

**The Cross And Faithful Ministry As Seen In The Pastoral And Missionary Ministry Of  
George Leile: First Baptist Missionary To The Nations  
Galatians 6:11-18**

**Introduction:** 1) He was the first Baptist to leave his home land and take the gospel to foreign soil. Immediately many of you will think that I speak of William Carey who is rightly called “the father of the modern missionary movement,” who left England in 1793 taking the gospel to India. But you would be wrong in your assessment. So, you might think I had in mind Adoniram Judson, “the father of the American Baptist missionary movement,” who in 1812 left the USA taking the gospel to the hostile land of Burma where he like Carey, would labor for King Jesus for right at 40 years. Once again, you would draw an inaccurate conclusion.

2) No, the man I believe is the pioneer of Baptists missions was a black man and a former slave by the name of George Leile, who, as one biographer noted, “... was led by the living hand of a smiling Providence,” (*The Reformed Reader*, ch. VIII), to plant the gospel in Jamaica in 1782. Thus he predates Carey as a missionary to the nations by more than a decade! Leroy Fitts says it well, “the black Baptist church was born a missionary movement” (*A History of Black Baptists*, 109).

In the man George Leile we find the heartbeat for ministry and missions joined to that of the apostle Paul, who wrote in Galatians 6:14, “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world had been crucified to me, and I to the world.” Here we find the grounding for faithful ministry and a passion for missions. Here we find in vs. 11-18 a pattern for a cross-centered ministry, for a life for those who are willing to “bear in their own body the marks, the brands, the *stigmata* of the Lord Jesus” (6:17). Four marks of such a man stand out.

I. A cross-centered ministry is humble not prideful. 6:11-13

- 1) Paul has spent 6 chapters expounding the gracious nature of salvation apart from human effort. So concerned was he about any compromise of this message that he begins and ends the letter on a note of “grace” (1:3; 6:18). Further, he penned at least the end of the epistle, if not the whole letter, with his “own hand” in “large letters” which may give evidence of an eye affliction he may have received from the Lord when converted on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:9; cf. 2 Cor 12:7-10).
- 2) He rips into those who thru pride “desire to make a good showing in the flesh” and impress others by what they do. He notes they are motivated by a self-interested agenda: “that they may not suffer persecution for the cross of Christ” (v. 12). Further, they are hypocrites! They do not keep the Mosaic Law themselves, but do boast about the numbers they can tally up in terms of those they win to their team! John MacArthur sums up well the disposition of these false teachers and unconverted ministers, “They did everything possible to call attention to themselves, glorying in the recognition and praise they received because of their positions, titles and converts” (MacArthur, *Galatians*, p. 200). Edmund Clowney tells the story, “On one occasion I had tea with Martyn Lloyd-Jones in Ealing, London, and decided to ask him a question that concerned me. “Dr. Lloyd-Jones,” I said, “How can I tell whether I am preaching in the energy of the flesh or in the power of the Spirit?” “That is very easy,” Lloyd-Jones replied, as I shriveled. “If you are preaching in the energy of the flesh, you will feel exalted and lifted up. If you are preaching in the power of the Spirit, you will feel awe and humility.”” (Edmund Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture*, 55).

3) How contrary the mindset of pride and boasting is to a cross-centered minister.

Boasting in what I can do and manipulating others for further self-glorying. How contrary this mindset is to what we see in the life and ministry of Jesus, of Paul, of a man named George Leile.

\* Leile, whom Edward Holmes, Jr. calls, “one of the unsung heroes of religious history” (p. 27), was born a slave on a plantation in Virginia around 1750. These are humble beginnings to be sure, but it was not the fact he came into this world a slave of men that fostered his humility, but the fact he gladly saw himself as a slave of Jesus Christ. It was thru the influence of a godly father and the faithful preaching of a Baptist pastor named Matthew Moore that would see George Leile born into the kingdom and called to a ministry that would take him to the nations.

In his own hand he wrote in 1791 from Kingston, Jamaica:

“I was born in Virginia, my father’s name was Liele<sup>1</sup> [*sic*], and my mother’s name Nancy; I cannot ascertain much of them, as I went to several parts of America when young, and at length resided in new Georgia; but was informed both by white and black people, that my father was the only black person who knew the Lord in a spiritual way in that country. I always had a natural fear of God from my youth, and was often checked in conscience with thoughts of death, which barred me from many sins and bad company. I knew no other way at that time to hope for salvation but only in the performance of my good works.” (Quoted in Edward Holmes, Jr., “*George Liele: Negro Slavery’s Prophet of Deliverance*,” in *Baptist History & Heritage* (Aug. 1965): 27).

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<sup>1</sup> I have maintained a consistent spelling of the name throughout all references.

- ✳ Then in 1773, at the age of 23, he was converted to Christ. Speaking of that experience that came after six months distress of mind and inquiring the way of life (or what we call “seeking the Lord”), Leile said I, ...

“... saw my condemnation in my own heart, and I found no way wherein I could escape the damnation of hell, only through the merits of my dying Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; which caused me to make intercession with Christ, for the salvation of my poor immortal soul; and I full well recollect, I requested of my Lord and Master to give me a work, I did not care how mean it was, only to try and see how good I would do it.” (Ibid, 28)
- ✳ Moore, a white minister, would baptize Leile. Following his dramatic conversion his owner, a kind and godly Baptist deacon named Henry Sharp, gave him his freedom that he might exercise his gifts and fulfill his calling that had been given to him by King Jesus. A genuine humility would mark this man of God throughout the ministry and mission given to him by our Lord. Ordained May 20, 1775, he is recognized as the 1<sup>st</sup> ordained black Baptist pastor in Georgia. In Savannah, he would found the first “African Baptist Church in North America, a church still in existence today. (*Semper Reformanda*, 2-7-08). One will look in vain for any pride or boastfulness for these or any other of his many accomplishments. Bi-vocational all his life, Leile would, without complaint, support himself, his wife and 4 children by whatever jobs he could find. In a letter to Dr. Rippon of London he shared, “I cannot tell what is my age, as I have no account of the time of my birth...I have a wife and four children. My wife [her name was Hannah] was baptized by me in Savannah, and *I have every*

*satisfaction in life from her.* She is much the same age as myself. [My four children], *they are all members of the church.* My occupation is a farmer, but as the seasons of this part of the country are uncertain, I also keep a team of horses and wagons for the carrying of goods from one place to another, which I attend myself, with the assistance of my sons, and by this way of life have gained the good will of the public, who recommended me to the business and to some very principal work for the government.” (Holmes, 31). As a cross-centered minister, he was humble not prideful. He gratefully accepted the sovereign assignment given to him by his Lord.

II. A cross-centered ministry glories in Christ not ourselves. 6:14-15

- ✱ Spurgeon said Galatians 6:14 “was the theme of [Paul’s] ministry” (Sermon #1447, *MTP*, p.2). In contrast to false teachers who boast and brag about their accomplishments, who they are, who they know, where they serve, what they have done, Paul declares in the strongest possible language “But God forbid” (*NKJV*). The text literally reads, “But to me not it will be.” No, I will not boast in me in any way. But, I will boast in someone and something else. I will boast in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Others were ashamed of the cross, embarrassed by the cross. Others viewed it as foolishness and nonsense. A poor Galilean Jew hanging on a first century gallow is not something you boast in. It is something you recoil from, fun from, turn away from. Not for me says Paul. As George Whitefield said, “If God is your glory, then you love His Cross” (*Memoirs of George Whitefield*). Why?!
  - The cross is the ground of my assurance that I have been made new in Christ and accepted by God (vs 14-15).

- The cross is the place where the wrath of God was poured out on another that it might not be poured out on me.
  - The cross is the place where united to Christ, I died to this world and all its claims on my life.
  - The cross is the place where all self-glorying was put to death that I might glory and delight only in Jesus.
  - The cross of Christ is the message I proclaim, the ministry I perform, the miracle that made me a new person.
- ✱ Listen to how Charles Spurgeon so wonderfully captures the heart of what Paul is after in his sermon entitled “Grand Glorying” (#3451 *MTP*, 5-6). “The Apostle adds, “By which the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.” There are two crosses in that saying-there is the world crucified, there, and there is Paul crucified, here. What means he by this? Why, he means that ever since he fell in love with Jesus Christ, he lost all love for the world! It seemed to him to be a poor, crucified, dying thing, and he turned away from it just as you would from a criminal whom you might see hanging in chains-and would desire to go anywhere rather than see the poor being. So Paul seemed to see the world on gallows-hung up there. “There,” he said, “that is what I think of you and all your pomp, and all your power, and all your wealth, and all your fame! You are on the gallows, a malefactor, nailed up, crucified! I would not give a fig for you! I would not turn on my heels to speak to you-all that you could give me would no more suit my taste than as if husks were given to me. Give them to your own swine and let them fatten thereon!”...And now observe the other Cross. There is Paul on that. The world thinks as little of Paul as Paul does of

the world. The world says, "Oh, the harebrained Paul! He was once sensible, but he has gone mad upon that stubborn notion about the Crucified one! The man is a fool." So the world crucifies him....So is it with the world and the genuine Christian. If he glories in Christ, he must expect to be misunderstood, misrepresented and attacked. And, on the other hand, he will say that he would sooner have the world's scorn than its honor! He would sooner have its hate than its love, for the love of the world is enmity against God. Blessed are you when they shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for Christ's sake and the Gospel's. Set your account, you Christians, upon rough weather and get seaworthy vessels that will stand a gale or two! Ask the Lord to give you Grace enough to suffer and endure for that precious Savior who will give you reward enough when you see Him face to face, for one hour with Him will make up for it all! Therefore, be faithful, and may the Lord help you thus to glory in the Cross of Christ. Amen."

With the man George Leile, it was the same.

- ✳ After his conversion Leile preached for 2 years in the slave quarters of plantations surrounding Savannah, even making his way into South Carolina. Many black slaves came to Christ as a result of his powerful preaching.
- ✳ About this time Leile's master, a kind and gracious man named Henry Sharp freed Leile. Sharp, however, was killed in the Revolutionary War in 1778, and Sharp's heirs sought to re-enslave Leile. They had Leile thrown in jail, but he was able to produce his "freedom papers." Then borrowing \$700.00 for passage for himself and his family, he left Savannah as an indentured servant and in 1782 landed in Kingston, Jamaica. What men had meant for evil God had meant for good! The hand of

- providential sovereignty selected him to take the gospel to Jamaica as the first Baptist missionary in history. He would be faithful in this ministry assignment.
- ✳ Eventually paying off his debt and free once more, this cross centered man set about the business of preaching Christ to a people in need of both spiritual and personal emancipation. Holmes says it so well, “Now free himself, he was filled with compassion by the wretched condition of the slaves in Jamaica.” (p. 30).
  - ✳ He immediately formed a church with 4 others (one being his wife) from America, and he would begin public preaching services at the Kingston Race Course! He shared in a letter that, “preaching took very good effect with the poorer sort, especially the slaves. The people at first persecuted us, both at meetings and baptisms, but God be praised, they seldom interrupt us now.” (Holmes, 30-31).
  - ✳ During 8 years of preaching, Leile baptized 500 persons and established a strong church in Kingston.
  - ✳ Again giving evidence of his humility and desire to glory only in Christ, he sent urgent appeals to the British Baptist to send missionaries. As a wise minister, he gladly shared the growing work with other capable co-laborers.
  - ✳ As a result of his gospel ministry, slaves in Jamaica would be emancipated on July 31, 1833. This road to freedom was not easy, and Leile himself would suffer for his Master, King Jesus, and those whom he loved and cared for. Some time prior to 1802, “Mr. Leile was charged with preaching sedition, for which he was thrown into prison, loaded with irons, and his feet fastened in stocks. Not even his wife or children were permitted to see him. At length he was tried for his life; but no evil could be proved against him, and he was honorably acquitted. (However, he was

thereupon) thrown into gaol [jail] for a balance due to the builder of his chapel. He refused to take the benefit of the insolvent Debtor's Act, and remained in prison until he had fully paid all that was due." Much of the expense of the chapel and others costs had come from Leile's contributions, and he also "labored without fee or reward, supporting himself by the work of his own hands." In 1805 the Assembly enacted a law forbidding all preaching to the slaves. Though the law was not always vigorously enforced uniformly until 1810, there were numerous instances of the severest persecution in the forms of whipping and brutal murder. Numerous instances of brutality, sexual abuse, imprisonment, lashings and murder were reported by numbers of observers and missionaries during the years between 1802 and 1834, when slavery was abolished throughout the British Commonwealth. However, it was July 31, 1838, before all vestiges of slavery were eradicated from Jamaica." (Holmes, 33-34).

- \* Only a man devoted to glorying in Christ crucified and not himself could endure such opposition and shameful conduct from fellow human beings. And the result of his humble perseverance:
  - 1814: 8,000 Baptists in Jamaica, including slaves, freed men and some whites.
  - 1832: 20,000 Baptists in Jamaica. The genesis of this great harvest: George Leile!
  - Numerous converts called to preach with several establishing churches in Savannah, Ga.; Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leone. The man was not only one who was sent (!), he was one a sender as well! Clarence Wagner gets it right, "George Leile, a black slave, is the first recorded licensed and ordained Black Baptist Preacher-Missionary in America. The initiator of foreign missions among Black Baptist in the world. Our

black Baptist heritage stems from the seeds planted by him in the soils of difficulty in America, Jamaica and Africa. Those seeds were incubated by the love of Jesus Christ, germinated by the power of the Holy Spirit and protected by the infallibility of God's Holy Word." (*Profiles of Black Georgia Baptists*, p. 4).

III. A cross-centered ministry walks in truth not error. 6:16

- ✳ The call to ministry is inherently theological. As preachers of the gospel and teachers of the Word, it could never be any other way. The very idea of a non-theological minister is nonsense. It is complete and utter foolishness.
- ✳ This is why Paul places the cross and all it entails at the very center of the Christian life and ministry (v. 14). It is why he stresses so strongly the doctrine of a new creation made possible by union of Christ (v. 15).
- ✳ It is why he now challenges the Galatians and us in v 16 to "walk according to this rule" where peace and mercy may be found upon Gentile and Jew alike. Timothy George puts it like this, "[Paul] invokes the peace and mercy of God upon those...who remain faithful to the truth of the gospel Paul had originally preached among them" (George, *Galatians*, 439).
- ✳ Once more this reminds us that theology matters, that theology is important, that good, sound gospel-centered theology is essential to both the health and life of the church. Ultimately this is something for which the whole church is responsible. Initially, it is something for which ministries will be held accountable. (cf. Heb 13:7, 17).
- ✳ In applying these truths to those who minister the word and who are called to protect the flock from the vultures of theological error, Don Carson says, "the cross stands as

the test and the standard of all vital Christian ministry. The cross not only establishes what we are to preach, but how we are to preach. It prescribes what Christian leaders must be and how Christians must view Christian leaders.” (*The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 9). Great harm comes to the church, if we separate ministry from theology, preaching from doctrine, and Christian care from conviction. In far too many cases today, the pastor’s ministry has been evacuated of serious doctrinal content, and many pastors seem to have little connection to or even concern for any sense of theological vocation. All this must be reversed if the church is to remain true to God’s Word and the gospel. Unless the pastor functions as a pastor/theologian and missionary/evangelist, the church is left with no leader or example at the top of what it means to live the cross-centered life.

- ✱ George Leile received no formal education as far as we know. However, to consider him illiterate, uneducated or theologically ill prepared would be an erroneous judgment of unforgivable proportion. The great scholar of the history of preaching Hughes Oliphant Old says of Leile, “his preaching was received by black and white alike...George Leile was a gifted evangelistic preacher who knew how to present the gospel in the language of his people” (*The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: The Modern Age*, 2007; pgs. 585-86). Some even compared his style to that of George Whitefield.
- ✱ In a letter to a Dr. Rippon of London dated 1891 Leile wrote, “I have a few books, some good old authors and sermons, and one large Bible that was given me by a gentleman....I agree to election, redemption, the Fall of Adam, regeneration and

- perseverance, knowing the promise is to all who endure, in grace, faith and good works to the end, shall be saved.” (*Semper Reformanda*, p. 2).
- ✳ In appealing to the Honorable House of Assembly in Jamaica for freedom to worship, he said they only “desired liberty to worship Almighty God, according to the tenets of the Bible” (*General History of the Baptist Denomination in America*, David Benedict, 196).
  - ✳ The black missionary minister and church planter was a Calvinist in the same vein as Brainerd, Carey, Judson, Rice and Moon! He saw no dichotomy between the sacred assignment of pastor/theologian and missionary/evangelist. What a model for ministry he provides.
  - ✳ And, the result of the ministry of a man who walked so faithful in the truth. Hear the words of one of his converts called, himself to the gospel ministry under Leile, “I am one of the poor, unworthy, helpless creatures, born in this island, whom our glorious Master, Jesus Christ, was graciously pleased to call from a state of darkness to the marvelous light of the gospel; and since our Lord hath bestowed his mercy on my soul, our beloved minister [Leile], by the consent of the church appointed me deacon, school-master, and his principal helper. We have great reason in this island to praise and glorify the Lord, for his goodness and loving-kindness, in sending his blessed gospel amongst us, by our well-beloved minister, brother Leile. We were living in slavery to sin and Satan, and the Lord hath redeemed our souls to a state of happiness, to praise his glorious and ever-blessed name; and we hope to enjoy everlasting peace by the promise of our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. The blessed gospel is spreading wonderfully in this island: believers are daily coming into the church; and we hope in

a little time to see Jamaica become a Christian country. I remain, respectfully, Rev. and dear Sir, your poor brother in Christ, Thomas Nicholas Swigle” (Benedict, 203).

IV. A cross-centered ministry seeks to please God not man. 6:17-18

- ✳ C.J. Mahaney says, “too many of us have stopped concentrating on the wonders of Jesus crucified” (*Living the Cross Centered Life*, 18). Then, so as to apply this truth deeply and personally to our souls he writes, “On a daily basis we’re faced with two simply choices. We can either *listen* to ourselves and our constantly changing feelings about our circumstances, or we can *talk* to ourselves about the unchanging truth of who God is and what He’s accomplished for us at the cross through His Son Jesus” (Ibid., 38).
- ✳ The apostle Paul clearly opted for the latter as should we. In essence he says I will not allow myself any longer to be troubled, harassed or bothered by the agendas of men, demons, circumstances or feelings. Why? Because I m a marked man! I bear in my body the branding, the *stigmata* of the Lord Jesus! His cross is my cross. He has marked me as His slave and “His insignia is in my very flesh” (George, 442).
- ✳ His words reflect his earlier declaration in Galatians 1:10! I am a Christ pleaser not a man pleaser. He died for me! He bought me! He loves me! He called me! His grace is with me! (v. 18).
- ✳ A marked man will serve the church of the Lord Jesus and seek the souls of the lost with a particular perspective and passion. Jonathan Edwards put it like this, “The thing that Christ did in shedding (his blood for the salvation and happiness of souls) should be regarded by ministers as their example and direction. If Christ so loved the souls of men as to lay out Himself and deny Himself at this rate for the salvation [and

- happiness of souls], then surely the ministers of Christ should be ready greatly to exert themselves and deny themselves and suffer for the sake of [the salvation and happiness of souls]. For as Christ often said, “the servant is not above his master, nor the disciple above his lord’ [Matthew 10:24]. (*The Salvation of Souls*, 170).
- ✳ Bearing, literally and spiritually, the marks of the Lord Jesus, and being a joyful recipient of His grace within his spirit, George Leile refused to be troubled when persecuted and opposed. For example, “On one occasion, when the church was about to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, a gentleman (so called) rode into the chapel, and, urging his horse through the midst of the people to the very front of the pulpit, exclaimed in terms of insolence and profanity, ‘Come, old Leile, give my horse the Sacrament!’ Mr. Leile coolly replied, ‘No, Sir, you are not fit yourself to receive it.’ After maintaining his position for some time the intruder rode out.” (Holmes, 32).
  - ✳ A contemporary, Stephen Cooke said of his missionary ministry among the Jamaicans, “He has been for a considerable time past, very zealous in the ministry; but his congregation being chiefly slaves, they had it not in their power to support him; therefore, he has been obligated to do it from his own industry; this has taken a considerable part of his time, and much of his attention from his labours in the ministry; however, I am led to believe that it has been of essential service to the cause of God, for his industry has set a good example to his flock, and has put it out of the power of enemies to religion to say, that he has been eating the bread of idleness or lived upon the poor slaves.” (Benedict, p.199).
  - ✳ Another, by the name of George Gibbs Bailey, said, “I have inquired of those, who, I thought, could give me an account of Mr. Leile’s conduct, and I can say, with

pleasure, what Pilate said, “I can find no fault in this man.” The Baptist church thrives abundantly among the Negroes, more than any denomination in Jamaica; but I am sorry to say, the Methodist church is declining rapidly.” (Benedict, 200).

- ✱ Leile himself would say to all of this, “I have a right to praise God, and glorify him for the manifold blessings I have received, and still do receive from him. I have full liberty from Spanish-Town, the capital of this country, to teach the gospel throughout the island [Reports indicate this is exactly what he did]. The Lord is blessing the work everywhere, and believers are added daily to the church. My tongue is not able to express the goodness of the Lord.” (Benedict, 201).

### **Conclusion**

George Leile, like Paul, was a cross-centered man who carried out a cross-centered ministry to the nations to the end of his life. As biographer E.K. Love writes, “When he established a church in the towns he made for the interior to unfurl the gospel banner to those who were sitting in darkness and in the region of the shadow of death.... We have no date of his death, nor the latter end of his life. But he will be remembered, and his name honored, both here and in Jamaica while memory holds its place. Whatever the negro Baptists here and in Jamaica are, they owe it to his humble beginning. And whatever may be written of either of us, it cannot be complete if his name is left out. His record is here, there and in heaven.” (Rev. E.K. Love, *History of the First African Baptist Church*, 1888).

Later records would indicate that Leile died in 1828. He did not see the full fruit of his labor in this life. Oh, but I suspect with the strongest certainty his Master did give him at least a glimpse of it from heaven! The summation of this cross-centered minister and missionary could not be said better than what we find in the words of Edward Holmes once more, “Ordained in a

white church in Burke County, Georgia, this freed Negro slave gathered the first Negro church in America at Silver Bluff, (Gaulphin's Mill) South Carolina. Brought up in no church by slave parents, he became the first ordained Negro Baptist minister in America. Though supported by no church or denomination agency, he became the first Protestant missionary to go out from America to establish a foreign mission, ten years before William Carey set out from England.... A man without formal education, he learned to read the Bible and became a preacher of such effectiveness that in seven years in Jamaica he had converted over 500 slaves to Christianity.

Though born a Negro slave in Virginia about 1750, his illustrious service as a patriot and preacher served as a weighty influence in the abolition of slavery from his adopted land of Jamaica, in 1838. When the first English Baptist missionary reached Jamaica in 1814 there were 8,000 Baptist converts. This number grew to 20,000 Baptists in 1832, much of which growth was accomplished despite persecution by the English planters and the jailing of Liele and his followers by the government authorities.

Several of his converts became preachers who established churches in Savannah, Georgia, Nova Scotia, Sierra Leone and Jamaica. His correspondence with John Rippon, and other English Baptists, helped furnish the enthusiasm for their missionary interest and activity at home and abroad....

The slave, who was himself set free to declare the glorious deliverance of his Lord, had brought the fruits of the Gospel's spirit to thousands who had learned to love his Lord and accept His salvation. The Negro prophet of deliverance had raised up many courageous servants of the Lord to lead his people into their Promised Land of freedom." (p. 36).