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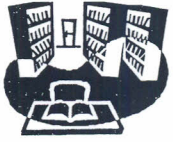
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## Restoration Biography George P. Taubman

KEVIN R. KRAGENBRINK

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews asked his readers to remember and honor the great men and women who had preceded them in the walk of faith. Although the canon of scripture is closed, and I would never suggest that we should add to it in any way, it seems to me that the great cloud of witnesses described by that inspired author continues to grow and that it would serve us well in this modern age to remember those men and women of faith who continue to exemplify the faithfulness and devotion of those listed in Hebrews. One such man was George P. Taubman:<sup>1</sup> a man who, before now, has seldom been mentioned and little recognized, perhaps because he made no effort to exalt himself in life. And yet he is a man whose influence and example are matched only by a very small number in the history of the Restoration movement.

From humble beginnings as a farmer's son in Ohio, George Taubman grew to become one of the best-known and most widely influential leaders among the Independent Christian Churches/Churches of Christ in the first half of the twentieth century. From his early ministry as a student preacher in a small Kentucky town to his crowning achievements as leader of the world's largest men's Bible class and senior minister for one of the largest Restoration movement congregations in America, Taubman kept one goal foremost: to win men and women to Jesus Christ. In a career that spanned five decades across two centuries, Taubman served churches in Kentucky, Ohio, Missouri, and California as a preacher, evangelist, men's leader, and Sunday school minister. Among his Independent Christian Church contemporaries, only P. H. Welshimer was more influential, and even he could not approach Taubman's success in reaching men from the 1910s to the 1930s.

Born on the Isle of Man in 1869, George Primrose Taubman first came to the United States in 1871. George's father, Thomas, bought a farm near Cleveland, Ohio, and it was there that George grew to maturity working with his father and acquiring an above average education through his parent's efforts. One day in 1889, George—now a young man working on his own for a bookseller in Cleveland—happened into a worship service at the Garfield Christian Church, where evangelist and preacher Francis Asa Wight presented the ancient gospel. On that day, George accepted the gospel message and was baptized into Christ by Mr. Wight.<sup>2</sup>

Not long after his baptism, young George decided to follow the example of his father in Christ and enter the ministry. Determined to get the best preparation possible before embarking on a preaching career, the young man joined the freshmen class of 1890 at the College of the Bible in Lexington, Kentucky. There, he became a protégé of J. W. McGarvey, one of the most popular and influential preachers and scholars in the Restoration tradition. From McGarvey he gained a thorough understanding

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of and love for the Bible, along with an abiding hatred for modernism and a keen ability to defend the ancient faith. Graduating with a Bachelor's

Degree in theology in 1894, Taubman went on to become one of the College of the Bible's most successful alumni.

Taubman's early career, like that of so many preachers, was marked by frequent moves from small churches at first, to increasingly larger churches and positions of greater responsibility and influence. His first call to preach came from the Falmouth Christian Church, in Falmouth, Kentucky where he remained for two years. His skill as a preacher and evangelist quickly attracted the attention of the elders at First Christian Church in Newport, Kentucky. They extended a call to him early in 1895, and in March of that year, Taubman began his second ministry. It was in Newport that he met and married Anne Payton Green, the love of his life and his lifelong companion.<sup>3</sup>

Taubman's ministry in Newport was blessed with early success. After only nine months, the church reported over fifty additions and announced a building program to expand their facilities and prepare for future growth. His success drew the notice of Restoration leaders in nearby Cincinnati, Ohio. He quickly developed relationships with *Christian Standard* editors Guy P. Leavitt and Edwin Errett and with fellow preacher P. H. Welshimer, who would become one of his best friends and chief rivals for prominence in the independent Christian Churches. It was also during his three-year stay at Newport that Taubman began to focus on work among men. In those early years, his attention was given to finding ways to develop his own relationships with the men of the community, which he did by joining and becoming an active participant in the civic and patriotic organizations of the community. Although there is no record that Taubman had established any specific program to reach men at this early point, there is abundant evidence that he was well respected by the men of his community and was quickly gaining the respect of other men in the Restoration movement as well.

Taubman concluded his work at Newport in December 1897 in order to accept the minister's post at the historic May's Lick Christian Church in May's Lick, Kentucky. Although one of the oldest churches in the Restoration tradition, the May's Lick church

had fallen on hard times in the years before Taubman's arrival. Perhaps the young preacher hoped to turn the church around and lead it to a position of prominence. Whatever his motivation for making the move to May's Lick, Taubman's success there was limited, and his stay was short. After only two years, he moved again—this time accepting a call to be minister for the First Christian Church in Portsmouth, Ohio.

Portsmouth was a larger community than any Taubman had served previously, and for the first time, the young preacher had an opportunity to attract large crowds to his work. During his seven years of service at Portsmouth, Taubman organized and conducted some of the most successful evangelistic meetings in the history of the Restoration movement in that area. In three widely reported evangelistic meetings in 1902, 1904, and 1906, the church added over 1,100 members. These came in on top of regular additions, which numbered in the hundreds for each of Taubman's years of service. Under Taubman's leadership, the church grew to over 2,500 in regular attendance and the Bible

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school grew to an enrollment over 1,000 to make it second in size among all churches reporting to the *Christian Standard*. At the same time, the Portsmouth church successfully launched two "mission" churches in nearby communities and provided support for five evangelists in the field.

Taubman's success at Portsmouth led directly to a dramatic change in the direction of his career. In January 1907, Taubman accepted an offer from the *Christian Standard* to enter into fieldwork as an evangelist. In this endeavor, Taubman was specifically tasked with conducting meetings for churches

that could not afford to hire an evangelist. Thus he was called to conduct campaigns for some of the smallest churches in the Restoration tradition. In two years of evangelistic fieldwork, Taubman reported over 700 souls won to Christ. He visited churches from the Carolinas to Kansas, from Michigan to Missouri, staying on the road for 10 to 11 months each year. Perhaps it was the high toll exacted by this hectic schedule, or perhaps it was the appeal of sharing a ministry with one of the premier preachers of the time that led Taubman to leave the evangelistic field in 1909 to join the staff at Independence Boulevard Christian Church in Kansas City, Missouri.

When Taubman moved to Kansas City, it was to take a position as associate minister to George H. Combs. Both men were already recognized as leaders among the preachers of the Christian Churches. Seldom had two men of such prominence come together in such a cooperative venture. Taubman himself had no experience with the role he was taking on, since he had been a preacher from the beginning of his ministry career. Despite the potential pitfalls of such a ministry, the team of Combs and Taubman was a huge success.

Taubman's primary responsibility at Independence Boulevard was to build the Bible school. When he arrived in 1909, the church report-

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ed attendance just under 800 per week. By the end of his brief service, the Bible school had more than doubled, making it one of the five largest schools among the Christian Churches. In fact, the only schools regularly reporting larger attendances were P. H. Welshimer's school at Canton, Ohio and the school Taubman had build at Portsmouth.

Despite such obvious success, Taubman was not really cut out for a career as an associate minister. His love for and ability at preaching soon led him to seek out new opportunities as senior minister. In 1910 he began an ill-fated work at Hyde Park Christian Church, also in Kansas City. Although the church grew under his leadership, the dramatic success Taubman had experience in other settings was not forthcoming, and Taubman became restless. In 1913 the preacher accepted a call from First Christian Church of Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Taubman's ministry in Tulsa, although again quite brief, demonstrated anew his ability as a church leader and preacher. Before he arrived in the city, the church averaged about 315 people in worship each Sunday, and the Bible school reported an average of 184. At the end of his first year of service, he reported over 1,100 in Bible school, and attendance at worship services was up to over 600. As he had done with others before it, Taubman built the church in Tulsa into one of the largest and most successful Christian churches in the nation.

Taubman's short stay in Tulsa ended in 1915 when he accepted a call from the First Christian Church in Long Beach, California. It is not hard to understand why Taubman made the move to Long Beach. At that time, the city itself was a relatively small resort community populated to a large degree with people who had left the harsh winters and hot summers of the Midwest in search of a more hospitable climate. But the city was already one of the fastest growing communities on the west coast. The church of just over 600 members had been founded only 20 years before and was one of the strongest congregations west of the Rocky Mountains.

Although he may not have known it at the time, Taubman's move to Long Beach was to be his last. He arrived in the beach city in March 1915, and stayed there until his death in 1947. His ministry at the First Christian Church was his most successful, lasting over 25 years and reaching thousands of souls for the sake of Christ. During Taubman's extended ministry in Long Beach, he led his church to a membership above 6,000. His Bible school was consistently among the top two or three in the nation, and his men's Bible class was listed as the

world's largest for most of twenty years. Taubman led his church through times of war, prosperity, depression, and incredible cultural change. He led in the construction of one of the most massive and impressive church plants on the west coast, and then led in the rebuilding of that plant after a devastating earthquake almost totally destroyed it. He endured church division and civic strife that might have broken the spirit and destroyed the faith of many, but not Taubman. Although he had been successful before, it was during his years at Long Beach that the true strength and character of George Taubman were fully revealed.

The single most significant accomplishment of Taubman's career was his successful leadership among men. At his arrival in Long Beach in 1915, Taubman established a men's Bible class that was to become a model for similar classes throughout the United States. Taubman's class began with 75 men in attendance, but by 1920 over 1,000 men were meeting each week in the Long Beach Civic Auditorium. That number grew until, by 1925, the class was averaging over 2,000 men each week. During several stretches, attendance swelled to over 3,000 per week, and on special occasions the class attracted over 20,000 men to hear Taubman speak. The single largest recorded attendance occurred on Armistice Day, 1923 when 31,034 men gathered in Long Beach's Lincoln Park.<sup>4</sup>

The story of Taubman's Bible class for men was more than just its size. The class was one of the most influential organizations in the city. Over the course of two decades, Taubman's class members included two mayors of Long Beach, a governor of the State of California, a speaker of the California State Assembly, a dean of UCLA's School of Religion, and hundreds of other well known and influential business and civic leaders. Often these men were part of the class but not members of Taubman's church. In fact, in some cases the men were not members of any church. Yet Taubman put them to work in the class, believing that their presence and their visible support would help him reach other men in the city.<sup>5</sup>

Taubman's passion for reaching men led him to adopt methods that were often criticized by his con-

temporaries, but no one could complain about his faithfulness to the simple gospel and his devotion to the word of God. During his years at Long Beach, Taubman emerged as a prominent defender of traditional Christianity against the rising influence of modernism and theological liberalism, especially within the Disciples of Christ. No preacher was more articulate in defense of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, and no church leader

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was more adamant in insisting that there be no compromise with modernism or theological liberalism in the Christian Church.<sup>6</sup>

By the mid 1920s, Taubman was recognized as one of the chief antagonists in the emerging dispute between the "Independents" and the Disciples of Christ leadership. He was a key figure in the campaign to rid the Disciples of the United Christian Missionary Society and was a leading promoter of sole support missionary ventures. His Long Beach congregation was responsible for sending at least two missionary families into foreign fields and was instrumental in planting several new congregations in the Long Beach area. Although not all these ventures were successful, Taubman never stopped believing that it was the responsibility of individual congregations to promote and support missionary work both at home and abroad.

At the same time, Taubman was a life-long believer in the Restoration plea for unity among all believers. Throughout most of the 1920s, the Long Beach church was among the largest contributors to the cooperative programs of the Disciples of Christ, despite Taubman's growing opposition to the denomination's leadership. Only after a divisive battle within the Long Beach church itself did Taubman completely withdraw his support from the Disciples and begin to focus his full energy on promoting the

independent position.

Taubman's struggle with the Disciples denomination was the source of some of his most lasting contributions to the Restoration heritage. As a leading preacher among the Independents, Taubman was a frequent speaker at regional conferences and Bible teaching events where the independent position was developed and spread. He was among the first to be asked to speak at the newly formed North American

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Christian Convention in 1927, and he is one of only a few men who have spoken for a main session at three or more such conventions.<sup>7</sup> The Long Beach pastor also played an important role in the founding and early success of Pacific Bible Seminary (later Pacific Christian College and now Hope International University), which conducted classes in the facilities of the Long Beach church for several years before acquiring its own facilities.<sup>8</sup>

Taubman's many successes did not come without sacrifice. Twice during his nearly 30 years at Long Beach, Taubman suffered severe physical breakdowns. His first breakdown in 1919 forced him to set aside his duties for most of a year. The second breakdown was even more devastating, causing him to be away from his pulpit and the men's class for long stretches over the course of a three-year period. But even in this circumstance Taubman was unwilling to give in to his own frail humanity. When the doctors told him he could not return to teaching the men's class for several months in 1928, he found a way to deliver his messages anyway. One of the region's first remote radio broadcast stations was moved to the driveway of the pastor's home each

Sunday morning so that "George" could deliver his message to the men without having to leave his bedroom.<sup>9</sup> As a result, tens of thousands more heard the preacher's messages than could ever have fit themselves into the Long Beach auditorium where the class was met.

A believer might be tempted, at this point, to report that God had demonstrated his strength in the moment of Taubman's greatest weakness. Indeed, much of this man's life demonstrated the power of his faith and the faithfulness of his God. From his father's Ohio farm to minister for one of the largest congregations in America and leader of the world's largest men's Bible class, George Primrose Taubman never lost sight of whom he was serving. His entire Christian life was focused on serving God and others. Indeed, it was for these things that he was honored at his retirement in 1939. The Long Beach congregation honored him with a permanent place as minister emeritus and with a book of tributes expressing undying gratitude and love for his years of service. The men's class he had founded honored him by disbanding at his retirement, believing that no one could ever successfully lead the men in the same way or with the same success as George. The City of Long Beach honored him with a larger than life bronze bust that was displayed prominently at the city's public library for many years before being transferred to Pacific Christian College where it is now.

George Taubman died in 1947, but he left an enduring legacy. The Independent Christian Churches he fought so hard to protect are now a strong and thriving Christian family numbering in the millions. The North American Christian Convention he helped to launch now attracts over 10,000 annually to hear the simple gospel proclaimed and to learn more about how to further the work of building the kingdom of God. The college he helped found is now a thriving university reaching thousands, if not millions, of people with the simple gospel through the work of the students trained there through the decades.

Although Taubman has not been widely recognized, his work was instrumental in the development of the Independent Christian Churches, and he will

never be forgotten by those whose lives he touched. Hopefully, this brief essay will help rescue this exemplary servant from the relative obscurity of historical indifference. Perhaps he can now take his

place among that “great cloud of witnesses” who will forever stand as guides and as an inspiration to those who would run with assurance the course of life in Christ.

KEVIN R. KRAGENBRINK

#### NOTES

- 1 Research for this essay was originally conducted from 1989–1991 in preparation for writing my M.A. thesis at Pepperdine University. Original documents come primarily from the sermons and personal papers of George P. Taubman housed at Hope International University, from the family scrapbook and personal papers now in the possession of this author, and from the original accounts and records of Taubman’s ministry printed in the *Christian Standard* and *The Lookout*. A more thorough treatment of Taubman’s life and work is available in my M.A. thesis, “George P. Taubman: Conservative Christian Church Evangelist and Champion of the Men’s Bible Class Movement” (master’s thesis, Pepperdine University, 1991). To my knowledge the only published work dealing with Taubman is George P. Taubman, Jr., “George Did It,” in *My Dad: Preacher, Pastor, Person*, eds. George A. Campbell and J. Edward Mosely (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1938), 157–162.
- 2 Information about Taubman’s early life is very sketchy. Almost nothing is known about his home life or his parents. The account of his baptism was reported in “George P. Taubman,” *The Evangel* 9 (Jan 1946): 2. It is ironic that in his later years Mr. Wight moved to Long Beach and became a member of the Long Beach church where he eventually retired with George Taubman as his minister. See “Long Beach Anniversary,” *Christian Standard* 73 (7 Jan 1937): 22.
- 3 One of the most revealing and touching bits of evidence for the life of Taubman is a brief poem written to his wife that is now part of his scrapbook. The poem gives evidence of a deep, abiding love between the two, and of a sensitive, caring man.
- 4 Panoramic photos were taken at many of these large gatherings including the largest day cited here. Several of these photos can be seen in the library of Hope International University, Fullerton, Calif.
- 5 George P. Taubman, “Men’s Work,” *Lookout* 37, no. 11 (15 March 1925): 13. Taubman was often criticized for allowing any man who claimed to be a Christian to hold a position of leadership in his class. His general response was that his concern was first to get men to come to the class where the gospel was being preached, “just as it was in the days of the Apostles.” He believed that if the men came, they would hear the truth and respond to it. Right or wrong, Taubman’s method did work to attract tens of thousands of men to hear the message.
- 6 Taubman wrote thousands of sermons during his career, most of which he kept in at least outline form. Those sermons, now housed at Hope International University, are evidence of Taubman’s tremendous love for and extensive knowledge of the scriptures. Without hesitation and without compromise, Taubman preached a traditional message of divine inspiration and traditional doctrinal purity.
- 7 Taubman was scheduled to be a featured speaker at the first NACC, but he was forced to back out due to health problems. He returned to the program as opening speaker in each of the next two years, an evident tribute to his skill and his popularity. See “Program Speakers of the N.A.C.C.” *Christian Standard* 63 (13 Aug 1927); Edwin V. Hayden, *North American Gold: the Story of 50 North American Christian Conventions* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1989): 45; James Beal Hunter, “A History of the North American Christian Convention,” (master’s thesis, School of Religion, Butler Univ., 1950): 26–27.
- 8 A brief history of the school is available in an unpublished manuscript. See Gerald C. Tiffin, Kathy Stranland, and Mike Warner, eds., *The First Twenty-Five Years of Pacific Christian College, 1928–1953* (Fullerton, California: Pacific Christian College, n.d.).
- 9 A photo of the remote broadcasting unit and Taubman preaching from his bedroom are in the possession of the author.