

RESTORATION REPROBATES (PART ONE): JESSE B. FERGUSON

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He was the most famous person in all of Nashville, TN, let alone the most well-known preacher there. Hundreds of people signed a letter of support for him—most of whom weren't even members of the church—including the governor of the state! He was on the board of trustees of Franklin College, had been given the editorship of the *Christian Review*, and preached in a newly-built church house that (in 1852) cost \$30,000 to build (approximately \$1.14 million in today's dollars).

And in just five short years, he lost the confidence of the brethren, his role as preacher, his influence in the church and community, his faith, and his soul. Oh, and he wouldn't debate Alexander Campbell because a ghost told him not to...¹

This is the story of Jesse B. Ferguson.

His Early Years

Raised in Virginia, Jesse B. Ferguson excelled in school. In fact, at age 11, after just three months of schooling, he became the assistant to the principal of the school—and very soon thereafter began teaching subjects.² At age 13, according to one source, he was asked to become the teacher of a brand-new school built by a Presbyterian mission.³

Jesse Ferguson was raised in the church. His father, Robert Ferguson, was an early Restoration preacher, and his brother John followed in his footsteps.⁴ So he knew the truth from a young age.

He expected to attend William and Mary College, like his brothers, but his father's financial situation had changed, and 14-year old Jesse was apprenticed to a local newspaper publisher. The newspaper went out of business around a year later, and the owner released him of his

¹ Buescher, John, "Jesse Babcock Ferguson" in *Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography*. <https://uudb.org/articles/jesseferguson.html>, accessed 10/8/2022.

² Nichols, T.L. (MD.), *Supramundane Facts in the Life of Rev. Jesse Babcock Ferguson, A.M., LL.D.* (London: F. Pittman, 1865), p. 26. The book lists T.L. Nichols as the "editor," but it seems most likely that Jesse B. Ferguson was the actual author. The glowing praise heaped upon him in the biographical sketch seems over-the-top, and fits with Ferguson's own view of himself. In the obituary of Ferguson in *The Spiritual Magazine* (Volume 5, p. 526), the writer (who is from England, where also Ferguson's biography was published) attributes this writing to Jesse B. Ferguson.

³ *Ibid*, p. 27.

⁴ "Robert Ferguson, [Jesse Ferguson's father]... was a native of Scotland, who early in the last century came to America and lived in Massachusetts and Virginia and finally in Kentucky, where he died. He was a minister of the Christian church, and his family have furnished several valued servants to that denomination. One of his sons, Jesse B. Ferguson, gained a reputation throughout the south for his power as a preacher. John D. Ferguson, [Jesse's brother]... was also a minister of the Christian church." (Hale, Will T., and Merritt, Dixon L., *A History of Tennessee and Tennesseans: The Leaders and Representative Men in Commerce, Industry and Modern Activities*, Volume V. [Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1913] p. 1366).

obligations, saying he had learned the trade. However, Robert Ferguson insisted his son finish as an apprentice with a book-printing establishment run by one of his friends.⁵ It was not very long, though, before a disease in his leg ended that apprenticeship. After a long disease and eventual recovery, he began working for his brother R.F. Ferguson, a lawyer who was editor of the *Woodstock Sentinel*.⁶ These experiences with publishing would be both a boon and a bane for Ferguson in later years.

His Early Work in the Church

After a few years, he left Virginia and moved to Ohio, where he discovered he didn't like the people there. He was determined to move back home when he met the "congenial" Arthur Crihfield,⁷ a preacher for the church of Christ, who convinced him to open a school. It was not long afterwards that Ferguson began leading in worship and preaching.

Unlike most Restoration preachers whose biographies (or autobiographies) have been written, there is no record of when or where Jesse B. Ferguson became a Christian—in fact, outside of a necessary inference from a biographical sketch of his brother John, there is no record of his religious beliefs or actions prior to his entry into preaching.⁸

He soon began writing for the *Heretic Detector* (published by Crihfield), handling answers to questions sent by readers, and later (1841) became co-editor—all of this by the time he was 22 years old.

He began doing missionary work, preaching and planting congregations throughout Kentucky and Tennessee. In 1843 he debated a Methodist preacher named J.J. Harrison, who after much study was reported 18 months later to have obeyed the gospel.⁹ During these preaching tours, he received requests to return and become the full-time preacher at congregations in Harrodsburg, KY, and Nashville, TN. He refused these invitations until finally moving to Nashville and the congregation of over 500 members in 1846.¹⁰

His Work in Nashville

While the congregation's attendance grew, trouble was not far away.

⁵ Nichols, *Supramundane Facts*... pp. 27-28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29. Arthur Crihfield is the only member of the church mentioned in Ferguson's biography/autobiography. One is surprised to see something good said by Ferguson about *any* of his former brethren. Arthur Crihfield edited and published the *Heretic Detector* for five years, but eventually left the church to join the Protestant Episcopal Church—all this before Ferguson's fall. Crihfield did return to the church of Christ in repentance at some point prior to his death in 1852, the same year Ferguson made his universalist views public.

⁸ It is perhaps notable that in *Supramundane Facts* (a biography of Ferguson which was at the very least written with information provided by Ferguson himself, but more likely written by him in third person and published during his lifetime), no mention is made of his religious upbringing. In fact, it never mentions the church of Christ or Christian Church, never names the *Heretic Detector* or the *Christian Review* (both of which he had been co-editor for a time), and only names one person in the church with which he had been associated (Crihfield)—and even there, simply calls him a "clergyman." It is as though he wanted to do everything possible *not* to show a connection to the church.

⁹ *Christian Review* Volume 1, 1844 (Charleston, AR: Cobb Publishing, 2021) p. 192.

¹⁰ Tucker, Johnny, *Like a Meteor Across the Horizon: The Jesse B. Ferguson Story* (Henderson, TN: Hester Publications, 2020—a republished and expanded/reformatted edition of the original: Fayetteville, TN: Tucker Publications, 1978), p. 8.

When Ferguson moved there, he worked as one of two preachers for the congregation, the other being W.H. Wharton, a medical doctor. Wharton soon turned over the preaching duties to Ferguson completely, and served as an elder while returning to his medical practice.

H. Leo Boles says this of Ferguson's time with the church there:

The Church of Christ in Nashville with Jesse B. Ferguson as its preacher enjoyed a greater prominence and popularity than any of the denominational churches. During this time Brother Ferguson was looked upon as the greatest pulpit orator that ever visited Nashville, and he enjoyed the fame of being the greatest and most eloquent pulpit orator in the South.¹¹

In 1847, having been a regular contributor to its pages since its inception in 1844, Ferguson took over the editing duties for Tolbert Fanning's *Christian Review*. The next year, he changed the name to the *Christian Magazine*, and charted a new direction for it. In his introductory article to the first issue, he said he wanted it to be "free from sectarian bias and party bickering,"¹² which was likely a veiled swipe at other brotherhood papers of the time. He then said "we... shall seek to make every sacrifice to obtain [union.]"¹³

Ferguson did what many other brotherhood publishers of the time was unable to do—publish a journal that turned a profit. By the second year of publication, the *Christian Magazine* was making money.¹⁴

Ferguson worked tirelessly in his work. Tucker says:

He prepared three to five regular sermons each week, carried on his editorial duties, was on the Board of Trustees of Franklin College (appointed in 1848), visited each family in the church once each three months, spoke for numerous social and cultural events, and carried on other works which are normally associated with a local church.¹⁵

Even those who later withdrew from him over his false doctrine admitted things "seemed to prosper in the church, at least, so far as attendance on preaching on Sunday was concerned."¹⁶

While *attendance* grew, the number of actual members remained rather stagnant.¹⁷ His preaching style appealed to the "idle, frolicsome, theatrical, sensual, and profane part of the community,"¹⁸ but there was a noticeable lack of conversions in these people who attended his preaching. Jesse Ferguson was well-known in the community, but it seems *that* was his main interest—being well-known. The church of Christ in Nashville became a place for people to go

¹¹ Boles, H. Leo, *Biographical Sketches of Gospel Preachers* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1932) pp. 188.

¹² Ferguson, J.B. "Introduction," *Christian Magazine*, Jan. 1848, pp. 1-4, quoted in Tucker, *Like a Meteor...*, p.13.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Tucker, *Like a Meteor...*, pp. 14-15. Barton W. Stone's *Christian Messenger* (especially the last several volumes) was filled with pleas for brethren to pay their subscription fees because he was losing money. Even today, most brotherhood papers/magazines (including this one) do not bring in much (if any) profit. They are usually published because the publisher/editor/congregation(s) behind them believe they are important and are willing to shoulder the costs associated with spreading them to others.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16, quoting Fanning, *History and True Position of the Church of Christ in Nashville*, a document which is included in the 2020 edition.

¹⁷ Tolbert Fanning, et. al., *History and True Position of the Church of Christ in Nashville*, p. 12

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

because it was fashionable to go where the famous Ferguson preached. This included future President Andrew Johnson,¹⁹ who historians seem to agree was “the least religious, and the president who was least affiliated with any religious group or identifiable religious philosophy.”²⁰ Ferguson himself (writing in third person) claimed President Johnson was “one of his most ardent admirers.”²¹

This attitude of seeking popularity over seeking to bring people to Christ caused his preaching to be entertaining, but shallow. When hundreds of lost people can listen to your sermons and leave happy without making any changes, something is dreadfully wrong.

His Stance on Slavery

In 1850, Ferguson gave a speech (though it would be better called a sermon) in the First Presbyterian Church of Nashville on the topic of slavery. The Civil War was still a decade off, but the issue was a hotly debated one. His speech was so pleasing to the audience that it was requested that it be put into print. *Address on the History, Authority, and Influence of Slavery* was published within a month.

In this document, Ferguson seeks to defend slavery by appealing to Abraham,²² among other Old Testament examples—examples which had nothing to do with the practice of kidnapping and selling humans that defined American slavery. He also attempts to claim slavery was a good thing for the slaves.

A generation has grown up under the influence of a one-sided view of the subject, and many excellent men have tacitly yielded to the assumption that Slavery is a crime for which there is neither justification or apology. It is time this state of things were changed.²³

He then goes on to say:

...the *natural* and *unavoidable* relations of different races occupying different positions in the *scale of intellectual advancement* and political civilization. [Emphasis mine, BSC]²⁴

[Slavery is] such a condition of servitude as that wherein one comparatively civilized people, may hold another of *absolutely inferior civic attainments*, in hereditary bondage, or a bondage that shall descend from generation to generation, until at least the inferior shall become, in some degree, capable of the sustained efforts and persevering toil of a free government. [Emphasis mine]²⁵

His stance was that slavery was good for black slaves, who were naturally less intelligent than white people. This won him great applause among the slave-holders in the South, because this preacher, this “great orator,” had just told them American-style slavery was not only acceptable, it was *expected and approved* by God.²⁶

¹⁹ “Obituary: The Late Dr. Jesse B. Ferguson,” *The Spiritual Magazine* (Volume 5, 1870), pp. 525-526.

²⁰ Archived version of http://www.adherents.com/people/pj/Andrew_Johnson.html.

²¹ *Supramundane Facts*... p. 42.

²² *Address on the History, Authority, and Influence of Slavery*, pp. 11-12.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 3 (“Correspondence”)

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁶ It should be noted that American-style slavery is *not* the same kind of slavery as seen in Scriptures. “Menstealers” are expressly condemned by God as “lawless and disobedient...ungodly...sinners” (1 Timothy 1:9-

He first tried to unite the South to avoid war, then when war started, he worked to unite all his hearers to fight for the Confederacy.²⁷ The Union soldiers eventually took Nashville and set up military headquarters there, and Ferguson tried to calm the populace. But prominent southerners were targeted for arrest, and Ferguson was definitely prominent, having been a candidate for the legislature in 1861. So he did what any brave person would do—he ran to Canada.

From there, he went to England, where he tried to rally support for the Confederacy. He failed, and upon returning was banished from the Union territory.

He went to Richmond, the capitol of the Confederacy, where he called for both sides in the Civil War to stop fighting because of the evils of war, and for both governments to work together to create an international congress to mediate between them. He published his thoughts in a pamphlet, in which he describes himself as a “white republican” (note: this isn’t referring to the political party, but a *white* supporter of “the republic”).²⁸

The Controversy that Killed His Influence

It wasn’t slavery that caused Ferguson to resign from preaching and to leave the church. After all, he was in the south, preaching what they wanted to hear. It wasn’t hard preaching that got people upset, because he was preaching what people wanted to hear. And honestly, if he had confined his beliefs on this topic to just his preaching, instead of publishing them and sending them to brethren across the country, there might not have been much of a controversy.

In April 1852, Ferguson wrote an article giving his interpretation of the “spirits in prison” from 1 Peter 3:18-20. In it, he claimed that all who have died will have a second chance after death, and that ultimately all will be saved—in other words, *universalism*.

This, understandably, caused a firestorm. The most popular preacher in the South, with one of the most-read papers in the brotherhood (perhaps second only to Campbell’s *Millennial Harbinger* at this point), was in essence contradicting Jesus’ teaching on judgment, rejecting the importance of preaching, erasing the need of repentance, and promising a false hope to everyone.

The response was swift. The *Millennial Harbinger* reprinted the article the following month, followed by Campbell’s response, which included a plea for Ferguson to repent. The next month’s issue included letters from such men as John Rogers and Samuel Church, the latter of which said:

I am truly sorry to see that Bro. Ferguson has got a maggot in his brain. This will destroy his usefulness and influence, and probably end in his becoming a wandering star, like Mr.

10). Most slaves in the time of the Bible were either indentured servants (in slavery due to indebtedness), conquered enemies (in slavery as a result of war), or people who were so poor that selling themselves into slavery was actually a step up for them (guaranteed food and shelter). Kidnapping to make slaves was never approved in Scriptures.

²⁷ *Supramundane Facts*, p. 37.

²⁸ Ferguson, Jesse B. *The Times! Or The Flag of Truce; Dedicated to the Cabinets at Washington and Richmond, by a White Republican* (Richmond, VA: Ritchie and Dunnagan, 1863).

Thomas.²⁹

Over the following months, Campbell, Samuel Church, John T. Johnson, Isaac Errett, John R. Howard, Benjamin Franklin and others wrote in the *Harbinger* and other papers against Ferguson's false teaching. All the while, the pages of the *Christian Magazine* expanded and reiterated Ferguson's doctrine of universalism—except now he blasted those who brought Scripture arguments against him as uncaring and unintelligent.³⁰

Ferguson, seemingly in an attempt to bolster his universalist teachings, then published a book called *Spirit Communion* in which he details many supposed conversations he had with the spirits of the dead. And as should be expected, faithful brethren exposed his false teachings there as well.

Ultimately, this controversy tore apart the church in Nashville (which had recently moved into its massive new building), and resulted in the faithful brethren publishing a booklet giving the history of the church in Nashville, including their doctrinal stances from the beginning, showing that Ferguson's views were not the views of the church or her members.³¹

A lawsuit ensued, wherein the faithful members sought ownership of the building (the booklet mentioned above may have been created in part because of this suit). It failed, but the pressure was mounting on Ferguson. A vote was taken, and less than 20% of the members stood with their wayward preacher.

And of course in true Jesse B. Ferguson fashion, he published his resignation sermon, with the “stick-it-to them” title: *Moral Freedom: The Emblem of God in Divinity and Life—A Discourse delivered in voluntarily surrendering the house of worship built for his use, to its doctrinal claimants, when their claim could not be legally sustained, and when not authoritatively demanded.*

Later Years

After this fallout, he still tried to keep his name in the news by giving speeches, writing more and more books and tracts on talking to dead people, encouraging southerners to fight against the North, running for office (and losing), and running for his life. Sometime after Lincoln's murder, Ferguson went to Washington to take a message to President Johnson—actually several messages, all of which he claimed to have received from ghosts.

He later went to England to travel with and manage the Davenport brothers, who were also involved in necromancy. It was while here that his autobiography (written in third person as a biography) was published. After returning home, he died in 1870.

Why Did He Fall?

The history is fascinating, the twists are crazy. But the question remains: *Why did he do this?* What caused him to embrace universalism and spiritualism? The only one who knows for sure is God Himself. But I think we can offer an educated guess.

²⁹ *Millennial Harbinger*, July 1852, p. 414. The “Mr. Thomas” of whom he speaks was Dr. John Thomas, a member of the church who later founded the Christadelphian Church.

³⁰ Tucker, *Like a Meteor...*, pp. 29-30.

³¹ Fanning, Tolbert, et. al. *History and True Position of the Church of Christ in Nashville*

He had a massive ego.

At 11, you are promoted to teaching your classmates. At 13, you're offered a teaching position at a brand-new school. At 22, you're put in charge of part of a prominent brotherhood periodical. For the next six years, as you're preaching from place to place, big congregations are practically begging you to move there and be their preacher. One of the most well-known and trusted brethren in Tennessee (and perhaps the country) turns over his paper to you. You're preaching in front of 800 people each Sunday, and the community loves you. You put all these things together, and you can see how Jesse B. Ferguson might think he was smarter than everyone else, better than everyone else. Humility wasn't one of his virtues by this point.

So, if he gets an odd idea in his head about something, he is certain he is right. And if someone questions him on it, he plays the victim and just screams it louder. Everything must now be viewed through the lens of this interpretation. He can't ever admit he might be wrong.

He liked the fame and wanted the popularity.

When you want to be popular, you often do things just to please people. When he was with Arthur Criehtfield, and his time was spent with the faithful brethren in Ohio, he acted like them, standing firm for the truth—because that is what they did. When he moved to Nashville and preached to a crowd that was nearly 40% lost people, he tailored his message as to not offend the lost ones whose praise he wanted—thus while attendance grew, the church did not. When in the South, he defended slavery and encouraged rebellion. When in England, and when close to Washington D.C., he sought to encourage peace.

Universalism is a very comforting doctrine to anyone who is lost, or whose family members died outside of Christ—the problem is *it is a lie!* It is no surprise Ferguson might promote this doctrine when he seems most concerned about making people happy and increasing his own popularity with the masses. He truly became all things to all people—but it wasn't to win them to Christ, it was to increase his popularity.

He liked the spotlight.

In introducing the topic of the spirits in prison, he admitted his interpretation was unique among his brethren. And he knew it would grab him a lot of attention. And through the pages of the *Christian Magazine*, he played it for all it was worth.

If these guesses are accurate, perhaps at some point he realized it had gone further than he intended, but he couldn't back down from it (see point 1: ego). So in an effort to keep the attention, he pushed it even further and claimed he talked with departed souls—*proving* (so the claim would go) his doctrine of universal salvation was true.

He did not have a love of the truth.

Ferguson clearly was an eloquent preacher who could preach the truth on some subjects. Arthur Criehtfield wouldn't have trusted him otherwise. Ferguson wrote some fantastic articles in support of the truth, which is why Tolbert Fanning trusted him to take over the *Christian Review*.

But Jesse B. Ferguson didn't have a love of the truth.

This is clear as you see his responses to the brethren trying to bring him back to the truth. In many instances, he ignored what they said, and instead played a “woe is me, they're attacking me” card. He ignored the New Testament's clear teaching on judgment for all (Acts 17:31), and

instead clung to his interpretation of a somewhat obscure passage even though it contradicted clear passages.³²

Had he loved the truth, he would have never gone into universalism and spiritualism in the first place—and if he had, would have repented.

Check Yourself

Please let the case of Jesse B. Ferguson serve as a cautionary tale. Love God more than popularity. Be willing to speak the truth even if you might lose friends. Remember that we are supposed to bring glory to God, not to ourselves. And finally, be humble.

³² I am not saying the passage cannot be understood—it can. But that the “spirits in prison” passage has been a difficult passage to explain for many Christians for many years.