# **THE RELEVANCE OF F. B. SRYGLEY TO CHURCHES OF**

# **CHRIST IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, Part One**

# Through the first half of the twentieth century, the name of F.B. Srygley was known and respected in thousands of homes where the *Gospel Advocate* was read. But nearly seventy years after his death, few brethren know much about his life and work. He wrote no books that might have kept his name alive. Restoration histories give him little, if any, notice. There is presently no published volume devoted to his life’s work.1 He did not teach in a college where he may have influenced students as a beloved teacher. He served no large church that could publicize his name. In fact, he did very little “located work.” He preached mostly by weekly appointments and in protracted meetings in rural areas and small towns. However, he preached extensively, baptized more than 4,500 people, and established many churches. But this is largely forgotten today. What relevance, then, could he have to churches of Christ today?

Doctrinally and temperamentally, Srygley would probably not fit comfortably in most churches of Christ today. He might have a closer affinity with more conservative congregations, but he would not likely be welcome in many of these. There is a very important reason for this. Harry Pickup, Sr., who knew Srygley well and regarded him as a great man, said: “If I have ever known a man who ‘wore no man’s collar,’ it was this man.”2 While I may differ with some of his conclusion, interpretations, and applications of scripture, I share the sentiment of J.D. Boyd, who said ay the time of Srygley’s death: “I have read from Brother Srygley since I was a boy, and it seems to me that he came as near being always right as any writer for religious papers.”3

My interest in Filo Bunyan Srygley, began more than half a century ago and was at first sentimental. He was born and reared near my father’s family. My paternal grandmother’s grandfather was a friend of his. When he died in 1906, F.B. Srygley wrote a laudable obituary of him in the *Gospel Advocate*. So while sentiment aroused my interest in the man, it was his character and work that kept me returning periodically to read about his ministry. The more I learned about him, largely from his writings, the more I came to see him as unique among churches of Christ in his time. His life spanned eighty turbulent years of the Restoration Movement, from the eve of the War Between the States until the eve or our entrance into World War II. Srygley began preaching before division over instrumental music and missionary societies became irrevocable. He took an active part in all the controversies that helped to define the churches of Christ in the twentieth century.

Some individuals are historically relevant only during their lifetime. Others remain relevant for a few years after their death. But a minority has relevance that extends into succeeding generations. F.B. Srygley belongs to the latter group. His relevance to churches of Christ today rests upon several facets of his independent and captivating life. It is my purpose to give some reasons why I believe that he is relevant to churches of Christ in the twenty-first century. This has no bearing on divine authority. On that score, the Bible alone is relevant. But to the extent that the Restoration itself is relevant today, Srygley, as a quintessential exponent of the movement, is relevant. We have twelve reasons for drawing this conclusion.

**First, F.B. Srygley is a *significant link* between the initial restorers and those who carried on their work into the mid-twentieth century.** His life connects directly to the pioneers of the Restoration and extends to the time of men living today. He was seven years old when Alexander Campbell died and *he* died only seven years before I began preaching. “Raccoon” John Smith, Samuel Rogers, Walter Scott, T.M. Allen, and Jacob Creath, Jr., were all living when Srygley was born. Thomas Campbell had been dead only five years and Barton W. Stone thirteen. Creath was still preaching when Srygley began his ministry in 1880. Further, Srygley was brought up under the preaching of John Taylor, J.H. Halbrook, and J.M. Pickens. He was educated at Mars’ Hill College under the greatly beloved T.B. Larimore. Srygley is a remarkable representative of the faithful Southern preachers that were contemporary with his time. His life overlapped the first three generations of restorers, from Alexander Campbell to B.C. Goodpasture.

Srygley’s life also was closely interwoven with that of John Taylor, a true pioneer restorer in his own right. Taylor was baptized for the remission of sins and began preaching that truth near the time it began to be preached by Walter Scott on the Western Reserve of Ohio. He established a congregation of Christians in Fayette County Alabama in 1829, consisting of about forty persons, all of whom he had baptized for the remission of sins. This was done before he heard tell of Stone or Campbell or had heard of another church of Christ anywhere on earth outside of the Bible. He came to an understanding of the gospel independently of others, and single-handedly began a one-church Restoration movement in the mountains of Northwest Alabama.

The Rock Creek church, where Srygley’s parents were charter members, was started by John Taylor in 1868. Srygley was born at Rock Creek in 1859, near the Franklin County home of John Taylor. He grew to up under “Parson John’s” preaching. It was with this old backwoods preacher that Srygley made his first preaching trip through the hills and hollows of Northwest Alabama in 1882, after graduating from Mars’ Hill. This was about three years before Taylor’s death.

F.B. Srygley moved to Lebanon, Tennessee in 1883. He said: “I came to this State many years ago to do missionary work in Wilson County and my home, when I had a home, was in Lebanon.”4 He lived in Lebanon ten years, preaching there in the winter, but spending the rest of the year evangelizing. He next moved to Donelson, Tennessee, where he lived in a cottage next door to F.D. Srygley, where he lived until his brother’s untimely death in 1900. He then took up residence in Nashville and lived there for the rest of his life. He continued to devote most of his time to evangelistic work and was away from home much of the year.

He preached in Nashville between protracted meetings, but not as a “regular preacher” for any church. He did little local work and held reservations about the practice. He did not oppose men preaching regularly for the same church or receiving wages for their labor. But he often criticized what he called the “hired preacher,” who, he thought, was trying to be a professional minister, seeking a soft job at a good salary, while doing little evangelizing. Srygley firmly believed that the missionary society was started in part by men who wanted easy preaching stations, but whose consciences caused them to desire the society to evangelize so they would not feel obligated to.

Srygley’s extended residence in central Tennessee, the nature of his preaching, and his long connection with the *Gospel Advocate*, gave him an intimate relationship with all the men who owned and edited the *Advocate* in his lifetime*,* except Tolbert Fanning who died tragically in 1874 before Srygley left Alabama. Srygley knew all of the leading preachers in the South who were his colleagues and he belonged to that galaxy of men on the *Gospel Advocate* staff who were known as the “old guard.” Actually, he was the last survivor of that noble band of Christian brothers.

From his first debate in 1885, Srygley was recognized by his brethren for his polemic skills. In the prime years of his life, he was an accomplished defender of the faith in public debate. G.C. Brewer said: “When the battle against digression began, F.B. Srygley was a young man, but he stood with Lipscomb against the error and became the main dependence of the Advocate contingency in oral debate. David Lipscomb, F.D. Srygley, E.A. Elam, and later J.C. McQuiddy, and M.C. Kurfees, were amply able to take care of any opponent in written discussion; but they usually put F B. Srygley forward to represent them in oral discussion.”5 Brewer meant that the *Advocate* men recommended Srygley for oral debate. The truth was always uppermost in Srygley’s mind, but he never represented in debate any man, contingent of men, or religious journal.

Srygley marched in close ranks with men in the forefront of the battle for the old paths against the tide of progressivism that swept away the major portion of the churches of Christ. He met John T. Hinds at Rogers, Arkansas, in the late 1800s when he went there to try to rescue the church from digression. He held a meeting in Terrell, Texas, in 1898, where the church, as he put it, had “gone to the Yankees,” and refused him the use of the meetinghouse. J.D. Tant, then living at Hamilton, Texas, came to Terrell to comfort him in what he said was “my loosing fight for the truth.” Srygley later returned to Terrell and established a faithful church, but of Tant he said: “Since that time, I have been a true friend of Brother Tant.”

Thus, Srygley was a vital member of that network of faithful preachers who carried on the Restoration work that began in the early years of the nineteenth century. Because most of his early work was in evangelizing and debating, little of which was committed to writing, the significance of his part in maintaining the apostolic order during the early years of his ministry is often overlooked today. But contemporaries bear witness to the importance of his role in forming the connection between the original pioneers and at least the older preachers of the present generation. Through his writings that link is well extended to the twenty-first century.

**Second, Srygley was an *explicit channel* of the conservative tradition advanced by Alexander Campbell in the *Christian Baptist.*** By “conservative tradition,” I mean the original concept of the Restoration as summarized in the watchword: “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.” This led brethren to attempt to fully restore “the ancient order of things.” It is generally known that Campbell’s Restoration principles were mainly honed in the earlier years of his ministry, between 1809 and 1830. The first ten or twelve years were formative in nature; but the 1820s, especially during the seven years he published the *Christian Baptist*, he produced a positive commitment to restoring the apostolic order. “It was through its pages that he hammered out most of the cardinal ideas which were to determine the course of the Disciples for a century to come…. True, Campbell later changed his spirit and many of his viewpoints. In some cases he reversed himself in his later writings in the *Millennial Harbinger*, still the core of his contentions, whether valid or not, contains to this day the major determining concepts around which the movement revolves.”6

Srygley was a repository of that early conservative tradition brought forward by men like Tolbert Fanning and David Lipscomb in the South and Benjamin Franklin and Daniel Sommer in the North. While he held little interest in the Restoration Movement itself, he was whole-heartedly loyal to its original principles. During the second generation some of Campbell’s basic concepts of apostolic Christianity began to be doubted by some in “high places.” This led to a division of sentiment toward the Restoration ideal. The notion was advanced that the silence of the Scriptures does not limit religious action. It was on this basis that missionary societies, instrumental music, and the one-man pastor system—the three cardinal doctrines that probably did more to change the course of the movement than any other—arose to rupture the Restoration churches near the beginning of the twentieth century.

There is no doubt that extreme positions have been taken by conservative brethren in the twentieth century in the name of apostolic Christianity, but a genuine conservative movement has been preserved after the tenor of Alexander Campbell’s earlier work. David E. Harrell gave expression to this in the 1966 Reed Lectures in Nashville. Harrell said: “I am a Biblical literalist. I mean by that simply that I believe in a literal and narrow interpretation of the Bible as the Word of God. My aim is the exact restoration of the ancient order of things. It is an article of faith with me that the Bible should be, can be, and is literally understandable and that it should lead all men to the same conclusions. I am concerned about all sorts of problems which most people consider irrelevant to Christianity.” 7

What Harrell says, especially in regard to “the exact restoration of the ancient order of things,” emanating from Thomas Campbell’s *Declaration and Address* and his son’s *Christian Baptist*, was kept alive between the time of Tolbert Fanning and Ed Harrell by men who were committed to the same ideal. No man within that period was more zealously devoted to the exact order of the old paths than F.B. Srygley.

**Third, Srygley committed himself completely and resolutely to *apostolic authority* in every stage and aspect of Christianity.** This is closely associated with our reasons for holding Srygley as a notable link with the pioneers and a preserver of the plea for the ancient order, which they advocated. He was probably as unswervingly devoted to the absolute authority of Christ and the apostles in all things as any preacher in the Restoration. One could hardly find a nobler example of single-minded allegiance to the Restoration ideal. Others may have equaled Srygley, but no contemporary excelled him. He was an opponent in controversy with whom not many were eager to tangle and those who ventured to do so usually came out with the short end of the stick. There is simply no way to defeat a man whose answer to ever religious question is “what saith the Scriptures?”

Srygley’s attitude toward the Bible was by no means exclusive. Thousands in his time shared his view of the Bible’s supremacy. Yet, it is hard to find a person in the course of the Restoration who clung more tenaciously to Bible authority in all things. In all matters religious, he applied the principle of Isaiah’s council to ancient Israel: “To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.” (Isa. 8:20.) He knew the Bible, he loved its message, and he endeavored to walk in its light.

Yet, in holding the Bible as the supreme standard, he never became self-righteous and arrogant, nor did he consider himself superior to others. He admitted weaknesses, shortcomings, and inconsistencies, and fully confessed his complete dependence on the mercy of God.He had little regard for what men said about anything. To him: “Any thing that passes through human hands is liable to be injured by it. Some germ of human error will stick when it comes through human hands. So let us go directly to the pure, unadulterated word of God. Let us drink of the water of life from its original source.”8

Srygley’s views in this regard are summarized in these words: “We believe that it is significant that Christ commanded his apostles to tarry in Jerusalem till they should be ‘endued with power from on high,’ for if they had gone forth preaching their own ideas of what the gospel was, no matter how sincere their efforts, there would have been a lamentable lack of unity in their message. But it is noticeable that when they received the Spirit they never seemed to worry about whether or not it was ‘up-to-date.’ They realized that the message of the Spirit was the only thing that could save humanity, and they went everywhere ‘preaching the word.’”9

**Fourth, in his zeal for apostolic authority, Srygley felt called on to passionately *guard the perimeters* of the ancient order**. One trait that impressed those who knew him well was his inclination to censure anyone whom he thought had overstepped the bounds of divine authority. It was the nature of his keen mind to detect seemingly innocent flaws in the words and deeds of others that he believed would, if pursued, lead to serious departures from the faith. L.L. Brigance said this kept brethren from going “off at a tangent.” Srygley was not a faultfinder, but his practice caused him to be regarded, even by friends, as a critic. In keeping with his zeal for apostolic authority, few gospel preachers matched his vigilance in fervently guarding the frontiers of the apostolic order than F.B. Srygley. And few men more militantly fought against any encroachment on apostolic authority in the teaching, faith, and practice of New Testament Christianity. In this there is no better example for preachers today among uninspired men.

Srygley did not hesitate to point out any error that he perceived in others, including his closest friends, because he believed that defense of the truth could not afford the niceties of patience and leniency. However, this trait, so prominent in his writings, should not obscure the attitude he manifested toward his brethren in error. He was a controversialist, constantly fought for the truth, and severely condemned anything he believed to be contrary it. He did not fail, when he felt the situation demanded it, to mark as a false teacher any who rebelliously crossed the frontier of divine truth. Yet, he never sought to denominationalize or sectarianize the Lord’s church. It was his view that: “God alone knows all of his children.”10

### Even in his often sharp and peppery controversies with brethren, Srygley, like Lipscomb, could deal kindly with his opponents. In reviewing his thirty years as an editor of the *Gospel Advocate* in 1896, Lipscomb stated the principle the guided his ministry. In so doing, he advised his readers to: “Be firm for truth, steadfast in the maintenance of right, yet forbearing to 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 born 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.”11 These words could very well have been truthfully written by Srygley himself.

Srygley felt duty-bound to speak against fallacious teaching and practices. Yet, in his tenacity for the truth and criticism of those who breached it, he never regarded himself as a “lord” over another’s faith. He simply had that rare ability to see serious faults in the reasoning and actions of his brethren while still harmless looking embryos. Having lived through a major division in the church, he had learned that little streamlets in time may become raging torrents. There is no credit to one seeing that the horse is gone when the stable is empty, but Srygley noticed what happens when the door is left unlocked while the horse is in the barn. He constantly warned brethren to keep the door securely fastened. There is no doubt that many people were kept fast to the old paths through the stern warnings given by Srygley each week in his *Advocate* editorials*.*

Being a critic fell to Srygley by necessity, not by choice. That he was well suited to the task by ability, temperament, and resolution, made it appear to many that he was contentious. But his deep humility, keen sense of humor, consciousness of his own faults, and dependence on the grace of God disprove it. Those who worked closely with him, who knew him best, and were themselves dedicated to the defense of the gospel, honored him for his work’s sake. He recognized, perhaps more acutely than some, that the truth of the gospel cannot establish a foothold and maintain its presence in the devil’s world without conflict with its evil landlord. He totally committed himself to Christ and his church. He determined from the beginning of his ministry to confine his preaching to these and to oppose anything and everything that would threaten the purity of either.

Srygley believed that controversy was essential to maintaining the apostolic order. He said: “Some of us have known for some time that the fighting spirit is the right spirit for those who propose to be Christians. A Christian ought to fight sin, and he ought to fight error wherever it is found. There has been a disposition in the religious world for some time to oppose fighting. This disposition has struck us lately. Some of our own members think it is better to wink at sin and error than it is to oppose it. Paul was not that kind of a Christian, for he said in the presence of death: ‘I have fought a good fight, I have kept the faith.’”12

**Fifth, in contending for the apostolic order, Srygley possessed a wholesome balance between his ability to steadfastly defend the truth and oppose error *with forbearance* toward his erring brethren.** He pointedly disavowed his brethren’s errors. Yet, like Lipscomb, as hard as he fought innovations and digression and as critical as he was of those who promoted these departures, he ever sought to maintain peace and unity among brethren, and was slow to draw the lines of fellowship against those with whom he differed. One cannot study Srygley’s life carefully and not recognize both his love for truth and his desire for unity among God’s people, but unity based on the Bible, not compromise. While he aggressively opposed everything he saw as a detriment to the gospel, he maintained a kindly attitude toward those with contrary views. John T. Lewis said of him, he would fight with you one minute and eat with you the next.

Many have painted Lipscomb as a “reactionary conservative,” when he was a “moderate conservative.” This is pointed out by Robert E. Hooper. “Only in recent years has anyone recognized David Lipscomb as a moderate, following Paul’s admonition: ‘Let your moderation be known to all men.’”13 Lipscomb sought to draw a distinction that many of his contemporaries, and others since, did to see: that one can stand forthrightly for the truth and firmly oppose error without being sectarian or promoting a denominational concept of the church.

Srygley learned this lesson well and shared Lipscomb’s moderation during his long editorial career. He knew that error is connected with people and that its exposure often requires identifying the people who uphold it; yet, he was moderate in dealing with them. Three things are evident in his writings that show moderation toward erring brethren. First, he avowed that all men, including himself, have human weaknesses and that such failings require patience. This is evident in his defense of Leon McQuiddy, the blemished owner of the *Advocate* after his father’s death in 1924. And he knew that the best Bible scholars miss the truth on some points. This is seen in his conflicts with Daniel Sommer. Both men had deficiencies, but Srygley held him in respect as a faithful brother in Christ.

Second, he understood that some men are slower in coming to the full understanding of truth on some points. Both J.C. McQuiddy and F.D. Srygley favored the missionary society when Lipscomb employed them to work with the *Advocate*, McQuiddy as business manager and Srygley as the front-page editor. While Srygley was perhaps the first to seriously attack the teaching of R.H. Boll, he confessed that for many years little effort was made to correct Boll’s teaching.

Third, Srygley recognized that all brethren, no matter how honest and studious, will not see exactly alike on every point. He differed, sometimes sharply, with many of the men who were connected with the *Gospel Advocate* while he served as one of its editors. He knew that there comes a time when fellowship must be withdrawn and he was ready to do it when necessary. Nevertheless, he was not trigger happy, but possessed a whole-some balance in his ability to doggedly defend the ancient gospel and to forebear so for as possible with erring brethren, even as he distanced himself from their errors. An objective view of Srygley’s criticisms shows that he could be caustic and even scathing at times, yet he endeavored to anchor his criticism in love of the truth and motivated by a desire for the purity of the church.

### A critic is “a person who forms and expresses judgments of people and things according to certain standards or values.” Srygley’s standard was the New Testament, and any departure from it, however slight, was to him a call for the unsheathing of his verbal sword. He was hard on exponents of error, those who defended its promoters, and those who compromised with it.

Srygley no doubt also filled his role as a critic, because he knew that others with ability and opportunity, either could not or world not do it. He thought the times demanded a critic and he acted while some faltered. In the last years of his life, he thought that many churches of Christ were moving away from their apostolic roots. Their successful growth and relative prosperity between the World Wars caused many to forget the struggle through which they had passed in the previous fifty years.

While critics are needed among God’s people and serve a useful purpose, they are seldom popular, especially with the objects of the criticism. But Srygley earned the kind of respect and possessed the dignity and bearing that lifted him above petty snipping. The brethren whom he censured usually recognized his purpose and accepted it, if not with grace, at least to edification. N.B. Hardeman probably expressed the sentiment of others when he said: “I have had him criticize me, but I always believed it was for my good, and I have profited by his remarks.”

Highly critical preachers and writers, in general, tend to assume an air of superiority and arrogance that give them the unique ability, as Foy E. Wallace, Jr. said of one brother, to “strut while sitting down.” This was never a problem with Srygley because he recognized his own imperfections and often spoke of these. He also quickly apologized for errors in his editorials, however well intentioned, One who was often the brunt of Srygley’s sharp pen paid tribute to him after his death, saying: “Among the most prominent characteristics of our departed brother I would name his simplicity and his humility. He never thought of himself as a *big preacher*, and always consulted his brethren about points of dispute.”13 His self-effacing disposition no doubt helped disarm his critics and make his criticism more acceptable. Probably the most vicious personal attack ever leveled against Srygley by a brother in Christ went unanswered by him.

In the Statuary Hall in our nation’s capitol, there are statues of men who are hardly known today, even in their own states. There are others who were well known for some time after their death, but then faded to little more than footnotes of history. But others are of such enduring relevance that they will have a continuing importance as long as this republic stands. I believe that F.B. Srygley belongs at least somewhere between the latter two. When he died, W.E. Brightwell said: “Now he is gone from us, but he left behind him a work and an influence that will not soon fade away.”14 Cled E. Wallace spoke of his influence, past and present, saying: “His influence will be felt a long time, and memories of his great personality will tarry on. I have been under the influence of his writing since I was a boy, and I am only one of many such.”15 Rue Porter said: “We will miss his pungent paragraphs in the Gospel Advocate. His ready wit made him an outstanding man. We younger men meekly pay tribute to the memory of a mighty warrior as we think of his going.”16

With the passing of Filo Bunyan Srygley, one of the greatest fighters for truth and right in modern spiritual warfare, the man whom we like to think of as the faithful and fearless Warrior from Rock Creek, was no more. He was on the field of battle in the conflict with the “digression” that caused the first major division among the Restoration churches. He relentlessly and under much opposition fought the proponents of premillen-nialism when it threatened the body of Christ. And he engaged the champions of demominationalism in what might well be called his “sixty-year war.” In addition to his longer battles, he also remained a vigilant watchman on the ramparts of spiritual Zion for any sign of danger that might appear.

After publishing Srygley’s last unfinished article intended for the *Gospel Advocate*, B.C. Goodpasture wrote: “We do not know what would have been said in this article if its writer had been spared to complete it. Yet we do know that he had planned to use the following quotation from Paul: ‘Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.’” (Phil. 4:8.)17

It is fitting that we conclude this discussion of the relevance of F.B. Srygley with the last verse he meant to use. It epitomizes the thinking of the man and the legacy he would leave to Christians, and especially to gospel preachers, who come after him. We believe that through his life and written works, F.B. Srygley has a relevancy for today and a relevancy that will continue to be congruous among God’s people so long as there are faithful men and women in this good land who strive to maintain the apostolic order in the midst of a perverse and crooked generation.

Notes

1The life of F.B. Srygley in *The Warrior from Rock Creek* is now in publication.

2Melvin Curry, ed., *They Being Dead Yet Speak*.

3*Gospel Advocate,* March 28, 1940.

4Ibid., February 21, 1935.

5Ibid.*,* May 23, 1940.

6Lin D. Cartwright, *The Influence of the Religious Journal*, Unpublished Manuscript.

7David E. Harrell, Jr., *The Disciples and the Universal Church*, 34-35.)

8*Gospel Advocate,* January12, 1939.

9Ibid., November 7, 1029.

10Ibid., January 13, 1938.

11Ibid., January 9, 1896.

12Ibid., June 20, 1935.

13Ibid., May 23, 1940.

14Ibid.

15Ibid., March 28, 1940.

16*Christian Worker*, March 21, 1940.

17*Gospel Advocate*, February 22, 1940.

Earl Kimbrough

January 10, 2008.