

W.E. Northcross

Autobiography of Reverend W.E. Northcross, 1897

—*Levi D. Shelby, Jr. (Colored), Tuscumbia, Alabama*

(Chapter 1—How Reared)

I was born a slave in 1840, in Colbert County, Alabama. Education was denied me, hence I grew up in ignorance. My mother and father were carried from me when I was only nine years old, but as soon as chance presented itself I ran away and went to them. My white people brought me back, and as they were not cruel to their slaves they did not "buck" me. I stayed with them until I was fifteen summers old. During this time my mistress made all the children, both girls and boys, come to her every Sunday, and she taught Sunday School. The book used was the old fashioned Catechism.

Jesus keep me near the cross,

There's a precious fountain,

Free to all, a healing stream,

Flows from Calvary's mountain.

It was against the law for them to learn to read and write, so she taught them the Lord's prayer and a few other things in the book. She said that she wanted them to know how to pray, how to tell the truth and not to steal, and always try to do right in the sight of everybody and in the sight of God. With these influences, I confessed a hope in Christ at the age of thirteen years.

Am I a soldier of the cross,

A follower of the lamb,

And shall I fear to own his cause,

Or blush to speak his name?

When she did not teach herself, she had an adopted girl to do the same. Finally the adopted girl married and moved to the farm where I was born, the farm from which I ran away. About this time, I was twenty years old. I felt that there was something for me to do. I began to lead prayer meetings. Still I felt that there was more for me to do.

(Chapter 2—Entering The Ministry)

I felt sure that I was called to preach, though "unlearned and ignorant." I trembled at the thought of preaching the gospel, but something seemed to push me forward in that direction. So I asked the people to let me preach. This request was granted. The people at that time had no place or house of worship. I

began to fast and pray night and day. Being "unlearned and ignorant" (Acts 4:13) my heart silently murmured—

Bread of heaven, bread of heaven,

Feed me till I want no more.

This was the only school I attended, both day and night. At this time I did not know "A" from "B," but I met a man who could read a little. This man liked me and promised to teach me how to read, provided I would keep it a secret. This I gladly promised to do.

I am weak, Thou art mighty,

Hold me with Thy powerful hand.

I secured a blue-back speller and went out on the mountain every Sunday to meet this gentleman, to be taught. I would stay on the mountain all day Sunday without food. I continued this way for a year and succeeded well. I hired my own time and with my blue-back speller went to the mountain to have this man teach me. The mountain was the great school which I attended. I went from there to the blacksmith shop to work. From that place I was captured by the Yankees and carried to war. As I was crippled I was allowed to remain in the commissary department for about six months. While we were at camp at Athens, Alabama General Forest came upon us and defeated, captured, and killed until they were almost literally wiped out of existence. I had been kind to some little white children, by which I had won their love, and of course, the love of their parents, and stayed with them three days during the battle. I came to a river and turned aside to a farm from which all the people had gone to save themselves from the war, I got a man to help reach an island where I worked three days without anything to eat except grapes and muscadines. I preferred to die on the island than to be killed by the soldiers. Therefore, in time of danger, I rushed to this house and the good people hid me and changed my clothes. Hence, when I was found I was taken for one of the gentleman's slaves. When I was permitted by the man to try to return to LaGrange, and had gone some distance, I was caught by deserters from the Southern army, who voted to shoot me. They bound me and kept me overnight, intending to do away with me the next day. It was a lonely desert on the Tennessee river. I could not sleep, so all night I prayed to God, and the wives of the men prayed to God for the poor "nigger," and also prayed to their cruel husbands. Their prayers prevailed, and I was robbed and let go. I had vowed not to reveal their whereabouts. I left loving God and believing in his providence as I had never believed before.

Earth has no sorrow that

Heaven cannot heal.

I went home and got another spelling-book, although it was not allowed. Some of my own people told my master that I had a book trying to read. He sent for me to come to the house. I obeyed, though I dreaded to meet him, not knowing what the consequence would be. But his heart had been touched by Divine power and he simply told me that he heard that I had a book, and if I was caught with it I would be hung. So I thanked him and departed. Notwithstanding my master's counsel I thirsted for knowledge and got some old boards and carried them to my house to make a light by which I could see how to read. I would shut the doors, put one end of a board into the fire, and proceed to study; but whenever I

heard the dogs barking I would throw my book under the bed and peep and listen to see what was up. If no one was near I would crawl under the bed, get my book, come out, lie flat on my stomach, and proceed to study until the dogs would again disturb me. I did this for many nights. I continued in this way to try to learn to spell and read as best I could.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness,
for they shall be filled.

I, like the Ethiopian, wanted a guide. I moved to Mrs. McReynold's. God bless her! She gave me a lesson every night for a period of four years. Then I went to my old master's brother, whose wife helped me every night as long as I would go to her for help. Rev. Shackelford (white) greatly aided me for a period of three years.

Boys and girls, grasp these golden opportunities which are now extended you from the school room. "Unlearned and ignorant" as I was I came along that way until the present time. My readers have better chances than I had. So I hope that they will make good use of their time and make my heart feel glad to see them setting their marks high and preparing themselves for the Great Beyond where all must go. Thither all nations will be called before the mighty judgment seat of the Ruler of the universe to give an account for the deeds done in this world. My prayer for the reader is, that they may make strong, useful, wise and Christian men and women, and at the end of time meet their God in peace.

(Chapter 3—My Work)

I will endeavor, in this chapter, to tell something about my works and whereabouts. I was ordained to the gospel ministry in 1867 by Rev. Mr. Slater (white), and Rev. Henry Bynum. Rev. Stephens Coleman and Rev. Henry Bynum, aided by Dr. Joseph Shackelford (white) laid down the foundation stones for the colored Baptist churches in Morgan, Franklin, Colbert, Lauderdale, and Lawrence counties, Alabama. I am now pastor of the First Baptist Church, at Tuscumbia, Alabama, which is the best Negro edifice in North Alabama. This church was organized thirty-five years ago, by me, with seventy-five members, but it now had a membership of nine hundred. I have pastored it for lo! these many years. This church is an excellent brick edifice. A few other brethren and myself organized the Muscle Shoals Baptist Association—one of the oldest and largest associations in Alabama. I have been Moderator for four years and its Treasurer for six years. I built the church at Russellville, Alabama, and pastored it for four years, and then ordained Bro. P. Jones and recommended him as pastor. I built the Barten church and pastored it for a period of fifteen years, after which I recommended Rev. James Hampton there as pastor. I pastored the Cherokee church five years, ordained Bro. Dennis Jackson and recommended him there as pastor. I pastored Liberty Baptist church for three years, ordained Bro. Alex Brown and recommended him there as pastor. I served Iuka, Mississippi for five years and then recommended a Brother from the West, who belonged to the Mt. Olive Association, to it. I built up the Sheffield church, pastored it three years and then recommended Bro. G.B. Johnson there as shepherd. I also built up Mt. Moriah church at Prides, Alabama. I frequently uttered these words:

Where Jesus leads me I will follow
and his footsteps I'll pursue.

I organized St. Paul church (Colbert County) and pastored it for two years. Rev. E.C. White, who is now Assistant Moderator of the Muscle Shoals Association, was ordained by me. I have ordained more than twenty preachers to the gospel ministry, baptized six thousand persons, united in marriage five thousand couples, and buried about seven thousand persons. I have been faithful to every charge.

Hark the voice of Jesus calling,

Who will and work today?

Fields are white and harvest waiting,

Who will bear the sheaves away?

I have never left the old land mark. Not an one of the churches which I have pastored has brought a charge against me.

The deepest secrets of our hearts

shall shortly be made known.

I have been married three times and have known no woman but my wife, "though unlearned and ignorant." I have never had but one "fuss" with my wife. I told her at one time to hush and she failed to do so, then I slapped her, after which I went to the Lord in prayer and asked to be forgiven. I regret very much indeed to inform the world in print that I have been drunk from intoxicating liquors twice, which was before I professed religion. Notwithstanding I have ever held up temperance and aimed to keep it high until Shiloh comes to gather up his jewels. The following recommendation will show what the best people of Tuscumbia think of me:

Tuscumbia, Ala., March 13, 1897

To whom it may concern:—

We take pleasure in stating that we have known the bearer of this letter, Rev. Wilson Northcross for a number of years, and that he is a conscientious, intelligent colored man of good character. He has been pastor of the Missionary Baptist Church of this place since the war, having been instrumental in building the church, and always has made a good citizen. We believe him in every way worthy of the respect and confidence of his people.

Fox Delony, Judge of Probate

Jas. H. Simpson, Circuit Clerk

Chas. A. Simpson, Deputy Clerk

W.H. Sawtelle

Max Lueddemann

The following resolution was adopted by the church which I pastored thirty years:

Resolved, That Rev. W.E. Northcross, our pastor, is a good, moral, Christian man. He has been our pastor for thirty years, and we can truthfully say that he teaches in all things by example as well as by precept.

--TUSCUMBIA MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH

The history of this church has undergone many changes, but they all worked for its betterment. At the close of the Civil war the few members went from brush arbor to brush arbor for three years. Then they held services in gin houses and under shelters for two years and six months. Then as the church was growing rapidly, they thought best to draw out, buy a lot, and build to themselves. So they bought a lot for what they paid fifty dollars (\$50.) and erected a five hundred dollars (\$500.) building thereon in which to worship the Lord. So the church continued to grow until it now has a membership of nine-hundred, a splendid brick edifice worth about six thousand dollars (\$6,000.) and a thriving congregation. The church has never had but one pastor, and I have been as faithful as a clock. Through me (Rev. W.E. Northcross) the church was built, and I have ever since held high the Baptist doctrine throughout North Alabama.