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Our Cloud of Witnesses

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OUR CLOUD OF WITNESSES

Historical Sketches

David Lipscomb: The Gentle Teacher by Doug Foster

For almost fifty years David Lipscomb shaped the beliefs of thousands in the Restoration Movement through the pages of the *Gospel Advocate*. From the beginning of his editorial career in 1866, however, Lipscomb faced opposition to his views on everything from civil government to the missionary society. To Lipscomb opposition made no difference. He always stated his convictions in unmistakable terms regardless of what anyone else thought. His intention was never to be contentious or divisive. He deeply wanted Christian unity and worked for it on the only basis he believed it could be achieved—adherence to “the plain teachings of Scripture.” If all Christians would adopt that rule, he believed, there would soon be no divisive denominational structures. There would be simply “churches of Jesus Christ composed of those following him.”

Though his convictions were deep, Lipscomb’s attitude was never one of smug closed-mindedness. He was not offended when someone disagreed with him, nor did he attempt to limit anyone’s freedom of expression. He insisted on opening the pages of the *Advocate* to all sides of every issue and even hired several departmental editors whom he knew to hold positions

different from his own. He insisted that since no one had learned all truth on any given subject, there was a constant need to examine all sides of the questions. “[L]et us not despise or reject him who is seeking and striving to learn the will of God, because he has not learned so much of the truth as we think we have.” It was imperative, he believed, that constant investigation and discussion of differences go on to promote unity. “Where differences exist, the discussion of these differences is the only hope of union. The suppression of discussion is the direct and open road to division.” Furthermore, in such discussion the participants should “place the most charitable construction” on each other’s words and actions.

Perhaps Lipscomb’s hardest fought battle put him in the middle of what he saw as two unscriptural notions of baptism. On the one hand the *Christian Standard and Christian-Evangelist*, while rejecting open membership, took the position of Alexander Campbell that the “pious unimmersed” were not lost. Lipscomb saw that position as totally inconsistent—why reject from membership in the churches those they claimed God had saved? This was to make a Disciples denomination based on a sectarian doctrine of baptism.

On the other hand, supporters of a Texas paper begun in 1884, the *Firm Foundation*, were demanding “rebaptism” for all who did not have what they deemed the proper understanding of the act when performed. Lipscomb insisted that God did not reject service done in obedience to God’s law simply because one had not learned all the blessings and promises connected with the obedience. The rebaptism group contended that those baptized into “sect baptism” were not baptized for the right reason; they often believed that their sins were already forgiven and that their baptism was for

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the purpose of joining a particular denomination. Lipscomb admitted that perhaps that was often true, but “sect baptism” was not restricted to those outside the Restoration Movement.

Baptist baptism is a baptism submitted to in order to get into the Baptist Church, or it is done in obedience to Baptist teaching. If a person is baptized to obey God, it is not Baptist baptism no matter where or by whom performed. A rebaptist baptism is that which is done to please those who believe in rebaptism. Many of the rebaptisms are done to please the preacher or church who requires it. It is not unusual for a person to say: “I will be rebaptized if you think I ought.” When one is then baptized, it is rebaptist baptism. Both these baptisms ignore the authority of Christ or the Scriptures, and are not acceptable to God.

Lipscomb pointed out to the rebaptism forces that it made no sense for a person who had gone a long way on the right road, upon taking a wrong turn, to go all the way back to where he or she began the journey. So it was with those who had been scripturally baptized yet found themselves in sectarian establishments. Such a subsequent wrong turn did not undo their faith, repentance or baptism. Such persons should keep all that they had which was true and right, and simply get off the wrong road and back on the right one. “We only return to the point at which we erred and there begin aright,” he insisted. As for those who were properly baptized and therefore in the kingdom, yet remained in denominational or “human folds,” Lipscomb preferred to make no judgment, leaving the decision to the only One who knew just what allowance to make.

Lipscomb waged a vigorous fight on both fronts because the matter as crucial to the movement’s quest for Christian unity. Perversion of the biblical doctrine of adult immersion would have those in Christ attempting to achieve unity with many who were outside of Christ—an impossibility. On the other hand, to refuse to recognize as Christians those who had been scripturally baptized would be to perpetuate division and frustrate God’s intentions.

Lipscomb’s harshest epithets were reserved for Disciples he believed had deliberately and obstinately left the only sure basis for unity. By introducing practices and beliefs not commanded by Scripture they had provoked controversy and division. They of all people, having been in the tradition of Thomas Campbell’s dictum, “speak where the Bible speaks, and be silent where the Bible is silent,” should have known better. He came to feel more kindness toward and hope for sincere believers in “sectarian churches” than he did for those he viewed as traitorous Disciples on the right or left (see reprint article: “Sectarians in the Worship”).

After Lipscomb’s death many came to know him through the selective reprinting of his harsher editorials, perceiving him as a stern separatist. In fact Lipscomb was a gentle, kind and sincere individual—much more open than his reputation might indicate. He held his doctrinal positions strongly, but his stance was not simply one of “truth-for-truth’s-sake.” He saw

a nonsectarian stand for the essential truths of the gospel as the path to true Christian unity.

David Lipscomb, “Sectarians in the Worship,” *Gospel Advocate* 49 (25 April 1907):265.

Brother Lipscomb: Is it right or wrong to ask a sectarian to get up and read a chapter in the Bible where they take part with us in the Sunday school, and should they offer prayer after reading?
Dicey, Texas. J. W. Lanier.

I would say it is wrong to encourage sectarianism in any way, if we can tell which are sectarians. But my observation is, it takes a sectarian to ferret out a sectarian, just as “it takes a rogue to catch a rogue.” Unfortunately, all the sectarians are not in sectarian churches; and I hope some in sectarian churches are not sectarians. Things get badly mixed in this world. Sometimes people who wish to obey God are born and raised in sectarian influences. A man who loves party more than he loves God is a sectarian. A man who divides the church of God for a theory or teaching not required by God is a sectarian. A person who pushes an idea or practice not required by God, to the disturbance of the peace of that church, or that exalts a human opinion or practice to an equality with the commands of God is a sectarian and a heretic.

There are some in nonsectarian churches who are sectarians, who violate the laws of God in order to oppose sectarians. They are sectarians in their opposition to sectarians. There are some in sectarian churches who will obey God and follow him in spite of the sectarianism of the churches in which they find themselves. As examples, there are persons in the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches who were baptized to obey God rather than to please the sects. In this they rise above the sectarian spirit despite the parties in which they find themselves. They ought to get out of the sectarian churches, but they see so much sectarianism in the nonsectarian churches that they think they are all alike.

Peter and John, Paul and Barnabas, all met with the sectarian Jews at their times and places of worship and participated with them, that they might find an opportunity to speak a word for the truth. I do not think it hurts any man, sectarian or sinner, to read the Bible anywhere or at any time. I do not think it hurts anyone to hear the Bible read by sectarian or sinner at any time or place. The great end is to be true and faithful to the truth and at the same time kind and sympathetic with those in error. The nearer we can do these two things, the more like Jesus we will be and the more sinners and sectarians we will save.