**JOHN WILLIAM McGARVEY, 1829-1911**

**A Brief Interpretative Biography**

**Introduction.** “Brother McGarvey” is the tile of W.C. Morro’s biography of John William McGarvey published in 1940, 29 years after McGarvey’s death. “Brother McGarvey” is the manner in which he was addressed by those who knew him and by others who knew his work. The title shows the depth of love and respect in which he was held by his brethren. It also reflects the humility of the man who was one of the best known exponents of New Testament Christianity in his lifetime and who desired no higher place among his brethren than simply to be one of them.

Two of McGarvey’s sons tried writing his biography, but each died before much was done. When family survivors asked Morro to complete the work, he did so with misgivings. Morro, a Bible professor in Texas Christian University, had been a student of McGarvey, but he had little sympathy for his convictions, although he loved and admired him personally. In the last chapter of his book, Morro said: “It was a serious question in the minds of the group that planned the writing of this biography whether sufficient interest could be aroused to justify the effort. Recently an aged friend of McGarvey’s made the comment, ‘There are men in Lexington that do not know that such a man as McGarvey ever lived.’… Like slowly falling snow that obliterates all of the outlines of the landscape, so time is thrusting his name into the ranks of the forgotten, yet he lives and will live on. In the sense that the poet meant, he has joined the ‘Choir Invisible.’”1

Professor Morro could not have been more wrong about McGarvey being forgotten. The fact that brethren include him today as worthy of a biographical sketch in a lecture program belies Morro’s attempt to relegate him to a place in the “Choir Invisible.” There are yet thousands, a century after his death, who admire McGarvey personally and who are glad to sit at his feet and learn from his life and teaching through the written page. Most of his published works are still in circulation and occupy a useful place in the libraries of numerous Christians. There is indication that theses have worn out their welcome or outlived their usefulness.

In 1967, Henry S. Ficklin, a student of McGarvey for five years (1904-1908), addressed an assembly of conservative Christians in Florida. The aged brother spoke lovingly and respectably of McGarvey. He said: “I speak the more confidently [about McGarvey] because I believe that you who are here today are better pupils of McGarvey than the students who were there when I was a pupil in Lexington. They loved and admired brother McGarvey, but they had already gone in a different direction. They went into digression. It is people with your convictions that are the true students of McGarvey.”2 Ficklin expressed the opinion on the same occasion that Morro wrote his book to discredit McGarvey. The book shows little respect for McGarvey’s convictions.

Why should we be talking about J.W. McGarvey today? Why should he be remembered by us? After all, he was just a man and he made mistakes, some of them grievous. There are three good reasons why such a man should be remembered. 1. We remember McGarvey because of our deep appreciation for all the godly men and women, known or obscure, who gave their lives to the cause of New Testament Christianity. 2. We are taught by Paul to “commit [the truth] to faithful men who are able to teach others also.” It should not be out of place, then, to remember those who have been faithful in doing that. 3. We also remember McGarvey because of his marvelous Christian charac-ter, his devotion to the word of God, and his ability to explain a passage in clear and simply terms.

“J.W. McGarvey was a great teacher, a great preacher, and a great writer. Few men have attained such eminent success in all three lines of endeavor as did Brother McGarvey.”3 This is ample reason to make him a topic of study. But there are so many facets to McGarvey’s life that we must restrict ourselves to a few items that will hardly scratch the surface. We will begin with a sketch of McGarvey’s life, consider some aspects of his character, and then review some things about his work as a preacher, teacher, and writer.

**A Brief Sketch of McGarvey’s Life**

J.W. McGarvey’s first years were spent in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, where he was born March 1, 1829. His father died when he was four and his mother married Dr. Gurdon F. Saltonstall, making a combined family of thirteen children to which they added six more by their own union. In this unselfish and affectionate family of nineteen children, McGarvey was reared. His stepfather, a generous Christian whom McGarvey called “eminently just,” was opposed to slavery and unwilling to rear his family in a slave state. So he moved to Tremont, Illinois, when McGarvey was ten. It was here that McGarvey spent the years of his early young manhood, learning skill in the manufacture of hemp, the produc-tion of which made his stepfather prosperous.

As a boy, McGarvey had a fiery temper. His mother told him in alarming tones that his temper was so bad it could lead him to kill someone. Taking her words to heart, he began to practice self discipline and changed his disposition to the calm, even-spirited, and self-controlled person we see in his mature years. In the same manner, he controlled all aspects of his life. McGarvey received a good education in a private school at Tremont, which prepared him for college. And in 1847, when he was eighteen, he entered Bethany College, of which Dr. Saltonstall was a contributor and a member of the board. Alexander Campbell was near the peak of his mental powers and exerted a strong influence on young McGarvey,

While a student at Bethany, McGarvey confessed his faith in Christ following a sermon by Campbell, although he had been considering the move for two weeks before. He was baptized with two other students in Buffalo Creek the same day by W.K. Pendleton. It was in the Bethany church, composed of students, faculty, and a few families from the community, that Campbell did some of his most effective preaching. The pulpit was also filled at times by Robert Richardson and Pendleton, as well as visiting preachers. These devotional services enriched the spiritual life of McGarvey during his three years at Bethany.

After graduating with honors from Bethany in 1850, McGarvey went to Fayette, Missouri, where his family had moved while he was in school. He was not yet sure what he wanted to do in life, although he had a strong desire to preach. However, he lacked self confidence that made him reluctant to follow that course, but in time he conquered his natural diffidence, as he earlier had conquered his violent temper. After conducting a private boys’ school for a while, he decided to preach, but he did not think he was yet ready for that. So while teaching school, McGarvey studied the Bible when he could with the view of preparing himself to begin what would be his life work.

He was ordained by Thomas M. Allen and Alexander Proctor in 1852 and began preaching along with his school work. But he soon quit teaching school to give full time to preaching. He first preached for the church at Fayette, but in 1853, he began working with the church in Dover, Missouri, and the same year married Miss Ottie Hix. He remained with the Dover church nine years, until he moved to Lexington, Kentucky, in 1862. Brother Allen encouraged McGarvey in the beginning. Allen was an evangelist in the fullest sense and likely contributed to McGarvey's life-long interest in evangelism.

McGarvey’s timidity hindered his work in the beginning. He lacked the force of eloquence and animation that characterized Allen. Once when they were conducting a meeting together and it was McGarvey’s time to speak, Allen prompted the young preacher in the language of the frontier. Just before McGarvey got up, Allen whispered something like, “Now, John, come out in a trot and under whip and spur, head and tail up.” But McGarvey never was a feisty horse kind of preacher. Abraham Lincoln said he liked to see a man peach like he was fighting bees. Allen might have pleased Mr. Lincoln, but McGarvey never fought bees in the pulpit.

Alexander Campbell went to Missouri in 1853, soon after Dr. Saltonstall’s death, and called on his family to pay respects. In reporting the tour, he mentioned McGarvey’s half-brother, who was a prominent attorney in Fayette. Then Campbell said: “His brother, J.W. McGarvey, is devoting his talents to a higher usefulness, and a more honorable rank in the Christian army. He was also one of the best and most gifted students, and no one left the College during his years there, with a higher or more enviable reputation, for all the elements essential to a learned, useful, and exemplary man.”4

In an 1863 character sketch of McGarvey, David Walk wrote: “Brother McGarvey is a ten-fold greater man, intellectually, than anyone would be led to suspect on merely seeing him.” He regarded the young preacher as one of the “coming men” of the age. “Nay, more, he is even now here.” So by the time McGarvey left Missouri he was already attracting the attention of brethren across the land. While living in Missouri, he engaged in three public debates: two with Methodists and one with a Universalist. In Paducah, Kentucky, he gave five replies to a Presbyterian preacher on infant baptism. This moved J.R. Howard to call McGarvey “the ablest debatant” among his brethren and to predict that he was “destined to accomplish great good for the cause of primitive Christianity.”5

It was in the spring of 1862, during the Civil War and as a result of it, that McGarvey began preaching for the Main Street church in Lexington, Kentucky. Hostile sectionalism and war troubled many churches, including Main Street. There were conflicting views among the members regarding the war. Some had sons and brothers serving in one army or the other. The preacher, W.H. Hopson, due to his sympathy for the South, felt that he could not hold the church together. He recommended McGarvey to take his place and McGarvey accepted the church’s invitation. One historian says McGarvey moved to Kentucky “at the urgent request of Dr. W.H. Hopson to forestall a split over the slavery issue in the Lexington church. Both factions joined in supporting McGarvey as their minister.”6Hopson became a chaplain in Gen. John Hunt Morgan’s troops. A vocal pacifist and less inclined to sectionalism than Hopson, yet still with much difficulty, McGarvey not only held the church together but led it in spiritual and numerical growth. The manner in which he managed to keep peace in the Lexington church, deeply divided emotionally and doctrinally, is a case study in New Testament congregational harmony.

The move to Lexington was momentous. McGarvey spent the rest of his long life there and became, through preaching, teaching, and writing, one of the greatest influences among his brethren. He began teaching in the College of the Bible in 1865 and continued until his death. His name became a household word among brethren through the land and beyond. John Clifton Trimble, in his doctoral thesis at Northwestern University on McGarvey*,* writes: “For nearly half a century McGarvey was, perhaps, the most noted figure among the Disciples of Christ. As professor and then later president of the College of the Bible in Lexington, Kentucky, his fame spread across international boundaries.”7

The balance of McGarvey’s life that is better known to us concerned with his preaching, teaching, and writing. So we will pass over that here except for two items. McGarvey died at his home in Lexington on October 6, 1911. Final services were held in the Central Christian Church. Three hymns were sung, each accompanied by the organ, which also played as his body was taken from the building. An elderly woman sitting near the back said: “This is a great wrong, for he opposed it all his life.”8 Ficklin said: “They made excuses for it; but his family was not related to him spiritually.”9

McGarvey wanted Hall L. Calhoun to succeed him at the college, but liberals had gained control and they moved in for “the kill” as soon as McGarvey was gone. This is the fate of human institutions. No matter how well intentioned, the founders cannot control them from the grave. It is inevitable that, after at least a few generations, men of lesser faith who covet the control of prestigious schools, will gain the ascendancy and will divert its aims to suit themselves.

**The Character of McGarvey**

Physically McGarvey was a small man being five feet, seven inches in height and of medium weight. “His head was round. In posture he was erect except that age tended to make him round-shouldered. His eye was clear and penetrating, blue gray in color. His hair in early life varied from dark brown to black, but most men now living remember him as decidedly gray. He wore a beard practically all of his adult life shaving his cheeks and upper lip till middle age and after that he wore a full beard.”10

What distinguished McGarvey asa writer, speaker, and teacher was his clearness of thought. There was not the slightest confusion in his ideas. He had very little imagination and relied almost exclusively on facts for effect. But his mind was well stocked with facts needed for the task at hand, whether the pulpit, classroom, or at his writing desk. In the construction and management of his arguments, he used the facts with great success. W.T. Moore said: “In debate he is one of the safest and ablest men among the Disciples, and not the least source of power here is his remarkable coolness—he is never thrown off his guard.... He attends strictly to his own business.”11 This is an admirable quality for a gospel preacher, some of whom love to meddle. McGarvey was very strict and regular in his habits, and this explains why he was able to accomplish so much mental labor without impairing his health. He was methodical in his work and study and this enabled him to do an immense amount of work. He lived a simple life. There was nothing showy about his preaching, writing, or person.

McGarvey could be sharp and biting in his written words, especially when inveighing against the critics of the Bible. This was true in much of his writing on “Biblical Criticism,” which appeared regularly for some ten years in the *Christian Standard*. Although he was tenacious and sometimes caustic in attacking what he believed to be mistreatment of the Bible, he was nevertheless fair and courteous toward an opponent. David Lipscomb said: “He was one of the few men I have known that could go through a shape controversy and not be wounded at his opponent…. He held some unscriptural positions on Bible questions, but would not consciously pervert a passage of Scripture to maintain that position. This can be said of few men.”12

McGarvey was kind, generous, and deeply sentimental, but he was not very demonstrative. People, sinners and saints alike, felt free to come to him with questions or problems. There was nothing in his character or demeanor, as great and busy as he was, the intimidated the poorest saint or the worst sinner in approaching him. Preachers often fail in this department by being aloof, if not carrying an air of arrogance that repels those who would come to them for help. “In [McGarvey’s] parlor in his home there was an ornamental white wax cross under a glass dome. Some visiting students wondered about it. He explained: ‘There was a woman in Lexington who ran a notorious house of ill fame. She quit that life and married and began to study about her soul.’ She wrote to brother McGarvey and said, ‘I am anxious to be saved, but I don’t know whether I can be or not. I am coming to hear you preach Sunday night and I want you to answer my question.’” Henry Ficklin, in telling the story, said: “I wish I could have heard that sermon. That poor soul who was afterward redeemed was led to believe that Christ would save her. And so she became a Christian and gave to him that ornamental white cross, much as the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet…. Now McGarvey was that kind [of man].”13

In a 1901 book, McGarvey wrote a short sermon entitled, “The Prints of the Nails.” He mentions the song whose chorus ends with: “I shall know him by the prints of the nails in his hands.” He said the author conceived of seeing a great host of glorified beings when she enters heaven, among whom she may not readily recognize the Savior. Then she exultantly thinks of the print of the nails. Without giving credence to such an appearance of Jesus in eternity, McGarvey tenderly describes the cruel death of Jesus, and then tells of an occasion where the song was sung at the bedside of a woman who had been bed ridden eight years with a crippling disease. He describes in moving words the impression of the song on the woman, who saw her suffering as nothing compared to Christ’s agony on the cross. Then McGarvey talks in tender terms about our meeting around the Lord’s table in memory of the Lord’s death, of Thomas’ examination at the sight of the risen Lord, and then back to the Lord’s table again. He closed with the words: “…and if the final coming of the Lord shall occur on the Lord’s day, and the living saints shall be caught up from the Lord’s table to meet him in the air, how enviable their last hour on earth will be.”14 Such sentiments characterized the life and teaching of J.W. McGarvey.

A keen sense of humor characterized McGarvey. This he used with telling effect in his writings against the enemies of the Bible. When he wrote his column on “Biblical Criticism, he was deeply serious and often severely critical of those who dealt dis-honorably with God’s word. But he at times also exhibited flashes of wit and humor. J.H. Garrison, in an editorial called “Criticism and Witticism,” said so far as he knew McGarvey had never manifested the qualities of a humorist until he became a Biblical critic. In reply, McGarvey denied any pretensions to being a Biblical critic. He defined his role in simpler terms, saying: “I only aim to stand in between the critics, some of whom I have had opportunity to study, and my brethren who have not enjoyed this opportunity, that I might give the latter the benefit of my readings, and guard them against being misled.”15

Regarding his humor, McGarvey said: “If the editor had known me better, he would have known that, without being a humorist, I have always been somewhat given to humor; perhaps too much so for a preacher. I have always been disposed to laugh at things which were ludicrous, and the only development in this respect of which I am conscious in connection with Biblical criticism, is this: I find myself disposed to laugh at things which once made me angry. When I first began to read these destructive critics, I was like Elihu while listening in silence to the sophistical arguments of Job and his friends—my wrath was kindled…. But now that I see farther into the sophistries and follies of the critics, I laugh at some things which then kindled my wrath…. I must be excused, then, if I laugh at some of the ridiculous positions of the critics and their apologists. 16

“I have observed, too that some things are exposed in their nakedness as soon as you turn the laugh on them, and that a good laugh is sometimes more effective than any amount of argument…. It is precisely so in regard to many of the positions and expositions of the destructive critics; so I have laughed, and I will laugh, at their folly. If I were to write a book, I would try to straighten my face and put on my dignity; but as I am only writing for a weekly paper, I can afford to have a little fun.”17

Another remarkable trait of McGarvey was his unchangeableness. Morro said: “Some men changed as the world changed; others, McGarvey among them, did not. His point of view and his modes of thought at eighty were substantially the same as those he held at thirty.”18 It was such statements as this, no doubt, that moved Ficklin to think Morro wrote his book to discredit McGarvey, especially in regard to his teaching. R.C. Foster went farther when he made an extended review of the book. While he conceded that Morro said many good things about McGarvey, he thought the book was nonetheless an attack on McGarvey and called it “a very able and very subtle piece of propaganda for modernism.”19

Morro was wrong as to the nature of McGarvey’s subbornness. He meant to discredit him. McGarvey sent a copy of his *Authorship of Deuteronomy* by Hall L. Calhoun, a graduate student at Harvard, to Professor George Foote Moore, requesting that he review it. Moore read the book and wrote to McGarvey pointing out five errors. McGarvey published Moore’s letter in the *Christian Standard* and acknowledge his errors, although he did not believe they affected his argument. The letter did not demand publishing and a man of less humility would not have published it. This shows that McGarvey was not adverse to change, when there was a reason for it. Other instances could be given.

But the context of Morro’s criticism of McGarvey was in his attitude toward the Bible as the inspired word, all-sufficient, and complete revelation of God. On this there was *no reason* for him to change. He stood like the Rock of Gibraltar when the Bible was at stake. He knew that without this all the Restoration stood for was lost. So he would not allow even his closest friends to turn him from his course, or to cause him to let up in his unswerving defense of God’s word. Whatever mistakes McGarvey made in regard to the Bible were from a misunderstanding some matter. He saw the march of theological liberalism among the Disciples and did everything in his power to stop it. He may have thought he could accomplish more by remaining in fellowship with his liberal brethren than in severing the ties. This was an error in judgment, if not in application of truth.

It was, in my judgment, the refusal of McGarvey, the most influential teacher among the Disciples, to bend with the winds of liberalism, which were sweeping through the Restoration ranks, which led some of the liberal brethren to seek to undermine his work after his death. It was no doubt hard for him to realize that they saw him as a relic of the past. He not only was unchangeable in matters of faith, when he was convinced by the evidence as to the truth of God’s word, but he was not given to change in other matters for the sake of change. He objected to the use of individual communion cups when they began to be introduced among the brethren, although he died before the controversy grew warm.

Preparation for anything one does, especially in the service of God, was with McGarvey a cardinal principle. When he first decided to preach, he felt unprepared for evangelism. Even though he had three years of intense study under able men at Bethany, it did not prepare him to preach. The school in that day did not train preachers for the ministry. While the Bible was taught daily, it was not the kind of concerted study that equipped one to preach. Before he began preaching, he spent two years preparing himself to preach. He reviewed the courses he had studied at Bethany. He read the Greek New Testament through several times. Yater Tant said of his preparation to peach: “McGarvey was ‘sacrificing’ the present I order to achieve something in the future.”20 This characteristic followed McGarvey all his days and no doubt accounts for his success. He never undertook any work in the Lord’s vineyard without first devoting himself to preparation for that work. Any man who is unwilling to tarry long and hard at the word of God has no business trying to teach it to others.

McGarvey not only clung steadfastly to the truth, but he had the courage to do what he believed to be right regardless of the consequences. When the Civil War began, he was living in Missouri. He was one of fourteen gospel preachers there who issued a “circular” saying that they would not take up arms against their brethren. As a result of is stand, he was persecuted by his own brethren. They cut off his support and he became concerned about the support of his family. It was at this time that he received an invi-tation to preach for brethren in Lexington, Kentucky.

In the controversy over the organ, Leroy Garrett says: “At the outset the most influential conservative leaders, [David] Lipscomb and J.W. McGarvey, insisted that the issues should not be made tests of fellowship. McGarvey did not change his mind like Lipscomb did.”21 We criticize McGarvey for sticking to his position regarding fellowship, but he was little different than other conservatives before they saw that division as inevitable. “Lipscomb always admired McGarvey and was disappointed that he would not write for the Advocate….”22

**The Preaching of McGarvey**

McGarvey was a profound Bible student. Many think he was the greatest Biblical scholar of modern times. It would be expected, therefore, that the Bible would be foremost in his preaching. He had a marvelous mind, committed much of the Bible to memory, and freely quoted it. He misunderstood, or misapplied some Bible principles, but there is no doubt as to where he stood on the question of Bible authority. His faith in the trustworthiness of the Bible as the foundation of the Christian’s hope was probably unexcelled anywhere.

After his death, M.C. Kurfees, in an editorial in the Gospel Advocate, wrote of him: “I think it likely that no man ever lived with whom the hope of heaven and eternal life was a more vivid reality than it was with him. His faith was sublimely beautiful and childlike. Not more certainly did he believe that he would die at all than that he would live on with God and the angels after [death] … His life presented the beautiful spectacle of constantly increasing faith, hope, and love as he advanced in years, and he could truly say as he journeyed on: ‘My faith looks up to thee, Thou Lamb of Calvary, Savior divine.’”23 Kurfees called him “one of the greatest biblical scholars of modern times.”

McGarvey’s style of preaching is thoroughly discussed by Clifton Trimble in his doctoral thesis, to which reference has been made. He begins by saying: “McGarvey’s style reflects the qualities of clarity and energy.”24 This is the testimony of many who heard McGarvey. Boles said: “As a speaker and writer, J.W. McGarvey’s strongest point was his clearness of expression. He used simple language and expressed himself in the fewest words possible.”25 Trimble shows the reason for his style of preaching. “Since McGarvey’s goal was to present the message of Jesus in such a clear manner as to evoke a response,” he said, “he does not employ an elegant style. However, there may have been present a certain beauty of simplicity which enhanced the impact of his ideas. The artless and unaffected manner in which McGarvey sought to persuade may have exerted a disarming effect upon his listeners—convincing them without their being aware of it.”26

Trimble made several points about the style of McGarvey’s preaching. He said McGarvey employed few figures of speech primarily using monosyllable words that contribute to energy as well as clarity. He freely used colloquialism (“a whirlwind comes tearing along,” “he struck the nail on the head”) and avoided classical references and technical jargon, effectively adapting to his audience with the extensive use of Anglo-Saxon words, which they understood. He sought to establish and maintain rapport with his audience by a generous use of first person plural pronouns: “our Bible,” “our suffering Savior,” and “Let us turn, now, to our second source.” His frequent use of interrogatives contributed to the characteristic of maintaining affinity with his hearers, as well as of arousing the keen interest in what he was saying.

McGarvey made effective use of pictorial words to paint graphic pictures. Describing the parting of the Jordan, he said, “when the priests went down the steep and their feet dipped in the brim of the river, the water moved away as they advanced; it was cut off on the right, and ran out toward the sea, and the river was empty.” Not a word over two syllables! Though using figures of speech sparingly, he used them effectively, and while his language was generally literal, rather than figurative, it was graphic, succinct, and forceful. He repeated key words to develop intellectual or emotional responses. “In his sermon on Joseph, McGarvey portrays the amazing transformation of character the ten brothers experienced through the repetition of the phrase ‘what a change!” Variety marked McGarvey’s use of sentences in length, voice, structure, and type. His sentences ranged from two words to forty.27

In describing McGarvey’s speaking, brother Ficklin said: “His face was radiant, and often enlivened with a kindly smile.... I never saw about him the least pretense, or affectation, either in what he said, or in the way that he said it…. When you heard him you were not charmed or thrilled, but you were helped. You did not go away saying, ‘That preacher is a great speaker.’ But you did carry away in your heart a heavenly message.”28

Trimble analyzed four of McGarvey’s sermons as to subject, purpose, type, supporting material, pathos, and arrangement. Then he used McGarvey’s own words to reconstruct its outline. His concluding chapter discusses “Factors Contributing to McGar-vey’s Preaching Success.” In this, he pretty much summarizes the whole of the man’s life. This shows, that the factors that contribute to the making of a preacher, to whatever degree of success he may attain, is in reality a composite of the man himself: his personal characteristics, his background, his history, his guiding principles, his knowledge (especially of God’s word), and his trust in God.

It is not possible in a sketch like this to include all subjects on which McGarvey dwelled as a preacher. The Bible was his field and he ranged the length and breadth of it. The themes that pervaded his preaching were the same as those that characterized his writing and his teaching in the class room. Trimble mentions five ideas that were prominent in McGarvey’s Broadway sermons on which he based his work. These are salvation, the Scriptures, the church, Christ, and divine providence.

McGarvey was an opponent of the organ in worship, but he was not willing to make it a test of fellowship. While he opposed it as a sin, not merely an expedient, and would not hold membership where it was used, he did not want it to be an occasion of division. When he was speaking on one occasion at the Kentucky state convention and the organ was being used, he was heard to say to his friend, Alexander C. Hopson, who was presiding, “Alex, stop that thing.” Yet, when speaking in a church where the instrument was used, he did not want a change in the practice because of his presence. When a church does something to please the preacher and not the Lord, the matter carries no conviction and is worthless as an act of faith. He supported and defended the missionary society, although in later years he does not seem to have been an ardent supporter of it.

Purity of speech in spiritual matters was always prominent in McGarvey’s thinking. In 1865 he wrote: “There is nothing for which the brethren of the present Reformation were at one time more noted than for their advocacy of a pure speech. They rightly insisted that purity of speech and purity of thought are inseparably connected; that they preserve each other; and that a departure from either involves, with practical certainty, a departure from the other. There is no one of the fundamental assumptions of our plea which has contributed more to the accuracy of our Scripture knowledge, yet there is none which we are more likely to abandon.”29

**The School Work of McGarvey**

It was in his connection with the College of the Bible in Lexington, Kentucky, that McGarvey did his most effective academic teaching and from which he probably exerted his greatest influence. When the University of Kentucky was moved to Lexington in 1865, McGarvey was appointed to the chair of the College of the Bible. He divided his time between preaching and teaching, but in 1866, he began devoting his full time to the college and preached only on Sundays. After a period of conflict in which he had a leading part, the college was separated from the university in 1878 and became an independent institution. The college was primarily for training preachers, but it was not properly a theological seminary. McGarvey was the main influence in the college for nearly forty-five years, from 1865 until his death in 1911, serving sixteen years as president.

McGarvey’s conception of preacher training is reflected in his classes at the College of the Bible. His views are given in an article on “Ministerial Education” published in *Lard’s Quarterly* (April 1865). In it he said: “That one who is to preach the gospel, and teach the disciples the whole will of God, should be educated for his work is a maxim of common sense.”30 This had been the sentiment of most Restoration leaders from the beginning. No protest group of any consequence has every denied the necessity of some kind of special training for preachers, although there have been differences as to content, form, and the most desirable means of accomplishing that goal.

McGarvey said: “We have had some discussion upon the subject, but the question at issue … is not whether our young preachers should be educated, but what kind of education they should have.” He did not disparage in the least preachers who lacked formal education. In noting the difference between educated and uneducated preachers, he said many pioneers of the Restoration were men of the latter class. Many of these he said “are still among the most powerful and successful preachers we have. Neither is their influence confined to rural districts or the more susceptible classes of the community. In towns and cities their labors are in demand, and the most solid men and women of every community are among their converts.”31

Rather than disparage the “uneducated” preachers, McGarvey hailed them above the educated ones in many instances. “Our successful evangelists,” he said, “are nearly all men of this class, while our educated preachers are often found very quietly passing away their lives in the dull routine of weekly sermons to very weakly (w-e-a-k-l-y) congregations.” He pointed this out both to honor the “uneducated” preachers who sacrificed for the gospel and to warn brethren not to oppose preacher education because the “uneducated” were so often more successful than the educated preachers. “Such persons,” he said, “are misled by a misapplication of terms. It is not education which renders preachers inefficient; but, the want of education.” He then put his finger on the crux of the problem: “What education they have is not of the right kind, or it lacks some elements of a proper ministerial education.”32

What is the best education for a preacher? McGarvey said: “That which produces the best result is the best.” “The man who can and does accomplish the greatest religious results by his ministerial labors, has, whatever he has learned or not learned, the very best education for a preacher. Such is the true, the practical, the rational standard by which to judge of this subject.” Based on this principle, he said: “We now proceed to point out some of the more essential elements of the education which has been demonstrated by experience and by common sense as that best adapted to the preacher’s wants.” He named three things he regarded as “more essential elements” of a preacher’s education.

He said, “First, we place a knowledge of the word of God.” “But if we examine, in this respect, those preachers who have been most eminently useful; who have most successfully fought against infidelity, sectarianism, and iniquity, we find them pre-eminently familiar with the word of God. In this respect, those who are commonly styled uneducated preachers are frequently the most thoroughly educated.” He believed a knowledge of God’s word included “a familiar acquaintance” with its history, biography, poetry, prophecies, and teaching; that it embraces acquaintance with all its leading subjects. “It also includes specific knowledge of all the perversions of Scripture common in the sectarian world, together with the correct method of exposing them; and all the points of infidel assault, together with the means of defense.”

“Next to knowledge of the Scriptures,” McGarvey said, “it is most important that the young preacher should have proper moral training for his work.” He believed the foundation for moral training was itself not subject to training, but it is the pre-existent ardent desire to become a preacher, “not for the ease and respectability, which may be attained by it, but for the good of men and for the glory of God.” The moral training “needs the results of the experience and reflection of wise predecessors, to prepare him for the details of his work.” He needs to be impressed with the necessity of constant industry, the best disposition of his time, how to deport himself toward others. “He should be taught that his field of labor is not confined to the pulpit, but extends from house to house throughout the community, and reaches down to all the little children.” “In short, he should have all the practical advice and instruction which the experience of wise and useful men has indicated as necessary to early and complete success.” While the preacher should profit from the experience and wisdom of others, much of this must come from his own experience: “his years of hard experience, and many mortifying mistakes.”

“The last and lest important department of ministerial education is an elementary course in literature and science …” But McGarvey did not attribute to classical education the high rank that it was given by many others.33

It is easy from an understanding of McGarvey’s views on “ministerial education” to gather the manner in which he conducted his teaching efforts at the College of the Bible. J.J. Haley, who was a student of McGarvey, described his method of teaching. Leroy Garrett, says: “Haley’s account of his teacher, whom the students called ‘Little Mac,’ would hardly pass the test of modern pedagogy. Each class began with the students reciting the lecture of the previous class, all by memory. The learning was by rote. The students were inundated with notes that they were required to memorize and repeat to the teacher. Another of McGarvey’s students, Colby Hall, confirms that the students had little incentive to think for themselves or to raise those questions that would be taken for granted in a seminary classroom today. He charges that McGarvey did more telling than teaching and that not once did he ever refer a student to any book except the Bible or to his own *Lands of the Bible.”*34 While this was obviously intended to belittle McGarvey’s method, it shows his strong faith in the Bible and is in keeping with his understanding of the preacher’s most fundamental need.

But even the most critical of McGarvey’s students conceded that his influence was tremendous. “His prodigious industry was contagious, and his devotion to the Bible was evident in the preaching of his students who filled leading pulpits all across the Disciple brotherhood. Haley concedes that by the time McGarvey finished with him he knew much of the Bible by memory, which gave him an advantage over other preachers.”35

Garrett correctly connects the liberal movement in the Restoration to the abandonment of the teaching and influence of McGarvey. This was at least a major contributing factor. At the University of Chicago H.L. Willett was succeeded as dean by W.E. Garrison and Edward Scribner Ames, men who trained many preachers in a hermeneutics far different from what so many leading Disciples had learned from the conservative scholar, J.W. McGarvey. Generally the new approach was appreciated by liberal brethren, and it turned Disciple’s ministerial education in a new direction.

This change was augmented by the death of McGarvey and the loss of the College of the Bible to liberalism. Garrett says this turn in a new direction was made “especially when the College of the Bible, after an extensive baptism of fire, also became liberal. Once McGarvey was gone, the Lexington institution sported a new faculty of progressive thinkers.”36

**The Writings Of McGarvey**

McGarvey was a copious writer and began writing about the time he began preaching. His writings reflect a variety of subjects nearly all of which are concerned with his devotion to the word of God. He wrote in his early years for the *Millennial Harbinger* and the *American Christian Review*. He also wrote several articles for *Lard’s Quarterly*, during that paper’s short existence (1863-1868). The *Apostolic Times* began in 1969 to counteract the growing popularity of the liberal leaning Christian Standard. Its editors and writers were McGarvey, Moses E. Lard, Robert Graham, Winthrop Hopson, and L.B. Wilkes, a formidable array of talent. These men were household names among the Christians and there was not a stain on the character of any one of them. McGarvey edited the paper until 1875 and continued writing for it after that.

The *Apostolic Times* declared itself to be dedicated “to the primitive faith, and the primitive practice, without enlargement or diminution, without innovation or modify-cation.” The writers were confident they could slay “the Cincinnati dragon” and boldly announced that as a goal. However, the circulation was never large and it continued only a few years. Alfred T. DeGroot said of the editors of the *Times*: “Their purpose was to solve the problem of innovation by taking what they assumed was a safe, middle-of-the-road position, accepting the missionary society but rejecting the organ.”37

The *Apostolic Times* serves as a warning to those who think peace in the church can be achieved by compromising basic principles. This was a grave mistake of McGarvey. The *Gospel Advocate* eventually prospered by opposing all innovations, and the *Christian Standard* prospered by endorsing them, but the “middle-of-the-road” measures of the *Apostolic Times* met with failure and its position no doubt contributed to its early demise. After the death of the *Apostolic Times*, McGarvey wrote for other papers, including the *Old Paths Guide* that sort of took up where the *Apostolic Times* left off with its cessation. He was the editor of the *Apostolic Guide* during 1887-1888.

McGarvey’s commentaries and other books were many and diverse. His original Commentary on Acts was published in 1863. He began the work in 1860 while he was in Missouri and completed it in 1862 in Lexington. McGarvey says: “The composition of my first commentary on Acts was begun when I was thirty years of age, and the work was published four years later. The greater part of the writing was done amid the distractions of the first two years of the Civil War, and the volume was issued in the autumn of 1863, when men’s thoughts were turned away from religion to the events of that mighty struggle.”38

“J.W. McGarvey exemplified the strong pacifist sentiment in the brotherhood. He vigorously opposed the participation of Christians in armed conflict and refused to take sides in the war. It is interesting to note that ... While almost everyone around him was worked up to white heat about the war, he calmly devoted his talents to the problems of exegesis. Twice he was interrupted by military operations: once when a Confederate force under General Sterling Price attacked a Union force stationed in Missouri; and later when Confederate General Kirby Smith attacked Richmond, Kentucky, on August 30, 1862.”39

*Evidences of Christianity* appeared in 1886. Its homiletic style, along with that of other popular works of the period, is thought to have encouraged the development of homiletical style of preaching among the disciples that began about that time and that is reflected in W.T. Moore’s *Living Pulpit of the Christian Church.* In this work, McGarvey sought to reduce the subject into a form suitable for classroom use. “The work is intended,” he said, “not for those who are already proficient in the knowledge of evidences, but for those who have given the subject little attention or none: hence, its elementary character.”40 In the work, he discussed the integrity, genuineness, credibility, and inspiration of the New Testament. Other books on evidences and related matters include: *The Authorship of Deuteronomy*, *Jesus and Jonah*, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament*, and *Credibility and Inspiration*. In their time these books were very effective although they were naturally discredited by liberal scholars. McGarvey also published a commentary of Matthew and Mark, *The New Testament Commentary*, Vol. I (1875). Somewhat related to this was *The Fourfold Gospel* (1905). It was a harmony of the four Gospels and attempted to weave the four together as a single narrative. It was written in McGarvey’s old age in collaboration with Philip Y. Pendleton, as was his *Standard Bible Commentary: Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians, and Roman*.

In 1892, McGarvey published his *New Commentary on Acts*, which is regarded by some as his greatest contribution to Restoration literature. He felt a revision was needed because he was “far better fitted to write a commentary on this precious book” than he was twenty-nine years before, when he wrote the first one. For twenty-seven of those years he had taught the book verse by verse to the senior class in the College of the Bible. There was also new material in the study of the Greek text and the rise of the Higher Critics whose attack on the book needed to be considered. *Lands of the Bible* was published about 1881 after McGarvey made a six-month’s tour of the Middle East with a view to writing the book. Some former students advanced him the money for the trip and provided support for his family while he was gone. He was to repay the loan with funds from the book. The book was highly acclaimed at the time and had a wide circulation.

*McGarvey’s Sermons* had a great impact. While these were stenographically recorded as they were preached at the Broadway Christian Church in Louisville, they are in the style of speaking instead of writing. But his manner appears to have been little different, insofar as content is concerned. Henry Ficklin doubted, with the exception of the “sound and Scriptural sermons of Benjamin Franklin,” that any book of sermons was more helpful than the book of McGarvey’s sermons. “In these sermons,” he said, “McGarvey preaches the Word and speaks in plain, simply language on the greatest subjects in the world. In his sermons, as in his teachings and in his life, he was guided by the Lord, and labored only for his glory.”41 F.D. Kershner, a former editor of the *Christian Evangelist*, considered McGarvey’s published sermon “the most outstanding series of sermons ever delivered” in the evangelistic history of the Disciples.” Histori-cally, one may also see a strong influence of McGarvey’s sermons on those delivered by N.B. Hardman at Nashville in 1922.

From 1893, when he was sixty-four, McGarvey wrote a weekly column in the *Christian Standard* under the title of “Biblical Criticism.” This continued for nearly twenty years, until his death in 1911. McGarvey became alarmed at the manner in which the thinking of the Higher Critics was making inroads into formerly conservative religious circles, including many of his brethren and in some of the schools operated by them. After the death of Isaac Errett in 1888, the *Christian Standard* became more conservative, and also independent of conventions and agencies. This made it easier for McGarvey, who once opposed the paper, to write in its pages. Written in a popular style because of the makeup of the paper’s readers, rather than in the scholarly form he would have preferred, it became one of the strong features of that journal and had a tremendous influence in strengthening Christians against the arguments of the destructive critics. It also helped keep the paper closer to the original principles of the Restoration for McGarvey wrote on other subjects, many touching on Restoration ideals.

McGarvey’s usual genial and humble spirit did not prevent him from becoming so caustic in writing against the critics of the Bible, that his colleagues at the College of the Bible urged him to be more moderate or at least refrain from name-calling. But he refused to altar his course. This is not hard to understand in view of his strong and unyielding faith in the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, even to the point of asserting that Balaam’s donkey spoke good Hebrew. As well he might for it was God speaking through him.

**Summary**

In his eightieth year, McGarvey took part in the Disciples Centennial of Thomas’ Campbell’s *Declaration and Address* in Pittsburgh. While not in sympathy with many things the liberal brethren were doing, he nevertheless was in fellowship with them. But he never deserted the Restoration ideal, although inconsistent or mistaken in some applications This great and good man, who was a living link with the first generation Restorers, paid tribute to “the rule so tersely and admirably expressed by Thomas Campbell: ‘Where the Scriptures speak, we speak, and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.’” Then he gave a brief history of that slogan as to its influence on the Restoration. “It was this supreme devotion to the word of God,” he said, “that developed a movement having at first only the union of believers in view, into one having in view the complete restoration of primitive Christianity in its faith…. This, then, became, and has continued to be, the leading thought and purpose of the brotherhood.”42

Because the life of McGarvey almost spans the time of the Restoration at the Centennial convention, his place among the participants is significant. Murch describes the Centennial as “the crest of a wave which was to break in fifty years of controversy,” which led to the ultimate division within the ranks of those who called themselves the “Christian Church” or “Disciples of Christ.” The more conservative “churches of Christ” six years before had already recognized that they should be listed separately in the National Census, effectively recognizing a complete division. “There were only a few brethren present at Pittsburgh who opposed instrumental music in worship, missionary societies, and other such ‘innovations.’ J.W. McGarvey and Fred L. Rowe of the *Christian Leader* were the only men of national reputation representing this viewpoint.”43 What we see in McGarvey’s presence at the Centennial was the swan song of the middle ground that had been advocated by himself, Lard, Hopson, Wilkes, Graham, and others. As time went on, their number steadily decreased until there were none left.

But W.C. Morro’s attempt to relegate McGarvey to the ranks of the “Choir Invisible” in 1940 was at least premature. The addition of more than half a century shows that, at least among conservative Christians, his stature and his work have, if anything, become more entrenched. John William McGarvey has relevance for today and will continue to have wherever the Bible is foremost in the hearts of brethren and where the ideals of the Restoration are alive and well.

**Notes**

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