**THE RESTORATION OF APOSTOLIC PEACHING, Part 3**

**Introduction:** In studying about preaching under the apostles in the first century, along with the apostles’ instructions and their own example, the early restorers learned what is required of gospel preachers. They understood that preachers must have a good character, a divine message, and a righteous manner. They believed that following the example of the first century preachers was essential to the success of their own work. They realized that a restoration of the apostolic pattern of faith and practice in the early church would be impossible without first restoring the apostolic pattern of preaching that brought the church into existence and provided for its perpetuity. So from the beginning they made the first gospel preachers their standard.

The restorers, of course, understood the truth they preached, and they believed that it could be understood by ordinary people without extraordinary helps. In so thinking, they sought to free the Bible from the sectarian notion that it must be filtered through creeds and theological systems of human origin, in addition to a supernatural enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. This naturally affected their manner of preaching and must be considered a milestone in the Restoration Movement, if not comparable to the “Golden Milestone” in the Roman Forum, from which all Roman roads were measured. This likely did more to encourage Bible reading by common people than anything else, and it resulted in many unlettered Christians becoming “walking Bibles.”

There is a clear distinction between the preaching of one who believes that people can understand the Bible, and that of one who thinks he is possessed with special powers to unlock its mystery for them. One who knows that people can understand the Bible relies on the inspired word, whereas one claiming supernatural power cannot separate his subjective opinions and ideas from divine truth.

While the restorers believed that people can understand the Bible, they did not believe that they can do so without using common sense rules of study. So in preaching they recognized and employed simple rules study to the Bible, as Campbell did in *Christianity Restored.* These are the kind of rules needed to understand any book written to be understood. The people’s understanding of the Bible allowed them to hear preaching in the light of that book. A church can survive the mistakes of preachers when the members have “an open mind and free inquiry” toward the Bible. This also motivates a preacher to be careful about what he preaches. Some white-haired sister with little education might hang him out to dry, as Minnie Belle Ehl did to J.D. Tant at New River, Alabama, many years ago. She thought the great evangelist had left the gospel and gone to meddling because he spoke ill in the pulpit of the local institution of snuff dipping. When she got through with him the loquacious preacher was speechless.

Another effect this had on the restorers was in the *frequency* of their preaching. Naturally, other things also prompted the pioneers to preach more often than once or twice a week. These include the conditions of the times and the urgency of their message, impelled in part by their postmillennial expectations and optimism kindled by the people’s response to their preaching. Nothing encourages a preacher like success. Reports often carried such comments as: “I have preached and spoken three times a day for a week” (Walter Scott, 1847); “In ten weeks I have spoken upward of 100 times” (John T. Johnson, 1854); “I preach almost every day, and immerse at every meeting; and sometimes I preach and immerse twice a day” (“Raccoon” John Smith, 1830). “William Hayden, in thirty-five years as an evangelistic preacher, was reported to have traveled ninety thousand miles on horseback and to have preached more than nine thousand sermons, ‘which is two hundred and sixty-one discourses per annum, for every year of his pubic life. He once preached fifty sermons in the month of November alone.”1

The pioneers based their conduct in preaching on what they learned from the New Testament. Some features of their manner are mandated by the apostles. They saw that the truth was to be taught fully and without compromise, but also that it was to be taught “in love.” Paul was not pleased that some preached of envy and strife. B.W. Johnson said: “The motives of all preachers are not pure. Some still preach Christ, full of envy for other preachers, and some from a love of strife.” But this, on the whole, was not true of the early leaders of the Restoration.

The restorers also understood that some aspects of the preachers’ conduct reflect the time in which they live, the preacher’s individual personality, and permissible expedients within the framework of truth. Even in recognizing and applying these factors in their manner of preaching, the pioneers were restoring apostolic practice. Of course, where expedients are involved, there are liable to be extremes and there will necessarily be differences of opinion, as with Paul and Barnabas regarding John Mark.

The pulpit manner of some pioneer preachers was somber while that of others was more cheerful. John Rogers, who often heard Barton W. Stone, said he never saw him smile in the pulpit. Yet, he was not without humor in other walks of life. In contrast, F.B. Srygley quite naturally thought of illustrations in terms of humorous stories. While he did not use humor as an end in itself, those who remembered his preaching nearly all approved his humor. In debating Primitive Baptist C.H. Cayce in 1911, Srygley’s brethren stifled his humor. His moderator, J.W. Shepherd, called him down whenever he started to introduce a humorous illustration. I’ve heard brethren who knew about it say this greatly hindered Srygley’s effectiveness. He was like a fish out of water. The Primitive Baptists still circulate the debate.

Some preachers spoke softly without animation, while others spoke in a passionate manner, like Walter Scott, who on one occasion stirred the sterner minded Alexander Campbell to raise his voice with a “Glory to God in the highest.” Such latitudes were usually recognized by brethren as tolerable expedients, so long as the pure message of God’s word was fully preached and that moderating limits were not completely ignored.

A preacher’s education also made some difference in his manner of preaching. It is often suggested that one needs a dictionary to read Alexander Campbell. Yet, Campbell, in spite of his vast vocabulary, spoke often to people that had no formal education, who nevertheless, understood what he was saying. I spoke earlier of Campbell’s preaching in Alabama in 1857. On that occasion three country preachers of the region who had little if any formal education rode sixty miles on horseback to hear him preach. They came away amazed at the man’s knowledge of God’s word. One said he did not believe he could ever preach again after hearing Campbell. And another said he felt like he never had really preached after hearing him.

John Taylor, one of those “backwoods” preachers, accomplished something that at first eluded both Campbell and Stone. He established among the simple hill folks of Northwest Alabama an independent church composed of forty people, *all of whom he had baptized for the remission of sins*, in one meeting in which he preached on “What Must I Do to Be Saved?” At the time he had never heard of Stone or Campbell, nor had he ever heard of a church of Christ outside of the Bible. He learned the truth directly from the New Testament, and effected a one-church restoration movement in Fayette County, Alabama, in 1829. This was at the time Walter Scott was winding up his great ministry on the Western Reserve. The self-educated Taylor began with baptism for the remission of sins, while it took the well educated Stone and Campbell several years to reach that point.

Stone reprinted an article on *Ministerial Indiscretions* from a denominational paper that apparently reflected his sentiment. The unnamed writer expressed the view that “truth loses much of its beneficial results … by an indulgence of Ministers in odd expressions which excite levity, and with sayings which challenge ridicule, drollery, which excites disgust, and harshness, which stirs up anger. Now all this is unlike that solemn, manly, retiring, chaste, mild, persuasive eloquence of apostolic times…. It certainly would be well for preachers often to read … the Ministry of Christ and conform to his manner, as well as his matter in preaching.”2

While our aim here is the study of the preacher’s behavior in preaching, yet the article gives another perceived indiscretion that is closely connected. It is what follows one’s public preaching. The writer said, “often after preaching most powerful sermons, ministers retire to private circles, and take almost the lead in conversations about politics, news, or circulating evil reports, or the all-engrossing concerns of worldly business; which goes to prove to all present, that whatever good others may have received, they themselves are not impressed with the vastly momentous subjects they have just discussed.”3 Stone himself, in a letter to “elders, preachers and brethren in the Church of Christ,” echoed the same.

Stone saw in the lives of the apostolic preachers a manner regarding the gospel that was urgent and comprehensive. He said: “We that preach the gospel must be diligent.” He called attention to some things that needed to be preached more diligently. Then he said: “The successful preacher is the feeling preacher, and the feeling preacher is one who converses much with his own heart, and is often on his knees conversing with his God, and delights in studying his word.” As if to explain what he meant, Stone added: “We have seen great preachers in the pulpit, apparently engaged in delivering important truths; but out of the pulpit we have seen them immediately mingling with the vain, the sportive, and the gay, and joining in their empty talk about trifles and political subjects. Such too plainly show the want of the spirit of religion, and their labors are fruitless. Let us always preach in private circles as well as in public assemblies.”4

One cannot read the story of the restorers lives without seeing in them something that is missing in many preachers even in their own day that did not ring true of the men they saw bearing the burden of the gospel warfare in apostolic times. They gave themselves *wholly* to the gospel and realized that they, like the early Christians, should go everywhere preaching the word. Rather than to use the social circles to expound on worldly affairs, they used them as avenues to preach the gospel. Joseph H. Holbrook, whose remains rest in a little country cemetery near Bronson, Florida, once took a contract to carry mail once a week from New River to Fayette Court House in Alabama just so he could preach the gospel on the streets and in the shops of Fayette on Saturday. He had tried and failed to get other places to preach there and none were opened to him.

Another matter that greatly disturbed Stone was what he believed to be *excessive controversy*. He often engaged in controversy and he did not disparage it in others when it was needed. But it was the lack of moderation that bothered him. He wrote: “As much as possible let us avoid dwelling on the controversies of the day. These rather please the curious, than profit and convince the sinners, or comfort and strengthen the saint, or promote the cause of true piety on earth. Let us pursue steadily the course we have taken, and leave the event with God. We have taken the Bible as the only rule of our faith and practice, and the name Christian [sic], as the only name we wish to have. In this we cannot be wrong. While others may be contending for their various creeds and notions—while they lose sight of religion by endeavoring to proselyte to their faith—while they are quarreling about *Who shall be the greatest,* who shall have the greatest numbers, let us steadily follow our Leader, Jesus Christ, and keep his commandments. Let the parties deride and defame us—let them anathematize and reject us,—Let them call us heretics, arians or devils—still let us cultivate the gentle and meek spirit of Jesus. ‘Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.’ We are advancing to judgment where justice will be done us.”4 Stone beyond question was the most important Restoration leader in the Mid-South, certainly in North Alabama, but at a time when disputation was the rage in most circles of society, he never held a formal debate.

Before leaving the topic of excessive controversy, perhaps more should be said about preachers in this respect. In the earlier half of the twentieth century, there developed a style of preaching that was blunt to the point of rudeness and showed little apparent sensitivity or care for the hearers’ feelings. This manner of preaching, often referred to as “plain” or “bold” preaching, for which there is a genuine need, was often *in practice* “abrupt, unceremonious, rough, and lacking the forms of civility.” Such preaching had been characteristic of a few from the beginning of the movement, which with some able preachers proved to be very effective, but in the hands of less skilled men probably did a great deal of harm.

In 1939, Roy Lanier, Sr. wrote an excellent article on “Gospel Preaching,” in which he dealt with Paul’s being both *bold* and *gentle* in preaching. This duel manner, he noted, would seem to be a paradox, but he asked: “Can preaching be both bold and gentle at the same time? Can a preacher speak freely and positively in the assurance that he is delivering God’s message and still be as gentle, as tender and loving as a nurse is when she cares for her own baby? But some will reply that Paul was bold toward some and gentle toward others. They fail to read closely. He said: ‘We waxed bold … to speak unto you the gospel…. But we were gentle in the midst of you.’ The statements were addressed to the same people.”6

Lanier stressed the importance of the apostolic example in being both bold and gentle *at the same time*. He recommended boldness, but he saw it in two lights. He said: “Boldness born of egotism is never gentle; it knows nothing of that fine art. But the boldness born of an intense desire to be faithful to a God-given trust and of an affectionate desire for the salvation of lost souls can be as gentle and as tender in its treatment of its hearers as the nurse mother is with her own baby.” He further said: “But some brethren need to learn the difference between bold, plain preaching and abusive preaching. One does not have to abuse an audience in order to be plain. Boldness in preaching does not consist of harsh, unkind, unchristian treatment of one’s audience.”7 He said some use demeaning expressions such as: “If you do not see that point, you can get in through the idiot’s gate,” or, “Anyone who believes a thing like that will wind up in hell before their feet get cold.” It is hard to see much love for the lost in such language.

Shortly before his death, Barton W. Stone wrote an article addressed “To Young Preachers.” At the time he had been preaching for nearly half a century, thirty-eight years of which he had been seeking to restore the apostolic order. He had been young and had grown old in the service of the Lord. No man in the early years of the Restoration was more determined to serve “as it is written,” even if he had to stand alone to do it. His interest in and love for young preachers were deep and abiding. He loved them for the cause they served and wanted them to succeed in fulfilling their ministry. He had already suffered the stroke that slowed his preaching and was within about two years of his death. It was a sermon on the love of God that led to his conversion, and from that theme he never strayed. Even as he sat in an armchair in a room overlooking the mighty Missis-sippi River, awaiting his final breath, he wanted to talk again of the love of God. Stone was confident that the advice he gave to young preachers was based on the principles of behavior laid down by the apostles. He writes: “My sons; Hear the advice of an old Father, just about to leave you—just about to be discharged from his service in the ministry for nearly half of a century. I have been among the early pioneers of the west, in laboring through difficulties unknown to you, to preach the gospel.” With no further explanation, he then gave fatherly counsel on a half dozen topics.

He begins with controversy. “It is a common saying among preachers of this day, ‘Old men for counsel, young men for war.’ This is often advanced in justification of public debates, with opposers, or the clashing doctrines and opinions, which now distract and divide the world. ‘Old men for counsel.’—Do they counsel you to engage in such debates? Do they laud you for victories won? I will fearlessly answer, that no old man of piety, and intelligence, will give such advice, unless in an extraordinary case.”

Stone further said: “Seldom do we see in the same person, a warrior and an humble devoted christian…. But ‘young men for war.’ What war? not against flesh and blood, for nothing but carnal weapons can affect them; but against the powers of sin and hell, with spiritual weapons afforded us from above—not against men, but against their sins, as did our Lord and his holy apostles, in order to save them from ruin…. In these debates, but few attend them, who have not their minds predisposed in favor of one or the other of the parties. Arguments as weighty as lead, are to such minds as light as chaff.”8 Such advice to young preachers was in the day when debating was most often a spectator sport in frontier settlements, rather than a serious means of learning truth.

Stone’s second area of advice to his “son” in the faith, on balance, moderates his words on controversy for he urges the young preachers to preach the word “with all boldness and humility.” “If any error or stumbling block lie across the path of truth, and might neutralize its effect on your audience,” Stone said, “labor with cogent arguments to roll it out of the way, without pity for its age, though sanctified by many centuries, and supported by the great and learned for many ages. But be careful, and certain that it is an error before you touch it with your little finger.”9

Thirdly, Stone wrote: “I not only advise you to preach the word, but also to preach it in the spirit.” By preaching “in the spirit,” he apparently meant to preach the word as one who himself “has the Spirit” dwelling in him, and who himself experiences the force of the truth that he delivers to others. He was not talking about animation. He said a person can preach with “a great vociferous zeal and manner,” which “may be, and often is nothing more than mere animal nature, without the Spirit.” So he says: “Live and walk in the Spirit, and preach in the Spirit; then will the attention of your hearers be arrested, and good effects will follow.” Stone saw a “cold and unfeeling address” and a sermon delivered with “a great vociferous zeal” as both possibly being *devoid of the Spirit*. He thought the same could be said of a sermon delivered in a most eloquent manner.

To illustrate the latter, Stone said: “When we see our neighbor’s house in flames and the unconscious family within exposed to instant death, we do not take the time to study and write an eloquent speech in order to read it to them, that they may fly from impending ruin—nor do we write a speech to read to persons, whom we see ready to rush down a deathly precipice, unconscious of their danger—no. Were we to do so, those people would be apt to disregard our admonitions, and perish.”10

Other themes Stone wrote about in urgent tones include a preacher’s holy life, balance in his preaching, and the avoiding of covetousness. But within the lines that expand his words of counsel to young preachers, there are several statements that may very well stand as rules for preachers. The old pioneer said: “I advise you to beware of what is termed gallantry. It will ultimately sink your influence in the public mind.” He apparently used the word in the archaic sense of giving an *appearance* of conspicuous bravery, or bravado, a show of boldness intended to impress or intimidate. He further said: “Be plain, but neat in your dress.” “Wear not costly apparel, nor tinseled ornaments of any kind. It savors of vanity, and will detract from your usefulness.” “Some are tempted to please man by an ostentatious show of learning and talents. This is to preach self, not the Lord Jesus—it is to advance self, and not the cause of Christ—It is to gain the applause of the world, not to save souls from ruin—It is to be popular, not useful.”

Further, Stone wrote: “In your public addresses, like the householder, bring forth out of you treasure things new and old.” “Do not forever harp on one string—on one doctrine however true.” “Avoid every thing, every expression, every smart word, that may excite levity or laughter, in you hearers.” “Avoid every thing like boasting of your self, or of your success in the gospel.” However good and wise the counsel of Barton W. Stone was and is to those who preach the gospel, some of his ideas may seen to us a little too much, but he lets us down easy in the last paragraph, when he said: “My dear sons; If this is good advice, receive it.”11

Near the end of his life, F.B. Srygley began to see changes in the preaching of some brethren. He said: “The thing that troubles me more is that our own preachers and elders are playing into the hands of those who want entertainment more than they do the true worship of God.”12 This had been a factor in the movement since the introduction of instrumental music and choirs. Srygley said: “This effort to entertain will make monkeys out of all the preachers.”13

Concerning the main features of a preacher’s life and work, by which the early restorers sought to pattern their ministry, only the manner permits much wiggle room, but even here there is not as much room for wiggling as some suppose. Barnabas and Paul seem to have been very different in personality and approach to preaching. Yet, both were good men, preached with boldness, and put God and his word first in their lives. These are the very qualities that the pioneer preachers sought to imbibe in their lives, and although they imbibed them imperfectly, it was the degree to which they succeeded that determined the degree of their success in restoring apostolic Christianity.

**Notes**

1Stevenson, Dwight E. *Disciple Preaching in the First Century.*

2*Christian Messenger*, Mar. 1834.

3Ibid.

4Ibid., Feb. 1828.

5Ibid.

6*Gospel Advocate*, Aug. 24, 1939.

7Ibid.

8*Christian Messenger*, Aug. 1842.

9Ibid.

10Ibid.

11Ibid.

12*Gospel Advocate*, July 2, 1936.

13Ibid., June 25, 1936.

Earl Kimbrough, July 2007