

Baker , Caleb J. Bio

by John Bjorlie

Caleb J. Baker's life was a testament to the power of living out one's faith in business and ministry, as he used his awning and tent business to spread the gospel and give to the Lord's work.

Scripture: Matthew 6:19, Matthew 25:35, Luke 12:33, John 6:35, Acts 20:35, 2 Corinthians 5:1, 1 Timothy 6:17, James 2:14, 1 John 3:17

Topics: "Faith And Works", "Eternal Rewards"

Description

John Bjorlie shares the inspiring story of Caleb Jason Baker, a man of faith who trusted in God's provision and turned his humble beginnings into a successful business, using his resources to help those in need and spread the gospel. Despite facing challenges like the Chicago fire, Baker's unwavering faith led him to establish a rescue mission and later start an assembly in Kansas City, impacting many lives through his evangelistic efforts and generosity. His dedication to serving others and sharing the message of Christ exemplifies a life lived in accordance with 2 Corinthians 5:1, focusing on eternal treasures rather than earthly riches.

Transcript

His mother penned this in her Bible, "July 22, 1840. This day delivered of a son, Caleb Jason. The Lord have mercy on my son."

At seventeen, a defiant Caleb Jason Baker (1840-1918) left Sussex, England for America. But the God who hears and answers prayers is not stymied by the distance from Hailsham to Chicago. In 1869, walking down the street with twelve dollars in his pocket, he stopped in front of a window shaded by a tattered awning. He made some measurements, went to the ship chandler to price out canvas and proceeded to rent a treadle sewing machine for 75c per month. After making a modest earning from his first awning, he said, "Well, I could do that, I'm going into the awning business."

His sister Emma was his sole employee and seamstress. Baker was salesman, delivery boy, and installation artist. Soon they were ordering canvas in 500 yard bales.

In the path of the Chicago fire, October 8, 1871, he wrapped his sewing machine in canvas, tied a rope around it and dropped it out the window of his riverside apartment. He then rolled his three bales of canvas in likewise. The rope was tied to a post, and he ran. After the fire passed, he pulled his murky inventory out of the river. A sidewalk in the remains of "the metropolis of the mid-west" became his factory.

The soggy canvas was stretched out, dried and sewn into tents for the homeless. Baker immediately went to Western Union to telegraph his closest supplier, in Austin, Texas, to send bales of canvas, lots of bales.

In that tragedy God was good to C. J. Baker. Some time in 1872, he knelt down in his room and trusted Christ after reading His words, "Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out."

We know little about Baker's first marriage. He had a daughter, Margaret. Then, in December of 1877, he married a widow named Eliza Roe with a nine-year-old daughter named Grace. This marriage was in the Lord. C. J. was attracted to her because of her involvement in evangelism, and no doubt she was a great help-meet. Together they may have run Chicago's first rescue mission. He rented the floor of a building on South Desplaines Street and hung a sign outside the door: "Clean beds--5c" Inside were two hundred cots and two huge stoves. There was no bedding. The men just slept with their clothes on. The Chicago news reporter who wrote a large piece about the mission was as amazed by Baker's generosity as he was by the squalor of the mission's guests. The men might get a meal at night, and certainly a gospel message, and Baker's friends said if someone didn't have five cents, "he usually supplied the nickel."

We have no record that Baker ever labored with or knew D. L. Moody. John Darby also visited the area, but we have no record that they met. But we do know that he met a Scottish evangelist named Donald Ross (1823-1903).

Ross labored in the revival times of 1859-60 among the miners of Lanarkshire, Scotland. Ross was a fearless Scot. A leader of a band of gospellers, in military mindset they assaulted enemy citadels. Andrew Miller said of those sweeping days, "In country districts and in fishing villages, in towns and cities, the heralds of the Cross were busy. Brownlow North and James Turner, Hay-M'Dowall Grant and Reginald Radcliffe, Lord Kintore and Richard Weaver, Gordon Forlong and Harrison Ord, Duncan Matheson and Donald Ross, gathered numerous sheaves of golden grain for the Lord of the harvest. Duncan Matheson and Donald Ross were men of kindred spirits, and were splendid gospel pioneers. Matheson was accustomed to speak of his friend as 'that Caledonian warrior.'"

In the awakening, workers and converts found that the Spirit of God tended to either transgress or ignore their denominational scruples. Some, like Ross and his co-workers in the Northern Evangelistic Association, found themselves disconnected from any denomination. As they consulted Holy Scripture, they discovered that many of their practices lined up with New Testament teaching, and were therefore legitimate for today. Ross had his mandate.

Donald Ross came to America in 1876, and in 1879 he moved his family to Chicago. He and three other men began to remember the Lord in the breaking of bread in a tent, which was also used for evangelistic purposes. They knew of a well-to-do Englishman who claimed to have met in similar fashion back in the old country. They invited him to join the fledgling assembly. After the breaking of bread, he looked at the tent, and remarked, "This is indeed 'without the camp,'" and never returned. Ross seemed oblivious to discouragement. He did what true evangelists do--he preached, and prayed and plugged away.

Baker wrote, "I believe it was the summer of 1879 that I first met our brother Donald Ross. He, with James Goodfellow, of Canada, had pitched a tent in Chicago, on the west side, opposite Union Park. I was then engaged, four nights of the week, in a mission hall, and in spare evenings I went to hear him preach. I remember distinctly how impressed I was with his forceful, energetic preaching and his apt illustrations, also with the fact that he was proving his points with the Word of God, which was not at all the case with the preaching that I had been listening to in other places. I became much interested immediately...one

Sunday morning, I went to see them remember the Lord in the breaking of bread. Brother Ross invited me to participate with them, which I did; and six or seven of us altogether remembered the Lord in this, to me, novel way."

In August, Eliza Baker gave birth to Jessie Mae who would marry William Sommerville. In the fall of 1879, Baker offered Ross the use of his mission hall for evangelistic meetings. The nightly meetings continued until May 1, 1880. It was only after a full year of nightly gospel meetings that Ross conducted their first baptism, in which several went down into the water. The breath of God was felt in the windy city. A vigorous and devoted congregation was established.

This had all created tension with Baker's Baptist pastor. The pastor already felt endangered by Baker's evangelistic outreach to children in the slums. Besides the mission work, Baker was the superintendent over about 20 Sunday School classes. A divide came when the irked clergyman notified the Sunday School teachers: "Don't go there any more," and Baker suddenly had no Sunday School. Baker abominated such pettiness. He knit in with Ross. Thereafter the Presbyterians, Baptists, and any other Protestant group became to him part of "the sects."

In February of 1884, daughter Marion was born. She would become Mrs. Walter Lewis Wilson. Wilson is the author of the Moody Press books, *The Romance of a Doctor's Visits*, *Doctor's Casebook*, etc., and became himself a useful evangelist and Bible teacher.

In 1886 Baker published one of his two charts, *Two Roads and Two Destinies, or Life and Death: Hades or Sheol*, which taught dispensational truth. These visual aids were accompanied by books or study guides, and were widely used and really blessed. Baker also wrote several gospel and prophet booklets and tracts. The imminency of Christ's coming was big in Baker's thinking.

Baker's new views, practices, and associates embarrassed his brother-in-law and business partner, Mr. Murray, so that their relationship was becoming, shall we say, tense. Still their tent and awning business was prospering. Baker said, "Now look, we're sending a great many tents and a great many tarpaulins to Kansas City; there seems to be a big market down there. Let's do this: either I stay here in Chicago and you go down to Kansas City and set up a business, or you stay here and I will go to Kansas City. We'll just split up the business." Did he learn his diplomacy from Abraham, who gave Lot the first choice? Murray wasn't crazy, and immediately said he would stay with his half of the business in Chicago.

Baker then selectively approached seven or eight employees and invited them to come with him to Kansas City. He wanted capable tent and awning workers, but it appears that the chief qualification for going to Missouri was their agreement with him on spiritual matters, and their abilities in gospel outreach. Several were excellent singers. One of the men's wives, Mrs. Rendall, was an outstanding children's worker.

An assembly in Kansas City began the day they arrived in 1887. They found a place for a factory, and the congregation met in the main room.

Kansas City was the last outfitting station for the settlers pulling their wagons to a fork at Gardiner. From there, wagon trains branched out to Santa Fe, California, Oregon, or Oklahoma. Their trains could be 90 wagons long and they all needed canvas coverings. Situated in Kansas City, Baker had a virtual monopoly.

Those were busy days, but Baker was vigorous; he did not tire. Lines of wagons three city blocks long would be waiting for their canvas in a day. One of the ladies who worked for him pled, "Oh, Mr. Baker, we're so tired. Give us a little rest some time!"

His answer? "There's plenty of rest in heaven; we need to be working down here." Newspaper articles talked about the man who worked all day and preached for two hours each night. Saturday was the night for the open-air gospel preaching at the corner of Eleventh and Grand. Mrs. Charles and Mrs. Rendall's singing voices could be heard two blocks away. Clerks would pause and whisper, "Doesn't that sound beautiful!" If the preaching was good, the singing was better. People in the audience called out, "We want to hear that lady sing." When Mrs. Charles was told that singing above the bustle of the streets would ruin her voice, she said, "What better place is there to do it? Where am I going to use my voice; what am I going to use it for? What good is it if I don't use it?"

Down Kansas City's main street (then a dirt road) they rented a vacant building at Fourth Avenue to start a Sunday School. Baker told Mrs. Rendall, Miss Jamison, and a few others, "You're Sunday School teachers; now go get yourself a class." They fanned out in a ten-block radius, looking for street urchins to invite in for a Bible lesson.

Busy days became fruitful days. Baker was soon employing three hundred workers, and the assembly had about 150 in fellowship. Baker was a media event. Curious news articles appeared with headlines such as this piece on December 27, 1894 (at the time of their annual conference):

On factory walls, large Bible texts taught gospel fundamentals, and at noontime an evangelistic meeting was available to all workers.

In the year 1894, Donald Ross moved and made Kansas City his base of operations. Alfred Mace described Ross "as essentially a gospel preacher. He was more than a preacher and an exhorter. He was a laborer, and he toiled for the perishing; at fairs and races, in tents and halls, in barns and chapels, in music halls and theatres, in cottages and in the open air, he sounded out the wondrous story."

From Kansas City, Ross ranged in all directions in his gospel campaigns. He wrote, edited his periodicals, and preached there until 1901 when he returned to Chicago.

A year or two before his death, C. J. Baker approached his son-in-law's father, William Sommerville, and gave him a job as a janitor on a floor where more than a hundred women worked at sewing machines. He said he didn't want him to spend much time pushing a broom, "the less the better." Instead C. J. Baker instructed the evangelist to linger at the ladies' work stations and witness for Christ. Baker was never accused of showing favoritism to his believing workers. At times he employed almost 500 workers. The large government and automobile industry contracts did not intimidate the evangelist. His trade catalog had more gospel content in it than many so-called gospel tracts do.

All the officers and stockholders of the tent and awning company were Christians. At one annual meeting, Baker said, "Look, the Lord has given us all of this money in our hands. All of you that work here have received your salaries; you don't really need this money. Why don't we just turn over the entire profits of this business to the Lord's work?" It was amazing that he suggested such a thing--and more amazing that the men followed through with the suggestion. Baker provided large tents, free of charge, for pioneers in Argentina, China, Venezuela, and here among the savages of Canada and the United States. J. J. Rouse, William Williams, and Ross wore out several of those tents.

C. J. Baker died of pneumonia two weeks after his dear friend William Sommerville was taken home. Hundreds wept at his passing. Kansas City newspapers were emblazoned with HIS RICHES TO THE POOR, Gave Away His Riches. The copy read: "With this big business, however, Mr. Baker did not die a rich man. He made it the rule of his life to give away all that he made except the amount needed in the business and for his own personal expenses."

What was his secret? Baker knew the truth of 2 Corinthians 5:1, "For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

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