

Blalock, Ethel: The Primitive Baptists Endure ^[1]

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Ethel Blalock: The Primitive Baptists Endure

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 7/13/2003. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

The Primitive Baptists were once a central part of our state's religious life. Renowned for the austere beauty of their churches and the stirring harmonies of their congregational singing, they flourished especially in our tobacco-belt hamlets, mountain hollows and other country places. Today, however, few Primitive Baptist churches have more than a handful of members, and those members are usually quite elderly. Many Primitive Baptist congregations have already died out.

When I visited with Ethel Blalock, a Primitive Baptist in the little community of Stem, in [Granville County](#) ^[3], she explained that the surviving churches have held on dearly to the old hymns and traditional ways. Other Baptists embraced liberal doctrinal reforms as early as the 1820s and '30s, but the Primitive Baptists stood fast. The world changed, but they did not.

Ethel Blalock would have it no other way. She has lost no faith and sheds no tears over her church's declining numbers. By alternating worship services among a number of Primitive Baptist churches, she and the other congregants still enjoy a rewarding fellowship. On those Sundays Ethel Blalock can still be heard singing the beautiful old hymns in a church that maybe the modern world -- but not, she says, God -- has passed by.



Ethel Blalock. Photo by Chris Seward, 2003. ~~For Ethel Blalock's works further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.~~

My husband and I both came out of Primitive Baptist back as far we know. My great-grandparents were members at Camp Creek, and also George's granddaddy. I remember going to Gooch Memorial Primitive Baptist Church here in Stem a: There were much, much more Primitive Baptists back then. A lot of churches today don't have but two and three members. The worship services have changed very little. Very little. It's just the congregation has come down in size. The ways of the Primitive Baptists have not changed and probably never ever will. I hope it won't anyway. They are deeply rooted and founded in the old ways, and they'll never change. We have no desire for change. That's their belief, the Primitive Baptists, not to have anything but the old way, and we're glad to be the old way. The things that the worldly people are doing are not appealing to the Primitive Baptists. Other churches do things to entertain an The songs were so pretty when I was a girl. We've always used the same hymnbook, and they're still singing those same songs today. Of course the one that is mostly used is "Amazing Grace." And then "There's a House Made Without Han We've got some men members, they got the best voice. They can lead a song. It just leads off so pretty. They used to "line" the song. The moderator, whoever led the song, he would "line" it. He kind of says the line, like "Hungry, faint and po Sometimes they will do it now. We have one preacher comes here, Elder Paul Clark, and he does a lot of that. Because people will ask him, "I'd love to hear Elder Clark lead such and such the old way." And boy, he can do it too. We usually meet 30 minutes before time of the service and sing that 30 minutes. Most everybody comes in at 10:30 to enjoy the singing. After the service you take your time and speak to everybody you want to. We all bring a covered dish, and we say, "Plenty of food. Please stay." We spread our lunch and then we have prayer for the table and we eat. That's when you get to e The preachers don't study nothing. Whatever is on his mind, and that is given by God, that's what they say. He will speak on that and he has nothing written down. I've heard them talk so fast you couldn't hardly hear that fast. As good a sermon I've ever heard was a man up in Kentucky or Tennessee that couldn't even write his name. He had no education. He coal-mined, but he could read the Bible. Yes, he could read the Bible. And I've never seen a collection pl We used to wash feet, but most of them have got disabled now and can't get down on their knees to do that. They'd bring in buckets of water and have enamel pans to wash your hands, and they have long towels. One person will wash this p Most of them that are Primitive Baptist are my age and older. There's quite a few in their 60s, but there's quite a few in their 80s too. Every now and then we'll have somebody to join, but most people, if somebody come in and visit and all, the Gooch Memorial is still in good shape. It's been kept up, but just a few people go every second Sunday, very few. I think they're down to four members now. And, well, one is in a Roxboro rest home, one down the road can't go anywhere, and I don't think the churches closing or the numbers being down bothers the Primitive Baptists that much. I don't hear them saying that anyway, because what's coming is Primitive Baptist. We know it is all fixed. It is the way God would have it.

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