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T. B. Larimore

(1843-1929)

"The Lord Delivered Me!"

by Gary Holloway

"It's a miracle!"

Such a statement doesn't sit well with most members of the Churches of Christ. Yes, we believe God answers prayer. Yes, we believe he works in our world. But "miracle" smacks of charlatan faith healers and greedy TV preachers. So we hesitate to use the word "miracle" for God's current actions, reserving it to describe his works in the biblical past.

In the place of "miracle," we in Churches of Christ have traditionally used the term "providence" to refer to God's work in our world today. The problem with "providence" is that it is a particularly slippery term. One can argue that it is a biblical concept, but it is not a biblical word. In fact, "providence" became a popular way of describing God's activity in the age of rationalism and deism. That age believed providence to be God's "ordinary" work in creation, not to be confused with miracle. They said that God now works only through natural law.

From that concept it is only a short step to where we find ourselves today in Churches of Christ. Many in our churches avoid both "miracle" and "providence." We hardly speak of God's present action, assuming his work was completed in Bible times. We pray as an obligation, not because we think God will actually "do" something. Or if we do expect him to act, we expect it will be through normal scientific and technical means: "Guide the hands of the physicians," we pray.

Such was not always the case in our movement. Many of our early preachers and leaders had a strong sense that God was with them and protected them in unusual ways. They did not use the word "miracle" for this protection, but they also seldom used the

word "providence." Instead they referred to some amazing events in their lives as "special providences" of God. To them God was no mere Great Designer who was shackled by his own natural laws. He was their Father who cared for them and delivered them from specific dangers.

Life for preachers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was much more dangerous than for preachers today. Frontier preachers faced the dangers that all faced back then: wild animals, Indians, bad weather and other calamities. Those who traveled most faced the most hazards.

One of the most famous itinerant preachers of the time was T. B. Larimore (1843-1929). Larimore certainly lived a hazardous and colorful life. Fighting for the Confederacy, he was captured by Union soldiers, one of whom he later baptized. Later he started Mars Hill Bible School near Florence, Alabama. In spite of offers to be president of several colleges, he devoted himself to itinerant preaching.

In his long life, Larimore crisscrossed the country by train, horse, and stagecoach, preaching the gospel. On at least three occasions he faced death. His second wife Emma tells of one of "the usual experiences that evangelists and their traveling companions have." She and her husband were traveling by train and had to change their travel plans to leave two days earlier than originally planned. In her words:

Part of our trip took us through the Royal Gorge, and at Pueblo, Colorado, we changed from the Denver and R. G. to the Missouri Pacific train. The two trains stood on parallel

tracks about forty minutes while the change was made. Just two days later, at the same hour, the trains were again standing parallel while the necessary changes were being made. Suddenly and without warning a mighty avalanche of water, rushing down the Royal Gorge with the speed of an express train, broke over them. Those in the coaches were penned as in a trap, those outside were caught up by the mighty force of the water, hurled against the trains and other objects, and their lives crushed out. Had we adhered to our original plan we should have been in the train or walking about the station at Pueblo at the identical hour the tragedy took place. That experience made us more sensible of the guarding, guiding hand of Providence.¹

This was not Larimore's only brush with death. Another biographer, after remarking that Larimore believed in special providence, tells how he survived another train wreck:

One very dark night he was returning home from Memphis, Tennessee. A cyclone had carried away the railroad bridge at Tuscumbia, Alabama, and well nigh destroyed the town. The train he was on, not knowing of the destruction, plunged into the swollen stream where the bridge was blown away, while running at full speed. He went under the raging current, from which he emerged and by some means unknown to him, crossed the stream. He was thoroughly wet, and wholly unconscious as to how he got out of the wreck and across the creek. When he came to himself, he was leaning against a telegraph pole on the bank of the stream. Someone, he never knew whom, kindly pulled off his boots, drained the water out of them and put them on again for him. He walked to Florence, five miles, through the darkness and the mud.²

If this were not enough, Larimore experienced another accident, this time in a horse-drawn carriage:

At another time, he was in a carriage on his way to an appointment in Middle Tennessee. Passing around the base of a mountain, the horses took fright, wheeled suddenly to the right and leaped over a precipice twenty feet high into a creek. He was entangled among the horses, harness, and shattered carriage, and his feet were fastened by something at the bottom of the creek. Suddenly his feet were released, he knew not how, and he swam to the bank; but his boots were left in the wreck. The carriage was entirely ruined; the horses reached the opposite bank of the creek with a piece of it as large as an ordinary door shutter across their backs! How he ever escaped unhurt was a mystery. He was in the water, under the horses, his feet fast at the bottom of the creek, when somehow his boots were torn to pieces and his feet released. He says - "The Lord delivered me."³

No wonder T. B. Larimore was certain of the guiding hand of God in his life. He continued to travel extensively, eventually moving to California. Having faced so much danger, he passed away quietly in 1929.

Our own experience of God may be less dramatic. We may not face a missing bridge over a swollen stream. But our lives also have their dangers, and when we escape temptation or depression or illness or grief, let us not claim coincidence or technology as our savior, but rather have the faith to say with T. B. Larimore: "The Lord delivered me."

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Notes

¹ Mrs. T. B. Larimore, *Life, Letters, and Sermons of T.B. Larimore* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1954) 21-22.

² F. D. Srygley, *Smiles and Tears, or Larimore and His Boys*, 5th ed. (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1955), 239.

³ *Ibid.*