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The Spirit of the Fathers:

A Look at the Piety of the Early Restoration Leaders

Donald Kinder

Churches of Christ are variously known by outsiders. We are known for being a people of the Book—for quoting Scripture frequently in our messages. In the not too distant past, we were known for aggressive evangelism. We took pride in being one of the fastest growing movements in mid-century America. We were also known in many sectors for a rugged exclusivism, which led many an outsider to comment about us, “Oh, the Church of Christ—I’ve heard of them. Aren’t they the ones who . . . ?” Those of us who grew up in the movement know which phrase was often supplied. But we have not been famous in very many circles for our “piety.”

People do not generally think of us as a praying people, as a pious people, even though there have been some giants of piety who have walked among us. One reason for this misunderstanding of us could be that we have simply taken seriously Jesus’ words, “Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them.” Is it possible that outsiders just never knew how secretly pious we really were? Or could it be that other things going on in our movement caught people’s attention instead?

In July of 1996, the *Christian Chronicle* published the findings of a major research project, “Ministers’ Beliefs: A Special Report.”¹ The study surveyed Church of Christ ministers from around the country on key theological, social, and political positions. But the study included nothing on spirituality, piety, devotion, or prayer.

One of the charges frequently leveled against the early Restoration leaders is that they were caught up in the overwhelming rationalism of the Enlightenment and the Baconian exegetical model. Thus, the heart and the warmer

emotions fell victim to a message of salvation that called for a logical, rational response to a clear set of principles. Some suspect that this has been the trademark of Churches of Christ ever since.

However, even in 1901 A. B. Jones, one of the early analyzers of our movement, revealed that the restorers definitely had a warmer, more spiritual side. Jones wrote in his work *The Spiritual Side of Our Plea*: “A restoration of original apostolic Christianity, in letter and in spirit, was their motto.”² Indeed, as we look more closely into our Restoration heritage, we find a deeply committed, heartfelt piety in several of our forefathers in the faith.

Even Alexander Campbell, who so many have claimed bequeathed to subsequent generations our rational, emotionally deficient worship, was an individual of tremendous faith, warmth, and humor. On the one hand, he never thought that conversion was something spooky or mysterious. Indeed, it was all explicable by the Holy Spirit’s use of arguments addressed to the mind to bring sinners to right relationship with God.³ But on the other hand, Campbell was a man of intense prayer and private devotion, a man of deep piety.

Coming out of Scotch Presbyterian background, both father Thomas and son Alexander were believers in family devotions and daily prayer. Back in Ireland, before the family emigrated to America, Thomas would preside over the morning and evening prayers and Bible reading. Thomas then sailed to America. Within a year, the family set out to follow him to the New World. But even during their passage on the ship without the presence of Thomas, the

Campbell viewed kneeling as a sign of submission, standing as a sign of reverence, and sitting as sign of nothing.

mother gathered the family in the mornings and evenings, and Alexander led them in their prayers and private devotions. That part of life did not change just because they were saying good-bye to Ireland.

The morning and evening plan of family devotions continued throughout Alexander's life. He eventually gathered his own wife and children twice a day in the dining room, where he led them in worship. When his preaching tours took him away from home, his wife, Selina, took the lead in this faith-building service. By the age of eleven, Alexander's son Wycliffe had memorized the first fourteen chapters of Proverbs as well as a number of hymns. Wycliffe had planned to quote them to Alexander upon his return from the British Isles preaching tour;⁴ tragically, however, he drowned while his father was away. In 1832, Alexander Campbell wrote:

How perfect are those Christians who can dispense with the confession of any faults, who need never pray to God in secret, nor more than once-a-week or once-a-day in their families! Not so perfect was Paul and the first converts!! They and he needed to pray always. . . . Perhaps did we know, as we ought to know, we might think it fitting to go and do likewise!⁵

Some of Campbell's most beautiful thoughts on prayer are expressed in his discussions of those secret, quiet moments with the Lord. He wrote that the best school "under heaven" for learning prayer is really not classroom instruction, but time in one's closet, in fields, in forests, "where no human ear can hear us, no human eye can see us."⁶ Those secret prayers, he believed, are the ones that influence us the most.

Campbell felt that the Christian's heart should be visible on his face and in his conduct. He believed that a heart that was pure, warm, and full of devout affections should naturally be displayed by the outward person.

Furthermore, Campbell was convinced that body language was part of worship. Prayer posture meant something. He noted in 1835:

To sit down and address God, as is very common at most family tables . . . is most indecorous and disorderly. This, unless in cases of great physical debility, is not to glorify God with our bodies. Shall a man arise to address a respectable friend, and sit down to thank God! . . . To stand erect, and lift up holy hands—or to bow the knee before the Lord Almighty—or to prostrate oneself upon the earth . . . is sanctioned by the examples of the great, and wise, and good of all dispensations.⁷

He complained that the current practice of sitting for prayers came from a degenerate, apostate age and had not been known to earlier believers. He returned to the topic in 1845, writing in his *Millennial Harbinger* that when people offered prayers in church, "kneeling should be preferred, when it could be made convenient. If not convenient, then standing was the required posture." He viewed kneeling as a sign of submission, standing as a sign of reverence, and sitting as sign of nothing.⁸

Barton Stone, a third early giant among us, whose followers merged with many of the Campbells' followers in 1832, was known widely for his humble Christ-like character and his attention to the heart as well as his constant devotion to prayer. In his autobiography, Stone wrote that even when he was quite young he "had been in the habit of retiring in secret, morning and evening, for prayer."⁹ While Stone is known for his association with the extreme emotionalism and unusual manifestations of the Spirit at the Cane Ridge revival in 1801, he himself was never perceptibly affected by the "bodily exercises." He was sympathetic to them, and he rejoiced that people by the hundreds were turning to the Lord. At the same time, he knew that many could boast about receiving the Spirit but all the while be destitute of it. He said that one might ask of the claimants, "Do they pray in secret, and with their families night and morning? If not, is not their religion vain? Is it better than infidels?"¹⁰

In Stone's later years, as his age and illnesses led him to an awareness that his term of service would soon be ending, he wrote a series of articles addressed from an "Old Preacher" to a "Young Preacher." He told the young evangelists, "Be holy out of the pulpit as in it. . . . Be often on your knees, always endeavor to keep God before your mind, and labor to please him, rather than man."¹¹

Stone, like Campbell, felt that prayer posture was taken far too lightly in the church service. He wrote in his *Christian Messenger* that he had seen too commonly everywhere the “indecent mode of the congregation’s worship in prayer. Some were kneeling, others sitting, and others standing in time of prayer.” Stone realized that there were indeed cases in which a congregation could not kneel, as, for example, when a great crowd was present, but he wrote that “few cases can justify the posture of sitting.” He wondered if the reason more did not kneel was that they were fearful of dirtying their fine garments. Stone had the remedy: “This pretext should be removed by having the floors of the houses clean.” Stone believed that there was “hardly a more serious sight on earth, than to see a congregation kneeling in prayer before their God.”¹²

Walter Scott, the last of the four major early leaders, worked as evangelist in northeast Ohio, baptizing one thousand per year from 1827 to 1830. Before he accepted the assignment to evangelize the Western Reserve, he spent two months in prayer and study and in consultation with fellow believers. His work there consisted in preaching two or three times a day, traveling constantly on horseback, and sleeping and eating wherever he could.¹³ Part of his method involved talking to children on the playgrounds. He would have them memorize five steps to salvation on their fingers, then have them run home and tell their parents to come out that night and hear him talk about those steps. Houses would be packed to overflowing. Scott’s message was clear and simple. People remembered his sermons twenty years later.

Yet for Scott, conversion was always more than just a matter of how facts were aligned in the head. He would often accompany another preacher on a tour, and both men would address the crowd at a meeting. On the way to one such appointment, Scott said to the younger preacher, “Now I will tell you how we must do: I will preach, and you must follow in an exhortation; I will strike at the head, and you must strike at the heart.”¹⁴ Conversion always involved both head and heart—the total being.

Scott also loved to be with the Lord in nature. Scott worked in that part of Western Pennsylvania and Ohio which is still replete with hills and forests. He loved to climb to the tops of the hills, away from the city, and commune with God in the beauty of nature. For Scott, nature as well as the Word could reveal divinity. On one occasion, walking with one of his students—Robert

Richardson—in a garden outside the classroom, he picked up a rose and handed it to Richardson and said, “Do you know why Scripture calls Jesus the Rose of Sharon?” The student could think of no reply. Scott looked again at the delicate flower, looked at Richardson, and said, “It’s because this particular rose has no thorns. It is utter, unblemished beauty”—just like Jesus. He saw Jesus as the center of all Scripture and all doctrine. He saw himself as the voice of that “golden oracle.”

Rediscovering and sharing the piety of these Restoration leaders would go a long way toward rejuvenating contemporary worship.

Scott was enraptured with the message of Scripture. He encouraged every head of every household to spend time memorizing the Word of God. He wrote: “A chapter a day will put the head of a family in possession of the entire NT in much less than one year, for there are only 260 chapters in the volume.”¹⁵ Scott put his own advice into practice. He would often finish in the classroom and then be busy until midnight studying, learning, and memorizing the text.

Other early Restoration leaders seemed just as zealous for the work and just as committed to their own personal piety as were the Campbells, Stone, and Scott. They knew that by themselves they were not up to the task. “Raccoon” John Smith carried his Bible with him to the field and kept it beside his plate when he ate. Jacob Creath Jr. was known to walk a mile after breakfast each day to a nearby grove, where he would concentrate on his messages and commit himself to God in prayer. Each year for fifty years, Creath read the Bible through. James Garfield, who was a successful preacher before his success in the military and in politics, read the Bible daily. He often read the Bible at sunset, because his mother had told him that was when she would also be reading the Scriptures wherever she was. Isaac Errett, editor of the *Christian Standard*, once remarked, “With the help of God, I will rise at 4 o’clock each morning and spend until 6 in reading the Bible and in prayer.”¹⁶ J. W. McGarvey, long-time teacher and preacher, preferred not to read from the Bible in the pulpit or the classroom. Instead, he always quoted from memory every passage. David and Margaret

Lipscomb held their family devotionals at 9 o'clock every evening and always invited their guests to participate. W. L. Karnes said of James A. Harding, "Harding caused more people to read their Bibles than any man for the past fifty years."¹⁷ Rediscovering and sharing the piety of these Restoration leaders would go a long way toward rejuvenating contemporary worship, whether in private or in the corporate assembly.

Unfortunately, piety did not remain a way of life for everyone in the movement. After Scott had been preaching for a few decades, he began to notice that many people were beginning their days without prayer and that families were neglecting the practice of daily study. He said that there were "thousands who never think of such a matter, and this is not the worst of it. There are professing populations of one thousand in which there is not a family that calls upon the Lord night and morning." He challenged the movement: "Let us be a prayerful people and a praying people; let us be full of the spirit of praise."¹⁸ Scott believed that when people returned to meeting God on a daily basis, God would indeed bless them with more blessings than they could hold.¹⁹

Not only could the cares of the world crowd out piety, but Barton Stone and others wrote that sometimes the prideful quest for purer doctrine could dampen personal piety and devotion to God. Stone believed that a Christian should definitely know doctrine and how to defend it. Yet he observed that the years had brought a different spirit into the movement: "Now people are saying in their defense of doctrines, never to yield on one point, or submit to one argument, however just and plain." Unlike the earlier days of the movement when prayer and devotion filled people's attention, Stone complained that now

the hours set apart for meditation and secret prayer are neglected, or, if attended to, are interrupted, and the thoughts of the heart are diverted to these divisive doctrines, how they can be established or overthrown to advantage. When the Scriptures are read, it is not to hold converse with God—to learn duty and do it—but to find something there to establish their received doctrines of controversy. When the pulpit is ascended, the burden of the sermon is the agitated controversies of the day, teaching the congregation the art of war.²⁰

According to Stone, within a generation attention and energy began to be focused on maintaining true doctrine. Others coming into the movement wanted assurance that truth was not being compromised.

Richard Hughes, in *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, contends that it was Campbell who inaugurated the tradition of debates in Churches of Christ that lasted for generations.²¹ Leroy Brownlow holds to another position, challenging the idea that debates ever dominated the movement. He argues that there were always more gospel meetings than debates through this period, and thus we never lost sight of evangelism.²² Nevertheless, no matter how overstated Hughes' analysis may be, Stone does note the effect of the debating spirit among us. Stone warned that "debates tend to strife, deaden piety—destroy the spirit of prayer—puff up the vain mind. . . ."²³ In 1844, near the end of his life, Stone complained that many of his own people increasingly placed biblical knowledge, religious controversy, and debate over "godliness, piety and brotherly love." He asked:

Do we see genuine Christianity promoted by such controversies and debates? Look around and enquire for these fruits. Do you know of any person spiritually renewed or refreshed with spiritual understanding? Do you find brotherly love and Christian union advanced? On the contrary, do you not find their opposites promoted?²⁴

William Lipscomb, who began the *Gospel Advocate* with Tolbert Fanning, wrote in 1856:

In the midst of the fierce and unscrupulous warfare with which the movement called the Reformation of the 19th c. has been forced to contend, there, no doubt, has been too little attention given to the solemn and imperative duties of the Christian profession. The exertions which have been made, have been directed more to the exposure of the delusion of others, and to the defense of the gospel as God's only authority for the guidance of man, than to the noble and heavenly culture of the Christian life. . . . The Christian religion has never been made the first great matter of life. Its interests and concerns have been secondary. We have not permitted it to sink into our hearts, and fix itself in our affections as the great controlling and guiding

influence of our lives—We are not as truly godly and devoted as we need to be. . . . My brethren, what could we not do in Tennessee if we were a God-fearing and God-trusting people?—We have given ourselves to him only in part.²⁵

Leonard Allen in *Distant Voices* writes of Robert Richardson, author of the *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*:

The debating mindset, [Richardson] believed, produced a deadly spiritual vacuum. The effect of doctrinal controversy was to “distract the mind, destroy love, generate dislike, jealousy, revenge, [and] foster the passions of the carnal nature.” Too many people, he wrote, “are ready to argue, debate, discuss, at all times, . . . and will spend hours in the earnest defense of their favorite theories” but will not spend five minutes meditating “upon the character, the sayings, and perfections of Christ, or upon their own inward spiritual state.”²⁶

Allen portrays Richardson as an oasis of spirituality in a time when “heartless and superficial formalism” was overtaking the movement.²⁷

John Rogers, who helped promote the union of the Stone and Campbell movements, cites another possible reason for a reduction in piety. Rogers had written to Alexander Campbell in 1834:

Many of us, in running away from the extreme of enthusiasm, have, on the other hand, passed the temperate zone, and gone far into the frozen regions. . . . There is, in too many churches, a cold-hearted, lifeless formality, that freezes the energies.²⁸

Perhaps the fear of the excesses of the subjective revival mentality drove some to a more rational, and in Rogers’ estimation, a colder experience of faith.

Our current decade has seen a renewed emphasis on piety, spirituality, and worship—an emphasis that is being felt not only in our fellowship, but in wider circles as well. Jeanene Reese, in the Tenth Anniversary issue of *Image* (1995), writes:

Never in my lifetime have I seen people as interested in matters of worship as they have been in the

past few years. We seem especially focused on finding ways to encounter God in worship and appropriate forms of praising him as we do.

Reese continues:

Prayer has become a greater part of our personal and corporate lives. We hear more about seeking God’s will and the leading of his spirit than at any other time I can remember. Groups and individuals are committing themselves to periods of prayer, fasting and meditation, and other spiritual disciplines.²⁹

Christian retreats with the sole purpose of praise are being held across the country. Devotional books are among every Christian bookstore’s best sellers. The books of Max Lucado are immensely popular, not only in our fellowship, but throughout evangelical Christianity. Two of the past four Harding University Graduate School of Religion Ministry Forums have dealt with worship.³⁰ People are deliberately giving more attention to worship and trying to rejuvenate their own relationships with the Lord. These healthy signs among us reveal that we are once again returning to perhaps a better balance between head and heart. Let us return to being a people of the Book, a people of prayer, and a people of noticeable piety—not so that others will praise us, but so that they might praise our Lord, the one to whom all devotion and praise are due.

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Notes

¹Mel Hailey, Douglas A. Foster, and Thomas L. Winter, “Ministers’ Beliefs: A Special Report,” referenced in *Christian Chronicle* 53 (July 1996): 15–17.

²A. B. Jones, *The Spiritual Side of Our Plea*, 69.

³Max Ward Randall, *The Great Awakenings and the Restoration Movement* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1983), 360.

⁴Dabney Phillips, *A Medley of the Restoration* (Montgomery, AL: Bible & School Supply, 1978), 39.

⁵Alexander Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger* (1832): 64.

⁶*Ibid.*, 498.

⁷Alexander Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger* (1835): 488–89.

⁸Alexander Campbell, “Church Organization,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1845): 66.

(Notes continued p. 44)