



The Roots of Appalachian Christianity: The Life and Legacy of Elder Shubal Stearns (Religion In The South)

Elder John Sparks

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Appalachia's distinctive brand of Christianity has always been something of a puzzle to mainline American congregations. Often treated as pagan and unchurched, native Appalachian sects are labeled as ultraconservative, primitive, and fatalistic, and the actions of minority sub-groups such as "snake handlers" are associated with all worshippers in the region. Yet these churches that many regard as being outside the mainstream are living examples of America's own religious heritage.

The emotional and experience-based religion that still thrives in Appalachia is very much at the heart of American worship. The lack of a recognizable "father figure" like Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Knox compounds the mystery of Appalachia's religious origins. Ordained minister John Sparks determined that such a person must have existed, and his search turned up a man less literate, urbane, and well-known than Luther, Calvin, and Knox?but no less charismatic and influential.

Shubal Stearns, a New England Baptist minister, led a group of sixteen Baptists?now dubbed "The Old Brethren" by Old School Baptists churches in Appalachia?from New England to North Carolina in the mid-eighteenth century. His musical "barking" preaching is still popular, and the association of churches that he established gave birth to many of the disparate denominations prospering in the region today. A man lacking in the scholarship of his peers but endowed with the eccentricities that would make their mark on Appalachian faith, Stearns has long been an object of shame among most Baptist historians.

In *The Roots of Appalachian Christianity*, Sparks depicts an important religious figure in a new light. Poring over pages of out-of-print and little-used histories, Sparks discovered the complexity of Stearns's character and his impact on Appalachian Christianity. The result is a history not just of this leader but of the roots of a religious movement.

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