**T. B. Larimore:**

**Evangelist to the World**

Theophilius Brown Larimore began his life as a Christian at Hopkinsville, Kentucky, on his 21st birthday, July 10, 1864. A little less than two years later, he preached his first sermon in the same place where he first confessed Christ; and he continued in the high and holy calling of an evangelist until a few weeks before his death at Santa Ana, California, March 18, 1929. For more than 60 years, constantly increasing in power and influence, he carried the simple story of redemption across America and beyond, his field ultimately reaching from Maine to Mexico and from Canada to Cuba.

During the years of his ministry, in an almost endless succession of gospel meetings in which he customarily preached twice daily and three times on Sunday, be became one of the most universally loved, persistently successful and deeply influential preachers ever to rise in the ranks of the Restoration movement. He probably preached more sermons to more people, and baptized more, than any man since the time of Walter Scott and John T. Johnson. When scarcely halfway through his preaching years, he bad already baptized more than 10,000 persons. But his preaching was not solely aimed at making converts to Christ.

Larimore always stressed the supreme importance of members of the church living righteously before God and man. He believed that gospel preachers “should not neglect to preach and press and impress, with all the power they possess, the importance of obedience to the will of Jehovah, on the part of Christians as well as sinners.”1 He held the apostolic view that preachers should be models of purity; that their influence “should be good and only good and that continually.”2 “No gospel preacher has the right,” he said, “to have any habit that the purest Christian wife and mother on earth cannot consistently and conscientiously commend to her own husband and children.”3

When Larimore died in the eighty-sixth year of his life, A.G. Freed wrote of him: “Brother Larimore still lives in the hearts and lives of multiplied thousands and will live on and on. The sweet story of his life as it was made into the life of Christ will be told to children’s children.4 This is still true half a century later and is true because Larimore was no ordinary man.

**A Remarkable Life**

He was not perfect; never professed to be. Nor did he ever intimate, either in public or private, that he was more righteous than others. He often spoke of sins in his life and characterized them as grievous. Yet, he could say with complete sincerity: “I am not con­scious of ever having done anything because of which I should dread death.”5 While he lived most of his life with the strong belief that his death was imminent, he never spoke of his premonitions with fear. He was fully persuaded that life is but the preliminary step to a superior plane of service toward which he ever looked in the full assurance of faith.

In a few traits, Larimore excelled most men; in many others he was their peer. But the qualities of his life, whether excellent or ordinary, blended in him with a cheerful chemistry to produce a remarkable specimen of humanity: the kind of man that all too rarely arises from the masses to bless the world, to make the earth a better and happier place because he lived in it. Paul’s charge to Timothy “to preach the word” became the polar star of Larimore’s life. Perhaps few men in the history of the world pursued the work of an evangelist with more single-minded dedication, undistracted energy, and unselfishness of purpose than this kind and gentle servant of Christ.

Larimore’s influence on the character of the churches of Christ in the 20th century, although not generally recognized and appreciated today, is attested by credible witnesses. But it is not possible to estimate the many thousands of people his life and teaching touchedfor good, nor to trace the links of his influence to thousands more who never saw or heard him. M.C. Kurfees summarized the view of many who knew Larimore well and understood the nature of his influence, when he wrote, “that few, if any, have been the preachers since the apostolic age that left a deeper or more widespread impres­sion upon their friends and upon the people in general wherever they labored than did this stalwart and loveable man of God.”6

Such footprints in the sands of time do not easily nor quickly fade, even though the memory of the man who made them might. Larimore’s were footprints made with eternal truth, although other factors enhanced them. He was highly intelligent, deeply religious and personally attractive. As a speaker, he was eloquent, instructive, and persuasive. His life exhibited the qualities of gentleness, purity, and love which undergirded his other traits to amplify his strength and success as a preacher. Then too, the circumstances of his life and the nature of the times in which he lived undoubtedly contributed to his prominence. But an objective appraisal of the man leads one to believe he would have been a preacher of towering influence at any period in modern times.

But the intense influence of Larimore itself is unique. It did not rest upon the kind of special attributes or accomplishments that have marked most of the great leaders among the disciples of Christ. While his knowledge of the Bible was superior, he was not a Biblical scholar. He edited no significant religious journal; even the name of one he edited for two years has almost been forgotten. He was not a debater, nor a controversialist. He was not a fighter. He never wrote a book, although four volumes of his letters and sermons and a small biography of his early life were compiled by others. The excellent articles he wrote for the papers consisted of interesting essays on timely themes, but he is not remembered for his writings.

Further, Larimore was not particularly outstanding from a homiletic view, if those few sermons of his that have been preserved are typical. They are amazingly simple in content and rambling in structure, including long and detailed, often highly emotional, illustrations. No “in-depth” preacher would touch one with a ten-foot pole, and the or­dinary “three-points-and-a-poem” preacher would find them difficult to arrange in a useable outline, with few exceptions.

Even Larimore’s well-known aversion to controversy was out of tune with the temper of the times in which he lived. He did not gain popularity by specializing in a difficult field of study, riding a popular hobby, or creating a factious following. He did establish a little school, but it only lasted seventeen years and closed at a time of declining enrollment. Some say it failed and by academic standards it probably did.

How then could Larimore have had the tremendous influence upon the church and the world which he obviously did have? Any studied explanation of his influence must find its basis in the peculiarity of the man and in the power of his life. Kurfees, in a brief biographical sketch, set forth Larimore’s major accomplishments in three interlocking divisions: His Intellectual Endowments, His Cultural Acquirements, and His Attainments in the Christian Life. He added: “Let us now inquire, what was the secret of his great power? I hesitate not to say that it was his childlike faith in God; his conscious indebtedness to lost sinners; his clear and well-grounded conviction that the gospel is God’s power to save them; his Pauline determination ‘not to know anything among’ the people, ‘save Jesus Christ, and him crucified’ (1 Corinthians 2:2); and his further well-grounded conviction that life is only the prelude to a greater and higher life that is everlasting.”7

**Mars’ Hill College**

Larimore is perhaps best known today for his founding of Mars’ Hill College, which exerted an influence among the churches of Christ far in excess of its modest pretentions as a school. No center of learning of similar nature ever established by Restoration orientated educators comes close to approximating the power of Mars’ Hill, when compared with its size and duration.

Begun in 1871 when he was hardly more than an inexperienced boy, Larimore intended that Mars’ Hill be an instrument for rebuilding the churches of Christ in the war-ravaged Tennessee Valley surrounding the site of the school, near Florence, Alabama. The dominant idea and ambition of his life centered in the progress of New Testament Christianity. He founded Mars’ Hill specifically to further that interest; and he never allowed the secular aspects of educational work to supplant or hinder his emphasis on Bible teaching.

But the vast influence of Mars’ Hill did not rest in its role as an institution, as much as in the man who led it. Larimore’s pervasive presence magnetized every facet of the school’s existence. No schoolamong the disciples of Christ since the days of Alexander Campbell’s Buffalo Seminary was so completely mastered by one man. Mars’ Hill, for all practical purposes, was little more than an extension of Larimore himself. To appreciate this, one must understand his concept of a Bible School and his method of managing its affairs. Regarding the latter, F.D. Srygley said: “He is one of the most agreeable men I have ever known, and yet he has a way of his own about everything, and always does things his own way.”8

As to the other, Larimore offered no apology for founding a school expressly to advance the cause of Christ, or for making that its highest priority. The college belonged to him and his wife. It was conceived in his mind and built on their land with money they borrowed for that purpose. It operated on his principles and remained under his full control as long as it operated. When it closed in 1887, he closed it, and the property apparently remained in his hands.

Herein is the basis of the influence of Mars’ Hill College: It was Larimore’s school fully and completely, and nothing under his sway remained unaffected for good by the experience. He conducted the school and ordered its curriculum on the premise that the Bible is “the greatest of textbooks,” and every teacher and student was expected to study it and to treat it with due respect at all times.

Students were not only required to recite “at least one lesson in the Bible every day,” but the chapel exercises that began the daily routine at four a.m., Monday through Saturday, were altogether spiritual and moral in nature, each one including a Bible lesson by Larimore. He also met with the preacher-students in an additional daily session to instruct them “in the way and manner deemed best for all concerned.”9

At noon Saturday, all regular activities ceased and until Monday morning, “Mars’ Hill presented an aspect then supposed to be, in some respects, peculiarly its own.” The teachers and students who preached went to their appointments, accompanied by any who cared to go along. “Full of faith and hope,” Larimore wrote of them, “they found friends, sang sweet, spiritual songs, distributed Christian literature and preached the gospel wherever they went. Thus they blessed and brightened hundreds of homes, led many a sincere soul into ‘heavenly places in Christ Jesus,’ and finally leavened the whole land in which they found at first no ‘Church of Christ’ except the consecrated little church at Mars’ Hill.”10 Larimore usually preached at Mars’ Hill church Sunday morning, at a rented hall in Florence in the afternoon, and at the college in the evening.

The Christ-centered atmosphere that covered Mars’ Hill with a mantle of genuine and deep-seated spirituality, bound the whole campus together “as one great family, every one interested in the success, health and happiness of every other one.”11 In that righteous environment, the students who “lived, loved and labored” under the shadow of Larimore’s teaching and example came to consider life as their “school time” and Christianity their “curriculum.” F.D. Srygley said: “Every session was a genuine religious revival under the enthusiasm of which we went out to preach the gospel during vacation without one thought about all those little conveniences of food and raiment.”12

Untold good was done to the cause of Christ in North Alabama, Southern Tennessee, and beyond, as a direct result of Larimore’s work at Mars’ Hill. From the group of “happy and congenial” young preachers who sat at the feet of their beloved teacher and imbibed his spirit of devotion to Christian duty, there came some of the most stalwart evangelists of the Southland. The leadership of the conservative church of Christ was heavily weighted with his former students. Larimore’s “boys” were in the vanguard of those who fought the battle with digression, rallied the disheartened remnant from the ruins of division, and set the loyal churches on the road to spiritual recovery in the early years of the 20th century.

These men paid honor to their teacher for laying in them the solid foundation of faith, hope, and love on which they built useful lives in the service of God. Several of their number where closely identified with the *Gospel Advocate* as editors and contributors when that journal was at the height of its power for truth and right.

**Evangelizing the Nation**

Emphasis on evangelism, the very thing that brought Mars’ Hill College into existence, also hastened its early demise. Larimore’s devotion to teaching the Bible at the school caused other departments to be neglected. But even more was involved. The school sessions were arranged to run from January to June, inclusive, so Larimore could spend the last six months each year in meetings. His appointments included places increasingly remote from his home, as his preaching grew in favor and his reputation spread. Letters came in every mail begging him to come to places far and near at the earliest possible date. As these calls grew in number and urgency, he began to wonder if the school was a greater hindrance than help in preaching the gospel.

For seven years before the school closed, F.D. Srygley, Larimore’s most intimate friend, urged him to abandon the school for constant work in the pulpit, believing it provided him a better means of serving Christ. Larimore finally agreed, convinced that Mars’ Hill had fulfilled its mission. So it was “mustered out of service,” as he explained it, “that I might devote all my time and attention to evangelistic work, with the wide, wide world as my field.”13

“Like an uncaged bird, he went forth, the Bible in his hand and the joy of glad tidings for a lost world in his heart, ‘to turn sinners from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God.”14 Well-established schools in Tennessee and Kentucky offered him their presidency on comfortable salaries, but, to the puzzlement of many, he turned them down to preach the gospel without encumbrance, beyond family obligations, preaching earnestly, diligently, and constantly until the close of his life. In pursuing this course, he became one of the most renowned preachers of his generation, if not of the twentieth century.

Larimore’s immense influence as a preacher has been attributed to his keen rhetorical mind from which flowed a gentle stream of striking phrases and illustrations, or to the oratorical skill with which he wove simple adjectives and metaphors into masterworks of oral art. His ability to draw people to himself has been accredited to “personal magnetism.” He was, without question, an eloquent preacher. Kurfees considered him to be “one of the most polished and accurate (men) in the use of (the English language) whom it was ever (his) privilege and pleasure to hear.15 F.W. Smith, who listened to many of the great orators of his day, believed Larimore was “the most eloquent speaker” he ever heard.”16

Larimore’s speaking ability and commanding presence no doubt contributed much to his immediate popularity and effectiveness, and gave currency to other noble traits that further enlarged his influence. But eloquence and personal magnetism are too superficial and transient to account for the enduring quality of his work. His lasting impact as a preacher was extraordinary for the same reason his lasting impact on the students at Mars’ Hill was extraordinary. T.Q. Martin put it succinctly: “He was grand and great, because he was good.”17

J.W. Brent also struck the key when he said, “if I should seek to touch the secret of his greatness, I believe I would lay my hand upon his heart.”18 “Of all the men with whom I was ever associated,” C.L. Wilkerson wrote: “I think of Brother Larimore as possessing the greater faith.”19 E.C. Fuqua added: “In few men have the ‘seven Christian graces’ found so perfect a setting, especially the higher ones of brotherly kindness and love.”20 And F.L. Rowe was hut one of many who saw Larimore “as approaching nearer the Savior in life” than any man he knew.”21

Aside then from any external factors that contributed to Larimore’s greatness, there lay the unblemished life of the man himself. His heart was pure, his faith and hope strong, and his love for God and man real. He was the very embodiment of kindness and a living example of gentleness. There was in him an utter absence of any combative or warlike nature. When he appealed to people to live righteously, he made them feel that the words came from one who had ascended the mountain to drink from the pure spring of the peace of God. The goodness of his life gave an invisible inner strength to his preaching that can he sensed even when his sermons are read in cold print.

G.C. Brewer, F.L. Rowe, and others have told about how reading the letters and sermons of *Larimore* bolstered their spirits in time of gloom and troubling *doubts,* and when faith in *humanity began to* waver. As Brewer described such reading, “the world gets brighter, human souls seem more precious, [the] heart becomes tender, God is nearer and heaven a reality.”22

Few preachers have been so highly praised in their lifetime as Larimore, yet he remained one of the humblest of men. He was never pompous, flamboyant, or serf-seeking in the pulpit, or anywhere else. He wore plain clothing, lived frugally, sought no earthly honors, cared nothing for titles, and never thought his sermons and letters were worth preserving. Martin believed that one of the greatest things Larimore did was to suppress his oratorical powers, as he did in later life, “lest the people might be moved by his [eloquence] rather than the word of God.”23 There is nothing in the life or works of Larimore to make one believe he would want to be remembered for his eloquence.

**Manner of Preaching**

Larimore’s sermons were characterized by two deliberate and unvarying qualities that, aside from any others, must be taken into account in any meaningful assessment of his profound impression as a preacher. The first is the simplicity of his message and the words he used to convey it to the hearts of his hearers. He was always clear and concise in his utterances. For all his attainments, he was first and last a preacher of the common people; and they loved him for it. Good preachers like F.W. Smith could hear him and then say with all honesty, “When I sat before him as he proclaimed the unsearchable riches of Christ, I felt as if there were no use in my trying to preach, because I could never even dream of preaching like the inimitable Larimore.”24 Yet the poorly educated farmer or mechanic could hear him and clearly understand what he said.

He was one of the best educated men of his day, but used few works of men in preparing his lessons. He had no use for and never read any books of sermons. He frequently said, if confined to three books, no more, he would choose two Bibles and Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary. He told David Lipscomb that these were all the books he used in the great meeting at Sherman, Texas, in 1894, when he preached fifty minutes twice a day and three times on Sunday for 154 consecutive days. His sermons developed freely from his own resources, unencumbered with scholarly quotations or reference to the works of men. He did not even care much for poetry. He rarely quoted any authority but the Bible, and if he knew anything about Greek or Hebrew, he never let on.

The other of the two deliberate and unvarying qualities that perhaps contributed most to his power as a preacher, and most important of all, was his complete reliance on the word of God. If Larimore’s sermons often soared in beautiful flights of oratory, they contained nothing doctrinally save the simple and unadorned teaching of God’s word. He did not speculate. He had no theories; no hobbies. His sermons were filled with Bible quotations. Few men were as ready and complete in their use of the Scriptures. With him God’s word was the end of all controversy.

Although he was a man of peace, he had known war as a Confederate soldier, having participated in several important campaigns including the Battle of Shiloh. Speaking in the military metaphors that often colored his teaching, he said: “My shot and

shell are not manufactured by man. My gun is always loaded, and is fired automatically. My ammunition comes from the arsenal above. While I draw from memory’s stores as apt illustrations ... to simplify my lessons ... I rely always, for proof, on God’s eternal truth alone.”25

Asked, near the end of his life, to say something about “The Old Paths,” he wrote: “Some of the old paths are somewhat dim, a natural result of misuse, and some of the new paths are unquestionably questionable; but, as more than half a century has come and gone, I have persistently and hopefully exhorted saints and sinners to just simply take God at his word.... Believe what he says, because he says it; do what he commands, because he commands; become and be what he requires, because he requires; live as he directs, because he directs; and trust him for what he promises, because mortal man hath never trusted the Lord Almighty in vain.”26

A Baptist preacher, after hearing Larimore preach a few times, warned his brethren of him, saying: “He clings so closely to the exact wording of the scriptures, and makes such a profound impression against partyism, that many may be led by him ... There is no use for Baptists to make sport of him or his doctrine. Mark my prediction: [every] town in which he has preached a month will have Campbellism spreading like Johnson grass.”27

Larimore’s steadfast refusal to engage in controversy to the degree and manner some brethren thought he should caused him to be severely criticized, misrepresented, and condemned. This troubled him deeply, but he spoke of it only in private. In a letter to a friend, he said of his critics: “They seem determined to crush me or compel me to do what I believe to be wrong. They may do the former. I will never do the latter. Nor will I deny anything of which they accuse me, and thus be drawn into a row or a wrangle. My business is to ‘preach the word’... lf they stab me in the back while my face is to the common foe, I cannot help it. Nor shall I ever resent it, or, in any way, try to avenge myself or injure them.”28

He was accused of being digressive, but F.B. Srygley said his sermons “could never be made to fit a digressive pulpit.”29 When he was castigated for not speaking out forcefully against innovations, Lipscomb defended him, saying: “I have no sympathy with the idea that we must jump on and denounce every brother who does not do things our way. This is selfish bigotry.”30 The *Firm Foundation* accused him of preaching where the organ was used, but Srygley wrote: “I cannot remember that he ever ... preached for a church that used the instrument ...while he preached for it.”31 When someone tried to use him to discourage debating, Srygley denounced this as a perversion, then said: “In view of what I know of his life in the last sixty-two years, I dislike to hear any soft-soaper try to use the influence of that good and great man against honorable discussion.”32

**Personal Impressions**

While many aspects of Larimore’s influence must necessarily be omitted here, there is one other that should not be among these. He possessed an almost uncanny power, in the pulpit and out, to make a lasting impression for good on people in all walks of life. This theme recurs repeatedly in written and oral recollections of the man. Kurfees said: “To me personally ... his preaching was a great help, and it had much to do with molding and shaping my own life as a preacher of the gospel.”33

The scope of his evangelism brought him into contact with thousands of people whom he impressed in some personal way and who carried his memory and influence into succeeding generations. A current letter from Charles M. Jones of Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, accredits Larimore with setting “in motion God-given affairs” in his family, which he trusts will endure “until the Lord’s return.”34 His mother was restored and his father converted in a nine week meeting Larimore conducted at Lawrenceburg in 1908. From that one family four generations of Christians have come, some serving as elders, deacons and preachers.

Little children were also drawn to and deeply impressed for life by Larimore, finding in him a preacher who could hold their interest in the pulpit and show an interest in them out of it. Thomas J. Golson, a preacher contemporary with Larimore, lived at Highland Homes, near Montgomery, Alabama. Visiting preachers stayed and took most of their meals in his home, as Larimore did during a meeting there in 1910. It was on this occasion that Golson’s six-year old granddaughter, spending the summer with her grandparents, met and fell in love with Larimore. The impressions he engraved upon her young mind have remained across more than seventy years.

As they walked the half mile to the meetinghouse, and in the family circle, he told her stories from the Bible, emphasizing Jesus’ love for children and his desire that they follow him. He also told her of events in his early life, including his tearful departure for college at 16. He walked the 40 miles to the school in two days and carried with him for food a goose his mother had prepared; but when it came time to eat, he could not touch the food but wept, knowing the family was doing without to provide for his journey. He spoke lovingly of his mother and told his young friend that when she grew up she too would be a good and kind mother like his mother; a prophecy she fulfilled completely.35

Such stories are not unique. They could be multiplied in thousands of homes today. Who knows the world of good that has come in this land because Larimore took the time to treat children as friends and to fill their minds with spiritual and moral truths instead of foolishness?

**Summary**

When Larimore was a young man, Tolbert Fanning told him: “You may never amass a fortune; you may never be rich; but you will never depart from the faith or bring reproach upon the cause of Christ.”36 He was right on all counts. While Larimore could have been successful in any of several financiallyrewarding endeavors, he chose to be simply a gospel preacher, nothing more, and received little material reward for his efforts, never deviating from the course he had set to sample the wares of the world. His position in life, first and last, was to “Preach the word wherever and whenever Providence directs and duty demands.”37 His all-absorbing desire in this world, as often said, was to do as much good and as little evil as possible. In that pursuit he was a grand success.

If many churches of Christ survive this century with a steadfast adherence to the Ancient Order in all its aspects, they may need debaters, and scholars, and editors, yes, and even militant warriors; but they cannot hope to survive without men and women, young and old, who possess in some measure the same spirit of life and dedication of purpose that motivated T.B. Larimore. May God help us to have the wisdom to see this.

Earl Kimbrough

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Feb, 1981

**Notes**

1Larimore, Mrs. T. B. *Life, Letters, and Sermons of T.B. Larimore*.

2Ibid.

3Ibid.

4*Gospel Advocate*, May, 1929.

5Sygley, F.D. *Letters and Sermons of T.B. Larimore*.

6*Gospel Advocate,* May 16, 1929*.*

7Ibid.

8Srygley, F.D. *Smiles and Tears.*

9Larimore, Mrs. *Life, Letters*, *and Sermons.*

10Ibid.

11Ibid.

12Srygley. *Smiles and Tears*.

13Larimore, Mrs. *Life, Letters, and Sermons.*

14Srygley. *Smiles and Tears.*

15*Gospel Advocate,* May 16, 1929*.*

16Ibid.

17Ibid.

18Larimore, Mrs. *Life, Letters, and Sermons*.

19*Gospel Advocate*, May 23, 1929.

20Ibid.

21*Gospel Advocate*, May 16, 1929.

22Ibid., May 23, 1929.

23Ibid., May 16, 1929.

24Ibid.

25Srygley. *Letters and Sermons.*

26Larimore, Mrs. *Life, Letters, and Sermons*.

27Ibid.

28Srygley. *Letters and Sermons*.

29*Gospel Advocate*, Sept. 14, 1939.

30Ibid., Jan. 6, 1899.

31Ibid., Sept. 14, 1939.

32Ibid., May 16, 1929.

33Ibid.

34Jones, Charles M. Letter to Earl Kimbrough, Dec. 1980.

35Cutts, Mrs. Paul. Taped Interview with Earl Kimbrough, Dec. 1980.

36*Gospel Advocate*, May 29, 1929.

37Srygley, F.D. *Letters and Sermons*.