**F.B. SRYGLEY: HIS WAY OF THINKING**

Filo Bunyan Srygley is one of several gospel preachers from Northwest Alabama who are worthy of being called “great.” He was born on a small farm astride a little mountain stream known as Rock Creek in what is now Colbert County. His life spanned 80 years, from two years before the War Between the States, until one year before America’s entrance into World War II. He died in a Nashville hospital on a wintry Sunday morning, February 11, 1940.

Srygley’s early life was spent in the rugged mountains of Northwest Alabama, influenced primarily, he said, by his devout parents, the Rock Creek church, three pioneer gospel preachers—John Taylor, Joseph H. Halbrook, and James M. Pickens, the *Gospel Advocate*, which he read from childhood, and three years under T.B. Larimore at Mars’ Hill College near Florence. In regard to the latter, he once said: “Next to my father and mother, I owe more to T.B. Larimore than any other person that my life ever touched.”1

The theme of this brief lecture from the life of F.B. Srygley is, *F.B. Srygley: His Way of Thinking*. The exceptional characteristics of Srygley’s life naturally sprang from his noble heart, for “as a man thinks in his heart, so is he.” A few of these will be called to mind in our remarks today.

**First, F.B. Srygley was recognized by his contemporaries as a unique preacher.** When he died, he was lamented by many people across the land. Some who had worked closely with him and knew him best paid high tribute to him. H. Leo Boles wrote: “Truly a great man among us has gone. The Gospel Advocate Company has lost one of its oldest and ablest friends and coworkers. The brotherhood has occasion to mourn its loss in the passing of Brother Srygley. It will be a long time before, if ever, there arises among us another such man as F.B. Srygley.”2 Robertson L. Whiteside said: “Occasionally there arises a man whose life, character, and work are so outstanding that we do not see how we can get along without him. Such a man was F.B. Srygley.”3 W.E. Brightwell also gave expression to the uniqueness of F.B. Srygley, saying: “It can be truthfully said that there is not, there was not, another like him in all the earth.”4

Srygley’s way of preaching harmonized with his upright and candid disposition. N.B. Hardeman, himself a prince of preachers and a trainer of preachers, said: “Brother Srygley was in a class by himself in his manner of presenting the truth and emphasizing the same with some story to more firmly fasten it upon the minds of his hearers.”5 Srygley’s broad and practical knowledge of the Scriptures enabled him to apply its teaching to every facet of salvation, the church, and the Christian life. T.Q. Martin said: “As a preacher, writer, and debater, Brother Srygley was exceeded by few, if any, man known to me.”6

**Second, a man more devoted to God’s word than F.B. Srygley very likely did not live**. C.R. Nichol remembered Brother Srygley from childhood and was deeply impressed by him. He said: “Before I tried to preach I heard him say: ‘I endorse Jesus Christ and the apostles, but I tie my faith to no mere man; no man is authority for me in religion.”7 Nichol always believed that this one statement from Srygley, so reacted on him from early life that he never quoted Alexander Campbell or David Lipscomb in preaching or writing. Srygley had little use for commentaries. He believed the writings of uninspired men get in the way of truth. In his way of thinking: “Anything that passes through human hands is liable to be injured by it. Some germ of error will stick when it comes through human hands.”8 “There is nothing infallible in religion,” he said, “except the infallible word of God.”9 He thought a preacher toward the Bible as being like a lawyer with a good witness: “He is never anxious to get him off the stand, but is always willing for him to have time to testify.”10 F.B. Srygley’s crowning virtue as a preacher and as a Christian was in his tenacity in clinging in all things spiritual to a “thus saith the Lord.”

In preaching, writing, and debating, Srygley trusted the Bible alone. He never invoked uninspired men as authority in religion. Once an opponent in an early debate, asked him to defend some things written by some well known and faithful gospel preachers, but he refused. Srygley said: “He read from [David] Lipscomb, but I still stuck to my position. He even quoted my brother [F.D. Srygley] who was present, and was my moderator, yet I declined to defend him. I told the audience that I was raised with him, and I was sure that he was wrong in some things, but the Bible is wrong in nothing.”11 Such was the tenacity with which he depended wholly on God’s word in his ministry. Hardeman encapsulated this characteristic of Srygley’s life. “I have known F.B. Srygley for possibly forty years, and he has been to me an inspiration due to his uncompromising attitude and his determination to stand four-square for what he believed to be right in all matters. I believe he would have been willing to sacrifice his life rather than to surrender his convictions of what he thought God has taught.”12

**Third, Srygley was justly recognized by his brethren as a critic.** He felt compelled before God to censure anyone or anything that he thought had transgressed the bounds of divine authority. Brightwell said: “He naturally fell into the role of a critic, and none followed it more faithfully and successfully in his field.”13 No gospel preacher, or anyone else whose ideas came to his attention, from a “big preacher” to a poorly educated brother in the back country, escaped the bite of his trenchant pen, when he thought his words or action had an adverse effect on the gospel or the church. Even so, he said, with a flash of wit: “The Lord does not expect me to correct every brother that is wrong, and I am glad of it, for I could never get them all straight.”14

His motive as a critic arose from his unswerving devotion to truth, which he thought some in “high places” among did not share. He held no personal animosity toward any, nor did he censure with an editorial arrogance, or with a view that he was without error. He with utmost sincerity: “I have faults, but one of them is not a wish to compromise the word of God in an effort to save a friend, or to twist a passage out of shape to persecute an enemy.”15 He would not separate a man from his teaching, but he had that rare ability to criticize without condemning the man criticized. John T. Lewis, who had sharp words with Srygley, said he would fight with you one minute and eat with you the next. Harde-man wrote: “By nature he was argumentative and critical. I have had him criticize me, but I always believed it was intended for my good, and I have profited by his remarks.”16

**Fourth, Srygley’s love for people moderated his critical nature.** Unlike most self-appointed critics, Srygley was unassuming and possessed a good will toward others. He was a critic, but not a fault-finder. His criticisms were neither selfish nor partisan. He never used his critical thinking to herd brethren into some sort of sectarian or factious pen; nor did he did circumscribe the church numerically, saying: “God alone knows all of his children.”17 He was reluctant to withdraw fellowship even from brethren he marked as false teachers. He once said: “I have been accused of withdrawing fellowship from certain ones, when I did not know I had done it.”18 He never tried to turn anyone out of the church, leaving that to God, but at the same time, he said he was glad “that poor, weak men cannot cut me off from God’s church. I think I have got some of them mad enough to cut me off if they could.”19

Perhaps nothing reflects Srygley’s thinking in this regard more than the genuine forbearance toward others that he held in common with David Lipscomb. In a personal way, he dealt kindly with those he sharply criticized. In reviewing his thirty years as editor of the *Gospel Advocate* in 1896, Lipscomb expressed the principle of moderation that guided his ministry. “Be firm for truth, steadfast in the maintenance of right, yet forbearing with the weaknesses of our fellowmen, knowing we are liable to be drawn aside, and as we judge others, God will judge us. We have often borne with men that were wrong, tried to get them right, often failed, but have never regretted the forbearance. Be true to the truth, oppose the error, but forbear with humanity.”20 These words of David Lipscomb could very well have been penned by F.B. Srygley. They reflect his attitude in balancing his role as a critic with his feelings toward his brethren, including those he criticized.

**Fifth, in his battles for truth, the old warrior from Rock Creek never stood above the fray.** He fought in the trenches, not from a safe command post. He did not expect to criticize others and escape criticism himself. He knew that in warfare bullets fly in both directions. He was willing to face any opponent of truth at high noon, even if he had to stand alone. As a critic, he expected to receive criticism, and in this he was not disappointed. But he received it with grace and replied with refreshing repartee, yet, always with truth uppermost in his mind.

His sense of fairness was not limited to men of prestige, but applied to the “little people” whom he could have easily trampled from his position as an editor. He admired this quality in Lipscomb seen in an 1881 incident at meeting in a Tennessee mountain school. It was said that as Lipscomb preached a man who had tarried too long at the wine jug, fervently nodded his head and punctuated his approval of Lipscomb’s words with an occasional, “That’s so.” But later in the sermon Lipscomb said something the man disagreed with and he shouted, “That’s a lie!” Brethren who were watching the inebriated man prepared to escort him out, but Lipscomb stopped them, saying: “Let him alone. He has the same right to disapprove as he has to approve.”

Critics high and low aimed their sharp arrows at Srygley and he met them with due deference. Of course, there were exceptions. He was once treated rather harshly in a college lectureship, in his absence, because of his opposition to premillennialism. This was at the time the premillennial controversy among churches of Christ was at its height. Srygley was willing to endure such abuse to defend the truth. But occasionally an attack was extremely venomous. On the day his wife died, a letter came to the *Advocate* office from a well-known brother on the West Coast that was probably the most vicious personal attack he ever received. A copy of the letter had also been mailed to John T. Hinds, who thus knowing the contents, withheld Srygley’s letter from him until several days after his wife’s funeral. The letter was so abhorrent that Srygley refused to answer it, although others did.

**Sixth, Brother Srygley was a humble man and acutely awareness of his own deficiency.** Critics often are self-righteous, haughty, and condescending. Those criticized by Srygley may have felt that he was unkind to them, but that was not his aim, and he sought to lessen that notion by his own self-abasement. He believed that: “It takes humility to restore the fallen [or to correct the erring].”20 In his way of thinking: “A man who misrepresents his brethren … is not competent to represent God or his word correctly.”21 He said: “Preachers are human, and some of them are very human.”22 Srygley did not exclude himself from that observation. He was ever aware that: “Sometimes people who are nearest in their religious life are the bitterest enemies.”23 He deplored that and rejected it in his own life.

Srygley criticized others with the outlook of a Christian. He dealt with others as he would have them to deal with him. As he saw it: “Abuse is evidence of a weak cause, and it is no compliment to him who resorts to it.”24 He said: “If one cannot prove his proposition except by running me down, he cannot prove it at all.”25 “If I felt that I could make no mistakes, I might be willing to say that no one can correct what I write; but as it is, I cannot make a rule of that kind.”26 He never claimed superior morality. “Brethren,” he said thoughtfully, “I have done enough bad things to be lost, if the Lord is not more merciful on me than some of the brethren seem to be.”27 He added: “If brethren who write cannot think of enough to tell on me to ease their pain, let any one who is interested call on me and I will give him the balance.”28 His criticism of others was greatly tempered by his belief that: “There is too much meanness in the best of us to fall out very much with the worst of us.”29

It was Srygley’s way of thinking that brethren should be treated honorably and brotherly regardless of any differences he had with them. He did not expect perfection either in brethren or congregations. “No one,” he said, “should knowingly teach error or indorse any error, but as there are no infallible men in the church [now] … therefore there are no perfect churches of Christ, except in theory.”30 “Just how much error a church can have and not cease to be a church of Christ is more than I can tell.”31 The same is true of Christians. “Most of us know before it is proven on us that we are weak, frail mortals, and without the mercy of God we would be lost forever.”32 “We may as weak human beings wobble some in our efforts to follow the teaching of the Bible, but with all our weaknesses we have a fixed star, God’s word, which is complete, and it changes not.”33

**Seven, another characteristic of Srygley in his way of thinking was his intense independence.** Near the end of his life, he said he had worked for and with the *Gospel Advocate* for fifty years. He never wrote for any other religious journal, not even so much as to send in a simple report of his work, which was common in his day. He loved that journal and its owners and editors, but he feared none of them. He may have consulted with them, but he wrote what he pleased. Harry Pickup, Sr., who knew Srygley well, described his independence in memorable words: “If I have ever known a man who ‘wore no man’s collar,’ it was this man.”34 He refused to favor any faction. He said: “I am my own man, so far as men are concerned, and every other Christian should be the same.”35 “When a man loses his individual responsibility to God and turns himself over to *anything*, he has lost too much.”36

**Eighth, we cannot end a discussion of Srygley’s way of thinking without some reference his marvelous humor.** Almost all who spoke of him referred to it. His humor was not contrived, nor was he a comedian, but humor reflected his love for the sunny side of life. Whiteside wrote: “His wit and humor were so much a part of his very nature that they bubbled up in serious and solemn moments, breaking forth like a ray of sunshine through a dark cloud. But underneath it all there was a seriousness of thought and a firmness of purpose that knew no wavering.”37 He used humorous illustrations that flowed out like a refreshing hillside spring from his native Northwest Alabama, without any conscious effort, and his wit and humor naturally gave a sparkle to his editorials.

A few brethren of a more sedate disposition thought his humor was out of place and detracted from the truth. Unfortunately, in our way of thinking, Srygley’s Nashville debate with Primitive Baptist C.H. Cayce, was controlled by some of these brethren. His moderator, J.W. Shepherd, would not permit him to use his customary humorous illustrations. Many brethren then, and later, believe this was a great mistake, that the debate was not as effective as it might have been because Srygley was hampered by this unnatural constraint on his way of thinking.

J.W. McGarvey possessed a sense of humor that was not often apparent in his preaching. After he began writing on “Biblical Criticism” in the *Christian Standard*, flashes of wit sometimes crept in. This led J.H. Garrison to belittle McGarvey, saying he never manifested the qualities of a humorist until he became a Biblical critic. In regard to his humor, McGarvey said: “I have always been somewhat given to humor; perhaps too much so for a preacher. I have always been disposed to laugh at things which were ludicrous, and the only development in this respect of which I am conscious in connection with Biblical Criticism, is this; I find myself disposed to laugh at things which once made me angry. When I first began to read these destructive critics, I was like Elihu while listening in silence to the sophistical arguments of Job and his friends—my wrath was kindled…. But now that I see farther into the sophistries and follies of the critics, I laugh at some things which then kindled my wrath…. I must be excused, then, if I laugh at some of the ridiculous positions of the critics and their apologists.”38

McGarvey refused to allow critics like J.H. Garrison to intimidate him into changing his use of humor against the higher critics of the Bible. Srygley perhaps should have been more like McGarvey on the occasion of the Cayce debate. If he had not yielded to the demands of men like Brother Shepherd, and preached in his own original style, humor and all, the debate might have been more effective.

If I ever give another lecture on Srygley, I think it will focus on his humor. Time permits little of that here. He once read about a man spending fifteen years studying a particular insect. He observed that: “Fifteen years is a long time to give to one bug, and the man that would do it almost proves that he himself is a bug—a humbug.”39 He described a small boy’s definition of a falsehood, saying the boy explained: “It is an abomination in the sight of God, but a very present help in time of trouble.”40 When he heard a brother say that a plainly preached sermon made him nervous, Srygley said: “I am satisfied we have some who need a nerve tonic.”41 He said he would rather be right than witty, but he refused to wear a coffin under his chin.

I will close with a personal note. Some of Srygley’s brethren were blaming his criticism of a certain college president on his advanced age. I can appreciate his reply, because I am older now than he was then. He said: “I do not object to any one talking about my advanced age. I sometimes think about it myself, but I try not to allow myself to be troubled over anything I cannot prevent.”42

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on this pleasant occasion in the historic home of T.B. Larimore and for your interest in Filo Bunyan Srygley, a Northwest Alabama mountain boy, some of us natives of that region might say, a hillbilly, who made good in the greatest of causes.

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