the surrounding areas about missions almost every night. He reported that his church in Shanghai had 26 members, and to be a member of the church was no casual thing. Members had to give up working on the Sabbath, come to worship regularly, give at least 10 cents to the church each month, and profess their faith publicly regardless of the shame it would bring them in the eyes of the average Chinaman.

## **U.S. Civil War**

It wasn't long after the China Civil War was over that the American Civil War started, and with it, funds dried up for missionary support. Yates would have to return home or find other income. By the 1860s his fluency in Chinese was so smooth and his

reputation among the people so stellar that he was asked to serve as a civil magistrate and an interpreter for the courts. His wisdom was so respected that he was asked not only to interpret for the court, but to offer guidance on court decisions. A merchant from London said of Yates that “Dr. Yates had more influence over the Chinese, and also over foreigners, than any other person in Shanghai” (Dr. T.E. Skinner).

The Civil War halted the missionary work in most places. Yates pleaded with the convention to send more missionaries to Shanghai, but none were forthcoming. Despite being the lone missionary in this city of 600,000 people, and losing his voice at the age of 50 because of the strain of guttural sounds required by the Chinese language, Yates pushed ahead. His weakened voice drove him to translating the New Testament into the cumbersome language of the Chinese people. He managed the building of the largest Protestant church building in Shanghai by 1875 that costs \$3300, all but 868 dollars donated by him. Lottie Moon herself came to the dedication of the church building and she wrote in a letter, “[Yates] will not write how nobly and successfully he has worked to build up a true Christian church. The new building is, perhaps, the most complete in all its appointments of any in China.” No one, including Lottie Moon had a greater impact on the Christian movement in China than Matthew Yates.

### **Conclusion**

Yates wrote near the end of his life it was good he didn't know how hard his life's work would be when he started out. The Chinese were suspicious of foreigners and thoroughly indoctrinated with ancestor worship. They were unwilling to give the Gospel a good hearing, even when spoken clearly in their language by a man they came to love and trust. Yates suffered a major stroke in the summer of 1887 and died in his bed in Shanghai on March 17, 1888. I can think of no better way to end this sermon, to the church with his namesake than to read his words that he wrote in 1877 to the Durham Church, no doubt written to the First Baptist Church of Durham, the mother church that would birth Yates Baptist Church one year later in 1878. Listen to these words from our father in the faith, Matthew Yates first NC missionary to China.

Nov. 5, 1877

To the Durham Baptist Church:

I do not know many of your faces; but I know that you are co-workers in obeying the Lord's command, 'Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations.' This is addressed to every Christian from the day it was uttered until now. It does not mean that you should all come to China or go to Africa. To you, it means begin at Durham....

The greatest happiness that is possible for a man or a woman to enjoy in this life is found in obeying Christ. Will not each of you take the advice of one on the other side of the globe, and ask God in secret what he will have you do? And then, when you feel it to be your duty to do anything, to pray in your families, to teach in the Sunday School, to talk about Christ to others, begin, and God will help you.”

On this Homecoming Day of 2010, I want to remind you, Yates Baptist Church, your namesake was a missionary to China, a plodding scholar, a wise counselor, a prayerful servant, and one determined to do what the Lord wanted him to do. Should we do any less? Should we not offer ourselves to the Lord just as much? Should we not commit ourselves anew to the cause of missions in Durham and around the world? Can we who live in times of tremendous promise and opportunity sit and watch the world go by without a fair hearing of the Gospel? If we want to be faithful to the name that identifies our church, we will, in turn, be ambassadors for Christ, calling our neighbors and our world to be reconciled to Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Let this be our cause. Let this always be our mission. And let us pray the prayer that dominated his life: "Lord show me what you will have me do." Amen.

#### Bibliography

Taylor, Charles E., *The Story of Yates the Missionary*, Sunday School Board: Southern Baptist Convention: Nashville, Tenn.) 1898.

I am indebted to Barbara Guthrie, member and missions leader of Yates Baptist Church who gave this book published 112 years ago. Charles Taylor was the President of Wake Forest College when he published this book.