

Introductory Note

When discovered, this work contained no author title, author, or date. It was originally written in the late 1950s as a paper for a college class.

We have chosen the title, *James Mathes: Frontier Preacher*, because it seems to fit with the stated purpose of the author. We have re-formatted it in order to make it easy to read without straining your eyes and trying to decipher the old type-written pages with hand-scribbled corrections. We took care of that part for you.

We hope you enjoy!

-Bradley Cobb (2014)

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OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION.

- A. James M. Mathes was a pioneer preacher of Indiana.
 - B. Mathes was a many talented nan,
 - C. Although he was born in Kentucky, he moved to Indiana when only a child.
 - D. The purpose of this paper is to compare Mathes with Turner's man of the frontier.
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- I. Some of the Major characteristics of the man of the frontier are listed by Turner.
 - II. The times of James M. Mathes.
 - a. Mathes' family left Kentucky chiefly because of slavery.
 - b. Mathes was reared in the strict Calvinism of his day.
 - c. Not being able to find comfort in religion Mathes became skeptical.
 - d. He then studied the Bible for himself.
 - e. He was converted as a result of his own study.
 - III. Mathes received very little formal education during his childhood.
 - IV. Mathes edited a paper in Indiana called the Christian Record.
 - V. During Mathes' lifetime two serious issues confronted the Restoration Movement.
 - a. Mathes was in favor of the Missionary Society.
 - b. He opposed the use of the instrument in Christian worship.
 - VI. Conclusion: This section includes an estimate of the life and influence of James M. Mathes.

INTRODUCTION

Janes Madison Mathes was a pioneer preacher of the Restoration Movement in the state of Indiana. A great deal of his work was done in this state, and it is believed that he has made lasting contributions to the cause of Christ in Indiana.

James M. Mathes was an educator, preacher, debater, author, editor, and, on top of all that, a farmer. Truly he was a many sided man, whose life has touched thousands. During his ministry he is said to have baptized between eight and ten thousand.¹ These he is said to have baptized with his own hands. No doubt, that number would be augmented greatly, if one included all those who were influenced to be baptized by the preaching, writing, educating, and debating of this great man.

Mathes was born July 8, 1808, in Jefferson County, Kentucky, near Brownsboro.² However, when he was only a child of eight, his father sold out his little farm in Ky. and moved to Indiana, first stopping one year in Washington County and then two years in Jackson County near the village of Leesville. In the spring of 1821, he moved to Owen County, and settled on a tract of land, about one mile north of where Gosport now stands. This was the year before the sale of land in the 'new Purchase,' a 'Harrison purchase' as it was called.³

The Mathes family moved into Indiana in the year 1816, the same year Indiana was admitted into the Union as a state.⁴ Mathes lived until the year 1892, thus, he had a life span that covered the greater part of the nineteenth century.

¹ Enos E. Dowling, *James Madison Mathes (1808-1892.) Pioneer Indiana Preacher*, (Indianapolis: Unpublished B. D. Thesis, School of Religion, Butler University, 1937), p. i.

² Madison Evans, *Biographical Sketches of the Pioneer Preachers of Indiana*. (Philadelphia: J. Challen & Sons, 1862), p. 277.

³ Dowling, op. cit., p. 13.

⁴ *Rand McNally-Standard World Atlas*. (New York, Chicago & San Francisco: Rand McNally & Company, 1955), p. 232.

In this paper it is my purpose to compare the life, work, and influence of J.M. Mathes with the thesis put forth by Fredrick Jackson Turner in his book, *The Frontier In American History*. The so-called "frontier line" had already passed further west when Mathes was born, and yet, the frontier was still a reality during his lifetime. In the words of Turner:

*Thus the Old Northwest is a region where the older frontier conditions survive in parts, and where the inherited ways of looking at things are largely to be traced to its frontier days.*⁵

It can thus be seen that, even though the frontier line had passed further west, many of the conditions of the frontier prevailed for at least a part of Mathes' lifetime. In many respects he can be looked upon as a pioneer.

In the thesis, written by Enos Dowling, which is mentioned above, there is an autobiography of Mathes which has never been published. The original copy of this document is in the collection of the Indiana School of Religion, and Dowling has copied this document and incorporated it into his thesis. I will draw freely from the information contained in this autobiography in attempting to make this study. The autobiography covers Mathes' life down to the year 1867. I will draw from other available sources during the remainder of his life.

THE AMERICAN FRONTIERSMAN

A "Major factor in changing the European Into an American was the existence of the unpossessed frontier."⁶ Turner's book stresses the importance of the frontier in every phase of American history. To Turner the frontier is "the meeting point between savagery and civilization."⁷ He distinguishes the American Frontier from the European frontier. In the latter the frontier is "a fortified boundary line running through dense

⁵ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier In American History*. (New York: Henry Hole & Company, 1920), p. 219.

⁶ Ronald E. Osborn, *The Spirit of American Christianity*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), p. 3.

⁷ Turner, op. cit., p. 3.

population."⁸ In the American usage the frontier "lies at the hither edge of free land."⁹

The frontiersman possessed many definite characteristics which have left their influence in other phases of American life. Turner gives a very good summary of the characteristic traits of the man of the frontier.

That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to affect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are the traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier.¹⁰

To Turner's summary of the man of the frontier Burlingame adds:

*the generosity for which Americans have become so celebrated abroad, the openness and candor, the friendliness to strangers, the almost instinctive hospitality—traits which sometimes embarrass Englishmen and Europeans—and, above all, the unique humor. The moving frontier molded these things.*¹¹

There are other traits of the frontier mentioned by Turner. "The frontier promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people."¹² The frontiersman was an independent individual, who was anxious to break with past traditions. In many sections of the United States the people were dependant upon Europe for manufactured goods, food, clothing, etc. The frontier influenced a break with Europe, which led to the making of Americans, rather than

⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 37.

¹¹ Roger Burlingame, *The American Conscience*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 214.

¹² Turner, Op. cit., pp. 22, 29, 141.

transplanted Europeans.¹³

The frontier was productive of a strong sense of individualism. One of the reasons for such a strong sense of self-reliance is the extreme isolation of the frontiersman.

Away from the towns, the prevailing characteristic of the frontiers, north and south, was loneliness. In the isolation in which thousands, eventually millions, of families lived inarticulate, their thoughts forever hid from the civilized world from which all the people came, countless tragedies lie buried.¹⁴

The westerner was also an optimistic idealist. Not only that, but "The ideals of equality, freedom of opportunity, faith in the common man are deep rooted in the Middle West."¹⁵

These have been just a few of the predominant characteristics of the man of the frontier. Others could be added, but I feel that these are sufficient for the comparison of the life of James M. Mathes. It is my purpose in this paper, therefore, to examine the work of Mathes and to compare his with the man of the frontier. I will also make an attempt to evaluate the life, work, and influence of this man.

THE TIMES OF JAMES M. MATHES

Although Mathes was born in Kentucky, his parents moved into Indiana when he was only eight years of age. In his autobiography Mathes gives the reason for the family's removal from Kentucky.

He left Ky. chiefly on account of slavery, which he considered morally wrong, and opposed to the very best interests of all concerned, both white and black. In a word, he considered American Slavery, as 'The Sum of all Villanies,' the curse of the nation. To get clear of it as far as he could he left Ky. to make his home in a free state.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 24, 65, 185, 210.

¹⁴ Burlingame, op. cit., p. 214

¹⁵ Dowling, op. cit., pp. 30-31.

Kentucky seems to have been a melting pot border state from which those who favored slavery migrated further south, and from which those who opposed slavery migrated further north. Turner makes a very interesting observation of a similar situation that had taken place during this general period of time.

Abraham Lincoln migrated from Kentucky to Indiana and to Illinois. Jefferson Davis moved from Kentucky to Louisiana, and thence to Mississippi, in the same period. Starting from the same locality, each represented the divergent flow of streams of settlement into contrasted environments.¹⁶

One can readily see from the above that the man of the frontier was a man of conviction and that he stuck by his convictions, even though it meant being inconvenienced at times.

I have been unable to locate a statement of Mathes himself concerning his own feelings about slavery and the War Between the States. Madison Evans, his biographer, would have one believe that he was very patriotic to the Union. He says concerning Mathes, "Though too old to enter, himself, into the great struggle now going on between patriots and rebels, he has sadly but willingly laid his three sons on the altar of his country."¹⁷

A. EARLY RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

Mathes was reared in the strict Calvinistic traditions. Very early in his life he began having very serious impressions about religion. Under Calvinistic influences when he was about ten years of age, he "was deeply concerning about my eternal interests, but could find no relief."¹⁸ In 1818 a Regular Baptist Church was organized in Lawrence County, Indiana, and Mathes' parents were among the original members. Yet, still Mathes could not understand the theology of the strict Calvinist of his day, although he could read well from the Bible, and, later, learned to repeat from memory the "shorter Catechism."

¹⁶ Turner, op. cit., p. 139.

¹⁷ Evans, op. cit., p. 277.

¹⁸ Dowling, op. cit., p. 32.

Because of his difficulties, Mathes began even more seriously to reflect upon his spiritual condition. In his own words he says:

The apostasy of some who had come through, shouting victory; also had a very bad effect upon my mind, and the result was I became skeptical I could not believe that a God of infinite love, mercy, goodness and mercy, would so long refuse to bless a poor penitent mourning Soul!"¹⁹

Mathes even admitted that he tried to find relief in gay company and in various amusements. Yet he was extremely unhappy in this state of mind, and commented, "There was still in my heart an 'aching void which the world could not fill'."²⁰ Later, upon more serious reflection he says:

It now occurred to me, that the fault might be in the Preachers, and professors, and not in the Bible, and that it would be wisdom in me, before rejecting Christianity, to search the scriptures for myself.²¹

One prominent characteristic of the frontiersman, as I have already pointed out, was a strong sense of individualism. I believe this trait of individualism is very clearly seen in Mathes' life at this point. In a very independent fashion Mathes states:

My plan was, to forget as far as possible all I had ever learned about religion, and take up the Bible, as though I now saw it for the first time, and endeavor without prejudice or prepossession to learn what I could from its teachings. In my reading I became satisfied that the Bible was true, and that there was a living reality in the Christian religion.²²

Concerning his independent study of the Bible, Evans writes of Mathes:

The entrance of God's Word also gave him light as to the

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 58

²⁰ Ibid., p. 60.

²¹ Ibid., p. 62.

²² Ibid., p. 63.

*means by which he might obtain pardon. In looking in 'the perfect law of liberty,' he saw, with some degree of clearness, the plan of salvation; and was made exceedingly happy in believing the truth.*²³

Mathes read and studied the Book of Acts very carefully. He examined the case of the conversions on Pentecost, as well as "all the parallel passages." He was convinced that he should obey the Gospel in order to obtain salvation. There was only one hitch. No one else in that vicinity held to his views, and he could find no one to administer baptism "for the remission of sins."

It was not until several months later, in the middle of October, 1827, that he was able to complete his obedience of the Gospel. He had a talk with John Henderson, a preacher, reasoning with him from the scriptures. Later that day Henderson baptized Mathes and his sister. Garrison makes an interesting statement concerning Mathes' conversion.

James M. Mathes similarly claimed an independent discovery of enough to start him on the way as a reformer, and he had to convert a preacher before he could be baptized on a simple confession of faith.²⁴

B. EDUCATION

James M. Mathes' first formal education did not come until he was in his fourteenth year. A missionary family of Presbyterians moved into his neighborhood and organized a Sunday School. In this school Mathes memorized portions of the New Testament and the "shorter Catechism."

His first experience at attending day school came in 1824, when a man by the name of Scott W. Young moved into the community. Young later became Mathes' brother-in-law.

I attended these sessions as much as I could, which amounted to about 3 months during the winter, and all the weather during

²³ Evans, op. cit., p. 283.

²⁴ Winfred Ernest Garrison, *Religion Follows the Frontier*, (New York & London: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1931). p. 207.

*the Spring, Summer, and fall, that was too inclement to do farm work.*²⁵

I believe we can see the influence of the frontier at this point, at least in the case of his father Jeremiah Mathes. Turner points out that the frontiersman was an extremely practical man. He could see no need for any further education for his son. He was needed on the farm, and felt that he had enough education to get by. In Mathes' own words:

*My father did not think that any boy needed any thing more than a 'common school education,' and this was understood to include the following items: Viz: Spelling, reading, and writing; and also 'ciphering' as far as the 'single rule of three'; and as soon as I acquired all these elements, and more, he felt no concern for my future schooling, considering me already sufficiently educated, for an honest man, and occasionally hinting, that a collegiate education made more rascals, than honest men.*²⁶

However, young Mathes shows another trait of the frontier, that of inquisitiveness. Mathes used all his free time seeking more knowledge.

Mathes never gave up his longing for a more liberal education. When he was thirty years old, married, with four children, and "being very poor in this world's goods," he rented out his farm and went to Bloomington, Ind., to attend Indiana University. He was enrolled as an irregular student and was only able to remain there for three years, because of his financial situation. There he studied such courses as Greek, Algebra, Latin, Evidences of Christianity, Rhetoric, Logic, Elocution, and Metaphysics.²⁷

EDITORIAL CAREER

James M. Mathes was not content with his many and varied activities, and he wished to accomplish more good than he had already done. Thus, he began the publication of a monthly journal called the

²⁵ Dowling, op. cit., p.50.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 51.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 104.

Christian Record. The first issue of this twenty-four page magazine appeared July 4, 1843. In the Prospectus of the paper Mathes states his purpose.

*In the Judgment of many intelligent brethren, a work, such as we propose publishing, is much needed in 'Central Indiana.' 1. As a medium of communication for the brethren; and 2. To meet and refute the many misrepresentations, which the prejudiced part of the community, are daily circulating, to our injury: 3. And last, though not least, to bring the whole subject of Christianity, as understood and taught by us, before the people, in this part of the state, in a plain, familiar style, so that they may be able to compare what we teach, with what the Apostles taught; 'prove all things, and hold fast that which is good.'*²⁸

The *Record* was published first from Bedford, then from Bloomington, and Indianapolis. Publication continued for a number of years. Although, by our modern standards, it would have been small and insignificant, it was a very powerful means of influence throughout the brotherhood in central Indiana. "The circulation of the *Record* never went much beyond 5,000 at its peak."²⁹

After sixteen years as editor of the *Record*. Mathes turned over his editorial duties to Elijah Goodwin. From July, 1859, to the early part of 1866, Elijah Goodwin edited the *Record*. He even began publishing the *Weekly Christian Record*.

But in 1866 the *Record* subscription list was absorbed by a new religious journal, the *Christian Standard*. This condition left Indiana without a means of edification and communication. Therefore, in January, 1867, Mathes again resumed publication of the monthly *Christian Record*.

The *Record* has been described as argumentative. "In his writing for the *Record* Mr. Mathes manifests a very pronounced tendency to be

²⁸ *Christian Record*, I (July, 1843), 3.

²⁹ Dowling, op. cit., p. 147.

polemic.”³⁰ To be argumentative seems to be another mark produced by the frontier. In addition to being polemical in his editorial policy Mathes held many debates.

Indiana during this period was the happy hunting-ground— though not the only one—for debaters. It must be remembered that debates were then the most popular indoor sport.³¹

ISSUES CONFRONTING THE CHURCH

During the lifetime of Mathes, two very grave issues confronted the Restoration Movement. These issues ultimately led to a division into what are now known as the Churches of Christ and the Disciples of Christ. It is interesting to examine the stand Mathes took on these questions.

A. COOPERATION

One prominent issue that had to be dealt with was the question of the Missionary Society. One of the earliest statements of Mathes on this issue that I could find is in the *Record* of 1867, which was only a few years after the question loomed before the brotherhood. Mathes states that he had purposefully remained silent, preferring not to enter the fray. But, finally, he was drawn into stating and defending his position.

In arguing in favor of the Society, Mathes compares it with other meetings carried on by brethren for the purpose of edification and learning, and attempts to show that they are parallel.

But we have only referred to the matter to show that those who oppose the Missionary Society, as an agency in the church for evangelizing the world, on the ground that there is no express command requiring the churches or individuals, to organize a Missionary Society, are doing the very same thing they object to

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

³¹ Garrison, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

under another name.³²

It seems that Mathes shows a weakness in defending his position, at this point, that is not shown elsewhere. Whenever he debated ministers of other beliefs, he was very pointed and precise in his arguments. He gave very exact reasons for what he believed. But in defending the Society he only argued that it was parallel to other cooperation meetings. It causes one to wonder if this might be due to the weakness of his position.

B. INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

Another live issue confronting the brotherhood during the lifetime of Mathes was the organ question. Unlike the society question, Mathes was very definite in giving his reasons for opposing the use of the instrument in Christian worship. He wrote:

Many good brethren and sisters are writing to me, and urging me to define my present position on the organ question. It is a well-known fact, that I have always opposed the introduction of the organ into the worship....

I am now and always have been opposed to the organ in the worship of God; and the following are some of my reasons.

1. Because there is neither precept nor example for it in the New Testament....

2. All Christians are commanded to sing....But as the introduction of the organ has a tendency to drive out congregational singing, and concentrate the singing on the organ, and the choir about it, we object to it and think it ought not to be introduced into the worship.

3. And we object to it....because it always produces trouble whenever introduced.

³² Christian Record, I (New Series, July, 1867), 196.

4. *We are opposed to the organ in the worship because it has a tendency to relieve the congregation of the labor of studying music, and qualifying themselves for the interesting exercise of singing with the spirit and with the understanding.*

5. *But we have never regarded the organ in the worship as a test of fellowship. We recognize many good and true brethren and sisters among those who favor its use in the worship, and while in our best judgment, nothing that is good, can be accomplished by the organ in worship, that could not be accomplished much better without it; still I have always been opposed to division in the churches on account of the organ. There is no true test of fellowship but the commands of God. Disobedience to the commands of God destroys the fellowship. And the apostle says, 'Withdraw yourselves from every brother who walks disorderly.'³³*

One might argue about the consistency of Mathes in his above stated position, but we can readily see a man who knows what he believes, and is quick to defend that belief. This, I believe, is another trait of the frontier being shown.

CONCLUSION: AN ESTIMATE OF THE LIFE OF JAMES M. MATHES

It is a thrilling story to read of the pioneers of our country, and it is even more thrilling to read of our pioneer preachers, who labored so diligently for the cause in which they believed. A study of the life of James M. Mathes has been no exception to this rule.

As a preacher the influence of Mathes could hardly be overestimated. He is said to have baptized between eight and ten thousand souls into Christ. As an editor he probably did more to aid the Restoration Movement in Indiana than any other individual. His paper was filled with strong teaching and sound practical instruction for individuals and churches. As an educator he was influential in directing the lives of many young people of his day.

³³ *The Christian-Evangelist*. March 31, 1881, p. 197.

It is interesting to note that this many talented man exhibits another trait of the frontier. The frontiersman had no use for a specialist. He liked to see a man who had many abilities, and certainly Mathes fulfilled this qualification.

Upon his death the editor of the *Christian Standard* wrote an excellent summary of the influence of this great soldier of the cross.

*Among our leaders a generation ago, was James M. Mathes, who as preacher, writer and editor, was among the most influential in the ranks. His portrait and life are prominent in all our biographical volumes of that day...He was among the last of the pioneer preachers in Indiana, a sturdy race, to whom is owed a debt that has never been half-recognized. To their unceasing toils, unflinching courage and ever-present faith is due the grand success which the principles of the Restoration have achieved. It is a mournful thought that they are so rapidly passing away.*³⁴

³⁴ *Christian Standard*. XXVIII (June 25, 1892), 541.

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